

Literature Reviews

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Why write a literature review? Academic communities use literature reviews to identify what is known about a particular topic so that research can be expanded. Literature reviews contextualize research about a topic; they identify debates and agreements between sources and point to gaps in knowledge and possibilities for new research.

What does a literature review include? Particular features of literature reviews vary considerably according to different disciplines and their goals. Ensure that you are following your instructors' guidelines, especially in terms of the kinds and number of sources required, the citation style, and the assignment length. The following pages describe and explain how to proceed to write a solid review of literature for most academic disciplines.

Getting Started

1. Locating Materials

Most often, literature reviews include academic sources only. Choosing the academic articles you will review for your assignment is one of the most important aspects of a successful literature review.

- Know what an academic source is and how to find one — academic articles are found in peer-reviewed journals and will have citations in them (brackets or footnotes with names and years). One possibility is to start by choosing a database dedicated to the discipline in which you are working (PsychInfo, for example). Then click “peer reviewed” before searching for articles by using key words. Be careful to note from which database your articles come — sometimes when articles print, the database does not print on them and you will have to return to the computer to find the information necessary for citation.
- Choose sources that address the same topic — this might seem self-explanatory, but the more precise your topic, the more precise you can be with your search words, and the more tightly related the articles you choose will be. One of the best ways to find materials is to choose an article that really works for your particular interests. Then, use the key words or main ideas discussed in that article to find others that are related. It is best to get more articles than you need so that you can narrow down to the final ones you will select by ensuring that there are common key words throughout each of them.

2. Planning for Your Draft

The most common mistake students tend to make when writing literature reviews is that

they simply summarize information source by source rather than gathering similar ideas together and showing relationships between them. If you simply summarize information source by source, readers will have difficulty gaining an overall picture of the literature, an overview of the thinking about it, because information about similar topics and subtopics is not in the same place. Thus, a common way to prepare to write a literature review is to work from a brief summary of each of the sources to develop a “tier of abstractions.” This refers to the mapping of general topics and more specific sub-topics within each article. In order to determine how much detail you need to note, try to imagine the whole literature review in terms of how much space you will have to allot to each subtopic.

- Use short summaries or notes from each source to identify main ideas (abstractions) from each source. It is also important to note methodologies and findings as these, too, are very important for scholars to know as they move forward with their research.
- Identify connections between sources (which ones discuss which sub-issues and in which ways?).
- Devise a tier of ideas from general (main, key) to specific (subtopics, details, examples)
- Identify sources that work with each abstraction. It is common that some sources will inform many topics for discussion within a literature review. That is why it is crucial not to report source by source, but topic by topic or theme by theme.
- Draft an outline to identify what you will address and in what order.

3. Writing the Introduction (see pages 3-4 for Annotated Example)

Your introduction (usually approximately 1/2 to 3/4 page) will not only present the main topic, but will also make a statement about the status of knowledge in this area of research. This usually involves reporting what is known about a topic and what is problematic about it. Knowledge deficits are crucial to literature reviews—such deficits are usually spoken about in terms of effects on particular populations, gaps in the research, and other contexts where the research could be useful. Additionally, your introduction will include a statement that outlines what issues within the broader topic (main ideas and subtopics) will be presented and in what order. Sources are often identified in this section but don’t have to be.

4. Writing the Body (see pages 3-4 for Annotated Example)

In order for your reader to move through your information with ease while keeping the big picture in view, order your body paragraphs in the same way that you did in the statement about how your literature review will proceed. Order the abstractions (main ideas) from general to specific, deciding which sources have contributions to make to which concepts. You will then present more specific information from the sources, using in-text citation, to discuss the abstractions in more detail and to point out areas of agreement or debate among sources. Your body paragraphs should work to not only summarize what sources have said, but also to demonstrate relationships between them. (i.e. Waterhouse (2006) and Silverstein (2007) both contend that..... While Smith (2004) and Watkins (2005) use different methods to measure.....).

As you move between body paragraphs, return to the big picture, the “map” you provided for your readers in the introductory paragraph. This works to bring them from within specific

details back out to a place where they can see the whole topic.

5. Writing the Conclusion (see pages 3-4 for Annotated Example)

You should conclude (approximately 3/4 to 1 page) by reminding readers of the main topics and subtopics by identifying points of consensus and debate that have been presented in your literature review. Identify new possibilities for knowledge making, new gaps in knowledge—what else could be looked at now that scholars know this information? Are there other contexts that need to be examined? Gaps in the research so far? You also want to include statements about what communities are best served by this knowledge—where and for whom is the information most relevant?

6. Citing Your Sources

While you will be citing all through your literature review, do not forget that you also need to include a References page, Bibliography, or Works Cited page, depending on the citation style required for your literature review.

Annotated Example

Internet addiction has become a widespread social issue now that technology has advanced and spread throughout the world. Internet addiction has been defined in the literature as “a psychological dependence on the internet, regardless of the type of activity once logged on” (as cited in Chow, Condron, & Belland, 2005, p. 365). Internet addicts are seriously affected by their addiction in many ways. Ng and Weimer-Hastings (2005) found that 34% of internet addicts spend 21 to 40 hours per week on the internet, while 11% of internet addicts spend more than 40 hours per week on the internet. The amount of time that is spent on the internet by addicts has detrimental effects on their over all well-being. There have been ten reported cases of epileptic like seizures that have been induced by Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) (Yao-Chung, 2006). Internet addicts are not only game addicts; there are many other sub-addictions within the overarching label of ‘internet addict’.

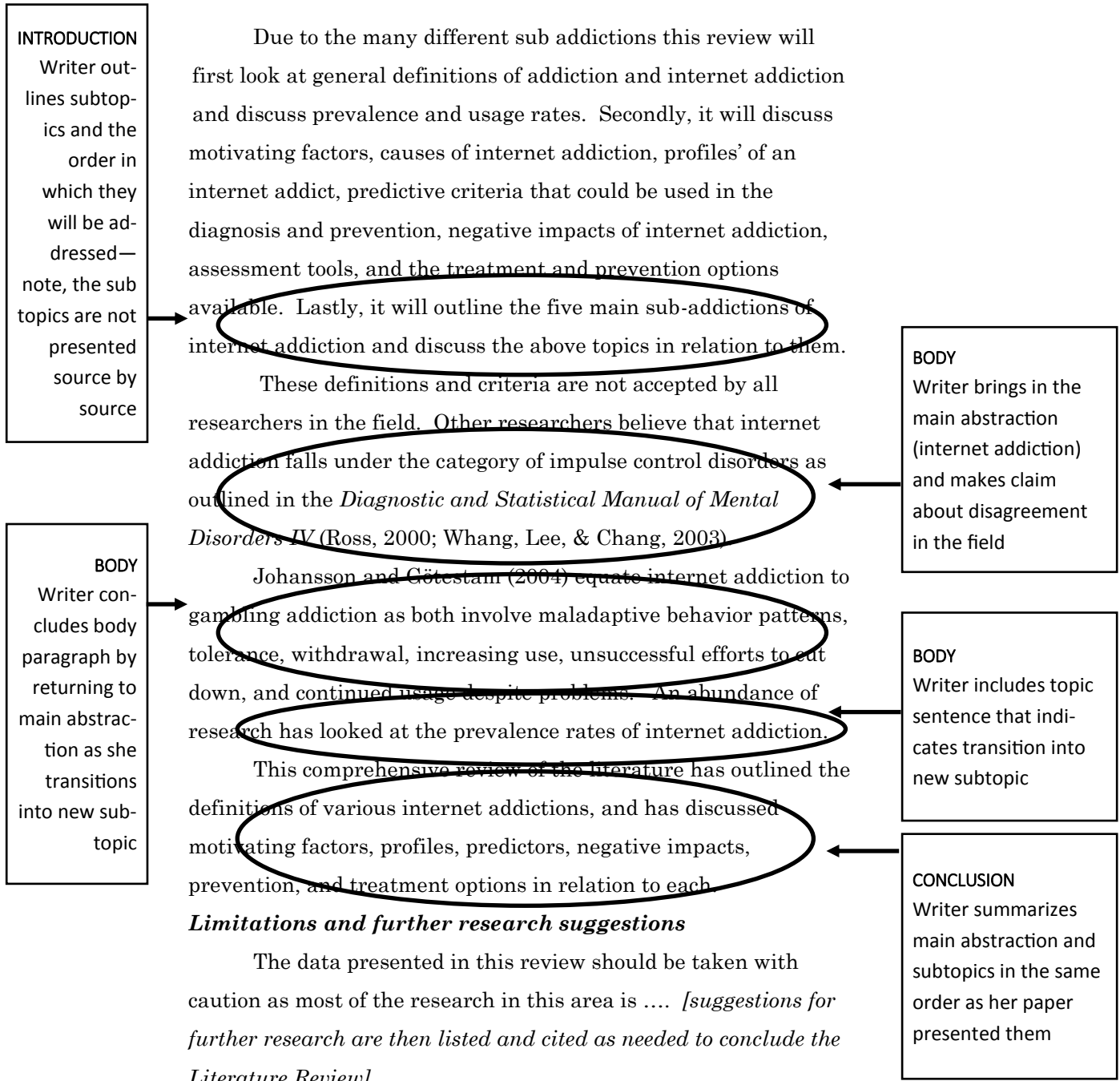
INTRODUCTION
 Writer contextualizes topic and defines it

INTRODUCTION
 Writer uses research to explain what is known about the topic—also points to problem statement (detrimental effects on well-being)

INTRODUCTION
 Writer presents knowledge deficit—what needs to be looked at within the topic

Annotated Example continued on next page...

Annotated Example, cont'd



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