How to Write a Literature Review

Presented by the VCU Writing Center and Library Services
What is a Literature Review?

We know that's a hard question.

From the VCU Library page:

"A literature review provides an overview of what's been written about a specific topic. There are many different types of literature reviews. They vary in terms of comprehensiveness, types of study included, and purpose."

This guide is here to break this down for you.
"Literature" is not referring to fiction, poetry, or other forms of "literature" that you might've studied in high school. **Literature in a research paper refers to THE RESEARCH that exists on a given topic.** We refer to this body of knowledge and these studies collectively as "the literature".
What is synthesis?

We'll show you how to do this later, but an important part of a literature review is SYNTHESIZING the information together.

Synthesis: The combination of ideas to form a theory or system.

Think of synthesis as a zipper. You are zipping multiple sources together in your discussion to create themes!
What's the difference between an annotated bibliography and a literature review?

Annotated bibliographies and a literature reviews seem like very similar writing formats. **Here's the difference:**
Let's clarify the difference...

- Annotated Bibliographies
- Literature Reviews
- BOTH
Annotated
Bibliography

Check out this sample annotated bibliography

Subject: Humanities - Psychology
Sample Topic: Psychological benefits of pet ownership during the COVID-19 isolation
Sample Research Question: What are the psychological benefits of pet ownership during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Template:
- Summary of the source’s main ideas
- Evaluation of strengths/weaknesses of the source
- Reflection on the source's potential importance or usefulness for your research


This study examines the psychological impact of social isolation and loneliness on mental health. The authors note that loneliness during isolation can negatively affect a person's life and social well-being. The study found that loneliness is a significant predictor of depressive symptoms, anxiety, and burnout (p. 670). The study's findings are significant because they highlight the importance of addressing social isolation and loneliness during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (p. 671).

In their study, the authors also identified strategies to reduce loneliness, such as regular communication with loved ones and engaging in virtual social activities. These strategies are particularly important during times of social distancing and lockdown, when traditional forms of social interaction are limited (p. 671). The study's findings have implications for policymakers and mental health professionals, who can use the findings to develop interventions and support systems for individuals experiencing social isolation and loneliness (p. 671).

Suggested format for annotation:
- Summary
- Strengths/Weaknesses
- Potential importance or usefulness in your larger paper/research project

Important Links:
- What's an annotated bibliography? [YouTube]
- The Purdue OWL, 2019 Annotated Bibliography Guide
- Writing Commons Overview of Annotated Bibliography

Includes a description or annotation of each source.
- Approximately 150–200 words.
- Identifies the main ideas/findings for each source and any other identifying information that will help you sort your sources.

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A review of the different sources related to the research question or central topic of the paper. This review describes HOW the chosen sources relate to the central topic of the paper. The discussion of the ideas from the research are organized by THEMES so that you can combine multiple sources together. This is called SYNTHESIS. Instead of discussing each source individually, you synthesize the information from the various sources together to illustrate your themes.

**Important Links:**
- How to Write a Literature Review in 3 Simple Steps [YouTube]
You must identify a subject, topic, and research question that is guiding the research.

It is grounded in the work of others.

Important Considerations:

- What are the authors hypotheses or arguments and what do they ask?
- What exists on the topic and what can we learn from it?
- Pay attention to common themes, methods, key words, or references as they reoccur in the literature.

Important Links:

- Focused Inquiry and VCU’s Environment
- Rasmussen University: Literature Review vs. Annotated Bibliography
- Video: Annotated Bibliography vs. Literature Review: Are they different?
Steps to creating a successful Literature Review

Here we provide you with the steps needed to create a literature review. You'll be building a literature review with us, step by step.
Step one:

- Identify your subject- think about how this would be catalogued in a library…or your Netflix queue!
- Identify a focused topic within your subject. The more specific, the better!
- Create a research question. This needs to be very specific. Work with your professor or a consultant from the writing center to focus your ideas!

Subject: Humanities - Psychology

Topic: Psychology behind pet ownership during the Covid-19 lockdown

Research Question: Are there psychological benefits of pet ownership during the Covid-19 pandemic?
Step Two:

- Go find your research!
- Use a matrix like the one we've linked here to keep track of your search terms and your sources.
- As you read through your sources, make note of what you will need to discuss in your paper **and annotate your sources as you go.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Question:</td>
<td>Source: Author / Date / Title (APA citation and DOI link to PDF)</td>
<td>Search Terms / Techniques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
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Remember how you would create a theme statement in middle and high school after reading a fiction book? It's the same idea here!

Look for what your sources have in common and what is different about each one.

Create 1-4 theme statements that captures some ideas from MULTIPLE sources. Your number of theme statements depends on how extensive your research is!

- **NOTE:** If you find that one source doesn't "fit" or you made a theme that only applies to one source, then address in your paper **WHY** that is.
  - Did they use a different method? Do they have a variable that none of your other sources cover? Do they take a point of view that is absent from the rest of the literature?

There is no perfect way to do this. You can read and annotate all of your sources first OR you can do this at the end—do what works best for you!
Step Four:

- Synthesize the information that you have collected.
- You will organize your synthesis around your theme(s).
- With this, you are connecting all of the information in your research and how it coincides with the overall research question.

Look to see how each theme is woven together in the paragraph below. By discussing all of the sources as themes, you're able to identify the overlaps and the gaps in the literature and how the different pieces of research work together to form a comprehensive picture of your field.

Themes:
- Loneliness and isolation can contribute to pre-existing anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorders (Banerjee & Rai, 2020; Xin et al., 2021).
- Pet ownership decreased feelings of depression, anxiety, and loneliness during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (Xin et al., 2021; Oliva, & Johnston, 2021).
  - This used the two sources that specifically spoke to pets as an intervention method/coping mechanism during the pandemic.
- Pet ownership is associated with positive benefits to include emotional connection, healthy interactions, and positive psychological well being (Xin et al., 2021; Oliva, & Johnston, 2021; Campbell et al., 2016).

Synthesis:
The literature discusses three central themes to address the research question: What are the psychological benefits to pet ownership during the COVID-19 pandemic? The keywords used in our search were loneliness, isolation, pet ownership, and COVID-19. In studies by Banerjee & Rai (2020) and Xin et al. (2021) loneliness and isolation were identified as contributing to pre-existing anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorders. These findings were compounded due to the isolation individuals experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study by Xin et al. (2021) sought to provide support for encouraging pet ownership. Their data discusses how pet ownership decreased feelings of depression, anxiety, and loneliness during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their participants were located in Wuhan, China, the epicenter of the pandemic. This study, along with Oliva & Johnston’s (2021) findings present pet ownership as an intervention method/coping mechanism during the pandemic to combat these negative feelings. In the studies by Xin et al. (2021), Oliva, & Johnston (2021), and Campbell et al. (2016) pet ownership is associated with positive benefits that improve mental and physical health; such as emotional connection, healthy interactions, and positive psychological well being. In Oliva & Johnston's (2021) study, the overall results surveyed that pet ownership (more with dogs than cats) made the lockdown during isolation easier and eased loneliness, as some people reported that they could cuddle their dogs and talk with their cats or dogs.
Step Five:

- You're almost done! The final step is to make sure you're correctly formatting your in-text citations.
- You'll create a references page for at the end of your paper, but these citations are IN ADDITION to that, and they live inside of your paper.
- The format that you use will depend on if you're writing in APA, MLA, Chicago, IEEE, CSE, ACS, ACM, or NLM.
- Refer back to the information you wrote on your matrix to help streamline this process!

**Purdue OWL has a comprehensive overview for APA, MLA, and Chicago Style Citations**
You're ready to launch!

- You've got all of the tools and examples necessary to tackling the literature review.
- ALWAYS check in with your professor and review the rubric for the assignment to clarify the expectations.
Don't be surprised...

- If you realize that your research question needs to change from when you started- that's normal!
- If you're feeling stuck about what to write, return to the research. You have to read the research BEFORE you can decide what you want to say!
Links? We have them!

- For help with citations:
  - Purdue OWL
  - Introduction to Citations - VCU Writes! (rampages.us)
- For help with annotated bibliographies:
  - What's an annotated bibliography? [YouTube]
  - The Purdue OWL, 2019 Annotated Bibliography Guide
  - Writing Commons Overview of Annotated Bibliography
- For help with differentiating between an annotated bibliography and a literature review:
  - Focused Inquiry and VCU's Environment
  - Rasmussen University: Literature Review vs. Annotated Bibliography
  - Video: Annotated Bibliography vs. Literature Review: Are they different?
- Two great organizing softwares that help keep track of reference sources:
  - Zotero | Your personal research assistant
  - Mendeley | Reference Management Software
- For help with annotating research:
  - My Method for Digitally Annotating Articles
- Direct link to our Research Matrix to organize your sources!
- Direct link to our annotated bibliography sample
- Direct link to our theme and synthesis sample
If you have any questions or concerns, or you would like help, please contact your major's librarian for help. They can be reached at Ask Us | VCU Libraries. Writing Center Consultations can be scheduled through Navigate or by calling (804) 828-4851.
Credits:

Chris Alimenti (WC Consultant)
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