

The Literature Review

The “literature” represents an on-going scholarly conversation.

A literature review “re-views” – looks again – at what others have said, done, found in a particular area.

The “literature” you choose will inform and underpin everything you write, so plan searches carefully.

Search¹



An effective literature search:

- reduces time spent looking for information
- maximizes quality and appropriateness of results
- helps clarify the scope of your research topic
- helps define and “refine” the research question(s)
- helps find data and research methods
- helps locate a ‘niche’ in the literature
- helps identify experts/ important works in the field

Assess the relevance of the literature



Topic relevance: Is the literature on the same topic as you proposed to study?

Individual and site relevance: Does the literature examine the same individuals and sites you want to study?

If not



Re-search if necessary – revise strategies, select new keywords, change databases, etc.

Re-fine the research question(s)



Re-assess the relevance of the literature



Repeat process if necessary

Summarize each source with a matrix²



Summarize each source to:

- Recap the important and most relevant information found in each source
- Identify variables
- Identify context/ setting
- Identify theories
- Identify findings

¹ Need help with search strategies? Contact your VCU Library Liaison <http://www.library.vcu.edu/liaisons/>

² This Literature Review Guide includes several matrices <http://guides.library.vcu.edu/lit-review>

Synthesize the body of literature

Integrate the literature – enter into the on-going scholarly conversation with your own narrative about how these perspectives, findings, conclusions, fit together with one another – and – with your research questions

- Identify similarities and differences
- Trace the intellectual progression of the field, including major debates
- Reflect upon the importance of the body of literature for your research
- Evaluate the sources and advise the reader on the most pertinent or relevant.

