What Does a Literature Review Do?

A literature review surveys [a portion of] the literature on a particular topic. The literature review is most often presented in narrative form (i.e. a section in your paper), and will highlight foundational, influential, or meaningful works related to your topic. In a broader sense, the literature review is also an argument — by including a particular selection of scholarship on a topic, you are arguing that a topic ‘looks’ a certain way, and not another. As a point of clarification, most literature reviews are not comprehensive, meaning they do not include or discuss all the literature on a particular topic, but merely a representative sampling of said literature.

What to Include

You must first decide what material you will include in your literature review. Most literature reviews focus on scholarly literature, but depending on your topic, it will be appropriate to include other types of material as well. When introducing your literature search to the reader, let them know what type(s) of material you have included! Consider the following types of material for your literature reviews:

- **Scholarly Literature** - academic books, scholarly journal articles, dissertations, theses, etc.
- **Professional Literature** - articles from professional journals, how-to manuals, professional publications, etc.
- **Popular Literature** - blogs, websites, newspapers, magazines, etc.

Concepts

Before starting, brainstorm some keywords and/or concepts you think will describe your topic. You will find these initial concepts will expand and change as you begin searching, but it’s nice to have some starting points. When introducing your literature search to the reader, let them know which terms you have searched to find your literature!

Searching

After deciding which type(s) of material you’d like to include in your literature review, you should think about where you will find your literature, and how far back your search will extend. When introducing your literature search to the reader, let them know where, and within what date range, you have searched for your material! An acceptable date range is entirely up to you, but you might consider searching in the following places:

- **Schewe Catalog** - All the material housed in our library catalog (great for books)
- **I-Share Catalog** - All the material housed in a variety of Illinois academic libraries (great for books)
- **[Particular] Schewe Databases** - We have a number of databases, some quite specialized (great for articles)
- **Archives** - Many municipalities, colleges, and private organizations keep an archive (great for historical material)
- **Digital Collections** - Many universities and colleges post digital collections online (great for historical material)
- **Internet** - Play around with some of Google’s options to get a better search result (great for popular material)
Sample Literature Review:

Here is one format your literature review might take. Note that introducing your literature review precedes any actual discussion about the literature you are using:

In situating my own research, I reviewed the literature relating to the history of water, sewage, and sanitation in Tokyo. I searched for scholarly and government publications using the following resources to derive my literature base:

- Schewe & I-Share Catalogs (1980-Present)
- Academic Search Complete (2000-Present)
- JSTOR (2000-Present)
- Project Muse (2000-Present)
- ArticleFirst (2000-Present)
- Google Scholar (2000-Present)

I also used the following terms -- searched either as subjects, titles, or keywords -- to find the literature for this review (where the * character indicates a wildcard search):

- water*
- sanitat*
- sewage*
- river*
- dam*
- lake*
- tokyo
- japan*

The history of sewage in Tokyo is a varied one, as Fukuyamishi (2007) demonstrates. The first public, large-scale sanitation project in Tokyo made ground in 1564, and involved the construction of an effluent drainage system (Akiro, 2009; Janus, 2010). The effort was mired with a variety of problems, however, and Makako (1982) argues...

Help:

Schewe’s Librarians, Mike Westbrook (mwestbro@mail.ic.edu) and Luke Beatty (luke.beatty@mail.ic.edu), would love to help you with your literature reviews. Don’t hesitate to contact us!