What Is a Review of the Literature?

A review of the literature is a classification and evaluation of what accredited scholars and researchers have written on a topic, organized according to a guiding concept such as your research objective, thesis, or the problem/issue you wish to address.

Your objective is not to rack up points by listing as many articles as possible; rather, you want to demonstrate your intellectual ability to recognize relevant information, and to synthesize and evaluate it according to the guiding concept you have determined for yourself. Your reader not only wants to know what literature exists, but also your informed evaluation of the literature. To meet both of these needs, you must employ two sets of skills:

- **information seeking**: the ability to scan the literature efficiently using manual or computerized methods to identify a set of potentially useful articles and books.
- **critical appraisal**: the ability to apply principles of analysis to identify those studies which are unbiased and valid. Your readers want more just than a descriptive list of articles and books.
  - It's usually a bad sign when every paragraph of your review begins with the names of researchers.
  - Instead, organize your review into useful, informative sections that present themes or identify trends.

A literature review is NOT just a summary, but a conceptually organized synthesis of the results of your search. It must

- organize information and relate it to the thesis or research question you are developing
- synthesize results into a summary of what is and isn't known
- identify controversy when it appears in the literature
- develop questions for further research

Although we value "unbiased" scientific research, the truth is that no author is free from outside influence, such as

- a particular theoretical framework or model (for example, a feminist examination of gender inequity in medical research)
- the author's rhetorical purpose (for example, a researcher's reasons for advocating the effectiveness of a certain drug)
- an experience-based practical perspective (for example, the belief that one approach to pain management is more effective than another).
The value of your review depends not simply on how many sources you find, but also on your awareness of how these different levels of perspectives affect the way that research on your topic is conducted, published, and read:

1. Yours
2. The author's
3. The editor's (when the author appears in part of a larger work)

Questions to Ask Yourself About
Your Review of Literature

1. Do I have a specific thesis, problem, or research question which my literature review helps to define?
2. What type of literature review am I conducting? Am I looking at issues of theory? methodology? policy? quantitative research (e.g., studies of a new or controversial procedure)? qualitative research (e.g., studies determining criteria for allocating health care resources)?
3. What is the scope of my literature review? What types of publications am I using; e.g., journals, books, government documents, popular media? What discipline am I working in; e.g., nursing, psychology, sociology, medicine?
4. How good are my information seeking skills? Has my search been wide enough to ensure I've found all the relevant material? Has it been narrow enough to exclude irrelevant material? Is the number of sources I've used appropriate for the length of my paper?
5. Is there a specific relationship between the literature I've chosen to review and the problem I've formulated?
6. Have I critically analyzed the literature I use? Do I just list and summarize authors and articles, or do I assess them? Do I discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the cited material?
7. Have I cited and discussed studies contrary to my perspective?
8. Will the reader find my literature review relevant, appropriate, and useful?

Questions to Ask Yourself About
Each Book or Article You're Reviewing

1. Has the author formulated a problem/issue?
2. Is the problem/issue ambiguous or clearly articulated? Is its significance (scope, severity, relevance) discussed?
3. What are the strengths and limitations of the way the author has formulated the problem or issue?
4. Could the problem have been approached more effectively from another perspective?
5. What is the author's research orientation (e.g., interpretive, critical science, combination)?
6. What is the author's theoretical framework (e.g., psychoanalytic, developmental, feminist)?
7. What is the relationship between the theoretical and research perspectives?
8. Has the author evaluated the literature relevant to the problem/issue? Does the author include literature taking positions s/he does not agree with?
9. In a research study, how good are the three basic components of the study design (i.e., population, intervention, outcome)? How accurate and valid are the measurements? Is the analysis of the data accurate and relevant to the research question? Are the conclusions validly based upon the data and analysis?
10. In popular literature, does the author use appeals to emotion, one-sided examples, rhetorically-charged language and tone? Is the author objective, or is s/he merely 'proving' what s/he already believes?

11. How does the author structure his or her argument? Can you 'deconstruct' the flow of the argument to analyze if/where it breaks down?

12. Is this a book or article that contributes to our understanding of the problem under study, and in what ways is it useful for practice? What are the strengths and limitations?

13. How does this book or article fit into the thesis or question I am developing?