

Assignment Genres: Writing a Literature Review

Your first writing step is to make sure you understand the assignment.

Read the prompt and ask yourself:

Why was this assigned?	Professors design assignments with specific learning objectives in mind. Does your professor intend for you to learn how to write a literature review, a research proposal, or a policy memo? Is your task to demonstrate your understanding of a concept, or to practice critiquing a theory?
What am I being asked to do?	Most prompts contain key verbs, or action words, that help you determine the main tasks. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill divides these words into three categories: <i>information</i> , <i>relation</i> , and <i>interpretation</i> . <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Information words ask you to demonstrate your knowledge about a subject. Examples include define, describe, explain, illustrate, summarize, trace, and research.• Relation words ask you to show connections between ideas. Compare, contrast, apply, cause, and relate fall into this category.• Interpretation words ask for you to defend your own argument, thesis, or idea. These words include assess, prove, justify, evaluate, respond, support, synthesize, analyze, and argue.
What evidence is required?	Some assignments, like a reflective memo, may not require any formal evidence. More often, though, assignments will ask you to draw on outside research or other types of evidence.

About literature reviews

A literature review summarizes the published material on a topic in order to address a specific research question. The writer's job is to select, interpret, and arrange the prior research so that it accurately reflects the current state of knowledge, while at the same time showing how it supports your own ideas.

When preparing a literature review for the first time, a writer may be tempted to organize it in a linear way, going article by article and restating the main points. Resist this temptation. Such a paper is called an *annotated bibliography*. Annotated bibliographies are useful references, but a literature review requires more analysis, including:

- **Formulate a research question.** This question guides your inquiry. You are reading to determine what existing research can tell us about a particular question or dilemma, and to offer your answer by interpreting the facts.
- **Critique the literature.** Evaluate its strengths as well as any limitations you observe in the argument, methods, or analysis.
- **Synthesize the evidence.** Note connections or discrepancies in the research you find, and organize the structure of the paper around the key themes and takeaways that emerge from everything you've read.
- **Provide an explicit thesis statement and reasoning.** Based on your critiques and observations, offer an argument. In your view as an expert who has delved into the topic, what is known about the subject, and what gaps remain in our knowledge?
- **Identify recommendations for future research, policy, and/or practice.** What should readers take away from the research you present?

Sample assignment

The below assignment is relatively general, leaving lots of room for individuality. Students may pick topics within a broad range, and research it through three specified lenses in order to answer a particular question.

For our course on learning disabilities, you will have the opportunity to write a final paper on the disability of your choice. This paper will be a review of the extant literature in the field, focusing on three distinct domains: neuroscience, cognitive/behavioral, and intervention strategies. The key points will be for you to integrate the findings in these domains to answer the following question: How are theory and intervention tied together for this particular disability?

Reading the prompt

Format	Varying lengths, but standard academic format, structured around your argument and the key themes of the literature.
Evidence	Professors have different requirements. Some assign brief literature reviews to help you prepare for a final project, and the professor may provide guidance about how many sources you must find. To write a standalone paper like the one above, you will need a more robust reference list. Remember, you can always make an appointment with a Research Services librarian for help researching any topic.



Is a literature review its own paper, or a section of a bigger paper?

It can be either. In a standard academic paper or research article, the section describing relevant external information is often called the literature review (or the background section, theoretical framework, etc.). There are also standalone literature reviews, which is a distinct genre.

Audience	Some assignments, like a reflective memo, may not require any formal. Literature reviews are most commonly written for academics but may also be aimed at policy or practitioner audiences.
Purpose	The key action word, "integrate," is an interpretation word, signifying that you must combine ideas in an original way and justify it. In this case, you must identify common points of theory and intervention research.

Further reading

Gutman Library offers an extensive description of the literature review at <https://guides.library.harvard.edu/literaturereview>.