Literature Review

MOST DISCIPLINES in the social and natural sciences incorporate literature reviews into their scholarship—but the scope, purpose, and content of a literature review will vary, depending on the writing conventions for the discipline and whether the literature review is a stand-alone effort or a piece of a larger project.

LITERATURE REVIEWS examine the state of knowledge on a topic:

- Often, literature reviews establish the conceptual or theoretical foundation for an original research project. In this case, they may justify the researcher's design decisions or methods, and they almost always highlight a gap in existing knowledge or a need demonstrated by previous research.

- Some large-scale literature reviews (sometimes called meta-analytic reviews, integrative reviews, or systematic reviews) use a large body of existing research to answer a pressing question in a field or to make an evidence-based recommendation.

CONCERNS TO ADDRESS in a literature review often start with the questions below. Keep in mind that not all of these options will be appropriate for every project. Refer to your assignment sheet, professor, or advisor if you have questions about what to include in your literature review.

The project's significance:

- What is the practical significance of your project? What problem is it designed to address? What is at stake? Why does this issue matter, and who should it matter to?

- What is the scholarly significance of your project? What gap in the literature might it fill? How will it build upon, deepen, or extend current knowledge?

The literature review's coverage:

- What scholarly conversations or currents of knowledge will your literature review cover?

- What search terms did you use, and what databases did you consult?

- What were your criteria for inclusion and exclusion in this literature review? Why?

The state of knowledge on the topic or issue:

- How has knowledge of your topic shifted or changed over time?

- Are there important terms, variables, or phenomena that you need to define for your readers?

- What key theories or constructs govern scholars' understanding of your topic?

- What existing knowledge is most relevant to your project topic?

- What are the key findings in recent literature?

- What themes, issues, or sub-topics have scholars chosen to focus on?

- What, if anything, do scholars disagree upon? Are there any notable inconsistencies in findings?

- What don't we know? What are the gaps in knowledge? Why do those gaps exist?

- What is the relationship between the state of knowledge in your field and the state of practice among professionals in your field?

- Where does your project fit in to the "scholarly conversation" surrounding your topic?

The methods used to explore the topic or issue:

- What are the main methodologies and research techniques that researchers have used to explore your topic or issue?

- Why have researchers favored those methodologies?

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of those methodologies?

- Will your project use existing methodologies or instruments? Why or why not?