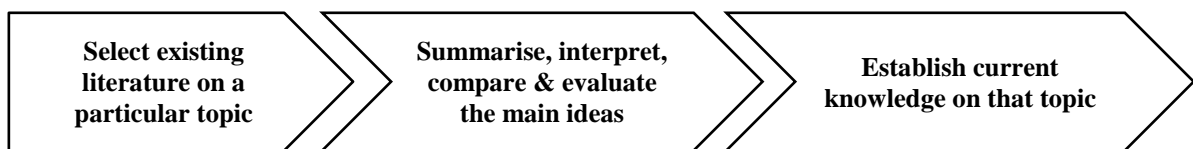




Literature reviews

What is a literature review?

Unlike other assignments, which use source information as evidence for an argument, in a literature review, the *literature itself* is the subject of discussion. Reviewing literature is an important component of academic writing and research and aims to gain an understanding of what is currently known or understood about a subject (Davies 2011, p. 217). Completing a literature review involves selecting, classifying and evaluating what other researchers have written on a particular subject. The process could be summarised in this way:



What does your lecturer expect?

Your lecturer expects you to:

- **demonstrate** your scholarly ability to **identify relevant information** and to outline existing knowledge in a particular area of research;
- **evaluate and synthesise** this information in line with your topic or research area;
- **identify a gap** in existing knowledge (which may provide a rationale or justification for further research i.e. in the case of a thesis);
- **communicate** about the existing debate in an area of study, and
- **motivate** the reader to reflect on what has been discussed.

Types of literature reviews

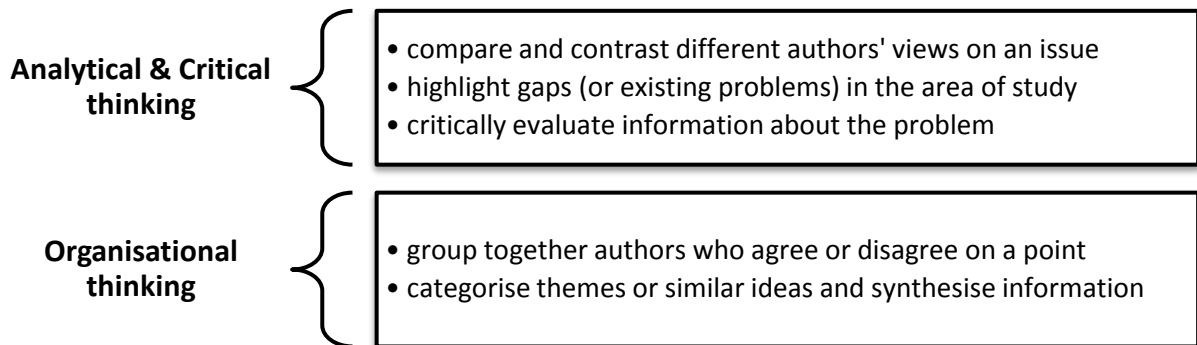
You may be required to review literature as part of the research that you do for an assignment such as an essay, case study or report. Sometimes, you may be required to write a literature review as a 'stand-alone' assignment. In addition, a Literature Review may:

- resolve a controversy and/or identify disagreements
- establish the need for additional research
- define a topic of inquiry
- outline a practical problem that needs resolution

Assignments will vary so **check the task requirements carefully** and be sure you are clear about the reason and purpose for completing a literature review.

What kind of thinking is needed?

You will need to think in different ways when creating a literature review. These will include;



How do you complete a Literature review?

It is important to remember that the focus of a literature review is the ideas within the text. With the exception of steps 1 & 7, the rest of the steps will most probably occur at the same time or at least overlap each other.

1. Identify credible sources (if they have not already been provided for you) and record the reference details
2. Read critically and evaluate the information
3. Take notes for both the summary (the content) and the evaluation (critique or analysis). It may be useful to have a separate column in your notes for your critical evaluation of the content
4. Identify the main ideas or key points provided by authors when they are explicitly stated
5. Paraphrase accurately
6. Organise your ideas into a structure. It is useful to combine similar or related details into categories and provide a label or heading for ideas
7. Write a brief summary (descriptive) of each article including a critical evaluation (analytical)

Possible critical questions to ask

Table 1: Critical questions

authority	Who conducted the research? Is the author an authority in their field of study? Check the resource for information about the author, the author's qualifications and experience.
reliability	Does the information come from a reliable source? Has it been peer reviewed or passed by an editorial panel? Is there any possible bias or other agendas?
accuracy	Is the content accurate? Is it supported by references, evidence or by other sources you have found?
objectivity	Is there evidence of bias? If only one side of an argument or issue is presented or criticisms are ignored, then the source lacks objectivity.
currency	How recent is the publication? This is important if the topic is one that requires current information.
relevance	Is the information closely related to the topic? Does the information included directly relate to the specific topic or is it overly general?



What does it look like?

Remember to always **check the task requirements carefully** and be clear about the required structure or format of the final version. The following can be used as a general guide.

Introduction

- Provide background to the issue or state the problem.
- Clearly specify the aim of the literature review (what will be discussed).
- Indicate the scope of the discussion (how it will be discussed).

Body: Discussion

- Place each source in the context of explaining the problem.
- Relate the assessed literature to others that have been reviewed.
- Organise the discussion clearly. This could be chronologically (from past-present) or theoretically (different theories relating to the problem), etc.
- Evaluate the literature and identify any gaps.
- Identify the controversies that exist in the debate.
- Suggest a need for future research.

Conclusion

- Restate the key points that contribute to understanding the problem.
- Do not introduce any new ideas.

References

Adapted from Davies, M 2011, *Study skills for international postgraduate students*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.