

DEFINITIVE GUIDE

Literature Review Guide: How to Write One That Actually Works

Mapping what's known, finding the gap, and avoiding the summary trap

SEO Title: Literature Review Guide: How to Write One That Actually Works (2026)

Meta Description: A practitioner's guide to writing a literature review that synthesises rather than summarizes — structure, methods, and the gap-identification step most reviews skip. From OASIS Research Writing.

URL Slug: /insights/literature-review-guide

Reading time: ~13 minutes | Last reviewed: July 2026

QUICK ANSWER

A literature review is a structured synthesis of existing research on a defined question, organized to show what is established, what is contested, and what gap remains — not a sequential summary of individual sources. Its purpose is to position new research (or a new decision) against the current state of knowledge, and its most common failure is degenerating into a source-by-source summary that never actually synthesises anything.

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The most common failure in literature reviews isn't poor research — it's poor synthesis. A reviewer who reads twenty sources and writes twenty paragraphs, one per source, has not written a literature review.

They have written an annotated list. A literature review earns its name by showing how the sources relate to each other: where they agree, where they conflict, and what none of them have yet answered.

1. What a Literature Review Actually Does

A literature review maps the current state of knowledge on a defined question, evaluates the strength and consistency of existing evidence, and identifies what remains unresolved. It is a required component of theses, dissertations, and grant proposals, and a valuable stand-alone document whenever a decision or new research project needs to be positioned against what's already known.

2. Types of Literature Reviews

- Narrative review: a thematic synthesis of the literature, typically used within a thesis or paper's introduction.
- Systematic review: a rigorously documented, reproducible search and inclusion process, often used in medical and scientific research.
- Scoping review: maps the breadth of research on a topic, often to identify gaps before a systematic review is undertaken.
- Meta-analysis: statistically combines results from multiple studies to produce a pooled estimate of effect.

3. The Literature Review Process, Step by Step

1. **Define the review question precisely.** A broad topic produces an unmanageable and unsynthesizable review.
2. **Set inclusion and exclusion criteria.** Which sources count, and why, decided before searching begins.
3. **Search systematically.** Across relevant databases, not just the first page of a general search engine.
4. **Evaluate each source's quality and relevance.** Before including it in the synthesis.
5. **Organize findings by theme.** Not by source or publication date.
6. **Identify agreement, disagreement, and gaps.** Explicitly, across the body of literature as a whole.
7. **Write the synthesis.** Connecting sources to each other, not summarizing them in sequence.

4. Organizing by Theme, Not by Source

The clearest sign of a weak literature review is a structure that mirrors the list of sources rather than the themes within them. A strong review is organized around sub-questions or themes — for example, "studies on X mechanism," "studies on Y population," "methodological critiques of prior work" — with each source appearing wherever it's relevant, sometimes in multiple sections.

5. Identifying the Gap

The gap is the specific thing existing literature has not yet established — a population not studied, a mechanism not tested, a contradiction not resolved. Identifying it precisely is what justifies new research

(or a new decision); a vague gap statement ("more research is needed") signals the review hasn't actually synthesised the literature closely enough to find the real one.

6. Systematic vs. Narrative Reviews

Dimension	Narrative Review	Systematic Review
Search process	Informal, researcher-directed	Formally documented and reproducible
Typical use	Thesis/paper introduction, general synthesis	Medical/scientific evidence synthesis, policy evidence bases
Reproducibility	Low — depends on the reviewer's judgment	High — search strategy and criteria are documented and repeatable
Time required	Days to weeks	Weeks to months

7. AI in Literature Reviews

AI tools can accelerate the search and initial screening stages, surfacing candidate sources faster than manual database searching. They cannot reliably judge study quality or synthesise nuanced disagreement between sources without human oversight, and any AI-summarized source must be checked against the original before being relied on — AI summarization tools have a documented tendency to misrepresent a study's actual findings or overstate its confidence.

8. Common Mistakes

- Summarizing sources sequentially instead of synthesising them by theme.
- Including sources without evaluating their quality or relevance.
- Stating a vague gap ("more research is needed") instead of a precise one.
- Failing to document the search strategy, making the review impossible to reproduce or update.
- Relying on an AI-generated summary of a source without reading the source itself.

9. Best Practices

- Define the review question and inclusion criteria before searching.
- Organize the review by theme, not by source.
- State explicitly where sources agree, disagree, or leave a question unanswered.
- Identify the gap precisely, not generically.
- Verify any AI-assisted summary against the original source before relying on it.

10. Frequently Asked Questions

How many sources should a literature review include?

It depends on the scope of the question and the review type — a narrow, well-defined question can be reviewed thoroughly with fewer sources than a broad one, and quality of synthesis matters more than raw count.

What's the difference between a literature review and an annotated bibliography?

An annotated bibliography summarizes each source individually; a literature review synthesises sources together around themes and identifies the resulting gap.

Can AI write a literature review?

AI can assist with search and initial screening, but reliable synthesis and gap identification still require human judgment, and every AI-assisted summary needs verification against the original source.

11. Key Takeaways

- A literature review synthesises sources by theme; it does not summarize them one by one.
- Precisely identifying the gap is what justifies the new research or decision that follows.
- AI can accelerate search, but cannot replace human judgment in evaluating quality and synthesising disagreement.

12. Working With OASIS Research Writing

OASIS Research Writing produces literature reviews for academic, policy, and institutional clients, organized around themes and gaps rather than source-by-source summary.

START A CONFIDENTIAL CONSULTATION

Internal Linking Recommendations

- [/insights/what-is-research-writing](#) — foundational companion piece
- [/insights/systematic-literature-review](#) — deep-dive on systematic methodology
- [/insights/research-proposal-guide](#) — related companion piece
- [/insights/annotated-bibliography](#) — related format deep-dive
- [/research-writing](#) — primary service page
- [/about](#) — firm background

External Reference Recommendations

- University library guides on literature review methodology
- PRISMA guidelines for systematic reviews
- Major academic databases (JSTOR, Google Scholar, PubMed) for source-search conventions

JSON-LD Schema Recommendations

Article Schema

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"publisher": { "@type": "Organization", "name": "OASIS Research Writing" },
"datePublished": "2026-07-23",
"mainEntityOfPage": "[CANONICAL URL]/insights/literature-review-guide"
}

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FAQPage Schema

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    { "@type": "Question", "name": "Can AI write a literature review?",
      "acceptedAnswer": { "@type": "Answer", "text": "AI can assist with search and screening, but reliable synthesis and gap identification still require human judgment." } }
  ]
}

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SEO / GEO Checklist

Primary keyword: literature review guide

Secondary keywords: how to write a literature review, systematic vs narrative review, literature review structure

Long-tail keywords: how many sources for a literature review, difference between literature review and annotated bibliography

Search intent: Informational, primarily academic and institutional audiences.

Featured image: Thematic-cluster diagram showing sources grouped by theme rather than listed sequentially, navy/gold palette.

Social description: "Most literature reviews are just source summaries in a trench coat. Here's how to actually synthesise — and find the real gap."