4.10: Literature Review

What it is?

A literature review involves summarizing what is known about a particular topic based on your examination of existing scholarly sources. You may be asked to write a literature review as a stand-alone assignment or as part of a larger assignment or research project. It will provide you and your readers with a summary of what is known and the gaps and inconsistencies in the existing literature and/or research approaches used.

A literature review involves synthesizing ideas. A synthesis combines multiple ideas and text into a larger whole. When you are synthesizing multiple texts, you should organize your writing based on the content as opposed to the individual sources. Consider the similar themes across multiple sources and organize your writing according to these themes. You should identify the main ideas in the literature and compare/contrast them with purpose.

Table 4.4 describes the types of literature reviews used in nursing. Various approaches can be used to frame reviews, but all literature reviews involve synthesis skills, with the exception of annotated bibliographies.

Table 4.4: Types of literature reviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of literature review</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Relevance/use</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Annotated bibliography</td>
<td>An alphabetical list of texts on a specific topic with a brief summary of each, and sometimes an evaluation of the quality and relevance of each.</td>
<td>Organizes the main ideas and your critique of multiple sources into an itemized list.</td>
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A combination of descriptive and critical writing.

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<tr>
<th><strong>Narrative review</strong></th>
<th>A synthesis and critical analysis of the literature on a topic (this is not a “systematic” review, which provides the audience with the detailed methods used to conduct the review).</th>
<th>Could be a standalone assignment, but is also a component of many types of assignments and forms the background or literature review section of a paper or a study.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scoping review</strong></td>
<td>A synthesis and critical analysis of the literature reviewed focusing on a broad topic area (includes a detailed description of the methods used to conduct the review after it has been completed).</td>
<td>Often used when little is known about a topic. Provides the audience with an initial understanding of the nature of the literature and the existing gaps.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Systematic review</strong></td>
<td>A synthesis and critical analysis of the literature reviewed on a highly focused topic. The literature review methods are detailed and established prior to conducting the literature review.</td>
<td>Conducted when a comprehensive review is needed on a specific topic.</td>
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</table>

### How to do it?

The following discussion explores annotated bibliographies and narrative reviews because these are common in undergraduate nursing curricula.

#### Annotated Bibliography

There are many ways to complete an **annotated bibliography**, depending on the assignment requirements. See **Figure 4.7** outlining the two components of the annotated bibliography including the citation and the annotation.
Here are some general steps to take when completing an annotated bibliography:

1. **Identify your topic** for the bibliography and the number of texts to be included.
2. If the texts are not provided for you, **search the literature** for articles or other types of texts that relate to your topic.
3. **Take notes** while reading and critiquing the identified texts.
4. Review your notes and then construct a short annotation summarizing each text’s main points. If a text presents the results of a research study, you also include the study purpose, methods, and conclusions.
5. Depending on the outlined requirements or your instructor’s expectations, the annotation may also include brief comments critiquing each text, comparing and contrasting texts, and describing how each text adds to the overall topic of the bibliography.
6. A bibliographic citation is included prior to the written annotation. The citation will vary based on what reference style is required; APA formatting is often required in nursing.

**see Chapter 3 and Chapter 9 for more information on critiquing a text for quality and APA style rules.**

### Narrative literature reviews

Here are some general steps for writing a narrative literature review:

1. **Narrow and define your topic**, and then review the existing literature in that area. You may limit your literature search to certain dates (e.g., the last five years) or certain countries, or certain types of literature such as empirical, theoretical, and/or discussion. You need to decide what sources are acceptable to include, such as journal articles, books, and/or grey literature. You may also check the reference lists of the literature you have found.
2. **Take notes** about the main points and critique the literature while doing pre-reading and during the full reading of the literature that you have located.
3. Gather your notes and **consider the literature** you have reviewed as a whole. Think about: What are the main points across all sources reviewed? Are there common findings across sources? Do some sources contradict each other? What are the strengths and weaknesses in the literature? What are the gaps in the literature?
4. Make decisions on **how to structure your review**. The structure is often based on content trends across the various sources; these trends can be used as sub-headings to help you categorize and organize your writing. You might also organize a literature review chronologically, particularly if “time” is an important element. Some literature reviews are organized by method, with sub-sections focusing on theoretical, qualitative, survey, and intervention studies.
5. Use **topic sentences** in each paragraph and logically link each paragraph and section to the next.

### What to keep in mind?

As you are writing literature reviews, keep in mind several points:

- Annotated bibliographies are **concise** and typically presented as one paragraph, ranging from 100–300 words, but expectations vary, so check the assignment guidelines or ask your instructor.
- **Narrative literature reviews are much longer** and vary in length based on the reason for writing it. If it is part of a
larger assignment, your instructor may provide you a specific length. If it is part of an article publishing results from a study, it may serve as a background section and be fairly short (a few paragraphs). If it is part of a graduate thesis, it may form one of your chapters and may be many pages long.

Activity: Check Your Understanding

The original version of this chapter contained H5P content. You may want to remove or replace this element.