The Literature Review

The “literature” represents an on-going scholarly conversation. A literature review “re-views” – looks again – at what others have said, done, found in a particular area.

The “literature” you choose will inform and underpin everything you write, so plan searches carefully.

Search¹

An effective literature search:
• reduces time spent looking for information
• maximizes quality and appropriateness of results
• helps clarify the scope of your research topic
• helps define and “refine” the research question(s)
• helps find data and research methods
• helps locate a ‘niche’ in the literature
• helps identify experts/ important works in the field

Assess the relevance of the literature

Topic relevance: Is the literature on the same topic as you proposed to study?

Individual and site relevance: Does the literature examine the same individuals and sites you want to study?

If not

Re-search if necessary – revise strategies, select new keywords, change databases, etc.
Re-fine the research question(s)
Re-assess the relevance of the literature
Repeat process if necessary

Summarize each source with a matrix²

Summarize each source to:
• Recap the important and most relevant information found in each source
• Identify variables
• Identify context/ setting
• Identify theories
• Identify findings

¹ Need help with search strategies? Contact your VCU Library Liaison http://www.library.vcu.edu/liaisons/
² This Literature Review Guide includes several matrices http://guides.library.vcu.edu/lit-review
Synthesize the body of literature

Integrate the literature – enter into the on-going scholarly conversation with your own narrative about how these perspectives, findings, conclusions, fit together with one another – and – with your research questions

- Identify similarities and differences
- Trace the intellectual progression of the field, including major debates
- Reflect upon the importance of the body of literature for your research
- Evaluate the sources and advise the reader on the most pertinent or relevant.

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**“The LITERATURE”**

Select reliable information sources from multiple perspectives.

- Scholarly article
- Book
- Report from Bureau of Criminal Justice
- Census Data
- Government document
- Book chapter

Your research question

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**“The REVIEW”**

Synthesize: compare themes, methods, controversies, and conclusions among the authors; make clear how the studies relate to one another and to your thesis/research question/purpose.

- Scholarly article
- Book
- Report from Bureau of Criminal Justice
- Book chapter

Your research question

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