

The Literature Review

When writing an annotated bibliography (see the section on this), each source is treated as a single unit where you provide a reference and a corresponding comment. In contrast, when writing a literature review, you deal with all your sources as one block: analysing and critiquing around key themes (Grellier & Goerke, 2018, p. 197). These themes may be suggested by the literature, or they may come from you. To succeed, you must avoid summarising and develop the skill of synthesising.

Do Not Summarise

Many students fail to write a good literature review because they:

1. treat their sources as individual units
2. summarise (i.e. cover the main points of) each individual source
3. present their review as a block of summaries

Learn To Synthesise

A synthesis is different from a summary. When you synthesise, you focus on one idea (or theme) and then compare and contrast what different writers say in relation to it. See the following paragraph from Joubert (2020, Slide 15) where she takes one theme (the definition of creativity) and weaves together four different sources (Doyle, 2019; Maguire, 2017; Naiman, 2019; and Wahl, 2019).

Language Use	What Is Creativity? (adapted from Joubert, 2020, Slide 15)
Introduce	<p>“There are similarities and differences in how creativity is defined in the research literature. Many authors agree that creativity involves developing something new or seeing things in a new way (Doyle, 2019; Naiman, 2019; Wahl, 2019). Maguire (2017) and Wahl (2019) both emphasise that creativity involves the creation of something unique whilst Doyle (2019) and Naiman (2019) reinforce the key role of seeing patterns that may be hidden or not obvious. Wahl (2019) is the only author to describe creative solutions as interesting, and Maguire (2017) is the only author to focus on the fact that creativity must have a positive impact. Naiman (2019) suggests there are two processes involved in creativity: first thinking and then producing. It is interesting that none of the authors use the word originality to describe creativity.”</p>
Compare	
Contrast	
Synthesise	
Cite (APA)	
Critique (strengths, weaknesses, gaps)	

Use of Language

Refer to Joubert's (2020) sample paragraph on the previous page whilst reading this section. Each paragraph of your literature review should contain a clear topic sentence introducing one main idea (Introduce). Throughout your work, though not necessarily in every single paragraph, you will describe similarities (Compare) and differences (Contrast). Take note of the way other writers do this (almost every journal article contains a literature review). What words and phrases do they use? Have a look at "Maintain Coherence: Transition Signals" in the *Write Well* materials to help extend your vocabulary. Aim to group similar ideas, opinions, or findings in the same sentence followed by an in-text citation containing more than one set of authors (Synthesise and Cite). To help you develop your skills in this area, see the *Write Well* document titled "Tools for Synthesising." Finally, whenever appropriate, remember to point out any strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in what the writers are presenting (Critique).

Common Structures

Like any piece of good writing, your literature review should have a solid introduction, body, and conclusion. It can be organised differently, though, depending on what you are trying to do. Van Wee and Banister (2016) have written an excellent article on this (see the References), outlining how your writing should "add value" (p. 278) to the existing academic conversation. Your literature review could be structured around:

- **chronology:** showing "patterns in how researchers approached [one] topic over [a broad period of] time" (McCombes, 2020, para. 22)
- **themes:** where "each paragraph or section focuses on a specific theme and explains how that theme is approached in the literature" (McCombes, 2020, para. 25)

- **methodology**: showing “an analysis of methods used, and their advantages and disadvantages” (Van Wee & Banister, 2016, p. 281; McCombes, 2020, para. 25)
- **theories**: discussing what theories are being used and their importance (Van Wee & Banister, 2016, p. 281; McCombes, 2020, para. 28)
- **“[e]mpirical insights”**: a synthesis of what is and is not known (Van Wee & Banister, 2016, p. 281)
- **“[g]aps”**: exploring “limitations and omissions” and suggesting “ways forward” (Van Wee & Banister, 2016, p. 281)
- **“[r]elevance for real-world application”**: (Van Wee & Banister, 2016, p. 281)
- **“[c]onceptual model”**: an “explicit structure on how dependent and independent variables are related” (Van Wee & Banister, 2016, p. 281)

Choosing a structure that works for you is part of finding your own voice.

References

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