

# WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW ASSIGNMENT

A literature review assignment is a broad-ranging, critical view of the literature on a particular topic. It is similar to the literature review of a thesis, with one major difference: the main aim of a literature review assignment is to summarise and critically evaluate the literature to establish current knowledge of a topic. The thesis literature review also needs to do this, but it also needs to identify a gap in the literature that will be filled by the writer's research.

Although a literature review is structured like an essay and is often a similar length, there are differences: in an essay, you argue a point of view, whereas in a literature review assignment, you critically analyse the literature in order to understand what is known about a topic.

Questions are often similar to this:

*Critically review the literature surrounding an area of contention in nursing.*

## What should I include in my literature review assignment?

Your literature review assignment should include the following:

- The main ideas, theories and concepts related to your topic.
- Areas of agreement and disagreement related to your topic
- Any problems or gaps in the literature related to your topic.

Here are some things to think about:

- What are some common themes?
- Compare and contrast the various findings, arguments, theories, and methodologies in the literature.
- What do the authors agree or disagree about? What are the major areas of disagreement, controversy, or debate?
- Critique the literature; synthesise and evaluate the research, don't just describe or report it. Look for any assumptions or bias in the literature.

## What is 'the literature'?

The literature refers to previous work or sources of information relevant to your topic. There are three sources of materials:

- **Primary sources:** First-hand reports of original studies, mainly found in academic journal articles.
- **Secondary sources:** Critical evaluations and syntheses of original studies.
- **Tertiary sources:** Information and ideas often put together from primary or secondary sources, such as text books, encyclopaedias, etc.

You should mainly use primary sources and perhaps the occasional secondary source.

## Should I use quotes or paraphrases?

**Quotations** are usually used only for:

- definitions of technical terms or key words and concepts
- particularly significant phrasing
- maintaining the writer's specific intention.

**Paraphrases** are the main method of citing authors. The advantages of paraphrasing are:

- showing that you understand and can interpret the original material
- allowing you to maintain your own voice.

## What reporting verbs should I use?

It is important that you are accurate in the way you report and interpret the work of others. When selecting reporting verbs to incorporate the work of other writers, you need to reflect the intention of the original work. You should also show your opinion of that work and how it relates to your discussion of the issues.

For example:

*Lewis (2013) explains the link between ...*

*Myers and Miller (2011) have conceded that their findings should not be ...*

*The findings have been criticised as lacking validity because ... (see Lee, Jones, & Elwood, 2013).*

*Hadan (2014) criticises previous researchers for ...*

*Several research teams singled out the importance of ... (Browne, 2013; Trang, 2012; McKay, 2014).*

These examples use APA referencing style.

## How should I structure my literature review assignment?

Your literature review should have a clearly organised structure with an introduction and conclusion.

Note that your literature review is **not** a summary of studies in your field presented one by one, paragraph by paragraph. Instead, you need to structure the body of your literature review in themes or ideas, synthesising information from various sources.

Here is a typical way of structuring a literature review assignment:

