

James Madison University

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Literature Reviews Overview - Supplement for "Genre Knowledge as Artisanship" presentation at IWCA 2019

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Literature Reviews

an overview

What is a literature review?

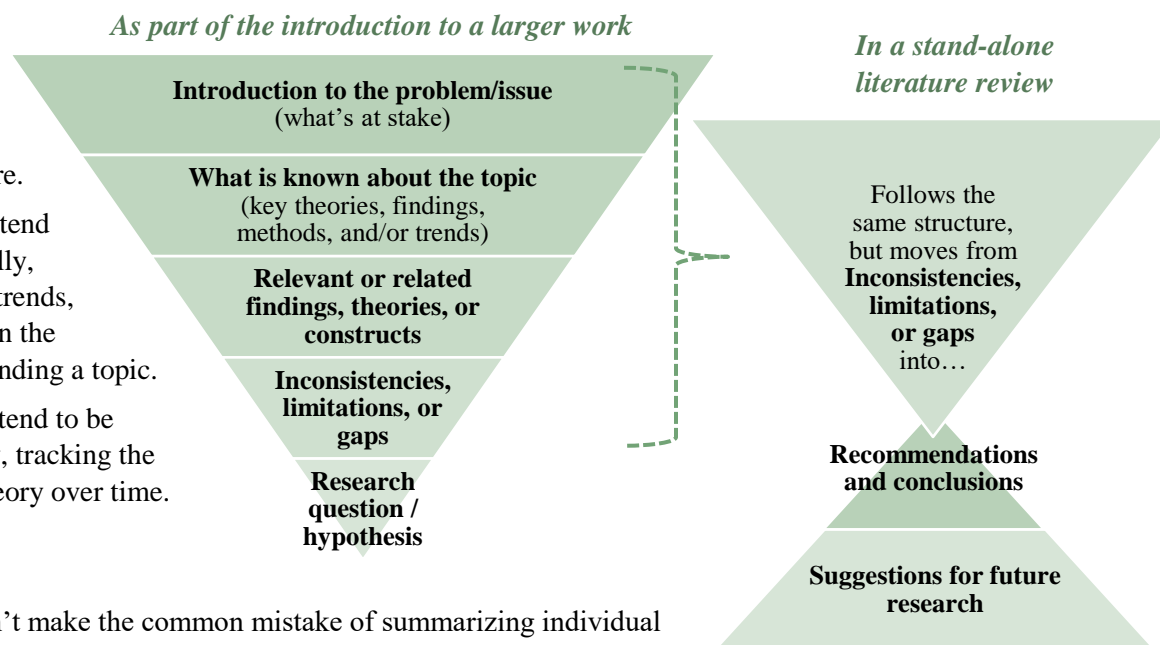
Literature reviews are a type of scholarly writing used to examine the state of knowledge on a topic or issue. They show “the progress of research toward clarifying a problem” by organizing, synthesizing, and evaluating existing research (Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 2009, p. 10). There are some common features of literature reviews (discussed below), but conventions vary by field. For example, literature reviews in the humanities and sciences employ different language and strategies for incorporating evidence. Make sure to review examples of literature reviews in your discipline before writing one. For a sample literature review annotated by UWC writing consultants and more resources on literature reviews, visit [this link](#).

Types of literature reviews:

- Many literature reviews are *part of a larger piece of writing*, but some are *stand-alone products*. For example, articles about empirical research studies have short literature reviews in their introductions that give context and help justify research questions. On the other hand, journals in the health professions often publish stand-alone literature reviews that describe and critique existing studies on a topic and make recommendations for evidence-based practice.
- Some literature reviews are *narrow in scope*, focusing only on the most recent research regarding a specific topic, while others are *comprehensive in scope*, tracking the evolution of a topic over a long time period and include information from a variety of disciplines and a wide range of themes. As a result, literature reviews can be as short as several paragraphs or as long as a book chapter.

Typical structure of a literature review:

- Literature reviews follow a broad-to-narrow structure.
- Shorter literature reviews tend to be organized thematically, identifying relationships, trends, gaps and inconsistencies in the scholarly literature surrounding a topic.
- Longer literature reviews tend to be organized chronologically, tracking the progress of research or theory over time.



A note on synthesizing: Don't make the common mistake of summarizing individual studies or articles one after the other. The goal is to synthesize—that is, to make observations about groups of studies. Synthesis often uses language like this:

- Much of the literature on [topic x] focuses on [major themes].
- In recent years, researchers have begun investigating [facets a, b, and c] of [topic x].
- The studies in this review of [topic x] confirm / suggest / call into question / support [idea / practice / finding / method / theory / guideline y].
- In the reviewed studies [variable x] was generally associated with higher / lower rates of [outcome y].
- A limitation of some / most / all of these studies is [y].