1. WHAT IS A LITERATURE REVIEW?

A literature review is a description of the literature relevant to a particular field or topic.

It gives an overview of:

- Books, reviews, articles, blog posts, and other materials that have been published on the topic.
- Studies that have been done on the topic.
- Theories and paradigms that have been proposed for the topic.
- The debate that surrounds the topic.
- The strengths and weaknesses of the approaches that have been used to study the topic.

It may take two forms:

- A whole paper, which annotates and/or critiques the literature in a particular subject area.
- Part of a thesis or dissertation, forming an early context-setting chapter.

It can be:

- A useful background outlining a piece of research, or putting forward a hypothesis.
- A whole paper, which annotates and/or critiques the literature in a particular subject area.
- Part of a thesis or dissertation, forming an early context-setting chapter.

2. THE STAGES OF A LITERATURE REVIEW

Define the problem

- It is important to define the problem in a way that is both specific and broad enough to allow you to carry out a comprehensive search.
- It is important to have a purpose for your literature review to narrow the scope of what you need to look out for when you read.

Carry out a search for relevant materials

- Relevant materials will probably comprise:
  - Books
  - Peer reviewed journal articles
  - Newspaper articles
  - Theses and dissertations
  - Other relevant information
  - Historical records
  - Commercial/government reports and statistical information

Evaluate the materials

- Evaluate the materials you have found using the following criteria:
  - Author credentials - are they an expert in the field? Are they affiliated to a reputable organization?
  - Date of publication - is it sufficiently current or has knowledge moved on?
  - If a book - is it the latest edition?
  - If a journal - is it a peer reviewed scholarly journal?
  - Is the publisher reputable and scholarly?
  - Is it addressing a scholarly audience?
  - Does it review relevant literature?
  - Is it an objective fact-based viewpoint? Is it logically organized and clear to follow?
  - Does it follow a particular theoretical viewpoint, e.g. feminist?
  - What is the relationship of this work to other material on the same topic - does it substantiate it or add a different perspective?
  - If using research, is the design sound? Is it primary or secondary material?
  - If it is from a practice-based perspective, what are the implications for practice?

3. HOW TO ORGANIZE A LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

- Introduce the topic and state reasons for choice. You could also point out overall trends, gaps and themes that emerge.

Body

- Discuss your sources. You can organize your discussion chronologically, thematically or methodologically.

Conclusion

- Summarize the major contributions, evaluating the current position, and pointing out flaws in methodology, gaps in the research, contradictions and areas for further study.

4. FURTHER INFORMATION

These universities have good information on how to write a literature review:

- University of North Carolina - http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/literature-reviews/
- University of California, Santa Cruz - http://library.ucsc.edu/ref/howto/

For links to "Write a Literature Review."