

## What is a literature review?

The aim of a literature review is to demonstrate that you have read, and have a good understanding of, the main published work concerning a particular topic or question in your subject area.

A literature review is a critical evaluation of what researchers have written on your topic - it is not just a simple summary of the information. You need to analyse each point of view as well as identify any strengths or weaknesses you may find in their research methods or findings.

It is important to select your sources carefully - you do not need to include everything you have read on the topic. Concentrate on publications that have influenced the field and have been written by reputable authors such as university academics. Use a variety of sources that are relevant and of a high quality such as: books, journal articles, conference proceedings and government reports.

### A good literature review...

- is more than just a list of relevant literature.
- considers the range of literature available.
- is a critical summary of the literature.
- gives opinions and personal response to the different writings.
- relates different writings to each other, compares and contrasts.
- does not take the literature at face value.
- shows an awareness of the theories and values that underpin the research.
- uses particular reporting verbs such as: assert, argue, state, conclude, contend.

## Writing your literature review

Writing a literature review is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. You need to figure out how each piece of writing fits together as well as identifying any missing pieces.

A conventional approach to constructing a literature review is to go from the general to the specific.

|  | Rough % guide for body content |  |
|--|--------------------------------|--|
| General overview of relevant literature                | 20%                            | Start by giving a general outline of the broad issues related to your topic or question. You need to show that you are aware of all the major issues surrounding it. |
| Research/literature indirectly relating to your topic. | 30%                            | Move onto describing/examining research articles and scholarly publications that have some connection with your topic.   |
| Research/literature directly relating to your topic    | 50%                            | Finally, Identify and critique literature that has a specific connection to your topic. Explain how this will guide your own research (if needed).                   |

## Before you begin to write your literature review

### Define your problem

- Which topic or field is being explored ?
- What are the main issues?
- Where do you define the boundaries?

### Search the literature

- Find materials relevant to what you are exploring
- Evaluate what you read.
  - Think about
    - \* Is it relevant to your topic?
    - \* Is it up to date?
    - \* Is the information reliable and accurate?
    - \* How are you going to organise and keep track of your sources?

Just like an essay, a literature review needs an introduction, a body, and a conclusion.

## The introduction

The introduction should always be one of the last writing tasks you do. It lets the reader know what the literature review contains, why it was done, what boundaries were set and an explanation of how it may inform further research.

### Introduction example (on the topic of leadership styles)

Numerous theories have been developed to explain leadership style and its effect on employees' motivation within an organisation. Although a search of the literature reveals a range of such theories, five key styles are identified as being the most common. These leadership styles are: laissez-faire, autocratic, participative, transactional, and transformational. There are advantages and disadvantages within each leadership style and usually it is the culture and goals of an organisation which determine which leadership style is most effective. Although the literature explains these leadership styles in a variety of business contexts, this review will focus mainly on their application within healthcare, and in particular, the management of nursing staff.

Look at how the introduction is broken down into three main parts.

Numerous theories have been developed to explain leadership style and its effect on employee's motivation within an organisation. Although a search of the literature reveals a range of such theories, five key styles are identified as being the most common.

Topic sentence noting there are five major themes to be covered.

These leadership styles are: laissez-faire, autocratic, participative, transactional, and transformational.

Five themes identified.

There are advantages and disadvantages within each leadership style and usually it is the culture and goals of an organisation which determine which leadership style is most effective.

Although the literature explains these leadership styles in a variety of business contexts, this review will focus mainly on their application within healthcare, and in particular the management of nursing staff.

Concluding sentence describing the specific focus of this review.

## The Body

This is where you put together all the parts of your *jigsaw* along with your own analysis of the literature and how it relates to your topic or question. Remember, it is a good idea to start by introducing the broad issues first before getting more specific. It is here that you must develop an integrated argument from all the sources that you have gathered. Linking many arguments together is what makes a good literature review. Look at the following body paragraph.

Most theories around transactional leadership identify rewards and punishments as being the prime motivations for employees' engagement. Blake, Wilson and Gifford (2011) argue that transactional leadership relies on employees agreeing to follow predetermined goals based on what managers decide are important. Similarly, the theories of Smith and McPhee (as cited in Roberts et al., 2010) suggest leaders promote compliance by workers through both rewards and punishments. However, studies conducted by Bernard, Hatton and Frobisher (2015) suggest that if it becomes the overriding leadership style of a business it could lead to an environment dominated by "position, power, perks, and politics" (p.23). The transactional style of leadership can be viewed as adequate in developing employee motivation. However, the literature suggests that transformational leadership within a healthcare setting seems to be more effective.

Note - Not all paragraphs need to have contrasting arguments but to include some when appropriate shows you have read widely. Look how the example paragraph is broken down into its parts.

Most theories around transactional leadership identify rewards and punishments as being the prime motivations for employees' engagement.

Topic sentence that introduces the main idea of the paragraph.

Blake, Wilson and Gifford (2011) argue that transactional leadership relies on employees agreeing to follow predetermined goals based on what managers decide are important. Similarly, the theories of Smith and McPhee (cited in Roberts et al., 2010) suggest leaders promote compliance by workers through both rewards and punishments.

Supporting evidence from the literature.

However, studies conducted by Bernard, Hatton and Frobisher (2015) suggest that if it becomes the overriding leadership style of a business it could lead to an environment dominated by "position, power, perks, and politics" (p.23).

Contrasting research from the literature.

The transactional style of leadership can be viewed as adequate in developing employee motivation. However, the literature suggests that transformational leadership within a healthcare setting seems to be more effective.

Concluding sentence linking to next paragraph

A good literature review not only presents the information you have found from the literature, it often includes your own critique and evaluation of it. Even though it may be your own judgement it is a good idea to support that opinion using other literature. Look at the following paragraph.

According to Beetson (2008), transformational Leadership occurs where the leader takes a visionary position and inspires people to follow. The roles of the transformational leader in the business setting include encouraging teamwork, promoting positive self-esteem, motivating staff to perform better, and enabling staff to become more involved in developing policies and procedures (Jones & Gilkerson 2012). It can be argued that it would also be very effective in a healthcare setting where nurses are given the opportunity to have greater input into the effectiveness of their own practice. This is supported by Roberts et al. (2007) who found that nurse leaders who use transformational leadership principles create higher levels of job satisfaction, well being, and a greater commitment to the organisation. When looking to generate lasting and significant change in nursing, a transformational style of leadership should be considered.

Look at how the example paragraph is broken down into its parts.

Transformational leadership is a theory that was developed by James Burns in 1978 and has since gained widespread popularity.

Topic sentence that introduces the main idea.

According to Beetson (2008), transformational Leadership occurs where the leader takes a visionary position and inspires people to follow.

First statement of evidence from the literature.

The roles of the transformational leader in the business setting include encouraging teamwork, promoting positive self-esteem, motivating staff to perform better, and enabling staff to become more involved in developing policies and procedures (Jones & Gilkerson 2012).

Second statement of evidence from the literature.

It can be argued that it would also be very effective in a healthcare setting where nurses are given the opportunity to have greater input into the effectiveness of their own practice. This is supported by Roberts et al. (2007) who found that nurse leaders who use transformational leadership principles create higher levels of job satisfaction, well being, and a greater commitment to the organisation.

Student analysis.

When looking to generate lasting and significant change in nursing, a transformational style of leadership should be considered.

Concluding statement.

Note - Not all paragraphs need to contain an analysis of the information but to include some when appropriate shows you have been thinking critically about what you have read.

Do not forget, just like an essay, you need to include a one or two paragraph conclusion that sums up the main points that have emerged throughout the body of your literature review.

### Examples of reporting verbs to present other peoples' ideas

|                                    |  |                           |
|------------------------------------|--|---------------------------|
| According to ...                   | Based on the findings of ... it can be argued... | ... proposed that ...     |
| As explained by ...                | ... states that ...                              | ... claims that ...       |
| However, ... stated that ...       | ... suggested ...                                | ... concluded that ...    |
| Similarly, ... stated that ....    | ... for example, ...                             | ... agreed that ...       |
| Based on the ideas of ...          | ... defined .... as ....                         | ... relates ...           |
| As identified by ...               | ... disputed that ...                            | ... contrasts ...         |
| With regard to ... argued that ... | ... concluded that ...                           | ... confirmed that ...    |
| ... argues ....                    | ... highlights ...                               | ... demonstrates ...      |
| ... found that ...                 | ... identifies ...                               | ... wrote that ...        |
| ... demonstrated ...               | ... also ...                                     | ... reported ....         |
| ... pointed out that ...           | ... maintained that ...                          | ... hypothesised that ... |
| ... expressed the opinion that ... | ... also mentioned ....                          | ... asserts that ....     |
| ... identified ...                 | ... goes on to state/suggest/say                 | ... emphasises            |
| ... challenges the idea ....       | ... showed that ...                              | ... explored the idea ... |

## Final checklist

### Selection of Sources

- Have you stated the reasons for doing your literature review?
- Have you stayed within reasonable boundaries?
- Why did you include some of the literature and exclude others?
- Have you emphasised recent developments?
- Are your sources credible?
- Is the literature you have selected relevant?

### Critical Evaluation of the Literature

- Have you organised your material according to issues?
- Is there a logic to the way you organised the material?
- Does the amount of detail included on an issue relate to its importance?
- Have you been sufficiently critical of design and methodological issues?



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