



FORHEAL: Forestry Higher Education Advancement in Laos (Erasmus+)  
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## Literature review

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# Why write a literature review?

1. When you write a thesis, dissertation, or research paper, you will have to conduct a literature review to situate your research within existing knowledge
2. The literature review gives you a chance to:
  - Demonstrate your familiarity with the topic and scholarly context
  - Develop a theoretical framework and methodology for your research
  - Position yourself in relation to other researchers and theorists
  - Show how your research addresses a gap or contributes to a debate
3. You might also have to write a literature review as a stand-alone publication. In this case, the purpose is to evaluate the current state of research and demonstrate your knowledge of scholarly debates around a topic
4. The content will look slightly different in each case, but the process of conducting a literature review follows the same steps



# Step 1: Search for relevant literature

Before you begin searching for literature, you need a clearly defined topic

1. If you are writing the literature review section of a dissertation or research paper, you will search for literature related to your research problem and questions
2. If you are writing a literature review as a stand-alone assignment, you will have to choose a focus and develop a central question to direct your search. Unlike a dissertation research question, this question has to be answerable without collecting original data. You should be able to answer it based only on a review of existing publications
3. Search for literature using keywords and citations
4. Start by creating a list of keywords related to your research topic and question. Some useful databases to search for journals and articles include: 1) Your university's library catalogue, 2) Google Scholar, 3) CABI, 4) JSTOR, 4) EBSCO
5. Read the abstract to find out whether an article is relevant to your question. When you find a useful book or article, you can check the bibliography to find other relevant



## Step 2: Evaluate and select sources

You probably won't be able to read absolutely everything that has been written on the topic – you'll have to evaluate which sources are most relevant to your questions

- For each publication, ask yourself:
  - What question or problem is the author addressing?
  - What are the key concepts and how are they defined?
  - What are the key theories, models and methods? Does the research use established frameworks or take an innovative approach?
  - What are the results and conclusions of the study?
  - How does the publication relate to other literature in the field? Does it confirm, add to, or challenge established knowledge?
  - How does the publication contribute to your understanding of the topic? What are its key insights and arguments?
  - What are the strengths and weaknesses of the research?



## Step 3: Identify themes, debates, and gaps

To begin organizing your literature review's argument and structure, you need to understand the connections and relationships between the sources you've read. Based on your reading and notes, you can look for:

- Trends and patterns (in theory, method or results): do certain approaches become more or less popular over time?
- Themes: what questions or concepts recur across the literature?
- Debates, conflicts and contradictions: where do sources disagree?
- Pivotal publications: are there any influential theories or studies that changed the direction of the field?
- Gaps: what is missing from the literature? Are there weaknesses that need to be addressed?

This step will help you work out the structure of your literature review and (if applicable) show how your own research will contribute to existing knowledge



## Step 4: Outline your literature review's structure

Here are various approaches to organizing the body of a literature review. You should have a rough idea of your strategy before you start writing.

Depending on the length of your literature review, you can combine several of these strategies (for example, your overall structure might be thematic, but each theme is discussed chronologically)

### Chronological

- The simplest

### Thematic

- If you have found some recurring central themes, you can organize your literature review into subsections that address different aspects of the topic.

### Methodological

### Theoretical

A literature review is often the foundation for a theoretical framework. You can use it to discuss various theories, models, and definitions of key concepts



## Step 5: Write your literature review

- Like any other academic text, your literature review should have an introduction, a main body, and a conclusion
- What you include in each depends on the objective of your literature review



# Thank you



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