What is a Literature Review?

Generally speaking, a literature review (lit review for short) is an analysis of existing scholarly publications (e.g. books, peer-reviewed articles) that directly relate to your research question.

The purpose of a literature review is to:
- Provide background information on a topic
- Give a sense of the overall status of the research conducted
- Inform on the historical and current argument
- Establish connections between previous research and your own

It may sometimes be more helpful to think about what a literature review is not:
- Summary
- Listing of vaguely or entirely unrelated resources
- Listing of every piece of research ever conducted on a topic
- Criticism of what has been already written

Different Types of Literature Reviews

Literature Reviews are most often included in research papers but they can also be stand-alone works. They come in different flavors, so it is important for you to know and follow the guidelines you are provided with for your assignment.

Here are the most common types of Literature Reviews:
- Traditional (narrative)
- Systematic
- Meta analysis
- Meta synthesis

For more on how each of these lit reviews are structured and to see examples, visit University of Toledo’s research guide: libguides.utoledo.edu/litreview
Writing Literature Reviews, Step-by-Step

1. Decide on what your lit review should look like by asking questions as such:
   a. Are there any specific assignment instructions I need to consider upfront?
   b. How many studies should I include?
   c. What time span should I cover?
   d. How comprehensive should I make the lit review without overloading my audience?

2. Select research materials:
   a. Think about the extent of your topic:
      i. Even though you are taking a social work class, does your topic also fall within other subject areas, e.g. health professions, psychology, education, justice studies?
   b. Consult with your professor about important authors and seminal works
   c. Find books on your topic for a broader approach and better overall understanding of your area of research (library.sjsu.edu)
   d. Use the online research guide for Social Work (http://libguides.sjsu.edu/scwk) to find links to subject-specific databases:
      i. Get started with a comprehensive databases like Academic Search Complete
      ii. Next, use subject-specific databases like Social Sciences Full Text
      iii. Look at Proquest Dissertation and Theses to find MA and PhD publications

3. Conduct your research:
   a. Keep track of your searches from the start
      i. Use Ref Works, a research journal, note cards, or any other system that works well for you
   b. Consult with your instructor about experts and seminal works to get you started
   c. Read the abstract of every article you find
      i. Ensure that the article is really on your topic
      ii. Saves time
   d. Use bibliographies in books and references in articles to find more resources

4. Write your literature review, with the following in mind:
   a. Who is/are the author(s)?
      i. Are they experts on the subject?
      ii. Has the study you are looking at been cited/analyzed by others?
   b. What research question(s) were asked? Why?
   c. What research methods were used?
      i. Look at the individual parts of the study: its own lit review, samples, variables, etc.
   d. What were the results and what conclusions did the authors draw?
   e. Dig deeper by asking questions such as:
      i. Who funded the research and why?
ii. Was the research approach comprehensive or did it leave you with questions or did it leave you with questions?

➡ Learning more about and Finding Examples for Literature Reviews

   a. Select the “Writing Literature Reviews” tab
   b. Look for the “How to Write Literature Reviews” tab
   c. Go through the content at your own pace, repeatedly if/when needed.
   d. Create a set of your own notes about what you learned from the examples and videos and use them to guide you through the lit review writing process

2. Last but not least, contact the subject librarian for the topic area you have chosen. While I am your Social Work Librarian and always happy to help, the Psychology Librarian, for example, will know much more about these topics than I do. A comprehensive list of SJSU subject librarians can be found here: library.sjsu.edu/staff-directory/sjsu-library-subject-liaisons

➡ Add Your Notes Below: