



Building a Research Base: How to Conduct a Literature Review

Welcome to Week 3 of our research methods course. Today, we'll explore the essential process of conducting a literature review - a critical foundation for any research project. We'll cover everything from search strategies to synthesis techniques that will help you build a comprehensive research base.

Purpose and Role of the Literature Review

A literature review serves as the backbone of your research by:

- Establishing what is already known in your field
- Identifying gaps in existing knowledge
- Providing context for your research question
- Demonstrating your familiarity with relevant scholarship
- Helping you refine your methodology

A well-executed literature review doesn't just summarize sources - it creates a dialogue between existing research and your own investigation.



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Unlock your potential

Search Strategies: Finding Relevant Sources



Google Scholar

Offers broad coverage across disciplines with citation tracking. Use advanced search operators like "quotation marks" for exact phrases and author:lastname to find specific researchers.



JSTOR

Excellent for humanities and social sciences with deep archives. Utilize the "Advanced Search" to filter by publication date, subject area, and content type.



EBSCO

Comprehensive database with full-text articles. Use Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) to refine searches and the "Subject Terms" feature to find relevant keywords.

Academic vs. Non-Academic Sources

Academic Sources

- Peer-reviewed journal articles
- Scholarly books and monographs
- Conference proceedings
- Dissertations and theses

Characteristics: Rigorous peer review, extensive citations, specialized terminology, methodological transparency

Non-Academic Sources

- News articles and magazines
- Government reports
- Industry white papers
- Blogs and websites

Characteristics: Less rigorous review, fewer citations, accessible language, potential bias or commercial interests



Identifying Themes, Gaps, and Trends



Identify Key Themes

Look for recurring concepts, methodologies, or findings across multiple sources. Create a concept map to visualize relationships between different themes.



Spot Knowledge Gaps

Pay attention to limitations mentioned by authors, contradictory findings, or areas where research is sparse or outdated. These gaps may provide opportunities for your research.



Recognize Trends

Notice shifts in methodology, theoretical approaches, or focus over time. Consider how recent technological or societal changes might influence your field.

Effective Note-Taking Strategies

Develop a systematic approach to note-taking that will facilitate synthesis later:

- **Bibliographic details:** Record complete citation information immediately
- **Summary notes:** Capture main arguments and findings
- **Methodological notes:** Document research approaches and limitations
- **Quotation notes:** Copy exact wording with page numbers for potential direct quotes
- **Critical notes:** Record your own thoughts, questions, and connections to other sources





Synthesizing Arguments

Group Sources by Theme

Organize your notes according to key themes, methodologies, or chronology rather than reviewing sources one by one.

Compare and Contrast

Identify points of agreement and disagreement between authors. Consider how different theoretical perspectives lead to different interpretations of similar evidence.

Develop Your Voice

Move beyond summarizing to evaluate the strength of arguments, identify patterns across sources, and articulate your own perspective on the literature.