

how to write a literature review apa 7th edition

how to write a literature review apa 7th edition effectively is a crucial skill for any academic or professional researcher. A well-crafted literature review provides a comprehensive overview of existing scholarly work on a specific topic, establishing context, identifying gaps in current knowledge, and ultimately justifying your own research. This article will serve as your definitive guide, detailing the strategic planning, meticulous research, effective organization, and precise APA 7th edition formatting required to produce a high-quality literature review. We will explore everything from defining your scope and conducting thorough literature searches to synthesizing complex information, integrating sources with accurate in-text citations, and constructing a flawless references list. Mastering these elements ensures your review is not only academically sound but also adheres to the rigorous standards of APA 7th edition, enhancing its credibility and impact within your field.

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Understanding the Literature Review in APA 7th Edition

A literature review is more than just a summary of books, articles, and other scholarly sources; it is a critical analysis and synthesis of existing research related to a specific topic or research question. Its

primary purpose is to provide readers with an overview of current knowledge, showcasing the intellectual landscape surrounding your area of study. This foundational document establishes context for your own research, identifies key theories, methods, and findings, and highlights where your work fits within the broader academic conversation.

What is a Literature Review?

At its core, a literature review systematically examines scholarly articles, books, dissertations, and other sources relevant to a particular area of research. It doesn't merely list sources but critically evaluates them, discussing their strengths and weaknesses, identifying consistencies and inconsistencies, and pointing out unresolved questions or debates. The review demonstrates the writer's understanding of the subject matter, their ability to navigate existing scholarship, and their capacity to synthesize complex information into a cohesive narrative.

The goals of a literature review are multifaceted. It helps to:

- Provide background information and context for your research.
- Identify gaps in current knowledge that your research aims to address.
- Establish the significance and relevance of your study.
- Avoid duplicating previous research and building upon existing work.
- Inform your methodological choices and theoretical framework.
- Demonstrate your expertise and credibility in the field.

Why APA 7th Edition Matters for Your Literature Review

The American Psychological Association (APA) 7th Edition provides a standardized set of guidelines for academic writing, particularly prevalent in the social sciences, education, and nursing. Adhering to APA 7th edition standards for your literature review is critical for several reasons. Firstly, it ensures clarity, consistency, and professionalism, making your work easier to read and understand for a wide academic audience. Secondly, it maintains academic integrity by providing a clear and consistent method for attributing sources, thereby preventing plagiarism.

Moreover, APA 7th edition offers specific guidance on how to structure your paper, format headings, integrate in-text citations, and compile a references list. These guidelines are not arbitrary; they are designed to enhance the credibility of your arguments by clearly distinguishing your voice from that of the sources you cite, and by allowing readers to easily locate the original research. By mastering APA 7th edition, you demonstrate attention to detail and a commitment to scholarly rigor, both of which are highly valued in academic contexts.

Strategic Planning and Research for Your Literature Review

Before you begin writing, strategic planning and thorough research are indispensable steps for creating a comprehensive and compelling literature review. This foundational phase ensures that your review is focused, well-supported, and relevant to your research objectives.

Defining Your Scope and Research Question

The first critical step is to clearly define the scope of your literature review. A broad topic can lead to an overwhelming amount of literature, making synthesis difficult. Conversely, a too-narrow scope might not yield enough relevant sources. Begin by formulating a focused research question or a set of questions that your literature review will address. This question acts as a compass, guiding your search for sources and helping you determine what information is truly relevant.

Consider the parameters of your review:

- **Timeframe:** Are you focusing on recent research (e.g., last 5-10 years) or a broader historical context?
- **Specific Population:** Are you looking at a particular demographic, age group, or clinical population?
- **Geographical Focus:** Is your review limited to studies from a certain region or country?
- **Types of Studies:** Will you include only empirical studies, or also theoretical articles, meta-analyses, or qualitative research?

A well-defined scope and clear research question will streamline your search and ensure your review remains focused and coherent.

Conducting a Comprehensive Literature Search

Once your scope is defined, the next step is to conduct a systematic and comprehensive search for relevant literature. This involves utilizing academic databases and search engines effectively. Start with broad keywords derived from your research question, then refine your search using synonyms, related terms, and Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) to narrow or broaden results as needed.

Key resources for your search include:

- **Academic Databases:** PubMed, PsycINFO, ERIC, Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar, JSTOR.
- **University Library Catalogs:** For books, dissertations, and theses.
- **Reference Lists:** Scrutinize the reference lists of highly relevant articles you find; they often lead to other important sources.

- **Citation Trackers:** Tools like Google Scholar's "Cited by" feature can help you find newer articles that cite an older, foundational work.

Keep a detailed record of your search terms and the databases you used, as this information may be relevant for demonstrating the systematic nature of your review.

Evaluating and Selecting Relevant Sources

After compiling a list of potential sources, you must critically evaluate each one for its relevance, credibility, and academic rigor. Not all sources are created equal, and including unreliable or irrelevant information can weaken your literature review.

Consider the following criteria when evaluating sources:

- **Relevance:** Does the article directly address your research question or a significant aspect of your topic?
- **Credibility:** Is the author an expert in the field? Is the journal peer-reviewed? Is the publisher reputable?
- **Currency:** Is the information up-to-date, especially if your topic is rapidly evolving?
- **Methodology:** If it's an empirical study, is the research design sound? Are the methods clearly described?
- **Bias:** Does the author present a balanced argument, or is there a clear bias?

Read abstracts, introductions, and conclusions first to quickly assess relevance. Only delve into full articles once you're confident they meet your criteria. This selective process ensures you spend your time effectively, focusing on the most valuable contributions to your literature review.

Organizing and Synthesizing Your Findings

Once you have gathered and evaluated your sources, the real work of constructing your literature review begins. This stage involves organizing your findings logically and, crucially, synthesizing them rather than merely summarizing each source individually. Synthesis is the process of combining diverse elements into a coherent whole, identifying connections, contradictions, and new insights that emerge from the collective body of research.

Developing an Outline for Your Literature Review

An effective literature review requires a clear, logical structure. Before you start writing, create a detailed outline that maps out the main sections and sub-sections of your review. This outline will ensure a cohesive flow and prevent your review from becoming a disjointed list of summaries. There are several common organizational approaches for literature reviews:

- **Chronological:** Tracing the development of the topic over time, highlighting shifts in theories, methodologies, or findings.
- **Thematic:** Organizing by recurring themes, concepts, or subtopics identified across the literature. This is often the most common and effective approach.
- **Methodological:** Grouping studies by their research methods (e.g., qualitative, quantitative, experimental).
- **Theoretical:** Discussing different theoretical perspectives that have been applied to the topic.
- **By Debate/Controversy:** Focusing on areas where researchers disagree or different perspectives exist.

Your outline should clearly define which sources will be discussed under each heading and how they relate to the overall argument or research question of your literature review.

Synthesizing Information, Not Just Summarizing

The most common pitfall in writing a literature review is simply summarizing each source one after another. A strong literature review goes beyond summary; it synthesizes the information. This means you need to identify relationships among sources, point out commonalities and differences, discuss controversies, and highlight areas where research is lacking. Instead of saying, "Author A found X, and Author B found Y," you should aim to say, "Both Author A and Author B found X, suggesting Z, but Author C's work introduces a different perspective, emphasizing W."

To synthesize effectively, ask yourself:

- What are the major themes or trends emerging from the literature?
- Are there conflicting findings or debates among researchers?
- How do different studies build on or challenge each other?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the collective body of research?
- What gaps in knowledge are evident when looking at the literature as a whole?

Your goal is to weave the sources together to build a coherent argument about the state of research in your chosen area.

Taking Effective Notes and Avoiding Plagiarism

As you read and evaluate sources, it is crucial to take detailed and organized notes. This practice will save you considerable time during the writing phase and significantly reduce the risk of accidental plagiarism. For each source, record key findings, methodologies, theoretical frameworks, and any direct quotes you might want to use.

When taking notes, clearly distinguish between:

1. **Direct Quotes:** Copy the text exactly as it appears, enclose it in quotation marks, and note the author, year, and page number.
2. **Paraphrases:** Rephrase the author's ideas in your own words, ensuring the meaning is preserved, and still note the author and year.
3. **Summaries:** Condense the main idea of a larger section or entire article in your own words, noting the author and year.

Always cite the original source immediately in your notes. This rigorous approach to note-taking is your primary defense against plagiarism, ensuring that all borrowed ideas are properly attributed according to APA 7th edition guidelines.

Writing the Literature Review: Structure and Style in APA 7th Edition

Once your research is complete and your outline is robust, you can move on to the writing phase. Adhering to APA 7th edition guidelines for structure and style will ensure your literature review is clear, professional, and academically sound. Each section of your review—introduction, body, and conclusion—plays a distinct role in conveying your analysis effectively.

Crafting an Engaging Introduction for Your Review

The introduction to your literature review sets the stage for the reader. It should begin by broadly introducing your topic, gradually narrowing down to the specific focus of your review. This section should clearly state the purpose of your literature review and outline the scope, including any limitations. Crucially, it must also articulate the organizational structure of your review, giving the reader a roadmap of what to expect.

An effective introduction will:

- Hook the reader and establish the importance of your topic.
- Provide necessary background information.
- Clearly state the main objective or research question of your literature review.
- Briefly summarize the major debates, gaps, or trends in the literature you will explore.
- Preview the organizational structure of your review (e.g., "This review will first discuss X, then move to Y, and conclude with Z").

Ensure that your introduction flows logically and prepares the reader for the detailed analysis that follows.

Developing Coherent Body Paragraphs

The body of your literature review is where you present your critical analysis and synthesis of the selected literature. Each paragraph should focus on a specific theme, subtopic, or argument identified in your outline. Begin each paragraph with a clear topic sentence that introduces the main point of that paragraph. This topic sentence should relate back to your overall thesis or research question for the review.

Within each paragraph, integrate evidence from your sources to support your points. Remember to synthesize, not just summarize. Discuss how different studies relate to each other, highlighting similarities, differences, and areas of contention. Use strong analytical verbs and avoid simply listing what each author said. Ensure smooth transitions between sentences and paragraphs to maintain a logical flow of ideas. Each assertion should be backed by cited evidence, following APA 7th edition in-text citation rules.

Writing a Concluding Section

The conclusion of your literature review should provide a sense of closure and reiterate the main insights gleaned from your analysis. It should not introduce new information but rather summarize the key findings, themes, and gaps identified throughout the review. Revisit your original research question or purpose and briefly explain how the literature you reviewed addresses it.

A strong conclusion typically includes:

- A succinct summary of the major findings and patterns identified in the literature.
- A reiteration of the significant gaps in current research.
- Suggestions for future research directions that emerge from these gaps.
- A clear statement of the implications of the reviewed literature, especially in relation to your own research (if applicable).

The conclusion should leave the reader with a clear understanding of the current state of knowledge on your topic and the critical areas that still need exploration.

Integrating Sources Effectively with APA 7th Edition Citations

Properly integrating sources is fundamental to academic writing and adhering to APA 7th edition standards. All information derived from external sources, whether directly quoted, paraphrased, or summarized, must be cited in the text. APA 7th edition primarily uses the author-date citation system. This means that after using information from a source, you must include the author's last name and the year of publication in parentheses.

Examples of in-text citations:

- **Paraphrase:** (Author, Year) or Author (Year) states that...
- **Direct Quote (less than 40 words):** "..." (Author, Year, p. X).

- **Direct Quote (40 words or more - block quote):** Indent the entire block, omit quotation marks, and place the citation at the end (Author, Year, p. X).

Focus on paraphrasing and summarizing to integrate sources smoothly into your own narrative. Use direct quotes sparingly and only when the original wording is exceptionally precise, impactful, or irreplaceable. Consistent and accurate in-text citation practices are vital for maintaining academic integrity and allowing readers to trace your arguments back to their original sources.

APA 7th Edition Formatting and Ethical Considerations

Beyond the content and structure, the physical presentation and ethical considerations of your literature review are paramount, especially when adhering to APA 7th edition standards. Proper formatting enhances readability and professionalism, while ethical practices uphold academic integrity.

General Formatting Guidelines for Your Literature Review

APA 7th edition provides specific guidelines for the overall layout and design of your paper. While specific requirements may vary depending on whether your literature review is a standalone paper or part of a larger work (e.g., a thesis chapter), general guidelines include:

- **Font:** Use an accessible font like 12-point Times New Roman, 11-point Calibri, or 11-point Arial.
- **Spacing:** Double-space the entire paper, including the title page, text, and references list.
- **Margins:** Maintain 1-inch (2.54 cm) margins on all sides (top, bottom, left, and right).
- **Page Header:** For student papers, a page number is typically sufficient, aligned to the top right. For professional papers, a running head (shortened title) is also included on every page.
- **Headings:** Use APA's five levels of headings to organize your paper clearly. Your main sections will likely use Level 2 headings, and subtopics Level 3, as demonstrated in this article.

Ensure that all these elements are consistently applied throughout your literature review. Consistency in formatting not only looks professional but also demonstrates meticulous attention to detail, a hallmark of scholarly work.

Constructing the APA 7th Edition References List

The references list, placed at the end of your literature review, provides complete bibliographic information for every source cited in your text. This list must begin on a new page, titled "References" (centered, bolded, and not italicized). All entries should be double-spaced and have a hanging indent, meaning the first line of each entry is flush left, and subsequent lines are indented by 0.5 inches.

Key principles for the references list:

- **Alphabetical Order:** Entries are organized alphabetically by the first author's last name.
- **Accuracy:** Every detail—author names, publication years, titles, journal names, volume/issue numbers, page ranges, and DOIs/URLs—must be precisely accurate.
- **Completeness:** Only sources cited in your paper should appear in the references list, and every in-text citation must have a corresponding entry in the list.
- **DOIs/URLs:** Include Digital Object Identifiers (DOIs) for journal articles and stable URLs for other online sources whenever available.

Refer to the official APA Publication Manual or reliable APA style guides for specific examples of how to format different source types (e.g., journal articles, books, book chapters, websites, dissertations), as these can vary significantly.

Ensuring Academic Integrity and Avoiding Plagiarism

Academic integrity is the cornerstone of scholarly research, and avoiding plagiarism is a fundamental ethical responsibility. Plagiarism involves presenting someone else's words or ideas as your own without proper attribution. While intentional plagiarism is a serious offense, accidental plagiarism can also occur if proper citation practices are not followed.

To ensure academic integrity:

- **Cite Everything:** Always cite the original source for any information, ideas, or data that are not your own original thought or common knowledge.
- **Paraphrase Carefully:** When rephrasing an author's ideas, change both the wording and the sentence structure. Simply changing a few words is not enough.
- **Use Quotations Sparingly:** Reserve direct quotes for instances where the original wording is essential. Always enclose quotes in quotation marks and include page numbers.
- **Maintain Meticulous Records:** Keep track of your sources, notes, and where ideas originated.
- **Understand Self-Plagiarism:** Even reusing your own previously published work without proper citation can be considered self-plagiarism.

By rigorously adhering to APA 7th edition citation rules and embracing these ethical practices, you uphold the standards of scholarship and build trust with your readers.

Revising and Refining Your Literature Review

The writing process is rarely linear; a well-crafted literature review benefits immensely from multiple rounds of revision and refinement. This crucial stage allows you to polish your prose, strengthen your arguments, and ensure full compliance with APA 7th edition standards, ultimately enhancing the quality and impact of your work.

Self-Editing and Peer Review Strategies

After completing your initial draft, step away from your literature review for a short period, if possible. Returning with fresh eyes will help you catch errors and identify areas for improvement that you might have overlooked. Begin with a comprehensive self-edit, focusing on several key areas:

- **Content and Argument:** Is your central argument clear? Do your paragraphs flow logically? Have you truly synthesized the literature, or is it merely a series of summaries? Are there any gaps in your analysis?
- **Clarity and Coherence:** Is your language clear, concise, and academic? Are there awkward sentences or ambiguous phrases? Are your transitions between ideas smooth?
- **Grammar, Spelling, and Punctuation:** Proofread meticulously for any mechanical errors.
- **APA 7th Style:** Check for consistent tone, appropriate use of headings, and correct in-text citation formatting.

Following self-editing, consider seeking feedback through peer review. Having another set of eyes—ideally someone familiar with your topic or APA style—can provide invaluable insights. Peers can identify areas of confusion, suggest alternative phrasing, or spot errors you missed, offering a fresh perspective that significantly strengthens your review.

Checking for APA 7th Edition Compliance

The final stage of refinement involves a thorough check for full APA 7th edition compliance. This goes beyond basic in-text citations and encompasses every aspect of your paper's presentation. Create a checklist or use an online APA style checker to systematically review each requirement.

Specific areas to meticulously check include:

- **Title Page:** Correct format for student or professional papers.
- **Page Header:** Correct page numbering and running head (if applicable).
- **Headings:** Consistent use of APA's five levels of headings.
- **Text Formatting:** Double-spacing, recommended font, and 1-inch margins throughout.
- **In-text Citations:** Accuracy of author-date format for all paraphrases and summaries, and inclusion of page numbers for direct quotes.

- **References List:** "References" title, alphabetical order, hanging indents, accuracy of all bibliographic information, and correct formatting for each source type. Ensure every in-text citation has a corresponding entry and vice versa.
- **Bias-Free Language:** Ensure your language is inclusive and free from bias, as emphasized in APA 7th edition.

A rigorous final check for APA 7th edition compliance is not just about following rules; it's about demonstrating professionalism, precision, and respect for academic standards, which are essential for your literature review to be taken seriously within the scholarly community.

Q: What is the main purpose of writing a literature review in APA 7th edition?

A: The main purpose of writing a literature review is to provide a comprehensive, critical, and objective overview of existing scholarly research relevant to a specific topic or research question. It establishes context, identifies key theories and methodologies, highlights gaps in current knowledge, and ultimately justifies the need for your own research or further study, all while adhering to the standardized formatting and citation guidelines of APA 7th edition for clarity and academic integrity.

Q: How does APA 7th edition impact the structure of a literature review?

A: While the core structure (introduction, body, conclusion) remains consistent, APA 7th edition primarily impacts the internal formatting, citation style, and presentation within these sections. It dictates the use of specific heading levels for organization, the author-date system for in-text citations, the precise formatting for the references list, font choices, spacing, and general paper layout. These guidelines ensure consistency, readability, and proper attribution of sources throughout the review.

Q: What is the difference between summarizing and synthesizing in a literature review?

A: Summarizing involves restating the main points of individual sources in your own words. While necessary, it's not sufficient for a literature review. Synthesizing, on the other hand, means integrating and connecting multiple sources to identify patterns, themes, contradictions, and commonalities across the research. It involves critically evaluating and combining information from various sources to build a cohesive argument, highlight relationships between studies, and uncover new insights or gaps in the collective body of literature, rather than just presenting each source separately.

Q: How many sources should I include in my literature review?

A: There is no fixed number of sources for a literature review; the appropriate quantity depends on the scope and complexity of your topic, the depth of your analysis, and the specific requirements of your assignment or publication. Generally, a comprehensive review will include a significant number of relevant, high-quality scholarly sources to demonstrate a thorough understanding of the field. Focus on quality and relevance over sheer quantity, ensuring each source contributes meaningfully to your analysis and helps address your review's purpose.

Q: Do I need a separate title page for my literature review if it's part of a larger paper (e.g., a thesis chapter)?

A: If your literature review is a standalone paper, it absolutely requires its own APA 7th edition title page. If it is a chapter within a larger work like a thesis or dissertation, it typically does not need a separate title page for just the chapter. Instead, it would begin directly with the chapter title (e.g., "Chapter 2: Literature Review") formatted as a Level 1 heading, following the overall formatting of the larger document. Always consult your institution's specific guidelines or your instructor's requirements for definitive guidance.

Q: What are common mistakes to avoid when writing a literature review in APA 7th edition?

A: Common mistakes include:

1. Simply summarizing sources: Failing to synthesize and critically analyze the relationships between studies.
2. Lack of focus: Not having a clear research question or purpose, leading to a disorganized review.
3. Poor organization: A haphazard structure without logical flow or clear headings.
4. Outdated sources: Relying too heavily on old research without acknowledging newer developments.
5. Inconsistent APA formatting: Errors in in-text citations, reference list formatting, headings, or general paper layout.
6. Plagiarism: Failing to properly attribute sources, even if unintentional.
7. Bias: Presenting only evidence that supports a preconceived notion, rather than a balanced view of the literature.
8. Weak introduction/conclusion: Not clearly stating the review's purpose or failing to summarize key findings and implications effectively.

Q: Can I use older sources in my APA 7th literature review?

A: Yes, you can and often should use older sources in your APA 7th edition literature review, especially foundational or seminal works that have significantly shaped the field. While it's important to include recent research to demonstrate current understanding, older studies can provide essential historical context, introduce key theories, or highlight significant methodological advancements. When using older sources, it's good practice to briefly explain their enduring relevance or how they laid the groundwork for contemporary research, demonstrating your awareness of the temporal evolution of your topic.

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