1. WHAT IS A LITERATURE REVIEW?
A literature review is a description of the literature relevant to a particular field or topic. It gives an overview of:

- A whole paper, which annotates and/or critiques the literature in a particular subject area.
- Part of a thesis or dissertation, forming an early context-setting chapter.
- A useful background outlining a piece of research, or putting forward a hypothesis.

It may take two forms:

- A descriptive review: as in an annotated bibliography.
- A critical assessment of the literature in a particular field, stating where the weaknesses and gaps are, contrasting the views of particular authors, or raising questions. It will evaluate and show relationships, so that key themes emerge.

A literature review is a description of the literature relevant to a particular field or topic. It is important to define the problem or area which you wish to address. Have a purpose for your literature review to narrow the scope of what you need to look out for when you read.

2. THE STAGES OF A LITERATURE REVIEW

Define the problem
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Carry out a search for relevant materials

- Search the university or academic library, with a good subject index in your subject area. What is the area you are interested in? What is the problem you wish to address?
- Search using the Internet – but be sure to avoid the pitfalls.
- Use specific rather than general keywords and phrases for your search strategy.

Evaluate the materials

- Assess credibility – who are the authors? Are they experts in the field? Are they affiliated with reputable organizations? Are they recognized in the field?
- Assess the methodological soundness – is the research method relevant? Is the sample size or geographical area appropriate? Is the methodology suited to the research question?
- Consider the research question – did the author address the right question? Did the author present the right argument?
- Evaluate the sources – are they updated and current? Are they peer reviewed?
- Assess the results – are the results clearly presented and believable?
- Consider the conclusions – are they supported by the evidence? Are they justified?
- Consider the implications – are there any important implications for future research or practice?

Carry out an analysis

- What themes emerge and what conclusions can be drawn?
- What are the major similarities and differences between the various writers?
- Are there any significant questions which emerge and which could form a basis for further investigation?

4. FURTHER INFORMATION
These universities have good information on how to write a literature review:

- University of North Carolina – http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/literature-reviews/
- University of California, Santa Cruz – http://library.ucsc.edu/ref/howto/
- Follow links to “Write a Literature Review.”

Introduction

- Define the topic and state reasons for choice. You could also point out overall trends, gaps and themes that emerge.

Body

- Discuss your sources. You can organize your discussion chronologically, thematically or methodologically.

Conclusion

- Summarize the major contributions, evaluating the current position, and pointing out flaws in methodology, gaps in the research, contradictions and areas for further study.