

Literature Reviews

A literature review is systematic examination of existing research on a proposed topic (30). Public health professionals often consult literature reviews to stay up-to-date on research in their field (30–32). Researchers also frequently use literature reviews as a way to identify gaps in the research and provide a background for continuing research on a topic (30,31). This section will provide an overview of the essential elements needed to write a successful literature review.

Collecting Articles

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Reviewing the Research

After selecting the articles for your review, read each article and take notes to keep track of each paper (32). One way to effectively take notes is to create a table listing each article's research question, methods, results, limitations, etc. Once you have finished reading the articles, critically think about why each one is important to your discussion (30,31,33). Try to group articles based on similar content, such as similar study populations, methods, or results (33). Most literature reviews do not require you to organize your articles in a certain manner; however, you should think about how you would logically tie your articles together so that you are analyzing them, not simply summarizing each article (33).

Organizing your Review

While there is no standard organization for a literature review, literature reviews generally follow this structure (30,32):

1. **Introduction.** The introduction should identify a research question and relate it to a public health topic. The significance of the public health problem and topic should be described.
2. **Body.** The body of a literature review should be organized so that the review flows logical from one subtopic to another subtopic. Consider breaking this section into the following sections:
 - a. **Methods.** Describe how you obtained your articles. Be sure to include the names of search engines and key words used to generate searches. Detail your inclusion and exclusion criteria (i.e. did not fit your definition of your outcome). Consider creating a flow chart to illustrate your search process.
 - b. **Results/Discussion.** Explain what the literature says about your question. What did the studies find? Is their conflicting evidence? What are the limitations of the current studies? What gaps exist in the literature? What are the outstanding research questions? A table of your studies can be a great tool to summarize of the essential information.
- B. **Conclusion.** Review your findings and how they relate to your research questions. Use this space to propose needs in the research, if appropriate.

Collecting articles, reviewing your research, and organizing your review are the first steps toward writing a literature review. Reading examples of peer-reviewed literature reviews is an excellent way to brainstorm how to organize your research and tables. The following resources also provide a more in-depth discussion on writing literature reviews:

- [Handout on Writing Literature Reviews from UNC Writing Center](#)
- [Tips for Writing a Public Health Literature Review from Tulane University](#)
- [Get the Lit: The Literature Review Video from Texas A&M University Writing Center](#)