

Structuring a Literature Review

There are four main ways to structure a literature review. You do not need to stick to only one type of approach. It is common to mix them!



Chronological

Show the development of the topic/focus overtime

Ex. A literature review on theories of English Language Learner teaching practices may explain how the way individuals acquire second languages has changed over time and associating this with key developments in various decades. This would end with most current theory and offer a direction for your research.



Thematic

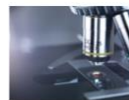
Explore different aspects of your topic/focus
Ex. A literature review on social media's influence on business success in the 21st century could present information on social media and marketing, social media and customer reviews, social media and customer relationship, etc. This would end with the author indicating the gap in the influence of social media and business success to offer a direction for the research.



Theoretical

Focusing on theories or concepts that exist, the relationships present between them, and how much is already known about them.

Ex. A literature review on leadership effectiveness may present information on the various leadership theories that exist to identify similarities in practice or focus, proven effectiveness, and/ or contradicting information.



Methodological

Identifying patterns between results that have collected using different methods (qualitative vs. quantitative or empirical vs. theoretical) and indicating, were they effective?

Ex. A literature review on the effectiveness of standardized testing in determining student success may compare qualitative studies focused on student and/ or educator perception and quantitative studies focused on test scores and GPA to determine how to improve the testing practice.

Common Questions:

How do I mix them?

Think about if you wanted to look at literature regarding second language learning theories over time, maybe over a 30-year period. Automatically we would think, okay so I'd use a chronological approach. This is absolutely possible! However, you could also combine chronological and thematic or theoretical. You could divide the thirty-year period into chunks of ten years and analyze the main theories that were prevalent at the time to show what the common practices were, what was known about the language acquisition process, and what limitations were present. You have the power to organize as you like – it just has to be logical for a reader to follow!

Can I see samples of how individuals organize by approach?

Yes! Please see a few samples below.



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Do I have to explain how I organized the literature review in the introduction?

Not necessarily. Some people mention the framework (conceptual/theoretical), but you do not need to specifically say that you used a particular approach. This will be something that becomes evident to your reader as they go through your dissertation.

If I do a chronological review, would I just explain the studies that others have done and organize them by date?

No. This is a common error and a great question! We want to focus on the patterns and connections within the literature. That means we can organize by a period of time (say five years, ten years, or more) and evaluate the literature available for that period, but we do not want to simply list studies in order of when they were published. This will lead you directly to simply summarizing information, which we want to avoid.