

Part II: Writing your “Literature Review” Section

In order to develop a relevant and valid experiment, you must have some background knowledge of the topic. This section (usually 4-6 pages long) conveys the knowledge you gained from reading the current “literature,” and provides you with enough expertise to write a sound hypothesis and develop the best experimental design possible. During your research you will have found answers to the questions you asked under each of these areas, introduction, historical background, current trends and practices, and controversies and debates.

Start with the introduction, where you will begin broadly, giving the reader an overview of the big problem and then narrowing it down to your focus. Continue with the subsections listed above (as many as are applicable), making sure that each paragraph has a point and at least two different sources cited to support your point.

You will conclude your literature review with a cohesive synthesis of your literature, ending this section with your hypothesis, the question you are trying to answer, or the problem you are trying to solve.

Guidelines to Follow:

Here is a paragraph from a lit review about sexism and language to demonstrate these points:

*“However, other studies have shown that even gender-neutral antecedents are more likely to produce masculine images than feminine ones (Gastil, 1990). Hamilton (1988) asked students to complete sentences that required them to fill in pronouns that agreed with gender-neutral antecedents such as “writer,” “pedestrian,” and “persons.” The students were asked to describe any image they had when writing the sentence. Hamilton found that people imagined 3.3 men to each woman in the masculine “generic” condition and 1.5 men per woman in the unbiased condition. Thus, while ambient sexism accounted for some of the masculine bias, sexist language amplified the effect. (Source: Erika Falk and Jordan Mills, “Why Sexist Language Affects Persuasion: The Role of Homophily, Intended Audience, and Offense,” *Women and Language* 19:2).*

- Use evidence: In the example above, the writers refer to several other sources when making their point. Your interpretation of the available sources must be backed with evidence to show that what you are saying is valid.
- Be selective: Select only the most important points in each source to highlight. The type of information you choose to mention should relate directly your research focus, whether it is thematic, methodological, or chronological.
- Use quotes sparingly: Falk and Mills do not use any direct quotes because the overview format of the lit review does not allow for in-depth discussion or detailed quotes from the text. Some short quotes here and there are okay, though, if you want to emphasize a point, or if what the author said just cannot be rewritten in your own words. Notice that Falk and Mills do quote certain terms that were coined by the author, not common knowledge, or taken directly from the study. If you find yourself wanting to put in more quotes, check with your instructor.
- Summarize and synthesize: Summarize and synthesize your sources within each paragraph as well as throughout the review. The authors in the example above recapitulate important features of Hamilton’s study, but then synthesize it by rephrasing the study’s significance and relating it to their own work.

- Keep your own voice: While this section presents others' ideas, your voice (the writer's) should remain front and center. Notice that Falk and Mills weave references to other sources into their own text, but they still maintain their own voice by starting and ending the paragraph with their own ideas and their own words. The sources support what Falk and Mills are saying.
- Use caution when paraphrasing: When paraphrasing a source that is not your own, be sure to represent the author's information or opinions accurately and in your own words. In the preceding example, Falk and Mills either directly refer in the text to the author of their source, such as Hamilton, or they provide ample notation in the text when the ideas they are mentioning are not their own, for example, Gastil's. For more information, please see our handout on plagiarism.
- Revise, revise, revise: Spending a lot of time revising is a wise idea because your main objective is to present the material, not the argument. Check your review to make sure it follows the assignment and/or your outline. Then, just as you would for most other academic forms of writing, rewrite or rework the language of your review so that you've presented your information in the most concise manner possible. Be sure to use terminology familiar to your audience; get rid of unnecessary jargon or slang. Finally, double check that you've documented your sources correctly using APA formatting guidelines.