

WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW

Brought to you by the *Writingcenter* at Washington College

<https://washcoll.edu/offices/writing-center>

A literature review is exactly what it sounds like. It is a written section inside of an essay (or article, if you are a scholar) where you review the literature. When you review something, you summarize and evaluate it. A literature review serves two purposes:

- 1) to survey and synthesize relevant past research in order to describe significant discoveries or findings in your research area
- 2) to evaluate and identify relations, contradictions, gaps, and inconsistencies in the literature either to a) preview research you will/have performed to address the gap in the literature, or b) examine the significance of the identified problem and suggest possible next steps in solving the problem

A literature review may be the entire written project in and of itself, or it may foreground your own research project. The literature review will inevitably lead up to, clarify, or confirm the significance of your research question, the mode of inquiry behind your research that adds relevance and momentum to your project.

Some Moves to Make When Writing a Literature Review

IDENTIFY A GAP or inadequacies in the literature. One of the main identifying features of the literature review is that it identifies instances where the literature is incomplete or insufficient. Ideally your own research will begin to fill that gap, or will argue for the significance of future research which will begin to fill the gap. For example, you might say, “Research up to this point has indicated that... What current researchers have failed to reveal is whether or not there is a causal relationship between....” (fill in the blanks)

SYNTHESIZE information relevant to your area of study. When you synthesize, you bring together information from different sources as a consolidated, cohesive whole. You will synthesize different information together in order to:

- Establish considerable overall consensus in a field or among a group of writers, which you might be preparing to agree or disagree
- Claim more or less sharply divided sides to the issue (a dichotomy), either to identify specific sources as typical of lines of reasoning or to identify the range of thinking about an issue
- Show several points of view from which the issue can be analyzed, resulting in different predictions about outcomes or prescriptions for courses of action

EVALUATE the literature in order to demonstrate your stance on the topic. When you evaluate you assess the validity of the information you are presenting.

- At the sentence level this can be as subtle as including words like “convincing,” “contradictory,” or “agree” when introducing the literature. The words you use to lead the reader into the information will inevitably offer your stance on them.
- On a larger level, you may want to be more explicit where you feel information is particularly important. For example, you can say, “The findings from this study are significant in that they demonstrate...”

WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW, continued.

Here is an excerpt taken from a literature review on the homeless and well-being. As you read, note specifically 1) the purpose of each paragraph, and how each paragraph relates to the paragraphs around it, 2) highlight language that indicates the stance the author is taking on the literature, and 3) note how and when citations are made and whether or not the cited literature prioritizes the author of a study/article or the idea presented by the study/article.

Subjective Well-Being of the Homeless

Poverty is one of the most pressing social concerns in the world today. In 1999, according to the United Nations Human Development Report (2002), nearly half the people in sub-Saharan Africa and more than a third of those in South East Asia lived on less than a dollar a day. Of the poor, the most visible are the homeless.

Whether they are gangs of street youth or panhandling drifters, no society is unaffected by the social problem of homelessness. There is little agreement about the possible causes and solutions to this social ill. Although past research has focused on psychopathology, incidence of trauma, and the demography of the homeless, little attention has been paid in the psychological literature to the overall quality of life of the homeless. Instead, the bulk of the research literature has been confined to clinical aspects of homelessness or to the effects of homelessness on children (e.g., Aptekar, 1994). It is often assumed that life on the street is fraught with difficulty, but little information has been collected to suggest which specific life domains might be the least problematic, and in which areas, if any, the homeless might actually be flourishing. Unfortunately, overlooking the possible resources and strengths of the homeless limits our ability to create effective interventions.

The existing literature on homelessness strongly suggests that there are many problems associated with life without a home. Studies have shown that homelessness is associated with problem behaviors in children (Edleman & Mihaly, 1989, DiBiase & Waddell, 1995), strained family relationships (Vostanis et al., 1996; Nyamathi et al., 1999), higher exposure to trauma (Hien & Bukzpan, 1999; Buhrich et al., 2000), increased anger and depression (Marshall et al., 1996), and the negative psychological impact of social stigma (Lankenau, 1999). Because of the methodological difficulties related to studying homelessness, it is unclear whether factors such as depression and alcohol abuse are causes or effects of homelessness.

While prior history of mental illness is undoubtedly responsible for homelessness in at least some cases, there is evidence to suggest that the experience of homelessness causes or exacerbates many psychological problems. In a study by Shlay (1994), for example, homeless people were found to report greater emotional well-being and fewer behavioral problems in their children after positive changes in their economic and social status. The need for research on personal resources and success on the street becomes more pressing to the extent that people can overcome the psychological ills that accompany homelessness. Studies on the harmful effects of homelessness are consistent with a larger body of literature examining the relationship between income and subjective well-being. In large national surveys, for example, income has been shown to be moderately correlated with life satisfaction, especially at the lower economic levels and in the poorest countries (Diener et al., 1999; Diener & Lucas, 2000; Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002). Higher income has been shown to be related to increased longevity (Wilkinson, 1999), better health (Salovey et al., 2000), and greater life satisfaction (Diner et al., 1985; Diner & Oishi, 2000). Scholars appear to agree that although correlations between income and subjective well-being are often modest, there appears to be a curvilinear relationship in which money has the greatest impact on psychological health at the lowest economic levels (Inglehart & Klingemann, 2000).

Two theories are often advanced to explain these findings: basic needs and adaptation. In the former theory, it is assumed that basic physical needs such as food, water, and shelter must be satisfied before a person can attain higher order psychological fulfillment (Maslow, 1954). By this reasoning, homeless individuals who face impediments to fulfilling basic needs, should exhibit lower levels of subjective well-being. As homeless people gain better access to food and shelter there ought to be a corresponding increase in psychological health. The theory of adaptation is also helpful in understanding the relation between income and subjective well-being.

Research on adaptation suggests that diminished responsiveness to repeated stimuli allows people to adjust to life circumstances, including adverse circumstances (Silver, 1982; Lowenstein & Frederick, 1999). But while people can often adapt relatively well to discrete instances of trauma, there are conditions to which it is more difficult to adapt. Stroebe et al. (1996), for instance, found that widows show higher average levels of depression than their non-bereaved counterparts, even 2 years after the death of their spouse. A review of income and national happiness data by Diener & Diener (1995) showed lower levels of social well-being in poor nations, suggesting that extreme poverty is a condition difficult to adapt to, even in the long run.