# Literature reviews by Helena Beeson [Video Transcript]

This video will explain what a literature review is, how to create one and offer some useful tips. Firstly, what is a literature review? Essentially, it is the exploration of a topic. Structurally, it is similar to an essay in terms of organising key ideas and contrasting authors’ views; and it’s also a great opportunity to show off your research skills.

Consider the acronym PLEAT when thinking about how to approach your review.

P stands for problem. Break this down and have a specific focus for your research.

Then the literature search; identify relevant literature here. Check the abstracts and conclusions of journal articles and contents and index pages for books. If they don’t look useful, don’t waste time reading the whole thing, discard it and move onto something more useful.

E is for evaluate. Judge how useful your sources are and how convincing your authors’ arguments are. Do they contradict or reinforce what other authors have said on the topic?

Analyse and interpret: identify all the key components, perspectives and influencing factors surrounding your topic. For example, these could be political or economic issues.

Finally, T, tie it all together and synthesise your research into a consolidated argument.

What a literature review is not; it’s not a general discussion. Make sure you retain your focus throughout the whole process. Don’t think of it as an annotated bibliography, which is a detailed summary of each source separately, it’s vital to compare and contrast authors’ ideas within the body of your text. Identify themes within your reading and structure your review with these headings in mind to avoid the annotated bibliography style. It’s also not a suggestion for recommended reading. You should give the reader all the information they need to understand the argument without having to consult other sources.

Moving on to creating the actual literature review, fundamentally it’s a 3-step process. So, finding the information, reviewing it and writing up your discussion, we’ll look at these in more depth.

Firstly finding, plan the topic areas you want to explore; what do you already know? Identify keywords you can use to describe the key aspects. Consider what sources will be useful for your review. It’s important to include a range of literature such as books, journal and newspaper articles, legislation and government sites. Start with NELSON to identify useful databases for the information. Make sure here that your literature is up to date and from reliable sources. Allow plenty of time to search; it will be a time-consuming process, potentially a third of the entire assignment production time.

If you find a useful source that an author has mentioned in their writing, try to track down the original work. Relying on someone’s interpretation is not always a good idea. Then reviewing - read and draw conclusions from the literature in order to answer your title question. Look at sources actively not passively. Can you identify key or recurring themes? Obvious gaps? Any areas for future research? How about the strengths and weaknesses of any methodologies used? Keep a record of your sources as you go and don’t be afraid to discard those that are not relevant.

Moving onto writing, expect to write multiple drafts - no one gets it right for the first time. Work towards a structure like this:

Start with your introduction. Think about: what is your topic, why have you chosen this topic, what are your limitations? For example, are you investigating a specific age group or using European sources only? What are the key themes that you are going to discuss? What are you going to argue? Discuss briefly how you conducted your literature search. Where did you search and why? Write the introduction section last and expect it to be around 5-10% of your word count. It is difficult to introduce your review if you haven’t considered the themes in depth.

Organise your main body around your themes and link them to each other. Consider different perspectives and relevant issues outside of your immediate field. You could have 3, 4 or 5 themes depending on your word count and module guide. Keep in mind how each of them answers your question. Compare and contrast the literature – do the authors agree with each other? Do the sources offer theoretically and methodologically sound points? Be critical and question everything.

So, your sections might be: theme 1 theme 2 and theme 3.

Finally, your conclusions – summarise your key findings within the literature and the main points you have made. Restate your argument and draw your final conclusions. This section will be roughly 5-10% of your word count. Remember, it’s important to recognise when you have enough sources for your review. Leave enough time for writing and reviewing. A general rule of thumb here is a third of your time for research, a third for writing and a third for redrafting.

Question the literature you use and justify why you have included it in your assignment. Are the authors making assumptions or including any bias?

Once you have written the first draft, re-read it to check that the purpose of the review is clear and that you have answered your title question.

If you would like any more information on NELSON, academic writing or dissertations, please see the related videos. Thank you for watching.