Literature Review

So you’ve been assigned a literature review, but what exactly does that mean? Aren’t literature reviews for English majors who actually read “literature”? Not really. The truth is that while people in the humanities do write literature reviews on occasion, the majority of literature reviews are written by people in sciences and social sciences as components of lab reports, research papers, and case studies.¹

Before starting a literature review, first recognize that “the ‘literature’ [in] a literature review refers to any collection of [source] materials on a topic.”² This includes, but is not limited to, scholarly articles, government pamphlets, court cases, news articles, etc. focused on sources or findings within a particular time frame.³ It’s important to understand that the writer of a literature review is not being asked to convey personal opinions about the sources. This type of writing only provides summary and synthesis of the research currently relevant to the subject matter.

What researchers need to know to successfully complete a literature review:
- **Its purpose**
  - To establish a base of information on a subject to allow the researcher to enter a scholarly conversation from an informed perspective.
- **Its organization**
  - A literature review can be a summary or a synopsis of relevant information.
    - Summary – reviews the major assertions, themes, and conclusions presented by a source.
    - Synthesis – reorganizes the summary of the sources, either by theme or time frame. For example, a synthesis might trace the evolution of a field through the years, referencing important debates or findings; alternatively, it might categorize and prioritize major themes that surround a subject for effective consumption by the reader.
  - **Components**
    - An overview of the subject in question
    - Acknowledgement of the social, political, and economic context of the time period and how that context affects the relevance of the sources
    - Proper citations that are consistent with the writing conventions within the researcher’s discipline
- **Its intention**
  - To provide background information on the subject in question and lend credibility and authority to the researcher so he/she can enter into the discourse concerning the subject.

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² Ibid.
³ Ibid.