

preparing for a literature review

Most articles in social work journals include a review of the literature, usually just after the introduction. The literature review is an up-to-date report on the work that scholars have conducted on a subject. The purpose in writing the review is to both convey and critique the knowledge and thinking that has been written about that subject. A well executed literature review might well include a statement of what research still needs to be done.

When writing a literature review, your objective is to gather and organize your material around the issue, research objective, or problem statement you plan to address. Because you only want to include pertinent work, it is essential to develop a discriminating eye for what to include and from which articles. As you make these decisions, think of categories (e.g., thematic, chronological, demographic) in which you can place the various articles; this way, you are already beginning to “write” your paper; that is, the thinking and organizing aspects have begun. Also, keep in mind that although we may strive for an unbiased view on a subject, we are each drawn to certain theories, models, and approaches, any one of which will no doubt influence the categories set up, the articles chosen, and the rhetorical presentation.

If you find an abundance of material, you will likely want to narrow the range of your subject (e.g., by limiting your population in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, SES, etc.). While reading abstracts and skimming through articles, deciding on what to include, keep in mind that most social work research builds on what has preceded it; therefore, look for recently published articles, as they will more likely have considered the most recent data and findings on your subject. However, you will also want to include pioneering research, which you should quickly be able to identify, as it will likely be featured in many of the articles you peruse.

some tips for gathering articles:

- Identify and find the big names and the best publications in your research area. Ask your professors for names.
- Conduct an on-line literature search, using, for example, PsycINFO, SocINDEX, and Social Work Abstracts.
- Look in bibliographies (reference lists) of the most recently published books and journal articles related to your work; copy the references out in APA style or use software programs such as EndNote.
- Check out the most recent journals in the field, as the articles therein may not yet be in other reference and bibliographic sources.

- Do not rely on one author's description of another essential study or its findings. Look up the original article because that one author may have cited the source erroneously.
- Avoid the popular press—New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Newsweek—and internet sources such as Wikipedia and Google and blogs. These are good starting places for identifying terms and learning about issues, but they are no substitute for scholarly work.

Some tips for a critical assessment:

1. List three questions you want answered by the material.
2. Summarize the major points the author makes.
3. How does the author support his/her position (specific facts, details, etc.)?
4. Were the three questions raised concerning the article answered? List answers. If not, what questions did the author subsequently raise and answer?
5. Evaluate the article, with consideration for the following:
 - A) What are its strengths and/or weaknesses?
 - B) Is the subject covered adequately?
 - C) Is the author's position adequately supported?
 - D) Is it biased, balanced, etc.?
 - E) Do you agree or disagree with the author's position and why?