

Literature Reviewing as an Architecture of Researchable Problems

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Abstract

A literature review is often taught as a preliminary collection of sources, yet its more important function is to construct a defensible research problem. This conceptual article reframes reviewing as an architecture of claims, relationships, and unresolved questions. It distinguishes six review purposes - mapping, integrating, evaluating, historicizing, theorizing, and reviewing methods - and explains how each purpose produces a different scholarly contribution. A staged workflow is proposed: delimit the problem space, retrieve evidence transparently, evaluate source fitness, code claims rather than quotations, synthesize relationships, and convert tensions into research questions. The article also addresses common weaknesses, including annotated-bibliography writing, citation accumulation, false gap claims, and indiscriminate reliance on search-engine visibility. It distinguishes empirical, theoretical, methodological, evidence-quality, and practice gaps and recommends cautious language that describes the actual boundary of the search. At the paragraph level, synthesis is defined as an analytical claim supported by related evidence, an explanation of agreement or tension, and an implication for the proposed study. The article argues that a credible review should show not merely what has been written but how the existing evidence supports, complicates, or limits a proposed inquiry. Suggested teaching products include search logs, source-fitness notes, synthesis matrices, and short gap arguments. The resulting approach is suitable for research-methods classrooms, thesis supervision, and early-stage proposal development.

Keywords: literature review; research problem; evidence synthesis; source evaluation; research questions; academic writing

Introduction

A research problem is not simply a difficult situation observed by a researcher. For scholarly inquiry, it must also be positioned within what is already known. The literature review performs this positioning. It establishes the concepts in use, summarizes available evidence, identifies disagreement or absence, and shows why another study is warranted. When treated as a ceremonial chapter placed before methodology, however, it becomes a sequence of disconnected summaries.

The review should instead function as an architecture. Individual sources are building materials, but the scholarly contribution comes from their arrangement. The writer decides which bodies of work belong in the problem space, how their claims relate, where their methods constrain interpretation, and what unanswered question follows. Hart (1998) describes reviewing as an essential part of academic research because it enables understanding of the topic, methodology, and contribution. The task is analytical rather than accumulative.

This article presents a practical framework for transforming literature into a researchable problem. It distinguishes review purposes, proposes a staged workflow, and identifies standards for credible gap construction. The focus is especially relevant to beginning researchers who may have access to abundant online information but limited experience evaluating and synthesizing it.

Six Purposes of Reviewing

Different review purposes require different organizing logics. A mapping review identifies the range, distribution, and boundaries of work in a field. An integrative review brings diverse findings together to generate a broader account. An evaluative review examines the strength and limitations of claims. A historical review traces how a concept, practice, or debate developed over time. A theoretical review compares explanations and clarifies their relationships. A methodological review studies how knowledge has been produced, including sampling, measurement, analysis, and reporting.

These purposes may overlap, but one should dominate. Without a declared purpose, writers often organize by author—“Author A said,” followed by “Author B found”—and leave the reader to infer the relationship. Torraco (2005) argues that an integrative review should critique and synthesize representative literature in ways that create new perspectives. The same general expectation applies across review types: the organization should perform intellectual work.

The purpose also determines the unit of analysis. In a theoretical review, the unit may be a proposition or construct. In a methodological review, it may be a design decision or analytic technique. In a historical review, it may be a shift in definition, institution, or practice. Identifying the unit prevents the review from becoming a miscellaneous report on everything associated with a topic.

A Transparent Review Workflow

The first stage is delimitation. The researcher writes a provisional statement specifying the population or setting, the central phenomenon or construct, the context, and the intended contribution. This statement is not fixed; it guides initial searching while remaining open to revision.

The second stage is retrieval. Search terms should include synonyms, related concepts, and disciplinary language. Databases, institutional repositories, citation trails, and relevant reference lists can complement one another. A record of search locations, dates, terms, and selection decisions improves transparency. Even when a review is not fully systematic, readers benefit from knowing how the evidence base was assembled.

The third stage is source evaluation. Authority alone is insufficient. A source must also be relevant to the question, methodologically credible for the claim being made, and current enough for the purpose. Older work may be indispensable for a historical or theoretical foundation; recent work may be necessary for policy, technology, or current practice. Snyder (2019) notes that review methods should be selected and reported according to the review’s purpose rather than presented as a single universal procedure.

The fourth stage is analytic coding. Researchers should record claims, concepts, designs, samples, contexts, findings, limitations, and implications—not merely copy quotations. A synthesis matrix makes relationships visible. The fifth stage is synthesis, where patterns of agreement, contradiction, extension, and silence are written as claims supported by multiple sources. The final stage converts these patterns into a warranted research problem and answerable questions.

Constructing a Defensible Gap

A gap is not synonymous with “few studies were found.” Low search yield may reflect narrow terms, inaccessible databases, language restrictions, or a topic framed differently in another discipline. A defensible gap specifies what is missing and why the absence matters.

Several forms are common. An empirical gap concerns a population, setting, period, or outcome not adequately examined. A theoretical gap concerns an unexplained relationship or competing explanations. A methodological gap arises when dominant methods systematically obscure a feature of the phenomenon. An evidence-quality gap exists when studies are numerous but too limited or inconsistent to support a firm conclusion. A practice gap occurs when established knowledge is not translated into implementation or local decision-making.

Gap statements should be calibrated. Phrases such as “no study has ever examined” are difficult to defend. More precise language describes the search boundary and evidence found: existing studies concentrate on one population; available evidence is largely cross-sectional; qualitative accounts explain experiences but not distribution; or reported interventions lack implementation detail. Such claims create a logical bridge to the proposed design.

Writing Synthesis Rather Than Summary

Synthesis is visible at the paragraph level. A strong paragraph opens with an analytical claim, groups evidence according to its relationship to that claim, explains differences, and closes with an implication for the research problem. Citations support the architecture; they do not substitute for it.

One useful strategy is to organize around tensions. Studies may agree on an outcome but disagree on its mechanism. Results may differ because of measurement, context, or sampling. A concept may be defined consistently while operationalized differently. Evidence may be strong at the individual level and weak at the institutional level. Identifying the source of tension produces a more informative review than declaring that results are “mixed.”

Critical writing does not require dismissing prior researchers. It requires judging what each study can support. Boote and Beile (2005) connect the quality of a dissertation literature review with the ability to situate and justify research. Fair critique acknowledges contributions while identifying limits in transferability, measurement, inference, or scope.

Implications for Teaching and Supervision

Research instructors can teach review work through small, inspectable products. A concept map tests the boundaries of a topic. A search log reveals whether retrieval is systematic enough. A source-fitness note distinguishes credibility from relevance. A synthesis matrix exposes patterns across studies. A one-paragraph gap argument tests whether the proposed study follows logically.

Supervisors should provide feedback on the structure of claims before correcting citation style. Questions such as “What relationship does this paragraph establish?” or “How does this evidence warrant your next research question?” focus attention on reasoning. Citation accuracy remains essential, but perfectly formatted references cannot repair an incoherent review.

The literature review is also an ethical practice. Selective citation can distort a field, while careless paraphrasing obscures intellectual ownership. Transparent searching, fair representation of disagreement, and accurate attribution are part of responsible scholarship.

Conclusion

A literature review earns its place in a research article or thesis when it builds a defensible route from existing knowledge to a new inquiry. Its success depends on purpose, transparent retrieval, source fitness, analytic coding, relational synthesis, and appropriately cautious gap claims.

Reframing the review as an architecture changes the learner’s task. The goal is no longer to collect a required number of citations. It is to design a coherent account of what is known, how it is known, where uncertainty remains, and why the proposed question is worth asking. This approach makes literature reviewing central to research design rather than preliminary to it.

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