



# Calumet College of St. Joseph Specker Library

## What is a literature review?

A literature review is a "review" of "the literature" on a topic.

What does that mean?

- In this case, "**Review**" usually means an overview summarizing major parts and bringing them together to build a picture of what's out there. Different fields of study (and different professors) will have different standards on whether a review is supposed to be more of a straightforward summary or if it is supposed to have a deep analysis and discussion.
- "The **Literature**" means the major writings - especially **scholarly** writings - on the topic. Depending on your field "the literature" can include all sorts of things: journal articles, books, published essays, government reports, and so on. The main thing is that "the literature" is the body of scholarly, professional information that is used by professionals and scholars working on that topic area

So a literature review is a summary of previous research on a topic.

Literature reviews can be a subsection of something bigger or can stand alone.

- As a subsection, literature reviews are usually put in early in the larger work. They tend to be after the Introduction but before the Methods section or any in-depth discussion and analysis of the issue. They may be incorporated into a Background section, or can come just before or after the Background. Examples of literature reviews as a subsection include:
  - A component in a larger research project or paper
  - A chapter in a thesis or dissertation
  - A mandatory section if you want to write and publish a scholarly journal article
  - The analysis of existing research performed before a research proposal
  - A component in the background or justification when applying for grant money
- Or it can be a stand-alone bibliographic essay:
  - A literature review assigned for class on its own, to understand and write up current research on a topic

- An analytical essay synthesizing an annotated bibliography into a formal paper
- A "review article" that you write to publish in a scholarly journal

You may have already written a "research paper" that was really a literature review! Many "library research" assignments are actually simplified literature reviews. So you've probably done one before and you shouldn't be intimidated!

Literature reviews are different depending what their purpose is. If the literature review is part of a Ph.D. dissertation, this review will be comprehensive covering all research on the topic. But if the review is part of a smaller research report, you need to cover the major work that has been done on the topic recently, but it is not necessary to try to identify all research on the subject.