The Literature Review

Definitions:

- A “re-view” or look again at what has already been written on a particular topic. Put more broadly, a literature review discusses the published scholarly/academic information on a topic or in a research area.
- Put another way, it is a thorough consideration of the significant research and scholarly writing on a particular topic or in a research area, systematically, logically, and coherently arranged.
- Organized ways to summarize, synthesize, make connections between and present the literature on your topic.
- NOTE: if a research “area,” keep as narrow and well-defined as possible.

Purpose:

- Provide you with a handy “guide” (that you have created) to the significant literature on your topic.
- Serve as an overview of the previous scholarly work in your subject area.
- Enlarge your scope of knowledge about a topic.
- Help you move out of your knowledge comfort zone.
- Let you demonstrate command of the literature in your field.
- Allow you to narrow/focus your topic based on what has come before.
- Offer the chance to conduct a critical appraisal of research available on your topic.
- Challenge your critical and analytical skills – not to mention your skills as a researcher!

Some of what it is not:

- The final reference list/bibliography for your paper.
- Simply a descriptive list of materials on your topic (an annotated bibliography).
- A string of annotations.
- A synopsis. A literature review is more than a summary of the major points in books and/or articles; it is a narrative discussion that requires context as well as content. **HOWEVER**, a brief synopsis or summary of each item is important in order to provide the context/reason for including a particular resource in your literature review.
- A new contribution to scholarship/research (that’s the role of your actual research paper).
A successful literature review should:

- Be organized around and directly related to the research question you are working on (or developing).
- Synthesize results into a summary of what is and what is not known about the topic.
- Identify areas of controversy or disagreement in the literature.
- Help you formulate questions that need further research/investigation.

Suggestions for process – or things to consider as you begin:

- Review the actual literature review assignment. Be sure you know:
  - How many sources you need to cover
  - If there are specific types of sources you need to include
  - If there are specific types of sources you should not include (websites, blogs, etc.)
  - If your literature review needs to be evaluative.
- Refine/narrow your topic.
- Determine whether you need or want to historic as well as the most current available research (use your topic as a guide here).
- Be selective; a literature review is not designed to cover everything ever written on the topic.
- Don’t forget about sources that address methodology. In other words, read critically in order to draw out the most relevant (to your topic) portions of a book or article.
- Think about the organization of the lit. review. How do you want to present the sources (chronologically, thematically, by type of literature, type of methodology?).

Where I got my information (truth in advertising):

- The Writing Center. University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. (http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/literature_review.html)
- University of California, Santa Cruz Library. Write a Literature Review. (http://library.ucsc.edu/help/howto/write-a-literature-review)