Writing the Literature Review

What the Literature Review Is Not

1. The literature review is not just a summary. The literature review is an organized discussion based on a series of subtopics that you identify.

2. The literature review does not develop or prove the main arguments of your paper or essay. The literature review provides background for the development or body section of your paper.

What Is the "Literature"?
The "literature" refers to published works you consulted on your narrowed topic. This means that you are writing a "selective literature review," not a comprehensive one.

What Does It Mean to "Review" This Literature?
It means that you provide snapshots of the major concepts or findings in each source, not a detailed summary of sources. You also provide commentary on the sources as you point out their relationships to each other.

What is the Purpose of the Literature Review?
In a college course, the literature review usually serves three purposes:

1. to deepen your understanding of the topic
2. to demonstrate your knowledge of the topic to the professor
3. to bring your readers up to date on your topic

Imagine those times in your life when you've met an old friend for the first time in years. What's one of the first things both of you ask: "So what have you been doing all these years? Fill me in. Bring me up to date."

By asking these questions, you are finding out where the other has been and how she/he arrived at the present. Filling in this background is an important part of establishing a present-day relationship.

How Does That Apply to the Literature Review?
Let's say you're writing about the use of steroids by high school athletes. In a literature review, you would say, "Over the past ten years these are the major studies about the use of steroids by high school athletes."

Then, after that literature review, you get to say, "Based on that background, this study
examines the use of steroids by one group of athletes still in high school today."

And there—at that exact point—is the dividing line between the literature review and the beginning of your own study—its methods, arguments, findings and recommendations.

**How Should I Organize My Literature Review?**

One of the keys to writing an effective literature review is finding a way to categorize or arrange the sources that you looked at. The most common techniques are:

- **CHRONOLOGICAL**—decades are often used as dividing lines, typically with a paragraph for each decade. In that paragraph you provide a brief summary of the studies published during that decade and comment on their achievements, shortcomings, historical importance or other relevant insights.

- **ADVANCEMENTS/BREAKTHROUGHS**—when appropriate, sources can be divided into major breakthroughs that advanced the field. Many time these advancements/breakthroughs correspond with a time line. For example:

  Autism was once thought to be caused by poor parenting and "refrigerator moms" (Bruno, 1956). Then in the 1960s leading researchers began to see autism as a "psychological condition of unknown origin" (Bradstreet *et al.*, 1972). Today autism is recognized by leading researchers as an immune disorder caused by genetic susceptibility triggered by environmental toxins (Blaxill & Olmstead, 2010).

- **GEOGRAPHICAL**—Let’s say your topic is the modern day slave trade. Today, all over the world, there are more humans in slavery than have ever been in history. Your literature review could be divided into studies of modern slavery from various countries or continents.

- **QUESTIONS**—These are key questions or issues in the field that researchers have attempted to address over the years.

- **YOUR OWN**—your own mapping or categories will often be the best. The key is that you have found a way to group together the publications you are reviewing.

**Video Lecture & Examples**

The following video (divided into two parts) discusses the literature review and presents an example from a former UMUC student.