

# 10-Step Guide to Making Your Literature Review Write Itself

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The literature review portion of research manuscripts can be the most intimidating part of the entire project. First, you have to do a reasonably comprehensive literature search to find articles relevant to your project and to ensure that your research project is unique and builds upon previous work. After you have found articles that inform your project, how do you go about synthesizing all of that information into a readable format? Writing a literature review is a skill that can be learned—and anyone can learn it. These ten steps can help make your task easier.

1. First, you want to **double-check the thoroughness of your literature search**. Did you search all possible relevant keywords? Did you search all library resources and databases available to you? Did you search libraries in the surrounding area to find additional information? I **HIGHLY** encourage you to input **ALL** of your articles into RefWorks ([www.refworks.com](http://www.refworks.com)). This can easily be done via the Ebsco, Ovid, PubMed, and FirstSearch databases (at UAMS). It can also be done manually without too much effort. If you use RefWorks, you will want to include **ALL** possible information (reference information and abstract). This will come in extremely handy later.
2. Next, **print a hard copy** of each of the articles that you think you might reference.
3. Attempt to **organize these articles by theme** if your literature review is going to cover multiple topics. You can do this efficiently by scanning the article abstracts. Suggested themes include a brief history of your topic, recent advances made in the field of your topic, other projects that support your methods, other projects that had similar results as you anticipate, and other projects that had different results than you anticipate having. You may also consider using articles that cover both experimental techniques and assessment techniques.
4. Next, **read carefully every article, with a highlighter, and mark information that you consider particularly relevant to your project that should be included in your literature review**. Since you have grouped your articles by themes, highlight information relevant to that theme. For instance, if you have an article under the theme “experimental techniques,” highlight information within that article that informs your own experimental techniques; highlight the historical review portion of your articles that are under your “history” theme. This way, you will ensure that you have highlighted all necessary topics for your literature review.
5. Then, using your word processor, **type a list of your themes, with page breaks between each theme**.



6. Then, **within each theme, type in the relevant information that you have highlighted, referencing the information with its corresponding article** (be sure to include author, title, journal name, date, volume, issue, and page number). If you have used RefWorks, the referencing is easy because you can simply copy and paste the reference from the RefWorks bibliography—and they are already in the required format for you. With each reference, you may want to include the author’s abstract of their article. This will aid your memory in recalling what that article is about. You can either re-type the abstract or, if you have used RefWorks to manage your references, you can simply copy and paste the abstract from the RefWorks bibliography.

Now, you have ALL the information that is pertinent to your project in one simple, easy-to-manage electronic file. Having the abstracts included in this file will save your having to refer to your stack of articles too frequently.

7. Then, **put topic sentences at the top of each theme**. An example of a topic sentence is, “Many groundbreaking advances have been made recently in the field of MRI imaging techniques.” Then, you would have your “recent advancements” themed information following.
8. Next, go through and **tweak the information that you have typed to make the sentences flow together smoothly**, using words such as “then,” “although,” “in addition,” etc. You will see information and sentences that are redundant or that you no longer need; delete or summarize as needed. You may need to change the order of some of the sentences in your list. Your paper is practically writing itself for you now.
9. Then, **wait a day or two, and re-read what you have written**. Change wording, sentence structure, grammar, and anything that sounds awkward to you.
10. You will be amazed how what you think is perfect today; you will think needs improvement tomorrow. Be sure to give yourself plenty of time to **go through several drafts**. You will finally change your references to footnotes/endnotes in the format that the journal to which you plan to submit prefers (again, RefWorks can help you with that).

Your literature review will come together nicely if you follow these steps. RefWorks is a wonderful tool that can be extremely helpful with writing literature reviews; the UAMS Library can give you pointers on how to use it. RefWorks also has an easy-to-follow online tutorial. OED can personally assist you with your literature review methods and techniques, and any case of writer’s block that you may develop. For assistance, please contact Elizabeth Hicks at 526-6584 or [ehicks@uams.edu](mailto:ehicks@uams.edu) . Happy writing!