

Literature Review Guide (UK University Guide)

A practical, no-fluff guide to planning, structuring, and writing a literature review — from the overall funnel shape down to the thematic "tree" that organises your sources.

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Featured Snippet Answer: A literature review is a structured, critical synthesis of existing research on a topic, organised thematically rather than source-by-source, that identifies patterns, debates, and gaps in current knowledge. It moves from broad context down to a specific gap (a funnel structure), while internally, sources are grouped into themes and sub-themes (a tree structure) rather than summarised one after another.

AI Overview Summary: Writing a strong UK university literature review means organising existing research thematically, not source-by-source — grouping studies into themes and sub-themes (a tree structure), and moving from broad context to a specific research gap (a funnel structure). Each theme should synthesise multiple sources critically, comparing and evaluating rather than listing findings. The most common weakness is a "list of summaries" structure, where each paragraph describes one source in isolation instead of weaving sources together around a shared theme.

Quick Answer

Structure your literature review as a funnel: start with the broad field, narrow through key debates and theories, arrive at specific themes, and end at the gap your own work addresses. Within the body, organise sources into a thematic tree — group them by theme and sub-theme rather than discussing one source per paragraph — and synthesise each group critically rather than summarising sources individually.

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What a Literature Review Actually Is

A literature review is not a list of summaries, and it is not a book report on everything you've read. It is a structured, critical synthesis of existing research that shows how the current state of knowledge on a topic fits together — where studies agree, where they conflict, what methods have been used, and, crucially, what remains unresolved.

The word "review" is slightly misleading, because it suggests passive reporting. In practice, a strong literature review does something closer to argument-building: it takes a body of scattered research and organises it into a coherent narrative that leads somewhere — usually towards a gap that justifies your own research question, dissertation, or assignment focus.

Two structural ideas run through almost every strong literature review, and they operate at different scales. At the level of the whole review, the structure typically follows a funnel: broad field, narrowing through key debates, arriving at specific themes, and ending at the gap your work addresses. At the level of the body's internal organisation, sources are grouped into a tree: a central topic branching into themes, themes branching into sub-themes, and sub-themes supported by individual studies. Understanding both of these structures — and how they work together — is the single most useful thing you can take from this guide.

Expert Tip: If you can only remember one distinction from this entire guide, make it this: a literature review is organised by theme, not by source. If your draft has one paragraph per author, you're writing an annotated bibliography, not a literature review.

Why the Literature Review Matters

The literature review typically carries substantial marks in dissertations, research reports, and many extended essays, and it does double duty: it demonstrates the breadth and

depth of your reading, and it demonstrates your ability to think critically about a body of evidence rather than any single source in isolation.

What Markers Look For	Why It Matters
Thematic organisation	Shows you can see patterns across sources, not just within them
Critical synthesis	Demonstrates evaluation and comparison, not just description
A clear sense of direction	Shows the review is building towards something, usually a gap or research question
Appropriate breadth and depth	Shows balanced reading across the topic, not over-reliance on a few sources
Identification of a genuine gap	Justifies why further research or analysis on this topic is worthwhile

⚠ **Common Mistake:** Treating the literature review as a separate "reading demonstration" section disconnected from the rest of the assignment. A strong literature review sets up everything that follows — your methodology, your analysis, or your argument — rather than standing alone as a summary of prior reading.

Types of Literature Review

Type	What It Involves	Typical Use
Narrative review	Broad, qualitative synthesis of literature on a topic, organised thematically	Undergraduate essays, dissertation background chapters
Systematic review	Rigorous, protocol-driven search and selection process, often following PRISMA guidelines	Health sciences, evidence-based practice, some postgraduate research
Thematic review	Organised entirely around themes or concepts rather than sources or time periods	Most standard undergraduate and postgraduate literature reviews

Type	What It Involves	Typical Use
Chronological review	Organised by how understanding of a topic has developed over time	Topics where historical development is central to the argument
Methodological review	Organised by the research methods used across studies	Methods-focused dissertations, research design modules
Integrative review	Combines theoretical and empirical literature to build a new conceptual framework	Advanced or theoretical dissertations

Lecturer Advice: Most undergraduate literature reviews are, in practice, thematic narrative reviews — rigorous in synthesis, but without the formal systematic-review search protocol. Check your module handbook before assuming you need a full PRISMA-style systematic review process.

A closer look at each type

Narrative reviews remain the default choice for most undergraduate and taught postgraduate assignments, precisely because they allow the flexible, thematic synthesis this guide focuses on throughout. They don't require a documented search protocol, though keeping a simple search log (covered later in this guide) is still good practice and strengthens the credibility of your selection process.

Systematic reviews are considerably more demanding, requiring a documented, reproducible search strategy, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria applied consistently, and often a PRISMA flow diagram showing how many records were identified, screened, and ultimately included. These are far more common in health sciences, evidence-based practice modules, and some postgraduate dissertations than in standard undergraduate essays.

Thematic reviews, in practice, overlap heavily with narrative reviews — "thematic" describes the organisational principle (themes and sub-themes), while "narrative" describes the overall style (flexible, qualitative synthesis rather than a rigid protocol). Most guidance in this document applies to thematic narrative reviews specifically, since they represent the large majority of UK undergraduate and postgraduate literature review assignments.

Chronological and methodological reviews are less common as a review's primary organising principle, but each serves specific purposes well. A chronological review works best when the historical development of a field is itself part of your argument — for example, tracing how attachment theory has evolved since Bowlby's original formulation. A methodological review works best when your dissertation or assignment is specifically focused on comparing research approaches, rather than comparing findings.

Integrative reviews sit at the more advanced end of the spectrum, typically appearing in postgraduate or doctoral work, where the goal is not just to synthesise existing findings but to build an entirely new conceptual framework by combining theoretical and empirical literature that hasn't previously been considered together.

⚠ **Common Mistake:** Assuming a systematic review is always more rigorous or higher-scoring than a narrative review. The two serve different purposes — a narrative review done well, with genuine thematic synthesis, can score just as highly as a systematic review, provided it matches what your assignment brief actually requires.

The Funnel Structure: Your Overall Shape

At the scale of the whole literature review, the most reliable structure to aim for is a funnel: you begin with the broad context of your field, narrow progressively through established theories and key debates, arrive at the specific themes the current literature addresses, and end at the gap your own work will address.



Figure 2: The funnel structure — move from broad context down to the specific gap your study addresses.

Funnel Stage	What Happens Here	Typical Length
Broad context	Introduce the general field and why it matters	Short — a paragraph or two
Narrower context	Introduce major theories or established debates	A few paragraphs
Specific themes	The main body — thematic synthesis of current research	The bulk of the review
The gap	State clearly what remains unresolved or under-explored	A focused paragraph
Your research question	Connect the gap directly to your own study or assignment focus	A short, clear statement

Expert Tip: A quick way to check your funnel is working: read only the first sentence of each major section, in order. If those sentences alone tell a coherent story of narrowing from broad field to specific gap, your funnel structure is doing its job.

Why the funnel shape matters for your gap statement

The funnel structure isn't just a stylistic convention — it does real argumentative work. By the time a reader reaches your gap statement, they should already understand the broad field well enough that the gap feels obvious and important, rather than arbitrary. A gap statement that appears without this narrowing groundwork tends to feel unearned, as though it's been asserted rather than demonstrated. This is one of the main reasons literature reviews that jump straight into narrow, specific studies without first establishing broader context often read as disorganised, even when the underlying research is sound.

The Tree Structure: Organising Sources Thematically

Within the "specific themes" section of your funnel — which is usually the bulk of your literature review — sources need their own internal organisation. This is where the tree structure comes in: rather than a flat list of sources, your literature review's main body should branch, much like a tree, from your central topic down to individual studies.

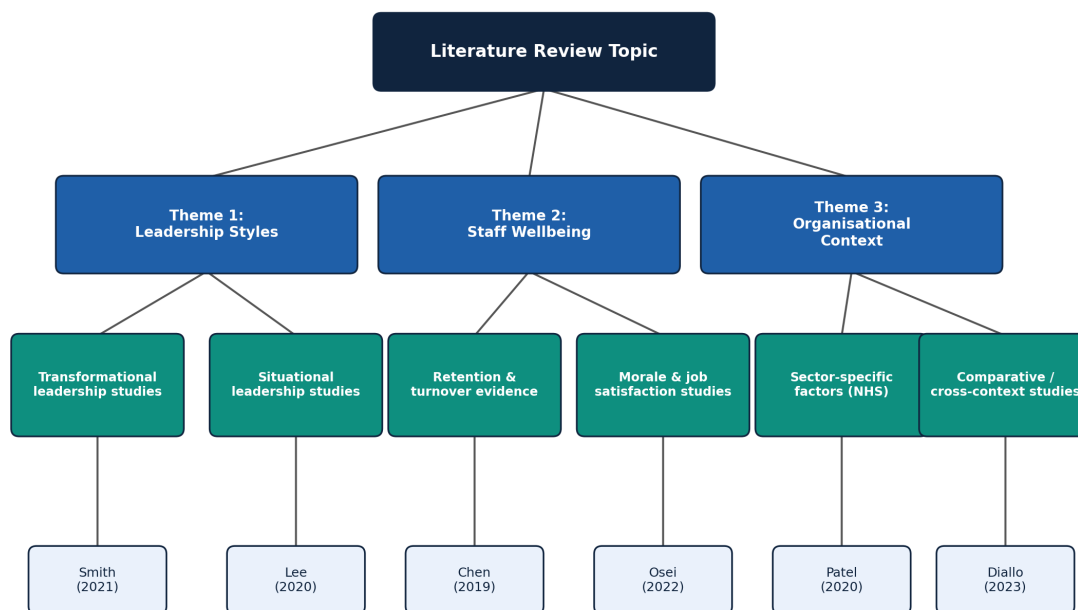


Figure 1: A thematic 'tree' structure — the topic branches into themes, themes branch into sub-themes, and sub-themes are supported by individual studies.

At the top of the tree sits your overall topic. Beneath it, the topic branches into major themes — the broad conceptual categories your reading has revealed. Each theme then branches further into sub-themes, which represent more specific angles, debates, or dimensions of that theme. Finally, individual studies attach to the sub-themes they support, providing the evidence base for each specific point.

Tree Level	What It Represents	Example (Leadership in Healthcare)
Root (topic)	Your overall literature review topic	Leadership and staff outcomes in the NHS
Branch (theme)	A major conceptual category	Leadership styles / Staff wellbeing / Organisational context
Sub-branch (sub-theme)	A more specific angle within a theme	Transformational leadership studies / Situational leadership studies
Leaf (individual study)	A specific source supporting that sub-theme	Smith (2021), Lee (2020)

Expert Tip: Build your tree structure before you start writing, not while you write. A rough sketch — even on paper — of your themes, sub-themes, and which sources

belong where will save far more time than it costs, and it prevents sources from ending up "orphaned" without a clear thematic home.

Why the tree structure prevents the "list of summaries" problem

The single most common structural weakness in undergraduate literature reviews is what's sometimes called the "list of summaries" problem — a review that works through sources one at a time, each in its own paragraph, without ever drawing them together. The tree structure directly prevents this, because it forces you to decide, before writing, which sources belong together under the same branch. Once sources are grouped this way, a paragraph naturally becomes about the sub-theme itself — with several sources cited together, compared, and evaluated — rather than about any single source in isolation.

Building your own tree: a step-by-step approach

Step 1: List your key sources. Before organising anything, list every source you plan to use, with a one-line note on its main finding or argument.

Step 2: Identify recurring themes. Read through your list and look for concepts, debates, or findings that recur across multiple sources — these become your branches.

Step 3: Group sources under themes. Assign each source to the theme it best fits. Some sources may fit under more than one theme; that's normal, and you can discuss different aspects of the same source under different branches if genuinely relevant.

Step 4: Identify sub-themes within each branch. Where a theme contains many sources, look for a further natural split — this becomes your sub-branches.

Step 5: Check for orphaned sources. Any source that doesn't fit clearly under a theme is either not essential to your review, or points to a theme you haven't yet identified.

⚠ **Common Mistake:** Building the tree structure after drafting, rather than before. Retrofitting thematic organisation onto an already-written, source-by-source draft is far harder than planning the tree first and writing directly into it.

Thematic vs Chronological vs Methodological Organisation

While thematic organisation (the tree structure above) is the default for most literature reviews, two alternative organising principles are sometimes more appropriate, depending on your topic and discipline.

Organising Principle	Best Used When	Example
Thematic	The topic naturally divides into distinct conceptual themes	Leadership styles, staff wellbeing, organisational context
Chronological	Understanding of the topic has clearly evolved over time and this evolution matters to your argument	The historical development of attachment theory since the 1950s
Methodological	The methods used across studies are central to your argument or dissertation focus	Comparing survey-based versus experimental approaches to studying employee motivation

Lecturer Advice: These organising principles aren't mutually exclusive — many strong literature reviews are primarily thematic, but use a brief chronological note within a theme to show how understanding of that specific sub-theme has developed. Choose your primary organising principle, then use the others sparingly, where they add genuine value.

Planning Your Search

A well-organised literature review depends on a systematic search process, even in disciplines that don't require a formal systematic review methodology. Searching haphazardly tends to produce patchy coverage and awkward gaps that only become obvious once you start writing.

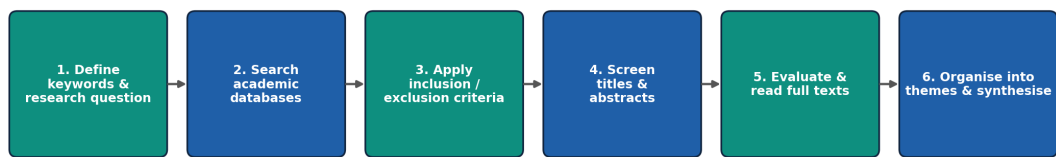


Figure 3: A typical literature search and selection process, from keyword definition through to thematic synthesis.

Search Step	What It Involves
Define keywords	List your core concepts and their synonyms (e.g. "leadership," "management style," "supervisory approach")
Use Boolean operators	Combine keywords with AND, OR, NOT to refine your search (e.g. "leadership AND retention NOT turnover")
Search academic databases	Use databases relevant to your discipline (e.g. PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Business Source Complete)
Apply inclusion/exclusion criteria	Set clear criteria (e.g. publication date range, peer-reviewed only, relevant population) before screening
Screen titles and abstracts	Quickly assess relevance before committing to reading full texts
Read and evaluate full texts	Apply deeper critical evaluation to sources that pass initial screening

Expert Tip: Keep a simple search log — the database, search terms, date searched, and number of results — even for a narrative review. It makes your search process transparent if a marker or supervisor asks how you identified your sources, and it saves you from accidentally repeating searches.

Worked Example: A search log entry might read: "Database: Business Source Complete. Search terms: ('transformational leadership' OR 'situational leadership') AND

('staff retention' OR 'staff turnover'). Filters: peer-reviewed, 2015–2025. Results: 47 records; 12 selected after abstract screening."

Evaluating and Selecting Sources

Not every source that matches your search terms deserves a place in your literature review. Selection should be based on relevance, quality, and how well a source contributes to your emerging thematic structure.

Evaluation Question	Why It Matters
Is this source directly relevant to one of my themes?	Sources tangential to your themes dilute focus rather than adding value
Is the methodology sound for the claims being made?	Weak methodology limits how much weight a finding should carry
Is the source appropriately recent, or is its age justified?	Older sources may still be relevant if foundational, but currency matters for fast-moving fields
Is the source peer-reviewed or otherwise authoritative?	Affects how confidently the source's findings can be treated
Does this source add something not already covered by others?	Avoids redundancy and keeps your review efficient

⚠ **Common Mistake:** Including every source you've read simply because you've read it. A literature review should be selective — sources that don't clearly serve a theme or add new value should usually be left out, however interesting they were to read.

Lecturer Advice: If you need a quick refresher on evaluating individual sources in depth — assessing methodology, sample size, bias, and evidence hierarchies — see our companion Critical Analysis Guide, which covers this in detail.

If you're conducting a systematic review: the PRISMA flow

Where a systematic review is genuinely required, most disciplines expect the search and selection process to be documented using a PRISMA-style flow, tracking exactly how your final source list was reached.

PRISMA Stage	What It Records
Identification	Total records found across all databases searched, before removing duplicates
Screening	Records remaining after duplicates removed, and how many were screened by title/abstract
Eligibility	Full texts assessed for eligibility, and how many were excluded, with reasons
Included	Final number of studies included in the systematic review itself

Expert Tip: Even outside a formal systematic review, briefly recording your record counts at each stage (identification, screening, eligibility, inclusion) strengthens your literature review's transparency and can be a useful appendix even in a narrative review context.

Managing a large number of sources

Literature reviews often involve considerably more sources than other assignment sections, and this volume can become unmanageable without a deliberate system. Beyond the synthesis matrix covered next, most students benefit from a simple triage: sorting sources into "essential" (central to a theme, directly cited), "supporting" (adds minor nuance or corroboration), and "background" (useful for context but not directly cited). This triage prevents a common failure mode where every source read gets forced into the final draft regardless of how much it actually contributes, which in turn causes the uneven thematic coverage markers frequently comment on.

⚠ **Common Mistake:** Trying to give every source read equal prominence in the final review. Not every source you've read needs to appear with the same weight — some will

only need a brief supporting mention, while others deserve sustained critical engagement.

From Summary to Synthesis: The Synthesis Matrix

A synthesis matrix is one of the most effective planning tools for moving from a pile of individually-read sources to a genuinely synthesised literature review. It's a simple grid: sources down one side, themes across the top, with each cell noting what that source says about that theme.

Source	Theme: Leadership Style	Theme: Staff Wellbeing	Theme: Organisational Context
Smith (2021)	Transformational leadership ↑ morale 23%	Improved satisfaction scores	Single NHS trust, small sample
Lee (2020)	Situational leadership more consistent under pressure	Mixed effect on morale	Multiple ward types compared
Chen (2019)	Not directly addressed	Retention linked to recognition, not just leadership style	Cross-sector comparison

Expert Tip: Once your synthesis matrix is filled in, read across each column (theme), not down each row (source). Reading across the columns is what reveals genuine synthesis opportunities — agreement, disagreement, and gaps within a single theme across multiple sources.

Turning matrix columns into paragraphs

Each column in your synthesis matrix corresponds roughly to one theme paragraph (or group of paragraphs) in your literature review. Reading down a column shows you, at a glance, what several sources say about the same theme — which sources agree, which conflict, and which leave the theme only partially addressed. This is the raw material for synthesis: rather than writing "Smith found X, then Lee found Y, then Chen found Z" as

three separate sentences, the matrix helps you write "While Smith and Lee agree that leadership style affects staff wellbeing, Chen's findings suggest recognition may be a more significant factor than leadership style alone" — a single synthesised sentence covering three sources.

Writing Theme Paragraphs

Once your tree structure and synthesis matrix are in place, writing the actual paragraphs becomes considerably more straightforward. Each theme paragraph (or group of paragraphs) should synthesise multiple sources around a shared idea, rather than working through sources one at a time.

Stage	Function
Topic sentence	States the sub-theme's main point, synthesising what multiple sources show
Evidence synthesis	Presents evidence from two or more sources together, showing agreement, disagreement, or nuance
Critical evaluation	Assesses the strength, relevance, and limitations of this combined evidence
Link	Connects to the next sub-theme or theme, maintaining the tree's overall flow

Worked Example: "The relationship between leadership style and staff morale is well-established, though the strength of this relationship appears context-dependent. Smith (2021) found a 23% increase in staff satisfaction under transformational leadership in a single NHS trust, a finding broadly supported by Lee's (2020) comparative study across multiple ward types. However, Chen's (2019) cross-sector analysis suggests that recognition and autonomy may explain more of the variance in morale than leadership style specifically, indicating that leadership style alone may be an incomplete predictor of staff wellbeing outcomes."

⚠ **Common Mistake:** Writing one paragraph per source even after building a tree structure and synthesis matrix. The planning tools only help if the writing itself follows

through — each paragraph should draw on the sources grouped under that sub-theme together, not sequentially.

Dealing with conflicting literature

Sources within the same sub-theme frequently disagree, and this disagreement is not a problem to hide — it's often the most valuable material in your entire literature review. Markers specifically look for evidence that you can handle contested findings thoughtfully, rather than quietly citing only the sources that support a tidy narrative.

When sources conflict, the strongest approach is to state the disagreement explicitly, then explore why it might exist, before reaching a reasoned view of your own about which position the evidence more strongly supports, or whether the disagreement itself reveals an important gap.

Reason for Conflict	What to Consider
Different sample populations	Could the disagreement reflect genuine contextual differences rather than a true contradiction?
Different methodologies	Might one method be better suited to capturing this particular phenomenon than the other?
Different definitions of key terms	Are both studies actually measuring the same concept, or talking past each other?
Different time periods	Could the field or context have changed meaningfully between studies?

Worked Example: "Smith (2021) and Osei (2023) reach opposing conclusions about transformational leadership's effect on retention, a discrepancy that may partly reflect differing organisational contexts — Smith's single-trust sample faced significantly higher baseline turnover than Osei's multi-trust comparison. This suggests organisational context may moderate the relationship between leadership style and retention, rather than one study being simply wrong."

Expert Tip: A useful habit is to ask, whenever you find two conflicting sources: "what would have to be true for both of these findings to be correct?" The answer often reveals

a moderating factor — exactly the kind of nuanced insight that distinguishes strong literature reviews from merely competent ones.

Writing Your Introduction

The introduction to your literature review sits at the top of the funnel — it establishes the broad context and signals the narrowing structure that follows.

Introduction Element	Function
Broad context statement	Establishes why this general field matters
Scope statement	Clarifies what your review will and won't cover
Structural signpost	Briefly indicates how the review is organised (thematically, chronologically, etc.)
Purpose statement	Signals that the review is building towards identifying a gap or research focus

Worked Example: "Leadership style has long been recognised as a significant factor in healthcare workforce outcomes, particularly staff morale and retention. This review synthesises current research across three themes — leadership styles, staff wellbeing, and organisational context — in order to identify where existing evidence remains inconclusive, particularly regarding leadership's effect on retention specifically, as opposed to morale more broadly."

Writing Your Conclusion

The literature review's conclusion sits at the bottom of the funnel — it should draw the themes together and state the gap clearly, without introducing new sources or evidence.

Conclusion Element	Function
Thematic summary	Briefly draws together the key findings across all themes
Synthesis statement	States what the overall body of evidence shows when considered together
Gap statement	Identifies specifically what remains unresolved or under-explored
Connection to your own work	Links the gap directly to your research question, dissertation focus, or assignment aim

Worked Example: "Taken together, the evidence reviewed here indicates that leadership style significantly affects staff morale, though its effect on retention specifically remains less clearly established, with organisational context and recognition practices potentially playing an equal or greater role. This gap — the relative contribution of leadership style versus organisational context to retention specifically — is the focus of the research undertaken in this study."

Critical Language for Literature Reviews

The language you use signals whether you're synthesising or merely listing. Certain phrases consistently mark genuine synthesis across sources.

Listing Language	Synthesising Language
"Smith (2021) found X. Lee (2020) found Y."	"While Smith (2021) and Lee (2020) broadly agree that X, they diverge on the extent to which Y applies."
"There are many studies on this topic."	"The existing literature converges on X, though notable gaps remain around Y."
"This author says... This author also says..."	"Taken together, these studies suggest..." / "This body of evidence points towards..."

Expert Tip: Phrases like "taken together," "when considered alongside," and "this is broadly consistent with" are reliable signals of synthesis. If your draft is missing this

kind of language throughout, it's likely still organised source-by-source rather than theme-by-theme.

Referencing and Citation Management

Literature reviews typically involve more sources than any other section of an assignment, which makes careful reference management especially important.

Practice	Why It Matters
Use a reference manager (Zotero, Mendeley, EndNote)	Reduces the risk of citation errors across a large source list
Match your referencing style consistently (Harvard, APA 7, OSCOLA)	Inconsistent referencing is a common, easily avoidable, mark deduction
Cite multiple sources together where genuinely synthesised	Reflects the synthesis you've done, rather than crediting one source per sentence artificially
Keep a master reference list as you go	Avoids a last-minute scramble to track down full citation details before submission

⚠ **Common Mistake:** Leaving reference list compilation until the end of the writing process. With the volume of sources typical in a literature review, this significantly increases the risk of missing or inconsistent citations.

Common tools for managing a literature review

Beyond reference managers, several other tools consistently make large literature reviews more manageable, particularly once source counts move into the dozens.

Tool Type	Examples	What It Helps With
Reference managers	Zotero, Mendeley, EndNote	Storing sources, generating citations and reference lists automatically
	NVivo, ATLAS.ti	

Tool Type	Examples	What It Helps With
Qualitative synthesis software		Coding and organising themes across a large number of sources or documents
Spreadsheet-based synthesis matrices	Excel, Google Sheets	Building and maintaining your synthesis matrix, especially with many sources
PDF annotation tools	Adobe Acrobat, Zotero's built-in reader	Applying evaluative annotation codes directly onto source PDFs while reading
Mind-mapping tools	Miro, XMind, or simply pen and paper	Sketching your tree structure (themes and sub-themes) before drafting

Expert Tip: For most undergraduate literature reviews, a well-organised spreadsheet synthesis matrix and a reference manager are sufficient — dedicated qualitative synthesis software like NVivo is usually only necessary for larger dissertations or postgraduate research involving dozens of sources.

Length and Proportions

Total Assignment/Dissertation Word Count	Typical Literature Review Length
3,000-word essay (lit review as one section)	800–1,200 words
5,000-word report	1,200–1,800 words
8,000-word dissertation	2,000–2,500 words
10,000–12,000-word dissertation	2,500–3,500 words
15,000+ word dissertation	3,500–5,000 words

Lecturer Advice: These figures are typical ranges, not fixed rules — always check your specific module or dissertation handbook, since expected literature review proportions vary between departments and disciplines.

Common Lecturer Feedback

Common Feedback Comment	What It Usually Means	How to Fix It
"Reads like a list of summaries"	Organised source-by-source rather than by theme	Rebuild using the tree structure before rewriting
"Lacks synthesis"	Sources are described individually without being drawn together	Use synthesis matrix columns to write combined, comparative paragraphs
"No clear gap identified"	The review doesn't state what remains unresolved	Add an explicit gap statement connecting to your research focus
"Uneven coverage"	Some themes are thin while others are overdeveloped	Rebalance using your synthesis matrix to check theme coverage
"Structure unclear"	No clear funnel or thematic signposting	Add clear topic sentences and structural signposts between sections

⚠ **Common Mistake:** By far the most common comment on UK literature reviews — "reads like a list of summaries." This almost always traces back to organising by source rather than by theme.

Weak vs Strong Examples

Weak	Strong
"Smith (2021) studied leadership in the NHS. Lee (2020) also studied leadership. Chen (2019) looked at staff retention."	"While Smith (2021) and Lee (2020) both find a positive relationship between leadership style and staff morale, Chen's (2019) broader analysis suggests recognition practices may better explain variance in retention specifically, indicating leadership style alone may not fully account for retention outcomes."

Weak	Strong
"There are many theories of motivation, including Maslow's and Herzberg's."	"Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Herzberg's two-factor theory both attempt to explain workplace motivation, but they diverge on whether motivation is best understood as a single hierarchy or as two distinct factor types — a distinction with direct implications for how this review approaches motivation as a theme."

Expert Tip: Notice the strong versions name specific relationships between sources — agreement, divergence, or complementary findings — rather than simply placing sources next to each other in a sentence.

Subject-Specific Examples

Business: "Existing research on hybrid working productivity converges on measurable gains for individually assessable roles (Chen, 2022), but diverges sharply on collaborative roles, where Osei (2023) finds no equivalent benefit. This divergence suggests role type, rather than hybrid working itself, may be the more significant explanatory factor — a gap this review's own case study aims to address."

Law: "The literature on promissory estoppel is broadly consistent in identifying High Trees as a landmark case, but disagrees on the doctrine's practical scope, with some scholars (Cooke, 2019) arguing for a broad exception to consideration and others (Halson, 2021) emphasising its narrowly defensive application in subsequent case law."

Nursing: "Studies applying Gibbs' Reflective Cycle to escalation delays consistently identify hierarchy-related hesitation as a factor (Osei, 2022; Patel, 2020), though the literature remains divided on whether structured communication tools such as SBAR meaningfully reduce this hesitation in practice."

Psychology: "Research on adolescent wellbeing and social media use has shifted significantly, with earlier platform-focused studies (Twenge, 2017) giving way to more

recent usage-pattern-focused research (Twenge, 2020), reflecting a broader methodological shift towards more granular behavioural measures."

Computer Science: "Existing MFA usability research consistently favours push-notification methods over SMS-based alternatives (Lee, 2021; Diallo, 2023), though the literature has not yet adequately addressed usability across users without reliable smartphone access, representing a clear gap this review identifies."

Engineering: "Studies of weld fatigue life consistently favour reinforced fillet welds over standard butt welds under simulated cyclical loading (Patel, 2020), though the literature is notably thin on field-tested, rather than simulated, loading conditions — a methodological gap with direct implications for design guidance."

Marketing: "The literature on awareness-versus-conversion campaign outcomes shows a recurring disconnect (Osei, 2023; Chen, 2022), suggesting that creative strategies optimised for awareness may systematically under-deliver on conversion-focused objectives unless deliberately combined."

Education: "Existing research broadly supports formative feedback's positive effect on pupil engagement (Diallo, 2023), though most studies lack control groups, limiting how confidently this effect can be isolated from concurrent classroom improvements — a methodological gap this review highlights."

Finance: "Studies comparing government and corporate bond performance consistently find a stability-yield trade-off (Patel, 2020; Lee, 2021), though this literature is concentrated in periods of atypical interest rate volatility, raising questions about how well these findings generalise to more stable economic conditions."

Common Mistakes

#	Mistake	Why It Weakens the Review
1	Organising by source rather than by theme	Produces a "list of summaries" rather than genuine synthesis
2	Building the tree structure after drafting, not before	Makes retrofitting thematic organisation far harder
3	Including every source read, regardless of relevance	Dilutes focus and unbalances thematic coverage
4	No clear gap statement at the end	Leaves the review's purpose and connection to your own work unclear
5	Uneven depth across themes	Some themes read as under-researched relative to others
6	Treating the introduction as a simple topic announcement	Misses the chance to establish the funnel's broad context properly
7	Ending abruptly without a synthesis or gap statement	Leaves the reader without a clear sense of what the review adds up to
8	Failing to compare sources directly within a theme	Misses the core synthesis work a literature review requires
9	Using a synthesis matrix but not translating it into synthesised prose	Planning tools only help if followed through into the actual writing
10	Citing sources without evaluating their quality	Treats all evidence as equally reliable regardless of methodology
11	Overusing direct quotations instead of synthesis in your own words	Reduces the appearance of genuine critical engagement
12	Ignoring chronological development where it's actually relevant	Misses useful context on how understanding of a theme has evolved
13	Choosing methodological organisation without a clear reason	Can obscure thematic patterns that matter more to your argument
14	Inconsistent referencing style across a large source list	An easily avoidable but common mark deduction

#	Mistake	Why It Weakens the Review
15	Leaving reference list compilation until the end	Increases the risk of missing or inconsistent citations
16	Failing to keep a search log	Makes your search process opaque and harder to justify if questioned
17	Treating older sources as automatically irrelevant	Foundational theories can remain highly relevant regardless of age
18	Not revisiting theme boundaries once all sources are grouped	Some themes may need splitting or merging once fully populated
19	Writing the introduction before finalising your thematic structure	Introductions often need revision once the final structure is set
20	Failing to link the literature review to your methodology or analysis	Leaves the review feeling disconnected from the rest of the assignment
21	Overloading a single paragraph with too many sources at once	Can overwhelm the reader and blur the specific point being made
22	Using vague synthesis language without specific evidence	"Many studies suggest..." without naming which studies weakens credibility
23	Failing to distinguish strong consensus from contested findings	Treats settled and disputed areas of literature with equal confidence
24	Not signposting structure clearly between themes	Makes the funnel and tree structures hard for a reader to follow
25	Repeating the same source's findings across multiple themes without added value	Suggests the source hasn't been fully integrated into your organisational plan
26	Assuming a systematic review protocol is required when a narrative review is expected	Can lead to disproportionate time spent on search documentation over synthesis
27	Failing to revisit the gap statement once the full review is drafted	The gap identified in planning may shift once all themes are fully synthesised
28	Writing theme headings that are too vague to guide the reader	Headings like "Literature Review Part 2" give no indication of content

⚠ **Common Mistake:** Treating the literature review as a box-ticking exercise completed early and never revisited. The strongest literature reviews are refined after the rest of the assignment or dissertation is drafted, once it's clear exactly which gap the remaining work actually addresses.

Literature Review Checklist

Printable Literature Review Checklist

- ☐ I have built a tree structure (themes and sub-themes) before drafting my paragraphs
- ☐ My literature review follows an overall funnel — broad context narrowing to a specific gap
- ☐ Each theme paragraph synthesises multiple sources rather than summarising one at a time
- ☐ I have used a synthesis matrix or equivalent planning tool to identify agreement and disagreement
- ☐ I have evaluated the quality and relevance of each source I've included
- ☐ My conclusion states a clear, specific gap connected to my own research question or focus
- ☐ My referencing is consistent throughout and matches my required style
- ☐ I have kept a search log documenting my search terms and selection process
- ☐ I have checked for uneven coverage across my themes

Literature Review Templates

Thematic Literature Review Template

- ☐ Introduction: broad context, scope, structural signpost, purpose
- ☐ Theme 1: synthesised evidence, critical evaluation, link to Theme 2
- ☐ Theme 2: synthesised evidence, critical evaluation, link to Theme 3

- ☐ Theme 3: synthesised evidence, critical evaluation, link to conclusion
- ☐ Conclusion: thematic summary, synthesis statement, gap statement, connection to your own work

Chronological Literature Review Template

- ☐ Introduction: broad context and rationale for a chronological approach
- ☐ Early period: foundational theories and studies
- ☐ Middle period: key developments, challenges, or revisions to early theories
- ☐ Recent period: current state of the debate
- ☐ Conclusion: how understanding has evolved, and what remains unresolved today

Methodological Literature Review Template

- ☐ Introduction: broad context and rationale for a methodological focus
- ☐ Method type 1: studies using this method, strengths and limitations
- ☐ Method type 2: studies using this method, strengths and limitations
- ☐ Cross-methodological synthesis: what different methods reveal or obscure
- ☐ Conclusion: methodological gap and implications for your own research design

Systematic (PRISMA-Informed) Review Template

- ☐ Introduction: rationale, research question, and review protocol overview
- ☐ Methods: databases searched, keywords, inclusion/exclusion criteria, PRISMA flow summary
- ☐ Results: thematic or narrative synthesis of included studies
- ☐ Discussion: strengths, limitations, and gaps in the reviewed evidence
- ☐ Conclusion: implications and specific gap addressed by your own study

Dissertation Literature Review Chapter Template

- ☐ Introduction to the chapter and its structure
- ☐ Theoretical framework section, establishing key theories underpinning the study

- ☐ Thematic sections synthesising empirical research relevant to each research question
- ☐ Explicit identification of the gap(s) the dissertation addresses
- ☐ Brief transition into the methodology chapter

Need feedback on your literature review before submission? Our UK academic tutors can review your structure, synthesis, critical evaluation, and referencing to help you strengthen your work.

Practice Exercises

Exercise 1 — The tree-building test

- ☐ List your key sources with a one-line note on each one's main finding
- ☐ Group them into themes and sub-themes on paper before writing anything
- ☐ Check for any "orphaned" sources that don't fit a clear theme

Exercise 2 — Synthesis matrix practice

- ☐ Build a simple grid with sources down one side and themes across the top
- ☐ Fill in what each source says about each relevant theme
- ☐ Read across each column and draft one synthesised sentence per theme

Exercise 3 — The funnel check

- ☐ Read only the first sentence of each major section of your draft, in order
- ☐ Confirm they move logically from broad context to a specific gap
- ☐ Revise any section that jumps too abruptly between levels of the funnel

Exercise 4 — List-of-summaries audit

- ☐ Highlight every paragraph that discusses only one source
- ☐ For each, check whether it could be merged with a related source under the same theme
- ☐ Rewrite merged paragraphs using synthesising language from this guide

Exercise 5 — Gap statement test

- ☐ Write a single sentence stating the specific gap your literature review identifies
- ☐ Check that this gap connects directly to your research question or assignment focus
- ☐ Revise your conclusion if this connection isn't already explicit

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is a literature review? A structured, critical synthesis of existing research on a topic, organised thematically, that identifies patterns, debates, and gaps in current knowledge.

2. What's the difference between a literature review and an annotated bibliography? An annotated bibliography summarises sources individually; a literature review synthesises sources together around shared themes, comparing and evaluating rather than listing.

3. What is the "tree structure" in a literature review? An organisational approach where your topic branches into themes, themes branch into sub-themes, and sub-themes are supported by individual studies — the opposite of a flat, source-by-source list.

4. What is the "funnel structure" in a literature review? The overall shape of the review, moving from broad context, through narrower debates and theories, to specific themes, and finally to the gap your own work addresses.

5. How long should a literature review be? This depends on the overall assignment length, but typically 15–25% of a dissertation's total word count, or a proportionate section within a longer report or essay.

6. Should I organise my literature review by theme or by source? By theme — organising by source produces a "list of summaries," which is the most common structural weakness markers identify in UK literature reviews.

7. What is a synthesis matrix? A planning grid with sources down one side and themes across the top, used to identify agreement, disagreement, and gaps across sources within each theme before writing.

8. Do I need to follow PRISMA guidelines for my literature review? Only if a systematic review is specifically required — most undergraduate literature reviews are narrative reviews, which don't require a formal PRISMA protocol. Check your module handbook.

9. How many sources should a literature review include? There's no fixed number — what matters is thematic coverage and quality, not raw source count. A well-synthesised review with fewer sources often outperforms a long, unsynthesised list.

10. Can I organise my literature review chronologically instead of thematically? Yes, if historical development is genuinely central to your topic or argument — otherwise, thematic organisation is usually clearer and more common.

11. How do I identify a "gap" in the literature? Look for questions the existing research hasn't fully answered, areas where studies conflict without resolution, or contexts (populations, settings, methods) that remain under-studied.

12. Should every paragraph cite multiple sources? Not necessarily every paragraph, but most theme paragraphs should draw on more than one source to demonstrate genuine synthesis rather than isolated description.

13. How do I avoid writing a "list of summaries"? Build a thematic tree structure and synthesis matrix before drafting, and use synthesising language ("taken together," "these findings converge on") throughout your writing.

14. What's the difference between a narrative review and a systematic review? A narrative review synthesises literature more flexibly and qualitatively; a systematic

review follows a rigorous, protocol-driven search and selection process, often reported using PRISMA guidelines.

15. How do I choose which sources to include? Select sources based on relevance to your themes, methodological quality, and whether they add something not already covered by other sources you've selected.

16. Should my literature review include a methodology section? Standard narrative reviews usually don't need a formal methodology section, though briefly noting your search approach (databases, keywords) adds transparency. Systematic reviews require a full methods section.

17. How do I write a strong literature review introduction? Establish broad context, state your review's scope, briefly signpost your organisational structure, and signal that the review builds towards identifying a gap.

18. How do I write a strong literature review conclusion? Summarise your themes briefly, state what the evidence shows overall, identify the specific gap that remains, and connect that gap to your own research question or assignment focus.

19. Can I use direct quotations in a literature review? Sparingly — literature reviews generally favour paraphrase and synthesis in your own words over lengthy direct quotation, reserving quotes for cases where exact wording adds precision.

20. How do I handle sources that don't fit neatly into one theme? It's acceptable to discuss different aspects of the same source under different themes where genuinely relevant, rather than forcing it into a single ill-fitting category.

21. What's the best referencing tool for managing a large literature review source list? Reference managers such as Zotero, Mendeley, or EndNote are widely used and significantly reduce citation errors across large source lists.

22. How do I know if my literature review has good thematic balance? Check your synthesis matrix or source list for uneven distribution — if one theme has ten sources and another has one, consider whether themes need merging, splitting, or rebalancing.

23. Should a literature review be written before or after my methodology? This varies by discipline and project, though many researchers draft the literature review early and revise it once the full study or assignment is complete, to ensure the gap statement remains accurate.

24. What's the biggest mistake students make in literature reviews? Organising by source rather than by theme — this consistently produces the "reads like a list of summaries" feedback that's the most common criticism of UK literature reviews.

25. How detailed should my search log be? Detailed enough to reconstruct your search if asked — databases used, search terms, filters applied, and approximate number of results at each stage.

26. Can I include grey literature (reports, theses, non-peer-reviewed sources)? Sometimes, depending on your discipline and topic — but weigh grey literature's relevance and authority carefully against peer-reviewed sources, and check whether your module permits it.

27. How do I write about a source that contradicts my other sources? State the contradiction explicitly, consider possible reasons for it (differing methods, contexts, definitions), and avoid simply omitting inconvenient findings.

28. Should I evaluate the methodology of every source I discuss? Not with equal depth for every source, but sources central to a theme's argument deserve explicit methodological evaluation; minor supporting sources can be integrated more briefly.

29. What's a good literature review word count for a 10,000-word dissertation? Typically around 2,500–3,000 words, though this varies by department — always confirm expectations with your dissertation handbook or supervisor.

30. How do I connect my literature review to my later analysis or discussion chapter? Make sure the gap identified in your literature review is the same gap your analysis or discussion directly addresses, creating a clear thread through the whole piece of work.

31. Is it acceptable to revise my thematic structure partway through writing? Yes — it's common and often beneficial to adjust themes as writing reveals better groupings than your initial plan, provided you also update your synthesis matrix and any cross-references accordingly.

32. How do I make sure my literature review doesn't just repeat my introduction? Keep your assignment's own introduction focused on your specific research question, while the literature review's introduction focuses on establishing the broader field's context and structure.

33. Should I include theoretical frameworks in my literature review? Yes, particularly in the "narrower context" stage of the funnel, where establishing the theoretical frameworks underpinning your themes helps orient the reader before the detailed thematic synthesis begins.

34. How do I handle a topic with an overwhelming amount of literature? Narrow your themes more tightly, apply stricter inclusion criteria (e.g. more recent sources, specific populations), and prioritise sources most directly relevant to your specific gap.

35. How do I handle a topic with very little existing literature? Broaden your search to adjacent fields or related theories, and be explicit in your review that limited literature is itself part of the gap your work addresses.

36. What's the fastest way to add synthesis to an already-drafted, source-by-source literature review? Group your existing paragraphs by shared theme, then rewrite the opening and closing sentences of each merged section using synthesising language that explicitly compares the sources together.

Key Takeaways

- A literature review is organised by theme, not by source — the tree structure prevents the common "list of summaries" problem.
 - The overall shape of a literature review typically follows a funnel: broad context narrowing to a specific gap.
 - Build your thematic tree structure and a synthesis matrix before drafting, not after.
 - Each theme paragraph should synthesise multiple sources together, not summarise them one at a time.
 - End with a clear, specific gap statement that connects directly to your own research question or assignment focus.
 - Choose thematic organisation as your default; use chronological or methodological organisation only where genuinely more appropriate.
 - Keep a search log and use a reference manager to handle the larger source volume typical of literature reviews.
 - The fastest way to fix a descriptive, source-by-source draft is to rebuild it around themes using synthesising language.
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Conclusion

A strong literature review does two things at once: it shows the breadth and quality of your reading, and it demonstrates that you can think critically across a whole body of evidence rather than one source at a time. The funnel structure gives your review a clear overall direction, from broad context down to a specific gap; the tree structure gives your body paragraphs a genuine thematic organisation, so that sources are compared and synthesised rather than simply listed. Build both structures before you start writing, use a synthesis matrix to spot genuine points of agreement and disagreement, and remember that the fastest fix for a weak literature review is almost always the same: stop organising by source, and start organising by theme.

Need feedback on your literature review before submission? Our UK academic tutors can review your structure, synthesis, critical evaluation, and referencing to help you strengthen your work before you submit.

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