LESSON 2

Review the Literature

Find trustworthy sources and learn what's already known.

About 95 min | Reading 30 min | Slides 60 min | Quiz 5 min

Learning objective. By the end you will be able to find credible scholarly sources on your question and summarise how they connect to each other.

Key points

- "The literature" simply means what has already been written on your topic.
- Search Google Scholar, PubMed or DOAJ, and read the abstract before the whole paper.
- Notice where sources agree and disagree, not just what each one says.

Learn

'The literature' just means what has already been written about your topic: research articles, books, reports and reviews. Reviewing it shows you what is already known, so you aren't repeating work and you can build on what experts have found.

Start with free search tools. Google Scholar covers most fields, PubMed is for health and biology, and DOAJ lists open-access journals. Search with the key terms from your question, try their synonyms, and check an article's 'Cited by' link to find newer work. Read the abstract first to decide whether a source deserves a closer read. Ask who wrote it, where it was published, and how recent it is.

Don't just write a list of summaries. Look for connections: where do sources agree or disagree, and what themes or methods keep showing up? Group sources around ideas rather than going one by one. As you read, you will often find better search words or realise your question needs adjusting, so loop back and revise.

Example

> Jordan is asking whether listening to music while studying affects test scores. He searches Google Scholar for 'background music' and 'study performance' and finds six studies. Using a simple table, he notices that most found lyrics hurt reading comprehension, while instrumental music had mixed results. Two studies tested only university students. He groups his notes into 'lyrics', 'instrumental' and 'who was studied' instead of summarising each article separately.

Across disciplines

Science reviews mostly use recent peer-reviewed journal articles. Humanities researchers lean more on books, primary texts and older scholarship. Social scientists mix journal studies with reports and data sets.

Watch

What is a Literature Review?, NC State University Libraries (5 min): youtube.com/watch?v=Rix0NDIxkaA

> **Takeaway.** A literature review is about understanding the conversation among sources, not just collecting them.

Try it: Build a mini source map

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Pull 2–3 key terms from your research question and list one synonym for each.

2. Search Google Scholar (or PubMed or DOAJ if it suits your field) and pick 3 relevant sources based on their abstracts.

3. For each source, record the author, year, main finding and method in a simple table.

4. Write two sentences on how the sources agree, disagree or connect.

Lesson 2 quiz

Circle one answer for each question. Pass mark: 4 of 5.

1. What does it mean to "read laterally" when checking a website?

(A) Read the whole page carefully, including its About page, before deciding
(B) Leave the page and open new tabs to see what others say about the source
(C) Compare the page's design and domain ending with other similar sites
(D) Skim the page quickly from side to side, looking for key words and numbers

2. A student studying history finds a 1919 newspaper editorial about a strike. What is it best evidence of?

(A) An opinion that was being expressed at the time
(B) A neutral, accurate record of what happened in the strike
(C) A modern historian's interpretation of the strike
(D) Nothing useful, because primary sources are biased

3. In the invented example, why did Noor's third search work better than her second?

(A) She switched from Google Scholar to a general web search engine
(B) She typed her full question as a sentence so the database understood it
(C) She added a term from her reading, joined with OR, plus "adolescen*"
(D) She removed AND so that the search returned as many results as possible

4. You open a long science article (IMRaD). What should your first reading pass include?

(A) Title, abstract, figures and conclusion, to judge if it is relevant
(B) Every section from start to finish, so you do not miss any key detail
(C) The methods and results tables, checked carefully line by line
(D) Only the abstract, since it fully and fairly summarises the paper's findings

5. An invented abstract ends: "Schools should therefore provide silent study zones for all students." The study tested 60 Year 10 students on one reading task. Best judgement?

(A) It is fully supported, because comprehension scores were lower with chatter
(B) It overreaches: one task, one group can't show all students need silence
(C) It is unreliable, because 60 students is far too many for a classroom study
(D) It must be correct, because a published abstract states it as a finding

Further reading

- **Literature Reviews**, The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. A clear explanation of what a literature review is and how to synthesise sources. https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/literature-reviews/
- **Google Scholar Search Help**, Google Scholar. Official tips on searching, finding free full text and using 'Cited by'.

https://scholar.google.com/intl/en/scholar/help.html

- **About DOAJ**, Directory of Open Access Journals. Explains this free index of quality, peer-reviewed open-access journals in every field.
  https://doaj.org/about/
- **PubMed User Guide**, National Library of Medicine, NIH. Official guide to searching and filtering PubMed for health and biology research.
  https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/help/