What Is a Literature Review?
A literature review is a survey of scholarly articles, books, or other sources that pertain to a specific topic, area of research, or theory. The literature review offers brief descriptions, summaries, and critical evaluations of each work, and does so in the form of a well organized essay. Scholars often write literature reviews to provide an overview of the most significant recent literature published on a topic. They also use literature reviews to trace the evolution of certain debates or intellectual problems within a field. Even if a literature review is not a formal part of a research project, students should conduct an informal one so that they know what kind of scholarly work has been done previously on the topic that they have selected. Check out this video posted on the Writing Center’s website: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9la5ytz9MmM&t=46s.

How Is a Literature Review Different from a Research Paper?
An academic research paper attempts to develop a new argument, and typically has a literature review as one of its parts. In a research paper, the author uses the literature review to show how his or her new insights build upon and depart from existing scholarship. A literature review by itself does not try to make a new argument based on original research, but rather summarizes, synthesizes, and critiques the arguments and ideas of others, and points to gaps in the current literature. Before writing a literature review, a student should look for a model from a relevant journal or ask the instructor to point to a good example.

Picking a Topic
First, the writer needs to pick a topic that she finds compelling and that is relevant to the course. Second, the topic should be relatively narrow so that it does not overwhelm the writer. For example, the literature on the causes of the U.S. Civil War is much too vast for a short review essay. A review of recent scholarship published on the economic impact of secession on the Confederacy is probably narrow enough for a relatively short essay. In most cases, students will need to clear a topic with the instructor before proceeding to make sure that it is a relevant topic of the proper scope.

Finding Relevant Literature
With the advent of electronic databases like JSTOR, Ebsco, and ScienceDirect it has become relatively easy to find relevant and trustworthy sources for a literature review essay. These and many more scholarly databases are available on the Niagara University Library website here: http://niagara.libguides.com/az.php. When searching these databases, the writer needs to use keywords or phrases that are as closely associated with the topic as possible. Searching with one or two phrases surrounded by quotation marks (for example, “Civil War” in tandem with “economic impact”) will help to hone in on the most relevant results, as only articles that contain those two specific phrases will be found.

Evaluating the Literature
After you have found numerous articles or books related to a topic, you will evaluate them to determine which ones seem to make the most important contributions to the scholarship on the topic. Nonetheless, by asking some of the questions below, you can make a pretty well educated assessment about whether or not an article contributes something significant to the relevant area of scholarship. In addition, evaluating articles with these questions will be helpful in figuring out how to organize the material later when composing the essay.

Questions to Ask about Individual Articles
- Does the article have a clear thesis statement? Is that thesis supported by a well organized argument that uses convincing evidence?
● What strategies or methodologies does the author use in the article?
● Was the article published in a respected academic journal?
● Is the author someone who seems reliable? Might the author have some sort of agenda or ideological motivation that might affect the way the argument is presented? (A Google search can be useful.)
● How recently was the article published? In rapidly changing fields, research can become dated quickly, so it is generally preferable to use articles published within the past five years or so. (In some cases, it is beneficial to use older articles with newer ones to trace how ideas and debates have changed over time.)
● What original contribution does the article make to the discussion about the topic?

Organizing a Literature Review: A successful literature review should have three parts that break down like this:

A. INTRODUCTION
   1. Defines and identifies the topic and establishes the reason for the literature review.
   2. Points to general trends in what has been published about the topic.
   3. Explains the criteria used in analyzing and comparing articles.

B. BODY OF THE REVIEW
   1. Groups articles into thematic clusters, or subtopics. Clusters may be grouped together chronologically, thematically, or methodologically (see below for more on this).
   2. Proceeds in a logical order from cluster to cluster.
   3. Emphasizes the main findings or arguments of the articles in the student’s own words. Keeps quotations from sources to an absolute minimum.

B. CONCLUSION
   1. Summarizes the major themes that emerged in the review and identifies areas of controversy in the literature.
   2. Pinpoints strengths and weaknesses among the articles (innovative methods used, gaps in research, problems with theoretical frameworks, etc.).
   3. Concludes by formulating questions that need further research within the topic, and provides some insight into the relationship between that topic and the larger field of study or discipline.

Creating Clusters or Subtopics
Chronological Groupings: With this method, you can group material according to when it was published or the time period the material addresses. For example, for a literature review about post-1965 immigration to New York City, you might group the material that addresses the 1960s and 1970s in one section, and the 1980s and 1990s in another. This method works well in essays that trace the evolution of a certain theme or idea over time, but can be less coherent in other contexts.

Thematic Groupings: In this approach, sections might be organized around particular subthemes within the essay’s topic. For the post-1965 immigration essay mentioned above, you might organize separate sections on literature dealing with different ethnic groups: Asians, Eastern Europeans, Mexicans, etc.

Methodological Groupings: A methodological approach differs from the two above in that it does not focus so much on the content, but the “methods” of the researcher or writer. In the above example, authors who interpret demographic data from the census might be put in one group, while another group might be formed around work that uses ethnographic approaches.

*This handout was adopted from the fine folks at Brooklyn College Library.*
Literature Review: Relational Words and Phrases

The entire point of writing a literature review is to synthesize, or write about the relationships between, the articles you’re using, defining the connection between them and explaining how they come together to represent a body of knowledge on a subject. The following words and phrases are useful because they express specific types of relationships between ideas:

- on one hand
- on the other hand
- contrary to
- in line with
- parallel to
- related to
- linked to
- responds to
- elaborates
- undermines
- explores / investigates
- contributes to the research on
- enters the debate
- re-emphasizes the categories
- in agreement with
- in opposition to
- in confirmation of
- in response to
- in reaction against
- in contrast to
- influenced by
- rejects
- confuses
- reinforces
- a similar focus/approach/tone
- a slightly different focus/approach/tone
- a broader scope
- a narrower scope
- more specific / more general in the same vein
- in a different sphere
- adapts
- misses
- supports
- revisits the same subject
- revolutionizes the field of
- bypasses the debate
- breaks out of the paradigm
- goes beyond
- misinterprets
- criticizes