

ACE Quick Guide to Writing a Literature Review

Adopting a Critical Approach

A literature review is **not** a descriptive list or summary of resources that have been written on a topic. Instead, it is important to **adopt a critical approach to the research, providing context and justification for your work**. This can involve:

- Engaging in comparative analysis, indicating which position or approach you will be taking in your project
- Demonstrating the extent to which the limitations of existing studies have left a research gap for you
- Synthesising arguments from different authors to generate original insights or points of view
- Agreeing with and / or defending an argument, foregrounding its significance
- Accepting that the existing research has certain strengths, but qualifying your position by underscoring weaknesses
- Rejecting a point of view with clear reasoning (e.g. a lack of evidence or applicability in the context of your industry)

(Adapted from Ridley, 2008, and University of Leeds, 2014)

Establishing Connections Between Studies

When tasked with writing a literature review, you also will be required to establish connections between studies and **group the literature according to common denominators**. You can use the following questions to identify potential **similarities** and **differences**, synthesising the information contained in related sources:

What ideas, themes, or debates arise in multiple articles? Are there any significant trends?
What do the scholars broadly agree on?

Do they approach the idea, theme, or debate from similar or different perspectives?

Has there been a change in thinking over time?

Are there any major areas of contention or disagreement that should be addressed?

Are there numerous methodologies being applied? Could these studies have been improved if conducted using a different framework?

In the context of a major project, a literature review may evaluate the suitability of methodologies and frameworks in practice!

Creating a Narrative of Trends

Once you have identified substantial ideas, themes, or debates, you can begin to **categorise the information** – creating a narrative of trends to organise your literature review. This can be seen in the following **extract** from a literature review on the impact of team virtualisation in the education sector:

2.1 Team Virtualisation

The term 'virtual team' describes a group of geographically separated employees who rely upon technology to work collaboratively across the boundaries of space and time (DeSanctis and Poole, 1997). More recently, this definition has been revised to include both temporal and relational dispersion. Whilst temporal dispersion occurs when team members interact asynchronously and across multiple time zones, reducing their ability to collaborate in real-time (Kirkwood, 2013; Rossi and Ahmed, 2019), relational dispersion refers to inter-team differences in affiliation with other workplace structures and external organisations (Davidov, Ladnier and Grieses, 2022).

The learner begins by defining key terminology – citing an older, influential study which has since been built upon by scholars working in related fields. As a result, the learner demonstrates that there has been a change in thinking over time.

External forces such as globalisation, technological advancement, and increased inter-organisational cooperation are driving many companies to adopt virtual teams even in co-

located workplaces (Ganguli and Mostashari, 2008; Stevens, 2015; Haynes, 2020). According to Johnson (2021), all teams in the contemporary workforce are, to an extent, virtual – coordinating and directing operational processes remotely. Vaughn et al. (2022) subsequently argue that rather than differentiating between conventional and virtual teams, evaluations should be contingent on their degree of ‘virtualisation’. As such, Fredrikson (2023) proposes a ‘virtualisation continuum’ defined by the proximal contact and technological intermediation between co-workers. Following Vaughn et al. (2022) and Fredrikson (2023), this project will therefore examine learning delivery teams that work remotely at least three days per week, accomplishing the majority of their responsibilities virtually.

Whilst Khan (2020) and Mitchell (2024) highlight the need to further investigate the effect of team virtualisation on communication, retention, and engagement, these studies are limited to the telecommunications and insurance sectors. As research on team virtualisation within the education sector has been primarily concerned with learner communication, retention, and engagement (Bilton, 2019; Evans, 2021; Cooper-Smithson, 2023), this study foregrounds its potential impact on learning delivery teams. The associated challenges and opportunities are explored below.

The learner goes on to introduce factors contributing to an increase in team virtualisation, citing multiple studies to bolster their arguments. As such, the learner contextualises the relevance of their research project.

The learner subsequently engages with their chosen studies in order to demonstrate how they selected teams for further examination in their own workplace.

The learner then shows how they narrowed the scope of their project – identifying three significant ‘themes’ and a gap in the existing research.

2.2 The Challenges of Team Virtualisation

2.2.1 Communication

Despite the benefits of virtual teams, virtualisation itself introduces significant constraints in the way co-workers participate in the fulfilment of tasks. These constraints are introduced by physical separation, time allocation, and restrictions associated with communication technologies such as Microsoft Teams (Hulme, 2018). Likewise, Workman (2020) suggests that with an increase in virtualisation, the frequency of formal and informal communication between colleagues tends to decrease. This can isolate persons from the wider team, increasing relational ambiguity. The more virtual a team becomes, the more communication is performed through electronic media such as e-mail, instant messaging, telephones and video conferencing equipment, which obscures the non-verbal cues that are typically associated with verbal communication (Kowalski, 2023).

Although Kim, Hassan, and Park (2021) warn that electronic communication methods can convey emotionally charged messages which can lead to conflict if there is incongruence between the message and the detected emotion, they neglect to consider the influence of non-textual conversational devices such as emojis, GIFs, and memes. Whilst the use of such devices can enhance interactions between associates, fostering community and belonging, Chen's (2025) recent study of the Millennial and Gen Z workforce explains that...

The learner goes on to explore the potential implications of challenges associated with team virtualisation – beginning with the first of their three significant 'themes'.

The learner adopts a critical approach to the existing research throughout their literature review, foregrounding its strengths and limitations in practice.

(Adapted from Danzfuss, 2012)

Reference List

Danzfuss, T. (2012) *The Impact of Organisation Structure on Virtual Teams*. Masters thesis. University of Pretoria. Available at: <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=4ba41284ef34ebe0b61f78365cf3871b9b54ed62> (Accessed: 26 March 2025).

Ridley, D. (2008) *The Literature Review: A Step-by-Step Guide for Students*. London: Sage.

University of Leeds (2014) *Final Chapter: Structuring Your Project*. Available at: <https://resources.library.leeds.ac.uk/final-chapter/structuringyourproject.html> (Accessed: 26 March 2025).



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