

Literature Review Self-Editing Checklist

A diagnostic checklist for evaluating coverage, synthesis, evidence, and scholarly argument

Purpose. Use this checklist to edit your literature review. The goal is not to increase the number of citations mechanically. Instead, determine whether your review demonstrates that you understand how the literature developed, what the evidence supports, where scholars disagree, and how your study enters the scholarly conversation.

1. Check the Historical Continuity of the Literature

- ☐ I have identified the foundational studies or theoretical works relevant to my topic.
- ☐ I have included scholarship from the period between the foundational literature and the most recent research.
- ☐ My references are not concentrated primarily in two periods (e.g., classic studies from the 1970s–1990s followed by studies from the last three years).
- ☐ If there is a long period from which I cite little or no research, I can explain why that period is not relevant.
- ☐ I have examined whether important theories, findings, or debates emerged during the “middle” years.
- ☐ I can explain how the literature moved from the foundational scholarship to the current state of knowledge.

Diagnostic question: *If you removed all sources published in the last three years, would your literature review still provide a coherent account of the development of this field?*

2. Check Whether You Are Synthesizing Rather Than Listing Studies

Watch for the “study-by-study” pattern: Smith found X. Jones found Y. Chen found Z. More recently, Garcia found A.

- ☐ My paragraphs are organized around ideas, arguments, mechanisms, findings, disagreements, or developments, not around individual authors.
- ☐ I compare studies, instead of merely report them.
- ☐ I identify patterns across multiple studies.
- ☐ I identify disagreements, contradictions, or inconsistent findings when they exist.
- ☐ I explain why studies may have produced different findings.
- ☐ I distinguish between theoretical claims and empirical findings.
- ☐ I distinguish between evidence that supports a claim and scholarship that merely discusses the claim.

Diagnostic question: What intellectual work does each paragraph perform that could not be accomplished by simply listing the studies in a table?

3. Check Whether You Understand What the Cited Studies Actually Did

- ☐ I have read the original source, and have not relied solely on another author's description of it.
- ☐ I know the study's research question or purpose.
- ☐ I know what population, setting, or data the study examined.
- ☐ I know what methodology the researchers used.
- ☐ I understand what the evidence actually supports.
- ☐ I do not make causal claims from evidence that establishes only association.
- ☐ I do not generalize findings beyond the population, setting, or evidence that produced them without justification.
- ☐ When relevant, I identify important limitations in the evidence.
- ☐ I can identify specific passages, pages, tables, figures, or findings that support my interpretation of important sources.

Diagnostic question: If someone asked, “How exactly did this study establish that claim?” could you answer without reopening the article?

4. Check the Development of Ideas Over Time

- ☐ I explain how important concepts or constructs have changed.
- ☐ I identify major theoretical developments.
- ☐ I explain how later studies tested, modified, challenged, or extended earlier studies.
- ☐ I identify methodological developments that changed what researchers were able to investigate.
- ☐ I recognize when questions considered important today were not important, or were framed differently, in earlier periods.
- ☐ I identify assumptions in foundational scholarship that subsequent research questioned or rejected.
- ☐ I avoid presenting the field as if scholars have steadily accumulated knowledge without disagreements, reversals, or competing perspectives.

Diagnostic question: Could a reader understand not only what we know now, but how researchers came to know it?

5. Check Your Citation Patterns

- ☐ My sources represent the literature relevant to the research question rather than simply the sources that were easiest to find.
- ☐ I have searched beyond the first page of database or Google Scholar results.
- ☐ I have followed references backward from important recent studies.
- ☐ I have searched forward to identify studies that cited important foundational works.
- ☐ I have examined highly cited and influential studies from different periods.
- ☐ I have searched using alternative terminology because constructs and keywords may have changed over time.
- ☐ I have checked whether I repeatedly cite the same small group of scholars.
- ☐ I have checked the quality and credibility of the journals and other sources I cite.
- ☐ I have verified every citation against the original source.
- ☐ I have checked that every source actually makes the claim for which I cite it.

Warning sign: *A large number of recent citations does not necessarily indicate a comprehensive literature review.*

6. Check Every Claim

For each sentence that makes a claim about the literature, ask:

- ☐ What evidence supports this statement?
- ☐ Does the cited source actually support the entire claim?
- ☐ Am I making a stronger claim than the evidence permits?
- ☐ Am I using words such as causes, leads to, results in, or influences when the evidence establishes only an association?
- ☐ Am I making a population-level statement from evidence based on a narrow sample or context?
- ☐ Am I treating one study as evidence of a general pattern?
- ☐ Would several studies provide stronger support for this claim?
- ☐ Are there credible studies with conflicting findings that should be acknowledged?

7. Examine Your Use of “Gap” Claims Especially Carefully

- ☐ I have conducted a sufficiently broad search to justify claiming that something has not been studied.
- ☐ I distinguish between “I did not find it” and “it does not exist.”

- ☐ My gap is not based simply on the absence of studies published during the last three to five years.
- ☐ I have considered whether the question was studied previously using different terminology.
- ☐ I have considered whether adjacent literatures have already addressed the question.
- ☐ I explain why filling this particular gap matters theoretically or empirically.
- ☐ My study does more than add another population, location, profession, or demographic group unless there is a theoretical reason that context should matter.

Diagnostic question: *Is this genuinely a gap in knowledge, or merely a gap in my search?*

8. Check Whether Your Literature Review Builds an Argument

After reading the entire review, a reader should be able to answer:

- ☐ What do researchers generally agree about?
- ☐ What remains contested?
- ☐ What evidence is strongest?
- ☐ What evidence is weak or incomplete?
- ☐ How has thinking about the problem changed?
- ☐ What important theoretical explanations exist?
- ☐ What important empirical findings have accumulated?
- ☐ What remains genuinely uncertain?
- ☐ Why does that uncertainty matter?
- ☐ How does my research question logically emerge from this literature?

Target: *Your review should have an identifiable intellectual trajectory: what scholars initially thought → what researchers subsequently discovered → how theories/evidence changed → what we currently know → what remains uncertain → why your study is needed.*

9. Check the Connection Between the Literature Review and Your Study

- ☐ The literature I review helps justify my research question.
- ☐ My research question emerges logically from the literature rather than appearing suddenly at the end.
- ☐ The literature helps explain my theoretical framework.
- ☐ The literature informs important methodological choices where appropriate.
- ☐ I can explain what my study could add to existing knowledge.

- ☐ I specify what existing claim, theory, relationship, mechanism, contradiction, or uncertainty my study addresses.
- ☐ I avoid claiming that my study is important merely because “no previous study has examined X in this exact context.”

10. Check for Signs of AI-Assisted Superficiality

Even if generative AI was used appropriately during brainstorming, searching, or editing, the final literature review should demonstrate your own engagement with the scholarship.

- ☐ I have personally verified every reference.
- ☐ I have personally read the sources on which my central arguments depend.
- ☐ I have checked quotations, page numbers, authors, dates, titles, journals, and DOIs.
- ☐ I have removed citations that I cannot verify.
- ☐ I have checked whether several citations attached to one sentence actually support the same claim.
- ☐ I have looked for suspiciously generic statements such as “Research has increasingly recognized...” or “A growing body of literature demonstrates...” and replaced them with precise descriptions of the evidence.
- ☐ I have removed unnecessary claims that a topic is “increasingly important,” “complex,” “multifaceted,” or “underexplored” unless I actually establish those claims.
- ☐ I can explain why every major source appears in my literature review.
- ☐ I could defend my interpretation of the literature in a conversation without relying on AI-generated summaries.

A strong literature review does not demonstrate how many articles you found. It demonstrates how well you understand the scholarly conversation and how convincingly you locate your own study within it.