

First-Year PhD Literature Review

Introduction: Purpose and Context

At the end of the first year in the PhD program, the literature review serves as a foundational scholarly exercise that demonstrates the candidate's emerging expertise in their field. It is not simply a summary of existing research, but a critical, analytical, and synthetic engagement with the major debates, theories, methodologies, and findings that shape their area of study.

The first-year literature review should demonstrate that the candidate can identify key scholarly conversations, situate their research interests within those conversations, and articulate gaps (or tensions) in the literature that may inform their future research trajectory. It is also an opportunity to develop their own scholarly voice, practice academic writing conventions, and refine research questions and objectives.

This document functions both as a milestone in doctoral training and as a building block for future work, including the dissertation proposal, the course design and thesis chapters. *The literature review is a cornerstone of doctoral training, marking the transition from student to independent researcher.*

The first-year literature review is an initial, shorter version of the one that will be in the dissertation itself, this milestone plays an important role in shaping the project. Throughout the completion of the project, parts of the literature review can be revised and incorporated into later stages of the dissertation.

Although the final version of the literature review (the one in the thesis) will be lengthier, for this initial exercise the candidate is asked to submit a version of 5000 words (+/- 5%).

Objectives of the Literature Review

1. **Demonstrate Breadth and Depth of Knowledge:** display familiarity with foundational texts as well as current developments in the field; this includes canonical works, influential theories, and recent scholarship.
2. **Critically Engage with Sources:** instead of summarizing sources individually, the review should analyze their contributions, limitations, and relationships to one another.
3. **Identify Key Themes and Debates:** the review should be organized around major themes, questions, or controversies that define the field.
4. **Highlight Gaps and Opportunities:** identify areas that remain underexplored or contested, laying the groundwork for the candidate's own research.
5. **Develop a Coherent Argument:** advance a central argument or perspective about the state of the field, rather than presenting a neutral overview.
6. **Refine Research Direction:** this process should help clarify the research questions and theoretical approach.

Defining Scope and Corpus

An important early step is defining the scope of the literature review. Given the 5000-word limit, the student must make strategic decisions about what to include and exclude. This involves:

- Identifying the primary field(s) and subfields relevant to the project.
- Selecting key authors, texts, and journals.
- Determining temporal boundaries (e.g., focusing on the last 20 years, while including earlier foundational works).
- Considering interdisciplinary connections where appropriate.

The corpus should be manageable yet representative, balancing breadth with depth. The goal is not exhaustiveness, but informed selectivity.

Note-taking strategies and research tips

* Effective literature reviews depend on systematic research practices, such as:

- Use academic databases and library catalogues to locate sources.
- Keep detailed notes on each text, including summaries, key arguments, methodologies, and critical reflections.
- Track bibliographic information carefully using citation management tools.
- Identify recurring concepts, keywords, and theoretical frameworks.

* It is helpful to organize notes thematically, as this facilitates synthesis when writing.

* Avoid over summarization.

- Focus on relationships between sources rather than individual summaries.
- Use comparative language (e.g., “similarly,” “in contrast,” “however”).
- Ask analytical questions about each source.

* A literature review can become unfocused if the scope is too broad.

- Define clear boundaries for the review.
- Maintain a central argument throughout.
- Regularly revisit the research questions.

* Disorganized reviews are difficult to follow; to improve structure:

- Create an outline before writing.
- Use clear topic sentences and transitions.
- Ensure each section contributes to the overall argument.

* Critical analysis is often underdeveloped in early drafts.

- Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of sources.
- Consider alternative interpretations.
- Reflect on the implications of different approaches.

Structuring the Literature Review

While there is no single correct structure, a clear organization is key. A good structure might include:

1. Introduction (Approx. 500–700 words)

- Present the general topic and its significance.
- Define the scope of the review.
- Outline the main themes or sections.
- State the central argument or perspective guiding the review.

2. Thematic Sections (Approx. 3500–3800 words)

The body of the literature review is generally organized into sections. Each one should:

- Focus on a specific theme, debate, or approach.
- Synthesize multiple sources, rather than discussing them individually.
- Compare and contrast different perspectives.
- Highlight methodological or theoretical differences.
- Evaluate strengths and limitations.
- Pay attention to transitions between sections: connections should be clearly stated and reinforce the overall coherence of the argument.

3. Critical Analysis and Synthesis

Throughout the thematic sections, it is key to move beyond description to critical analysis by:

- Questioning assumptions and frameworks.
- Identifying contradictions or tensions in the literature.
- Assessing the robustness of evidence and methods.
- Situating works within broader intellectual or historical contexts.

Synthesis involves bringing together different strands of the literature to show how they relate to each other. This is a major marker of advanced scholarly work.

4. Conclusion (Approx. 500–700 words)

Summarize the main insights from the review by:

- Reiterate the central argument.
- Identify gaps, limitations, or unresolved questions in the literature.
- Indicate how the candidate's future research will address these gaps.

Developing a Scholarly Voice

As a first-year exercise, the literature review is an opportunity for the student to begin developing their own academic voice, which involves:

- Writing with clarity and precision.
- Using discipline-appropriate terminology.
- Balancing confidence with critical openness.
- Avoiding overly descriptive or passive writing.

The candidate should strive to position themselves as an informed participant in the field, rather than a neutral observer.

Revising and Editing the Review

Revision is a crucial stage in every writing process. Before submitting your work, review the overall structure and coherence of the argument.

- Check for clarity, concision, and logical flow.
- Ensure consistency in terminology and citation.
- Seek feedback from supervisor.
- Multiple drafts are typically necessary to achieve a polished final version.

Defense of the literature review

While the student will be guided by their (assigned) supervisor while working on the literature review, this is supposed to be a relatively independent exercise.

The literature review has to be completed during the course of the Summer term of the first year or third term in the program. Once ready, the student will send it to the Graduate Chair, who will subsequently organize the defense. This will take place either by the end of the Summer (i.e. August) or as early as possible during the Fall term of the second year and/or during the student's fourth term in the program.

The literature review will be assessed by two or three faculty members (supervisor and member/s of the supervisory committee) and defended by the candidate. Faculty members and students in the program may be invited to attend the defense.

It is up to the student to decide whether they want to do a brief presentation of their work (10 minutes approx.) or not. This decision should be communicated by student when date and time of the defense are decided.

During the defense, there will be two rounds of questions by the examiners, the first one will be longer (between 15 and 20 minutes) and the second one shorter (between 7 and 10 minutes).

Once the defense comes to an end, the Chair of the session will communicate the results to the student. The decision by the examining committee can be a PASS, CONDITIONAL PASS or FAIL.

PASS: Likely, the committee will make suggestions for the student to incorporate to their work as they progress in their research.

CONDITIONAL PASS: If the committee believes that there is more work to be done, a new submission date will be determined for the student to resubmit the literature review. It is up to the examining committee to decide who will evaluate the revised version.

FAIL: If the committee determines that the work does not meet the standards of academic work at the doctoral level, the student will be given the opportunity to resubmit their work once. In this scenario, the entire examining committee will assess the new version of the literature review, provide feedback and communicate their decision to the Graduate Chair. The date of this second submission will be determined by the committee.