

Tips for Writing a Public Health Literature Review

As public health professionals, you will continue to conduct literature reviews throughout your career. Literature reviews inform you of the historical development of an issue, the current thinking and latest research, and provide direction for program development. A good literature review can help you focus your project, identify a conceptual framework, identify trends, and prevent you from repeating flawed programs or methods. A good literature review will also help you identify bias and explore arguments, if any, within the field. Most literature reviews take the following steps:

1. Determining the scope of your literature review
2. Identifying sources
3. Reading the sources
4. Evaluating the information
5. Organizing and writing the literature review

Most of your time will be spent on **researching** and **reading**, not on the writing of the actual review. The most important step is determining what you **will not** research. There are many interesting articles out there, but they will not all be relevant to your research. Narrowing your focus to a specific population, geographic location, theory, or ethnic group will greatly improve your chances of finding useful information. A few questions to ask are:

- What is the time limit for inclusion in your literature review? Will papers/books need to have been published within the last year? 5 years? 10 years?
- Will you include non-peer reviewed resources?
- Will you include only articles that address your specific population or will you include other relevant research?
- Will you focus on articles within one theoretical framework (i.e. Transtheoretical Model, Health Belief Model)? Or will you compare theories?
- Are you looking for qualitative or quantitative data?
- Will you include articles from other fields?

Once you have identified **what** you will be searching for, you need to determine **where** you will look. Typical online searches of research databases (PubMed, PsyInfo) are excellent, when you know the correct key words. For example, when searching for articles on breastfeeding, also try the terms “nursing”, “lactation”, and “human milk”. Most classes will require that you use peer-reviewed articles. Be on the look out for “supplement” issues of traditional journals. Some journals allow organizations or individuals to buy space in a supplement to publish research. These supplements may be subject to less rigorous standards than the standard journal.

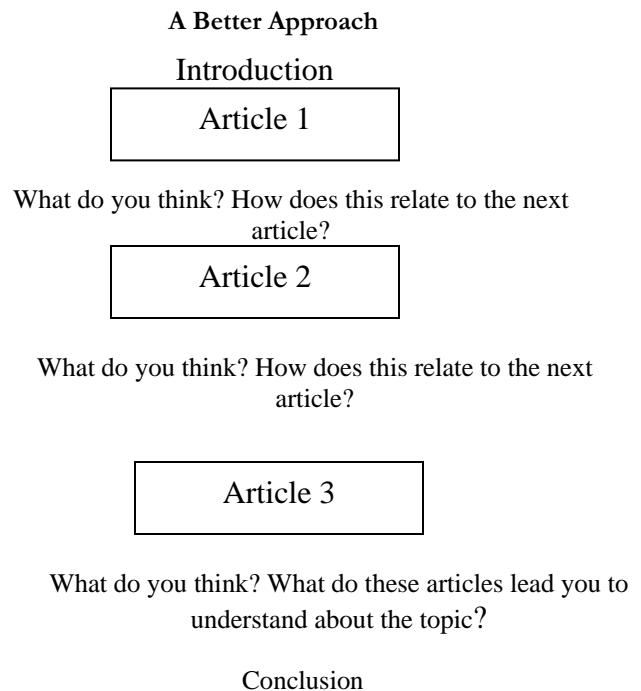
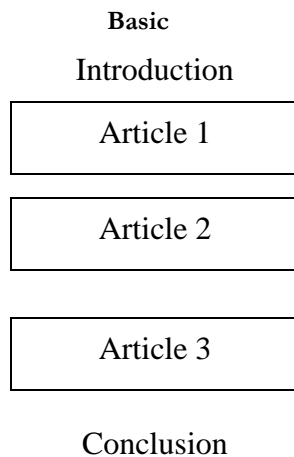
Look at the bibliographies of good articles and search out the original source material. **DO NOT** just include the article in your literature review without finding and reading it.

Caution: Be careful of conducting a literature review using articles that primarily include one author. For example, out of 10 articles, four list Smith, JJ as the first author and three list Smith, JJ as a second or third author. Your literature review could easily end up being a summary of one person’s research instead of a comprehensive view of an issue.

Once you have found several “good” articles or sources, how will you evaluate them? A few good questions to ask are:

1. Why did the author write this article? To summarize new findings? To disagree with the currently held position? What problem is the author trying to address?
2. What is the significance of the problem the author is trying to address? How is it defined?
3. What is the author's theoretical framework? A particular theory?
4. How good are the basic components of the article? Is the literature comprehensive or one sided? Is the research design well thought out or flawed?
5. Does the author acknowledge the limits or flaws in the study?
6. How does this article contribute to my understanding of the issue?
7. Do I agree or disagree with the basic conclusion of this article? How can I use these findings?

Once you have identified your articles, read and analyzed them, now you need to start organizing the articles for your literature review. You can organize the articles in several ways, depending on the topic. For example, in an article about breastfeeding, you could start with overview articles that discuss breastfeeding prevalence and trends, and then discuss articles that address the benefits and drawbacks to breastfeeding, and then discuss position papers from various organizations on breastfeeding. You can also organize your articles by publication date, theory, and methods. Whatever method used, there must be a logical explanation of why you chose to organize your articles in this way. Some classes will provide you with an expected paper structure. Pay careful attention to in class instructions.



Instead of simply listing articles, include your own analysis and how you understand that interaction of the articles. Include your understanding of debates on the topics. If you notice that there are gaps in the knowledge, say so! Don't try to fill in gaps with a few poorly written articles.

Pay particular attention to plagiarism in literature reviews. It is easy to accidentally plagiarize in your attempts to summarize findings. Review the writing and citing lecture for tips in this area