Writing a Literature Review

A literature review is a piece of writing on a specific topic exploring the published materials on a subject either to introduce a new research project or display understanding of important terms and ideas in a field of study.

"Literature" here refers to the "scholarly writing" on a subject, including:
- Scholarly articles
- Books
- Book chapters
- Conference proceedings
- Dissertations

Steps to writing a good literature review:
1. Decide on your topic and scope
2. Collect sources (the help of a good reference librarian can be unbelievable valuable here)
   - Questions to ask about your sources
     - What was the research question or main idea?
     - What methods were used? Were they appropriate for the purpose?
     - Did the number and kind of citations seem appropriate?
     - How has the source been cited? Who else is using the source and what are they saying? Has it been criticized?
     - If there are conflicting ideas (in your sources or noted by the authors), why do they exist?
     - What further research does the source suggest is needed?
     - Does the discussion of data seem complete? What might be lacking?
3. Look for patterns in your sources
   - Good literature reviews do not simply list the sources found
   - Good literature reviews synthesize the data
   - Synthesis includes:
     - Sorting of sources by themes, methods, concerns, etc.
     - Discussion of how sources fit together and comparative quality of source material
4. Write your literature review
   - Included are:
     - Introduction (explains issue and sets the scope of the review)
     - Discussion of sources (synthesizes source material)
     - Conclusion (summarizes overall findings; discusses how review points to new research and/or thinking)
5. Review your work for content and for sentence structure and word usage

NOTE: These steps are recursive. They happen many times in different orders during a single project.

<u>Tips for Writing Successful Literature Reviews</u>

- Give yourself as much time as possible.
- Consult the experts:
  - Reference Librarians can help in finding sources
  - Writing Center tutors can help in conveying what you know effectively
  - Scholars in your field (professors) can help in determining scope
- Take careful notes on sources, including content, methods used, and evaluations
- Organize, organize, organize (especially when collecting sources)
- Know the formatting guide you are using when you start (APA, MLA, CMS, etc.)
- Use quotes sparingly—when you use your own words, you prove your understanding of the concepts
- Review drafts for both content and for editing (don't do both in one try)
- Pay attention to verb tense (have variety, but use them correctly)
  - When the researcher's activity is the agent: <u>past tense</u>
    - Smith (2001) *explored* medicinal uses of common herbs.
    - Medicinal uses of common herbs *were explored* by Smith (2001).
  - When the researcher's activity is not the agent: <u>present perfect tense</u>
    - Medicinal uses of common herbs *have been explored* (Smith, 2001; Doe, 2005).
    - Several researchers *have explored* medicinal uses of common herbs.
  - When not referencing the researcher at all: <u>present tense</u>
    - Medicinal uses of common herbs *are* under investigation (Smith, 2001; Doe, 2005).

Information collected from:

  - Monash University, "The Literature Review." (online)
  - North Carolina State University, "Literature Reviews: An Overview for Graduate Students." (online)
  - University of Minnesota- Duluth, "Guidelines for Writing a Literature Review." (online)
  - Walden University Online Writing Center, "Literature Review Basics" (online)
  - *Academic Writing for Graduate Students,* 2nd edition. John Swales and Christine Feak. (print)
  - *Nursing Research,* 9th edition. Denis Polit and Cheryl Beck. (print)
  - *Conducting Research Literature Reviews,* 3rd edition. Arlene Fink. (print)