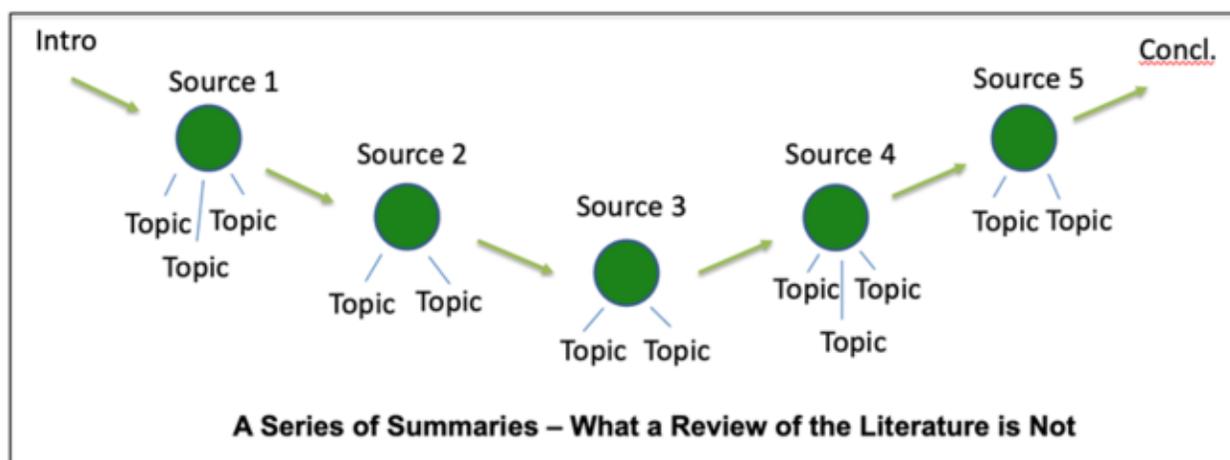




Organizing Literature Reviews: The Basics

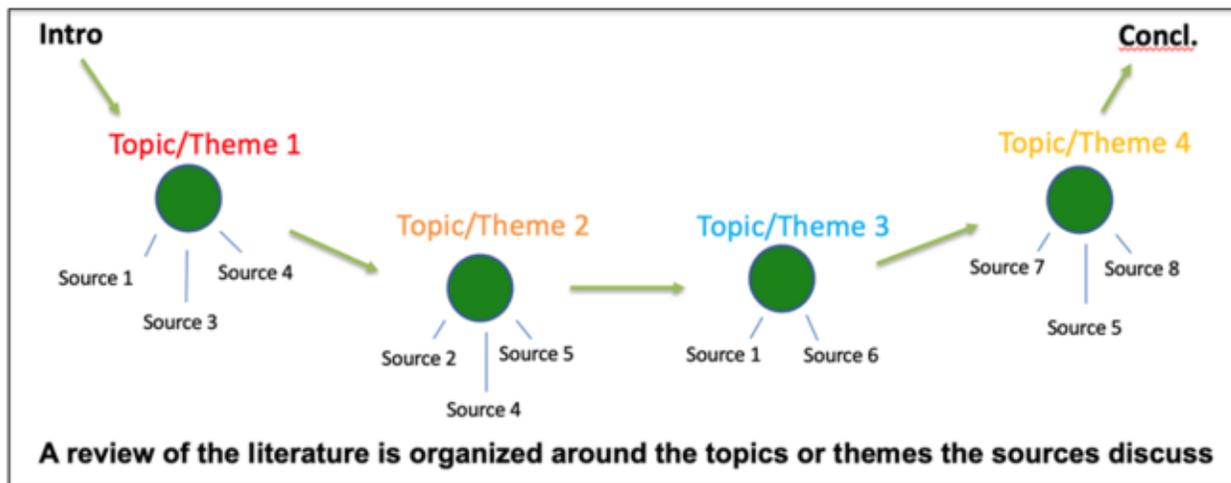
A review of the literature surveys the scholarship and research relevant to your research question, but it is not a series of summaries. It is a *synthesis* of your sources. This means you cannot write a review of the literature (which we'll call a "lit review") by composing a summary of each of your sources, then stringing those summaries together into a paper. This is a diagram of what a lit review is *not*:



How is a lit review organized, then? We like this quotation from Temple University's Student Success Center, which describes how a synthesis is different from a series of summaries:

“Writing a synthesis is like building a quilt. Imagine yourself taking each of your sources, tearing them into their component parts, reassembling the most interesting and important pieces from each into some new and beautiful design, stitching those parts together with your own prominent transitional and analytical thread.... A synthesis isn't simply one summary after another after another; the creative work of a synthesis is in reassembling the sources and presenting them from a new perspective.”

As the writer above says, in a lit review **you pull your sources apart and put the pieces back together in a new way**. **The structure of a lit review looks more like the diagram below**. As you see, the “backbone” of the lit review is made up of the topics your sources are discussing.



Each section of the lit review is focused on a topic, and the relevant sources are discussed within the context of that topic. For example, if your lit review discusses barriers to healthcare for older adults, you might have a section focused on transportation barriers. Within that section of the lit review, you would discuss the sources that provide information about transportation barriers to healthcare.

A Process for Organizing Your Review of the Literature

So how do you identify those topics and build that structure for your lit review? We suggest you follow a four-step process in which you *select*, *arrange*, *group*, and *order* the material from your sources:

1. **Select the most relevant material from your sources** With your research question in mind, read each of your sources and identify the material that is most relevant to that question. This might be material that answers the question directly, but it might also be material that helps explain why it's important to ask the question or that is otherwise relevant to your question. When you pull this material from your source, you can extract it as a direct quotation, or you can paraphrase the passage or idea. (Make sure you enclose direct quotations in quotation marks!) A single source may have more than one idea relevant to your question.
2. **Arrange that material so you can focus on it apart from the source text itself**
 Many writers put the material they have selected into a grid. They place each quotation or paraphrase in a cell in that grid. Arranging your selected material in a grid has two benefits: first, you can view your relevant material away from the source text (meaning you are now working with fewer words and pages!). Second, you can view all of the material that will go into your lit review in one place.

3. **Group similar points, themes, or topics together, and give each grouping a label**

Look at each cell in your grid—or each of the ideas you have pulled from your sources, whether they are quotations or paraphrases—and look for similarities and differences among them. Group similar ideas, approaches, or themes together. (Imagine cutting the grid into cells and moving those cells around so you can put similar ideas in the same group. You can actually cut your grid into cells and play with different ways of grouping your material.) If you have a lot of quotations/paraphrases in one group, see if that group should be split up into smaller ones.

Once you have created these groups of ideas, approaches, or themes, give each one a label. The labels describe the points, themes, or topics that are the backbone of your paper's structure.

Now that you have identified the topics you will discuss in your lit review, look them over as a whole. Do you see any gaps that you should fill by finding additional sources? If so, do that research and add those sources to your groupings.

4. **Order those points, themes, or topics as you will discuss them in the paper, and turn your labels into actual assertions**

Look at each group of ideas, approaches, or themes you have created. Change the label for each group from a noun phrase to an assertion—a sentence that makes a point that is directly related to your research question or thesis. That is, determine the point that you can make, given how the material in each group addresses your research question or thesis. For example, you may have a label called “Reasons focused on transportation” that can be transformed into the assertion “One barrier to healthcare for older adults is lack of access to transportation.”

Once you have an assertion for each of your groupings, put those assertions in the order that you want to use in the lit review. This may be the order that has the best logical flow, or the order that tells the story you want to tell in the lit review.

Once you have completed step 4, you have the outline of your lit review!

Some writers work more intuitively, jumping right from reading their sources to step 3 or even step 4. But if you are working with a lot of sources, or if you want to break this large task down into a set of smaller steps, this process helps you manage your sources and externalize your thinking at each stage of the process.