A literature review is an analysis of the current research on a specific topic, including controversies and areas of consensus, that will help you to answer your research question.

A literature review is not just a summary of the research. What makes a literature review unique is synthesis, which requires you to compare and contrast the ideas of several authors, discussing where they agree, disagree, or build on each others’ work. As you write your literature review, imagine you are reporting on a conversation among experts in the field, who are addressing the same issue but have different viewpoints or research findings (it might even help to visualize them sitting around a table, engaging in a lively debate).

To help you keep track of the articles you read, we suggest using a graphic organizer called a literature review matrix (an example of which is provided below). The literature matrix will help you to limit the amount of information you need to work with. In a 15-page article, for example, maybe only a few paragraphs pertain to your research topic. On your matrix, you’ll note only the ideas that address your research question, making your writing process more manageable. The notes on your matrix will help you see how the authors’ ideas compare—how they “talk to” one another.

As you fill out your matrix, themes—subtopics that are addressed by more than one author—will start to emerge. You will use these themes to create your headings. Under those headings you will identify the themes you uncovered in your research, and explain how they relate to your question.

Along the left column of the matrix, write your proposed themes. (If you don’t know what your themes will be, leave these blank until you read the research, and fill in as you go.). Note that in the example matrix, the themes are written as questions.

You can anticipate what themes will emerge and label those in advance of your reading. Do leave some blanks for surprises—when authors bring up ideas you haven’t thought about before.

You might need to expand your matrix as you review more studies. You can expand by taping pages together, or creating your matrix in Excel and adding rows and columns.

As you research, take brief notes that you can then insert into the blank cells. See our learning module on this process.