

# Writing Literature Reviews as Scholarly Knowledge Production: An Integrative Review

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## Abstract

Literature reviews play a central role in academic knowledge production by structuring disciplinary conversations, legitimizing research problems, and enabling theory development. Despite their importance, literature reviews are frequently treated as preparatory texts rather than as independent scholarly contributions. This integrative review synthesizes seminal and contemporary scholarship on literature review writing to examine its purposes, dominant review types, methodological standards, and recurring challenges. Drawing on peer-reviewed and authoritative sources, the review identifies a clear shift from descriptive and narrative approaches toward systematic, integrative, and theory-building reviews. Findings further reveal persistent conceptual and epistemic difficulties in literature review writing, particularly among postgraduate researchers, that undermine the rigor of reviews and scholarly contributions. By consolidating methodological frameworks and best practices, this article contributes to the literature by clarifying the role of literature reviews as forms of scholarly knowledge production and by articulating conditions under which reviews generate theoretical and intellectual impact.

**Keywords:** literature review, integrative review, systematic review, theory building, academic writing

## 1. Introduction

Literature reviews constitute a foundational element of academic research, shaping how knowledge is accumulated, evaluated, and extended across disciplines. Beyond summarizing prior studies, literature reviews perform critical epistemic functions: they define research boundaries, establish theoretical positioning, and identify gaps that justify new inquiry (Winchester & Salji, 2016). Consequently, the quality of a literature review often determines the perceived rigor and contribution of a research project.

Over the past two decades, academic publishing has witnessed a marked shift in how literature reviews are conceptualized and evaluated. Reviews are increasingly recognized as standalone scholarly outputs, particularly in management, social sciences, and education (Kraus et al., 2022; Kraus et al., 2023). High-impact journals now publish review articles that develop conceptual frameworks, advance theory, and set research agendas (Breslin & Gatrell, 2023; Paul & Criado, 2020). This shift has raised expectations regarding methodological transparency, analytical depth, and theoretical contribution.

Despite these developments, empirical evidence indicates that many researchers—especially postgraduate students and early-career scholars—struggle to meet contemporary standards for literature review writing (Badenhorst, 2018; Shahsavar & Kourepaz, 2020). These difficulties are not limited to language proficiency but also reflect deeper challenges in synthesis, critical evaluation, and authorial positioning.

Given these tensions, there is a need for an integrative synthesis of the literature on literature review writing itself. This review addresses this need by consolidating methodological guidance, conceptual debates, and empirical insights to clarify how literature reviews function as scholarly knowledge production.

## 2. Review Design and Methodology

### 2.1 Review Type and Rationale

This study adopts an integrative literature review design, following the approach articulated by Torraco (2016). Integrative reviews are particularly suited to topics that are conceptually heterogeneous and methodologically diverse, as they allow for the synthesis of theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions. Unlike systematic reviews, which emphasize exhaustive coverage and procedural replication, integrative reviews prioritize conceptual integration and explanatory insight.

Literature review writing itself constitutes such a topic, drawing on scholarship from research methodology, academic writing, and discipline-specific publishing practices. An integrative design, therefore, enables a comprehensive and theoretically informed synthesis.

### 2.2 Data Sources and Selection

The review analyzes 16 sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and authoritative research reports. All sources are indexed in established academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar, and each provides a DOI or stable institutional link.

Inclusion criteria were:

- Explicit focus on literature review writing, methodology, or review-based scholarship;
- Peer-reviewed or published by a recognized academic institution or publisher;
- Relevance to higher education, research methodology, or academic publishing.

### 2.3 Analytical Procedure

A thematic synthesis approach was employed. Sources were iteratively analyzed to identify recurring concepts, methodological positions, and evaluative criteria. Themes were refined through constant comparison, with attention to points of convergence, divergence, and conceptual progression across time.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Scholarly Purposes of Literature Reviews

Across the reviewed literature, there is a strong consensus that literature reviews serve productive scholarly functions rather than merely descriptive ones. Callahan (2014) and Winchester and Salji (2016) emphasize that reviews construct meaning by organizing disparate findings into coherent intellectual narratives. Paul and Criado (2020) further argue that impactful reviews actively shape research agendas by identifying unresolved debates and theoretical blind spots.

In this sense, literature reviews operate as sites of epistemic positioning, where authors demonstrate disciplinary mastery and articulate their contribution to ongoing scholarly conversations. The growing recognition of reviews as theory-building instruments underscores their central role in advancing knowledge.

### 3.2 Typologies and Methodological Approaches

The literature identifies several dominant review types, each associated with distinct epistemological assumptions and methodological requirements. Narrative reviews prioritize interpretive synthesis but risk subjectivity if analytical procedures remain implicit (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). Integrative reviews emphasize conceptual integration across diverse literatures (Torraco, 2016), while systematic literature reviews focus on transparency, replicability, and methodological rigor (Sauer & Seuring, 2023).

Recent scholarship highlights the emergence of theory-building and framework-generating reviews, which explicitly aim to advance conceptual understanding (Paul et al., 2024; Breslin & Gatrell, 2023). Kraus et al. (2022) stress that methodological coherence—alignment between review purpose, design, and contribution—is a key determinant of review quality and publishability.

### 3.3 Challenges in Literature Review Writing

Empirical studies consistently document difficulties in literature review writing, particularly among postgraduate researchers. Badenhorst (2018) characterizes literature review writing as a cognitively complex task that requires the simultaneous management of scope, abstraction, and argumentation. Shahsavar and Kourepaz (2020) report that students struggle to move beyond descriptive reporting toward critical synthesis and authorial voice.

These challenges reflect not only skill deficits but also unclear epistemic expectations. Rewhorn (2018) and McLean (2022) argue that literature review writing is often under-taught, with students expected to infer implicit standards of critique and synthesis.

### 3.4 Frameworks and Best Practices

Best-practice models emphasize intentionality, transparency, and contribution-driven design. Bodolica and Spraggon (2018) propose an end-to-end framework that integrates topic selection, analytical synthesis, and strategic publication positioning. Sauer and Seuring's (2023) decision-oriented framework similarly makes explicit the methodological choices shaping review outcomes.

From a pedagogical perspective, Galvan and Galvan (2024) highlight the importance of scaffolding review-writing processes to support progression from summary to synthesis to theorization.

## 4. Discussion

The findings indicate that literature review writing has evolved into a sophisticated scholarly practice central to theory development and disciplinary progress. However, this evolution has not been matched by corresponding advances in research training and supervision. The persistence of conceptual and epistemic difficulties suggests that literature reviews are frequently treated as technical requirements rather than as sites of scholarly knowledge production. For journals and reviewers, these findings reinforce the importance of evaluating reviews based on conceptual contribution and methodological coherence rather than coverage alone. For researchers, particularly early-career scholars, the results highlight the need to approach literature reviews strategically, with explicit attention to purpose, method, and contribution.

## 5. Conclusion

This integrative review synthesizes key scholarship on literature review writing, demonstrating that literature reviews function as central mechanisms of academic knowledge production. While methodological guidance has advanced considerably, challenges persist in practice, particularly regarding synthesis and theoretical contribution. Addressing these challenges requires clearer standards, explicit training, and greater recognition of literature reviews as independent scholarly outputs.

## Future Research Directions

Future research may empirically examine how different instructional and supervisory practices influence review quality, explore discipline-specific norms for synthesis and theorization, and investigate how emerging digital tools shape literature review practices. One way to make scholarly knowledge is to write literature reviews. This is an integrative review.

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