GENERAL

apa literature review sample paper

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When you’re preparing a research paper, thesis, or dissertation, one of the most critical components you’ll encounter is the literature review. It’s the backbone that supports your study’s rationale, showcases your understanding of the field, and demonstrates how your work fills a gap in existing knowledge. For students and researchers who follow the American Psychological Association (APA) style, creating a polished literature review can feel daunting. This guide walks you through the entire process—from understanding what a literature review is to crafting a professional APA sample paper—so you can produce a document that impresses both professors and peer reviewers.

What Is a Literature Review?

A literature review is a systematic, critical, and comprehensive survey of published sources that are relevant to a particular research topic. Unlike a mere bibliography, a literature review synthesizes findings, identifies trends, highlights contradictions, and sets the stage for your own research questions.

- Purpose: Establish the context for your study and justify its necessity.
- Scope: Includes peer reviewed journal articles, books, conference papers, dissertations, and credible online resources.
- Outcome: A clear narrative that leads readers to understand why your research matters.

Why APA Format Matters

The APA style is widely used in social sciences, psychology, education, and related fields. Adhering to APA guidelines ensures consistency, professionalism, and ease of evaluation. Key APA features in a literature review include:

- In text citations that follow the author date format.
- Reference list that provides full publication details.
- Use of Times New Roman, 12 point font, double spaced lines, and 1 inch margins.
- Proper heading levels to organize the paper.
- Clear, concise language that avoids jargon unless it’s essential.

Structure of an APA Literature Review Paper

While the exact structure may vary slightly depending on institutional requirements, a standard APA literature review follows this outline:

1. Title Page
2. Abstract
3. Introduction
4. Body (Thematic or Chronological Sections)
5. Conclusion
6. References

Below, we’ll dive deeper into each section, offering tips and sample content to help you craft a standout paper.

1. Title Page

In APA 7th edition, the title page should include:

- Running head (optional for student papers)
- Title of the paper (centered, bold, title case)
- Your name and institutional affiliation
- Course name, instructor, and date (if applicable)

Example:

Running head: APA LITERATURE REVIEW SAMPLE PAPER
APA Literature Review Sample Paper

Jane Doe
University of Somewhere
Psychology 101
Professor Smith
12/15/2025

2. Abstract

The abstract is a concise summary of the review's purpose, scope, and main findings. Keep it between 150–250 words, and avoid citations or references.

Sample Abstract:

This literature review examines recent empirical studies on the impact of social media use on adolescent mental health. Drawing from 45 peer reviewed articles published between 2010 and 2024, the review identifies key themes such as cyberbullying, self esteem, and sleep disruption. Findings indicate a complex relationship where moderate use may offer social support, while excessive engagement is linked to anxiety and depressive symptoms. The review highlights methodological gaps, notably the overreliance on cross sectional designs, and recommends longitudinal studies to better understand causality.

3. Introduction

The introduction should:

- Introduce the broad topic.
- Explain why it's important.
- State the specific research problem or question.
- Outline the structure of the review.

Example:

In recent years, social media platforms have become ubiquitous among adolescents, raising concerns about their psychological well being. While some studies suggest that online interactions foster community and self expression, others point to negative outcomes such as increased anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances. This literature review critically evaluates empirical evidence from 2010 to 2024 to determine the extent to which social media use affects adolescent mental health. By synthesizing findings across studies, the review identifies consistent patterns,

methodological shortcomings, and areas ripe for future research.

4. Body: Organizing Your Literature Review

The body is where you present the core of your analysis. Two common organizational strategies are **thematic** and **chronological**structures. Many scholars prefer thematic organization because it allows for deeper discussion of related concepts.

In a thematic review, you group studies around central themes or concepts. For example, in a review on social media, you might have sections on:

- Cyberbullying and Online Harassment
- Self Esteem and Body Image
- Sleep Patterns and Screen Time
- Social Support and Community Building

Within each theme, you summarize relevant studies, compare findings, and critique methodological strengths and weaknesses.

Chronological reviews trace the evolution of research over time. This is useful when the field has undergone significant methodological or theoretical shifts. However, it can be harder to weave a cohesive argument if the studies differ greatly in focus.

Cyberbullying and Online Harassment

Cyberbullying, defined as the intentional use of digital platforms to harm others, has been linked to adverse mental health outcomes among adolescents. Smith and Johnson (2012) reported that 32% of surveyed teens experienced online harassment, correlating with higher rates of depressive symptoms. A more recent meta analysis by Lee et al. (2021) expanded on these findings, indicating that repeated exposure to cyberbullying increased anxiety by 1.5 standard deviations. Despite these consistent results, many studies rely on self report measures, which may inflate prevalence rates.

In contrast, a longitudinal study by Patel (2019) found that the relationship between cyberbullying and depression weakened over time when controlling for offline bullying. This suggests that interventions targeting online environments may be effective if integrated with broader anti bullying programs.

Methodological critique: While cross sectional designs dominate the literature, they cannot establish causality. Future research should prioritize longitudinal or experimental designs to clarify the directionality of these relationships.

APA in text citations typically include the author’s last name and publication year. If you directly quote a source, add the page number. Example:

“Cyberbullying has become a pervasive issue in adolescent populations” (Smith & Johnson, 2012, p. 45).

For multiple authors:

- Two authors: (Brown & Green, 2020)
- Three or more authors: (Taylor et al., 2018)

Ensure that every in text citation appears in the reference list, and vice versa.

5. Conclusion

The conclusion should:

- Summarize key findings.
- Reiterate the importance of the research.
- Highlight gaps and propose future research directions.
- Avoid introducing new information.

Example:

Overall, the reviewed literature underscores a complex relationship between social media use and adolescent mental health. While moderate engagement can provide social support, excessive use—especially when coupled with cyberbullying—poses significant risks for anxiety and depression. Methodological gaps, such as the predominance of cross sectional designs and reliance on self report data, limit the ability to draw definitive causal conclusions. Future studies should employ longitudinal and mixed methods approaches to better understand the mechanisms at play and to develop targeted interventions that promote healthy digital habits among youth.

6. References

List all sources cited in the paper alphabetically by the first author's last name. Follow APA 7th edition formatting rules.

- Lee, H., Kim, J., & Park, S. (2021). Cyberbullying and mental health among adolescents: A meta analysis. Journal of Adolescent Health, 58(4), 456–468. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2021.01.005
- Patel, R. (2019). Longitudinal effects of online bullying on adolescent depression. Journal of Child Psychology, 35(2), 112–125. https://doi.org/10.1080/00223980.2019.1523456
- Smith, A., & Johnson, B. (2012). Online harassment and depressive symptoms among teens. Journal of Youth Studies, 15(3), 321–334.
- Taylor, M., Nguyen, T., & O'Connor, D. (2018). Screen time, self esteem, and body image. Psychology of Popular Media Culture, 7(1), 20–35.
- Brown, L., & Green, K. (2020). Social media use and sleep quality in adolescents. Sleep Medicine, 45, 1–9.

7. Tips for Writing an Outstanding APA Literature Review

1. Start Early: Give yourself ample time to read, annotate, and synthesize sources.
2. Create a Matrix: Use a table to track authors, year, methodology, key findings, and limitations.
3. Use Signal Phrases: "According to Smith (2012),…" or "Lee et al. (2021) found…" helps integrate citations smoothly.
4. Maintain a Critical Lens: Don't just summarize; evaluate the quality and relevance of each study.
5. Stay Focused: Keep each paragraph centered around a single theme or idea.
6. Check for Plagiarism: Use plagiarism detection tools and rephrase ideas in your own words.
7. Proofread Multiple Times: Check for APA formatting, grammar, and consistency.
8. Seek Feedback: Have peers or mentors review your draft before final submission.

8. Common Pitfalls and How to Avoid Them

- Over citation: Cite only when necessary; avoid citing every single sentence.
- Ignoring Methodological Quality: Highlight biases or limitations in studies.
- Failing to Synthesize: Don't list studies in isolation; weave them into a coherent narrative.
- Incorrect APA Formatting: Double check heading levels, citation styles, and reference list entries.
- Wordiness: Use concise language; avoid filler words.

9. Sample APA Literature Review Excerpt

Below is a short excerpt that demonstrates how to integrate citations, critique, and synthesis

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