

MLA Style Literature Review Example: Structure, Template, and Writing Guide

- An MLA literature review analyzes and synthesizes scholarly sources rather than summarizing them.
- It follows MLA formatting: double-spaced text, 12pt font, and in-text citations with author-page style.
- The structure includes introduction, thematic body sections, and a conclusion.
- Sources must be grouped by ideas, not listed one by one.
- Strong reviews highlight patterns, gaps, and contradictions in research.
- A Works Cited page is required at the end.
- Clarity, argument focus, and synthesis matter more than quantity of sources.

What Is an MLA Literature Review?

A literature review written in MLA style is a structured academic text that examines existing research on a specific topic. Instead of simply listing or summarizing studies, it evaluates, compares, and connects them to build a deeper understanding of the subject.

The purpose is to show how knowledge has developed over time, identify trends, highlight disagreements, and reveal areas that need further research. This makes it a foundational element of many academic essays, research papers, and theses.

MLA formatting is commonly used in the humanities, particularly in fields such as literature, philosophy, and cultural studies. It emphasizes clarity, author-based citations, and consistency in presentation.

MLA Literature Review Example (Short Sample)

Topic: The Role of Memory in Modern Literature

Scholars have long explored how memory shapes narrative identity in modern literature. According to Smith, memory functions not only as a narrative device but also as a structural framework that influences character development (45). Similarly, Johnson argues that fragmented memory reflects broader societal instability, particularly in post-war texts (112).

However, not all researchers agree on its centrality. Brown suggests that memory often serves as a secondary tool, subordinated to thematic concerns such as trauma and identity (78). This contrast highlights a key debate within literary studies: whether memory is foundational or supportive in narrative construction.

Recent studies attempt to reconcile these perspectives by proposing a hybrid approach. Lee contends that memory operates both structurally and thematically, depending on the author's intent and historical context (134). This synthesis offers a more flexible understanding of memory's role across genres.

Overall, the literature suggests that memory remains a dynamic and multifaceted concept, resisting singular interpretation.

How an MLA Literature Review Actually Works

Understanding the Core Mechanics

1. It is not a summary.

A common misunderstanding is treating a literature review as a collection of summaries. In reality, it is about connecting ideas. Each source should contribute to a broader discussion rather than stand alone.

2. It follows a clear logic.

Instead of organizing by authors, you organize by themes, arguments, or debates. This creates a narrative flow that helps readers understand how research evolves.

3. It answers a central question.

Every paragraph should connect back to a core research problem or perspective. Without this focus, the review becomes scattered.

4. It evaluates sources.

Not all studies carry equal weight. Strong literature reviews assess credibility, methodology, and relevance rather than treating all sources equally.

5. It highlights gaps.

One of the most important functions is identifying what has not been explored. This shows critical thinking and adds originality.

Step-by-Step Structure of an MLA Literature Review

Introduction

The introduction sets the stage. It explains the topic, defines its importance, and presents the main direction of analysis. A strong opening also hints at key debates or patterns in existing research.

Body Paragraphs (Thematic Organization)

Each section focuses on a specific theme or issue. For example:

- Conflicting interpretations of a concept
- Different methodological approaches
- Evolution of theories over time
- Comparative analysis of findings

Within each section, sources are compared and connected rather than described individually.

Conclusion

The conclusion summarizes major insights, identifies unresolved questions, and suggests future directions for research.

Works Cited

All sources must be listed in MLA format. This section reflects the credibility and scope of your research.

MLA Formatting Essentials

- Font: Times New Roman, 12 pt
- Spacing: Double-spaced throughout
- Margins: 1 inch on all sides
- Header: Last name + page number
- In-text citations: (Author page)
- Works Cited page at the end

Template You Can Use Immediately

Fill-in Template

Introduction:

Research on [topic] has evolved significantly, with scholars focusing on [main issue]. While some argue [position], others suggest [contrasting view]. This discussion highlights [core debate].

Body Paragraph 1:

A major theme in the literature is [theme]. For example, [Author] argues that [idea], while [Author] presents a different perspective by suggesting [contrast].

Body Paragraph 2:

Another important aspect is [theme]. Studies such as [Author] demonstrate [finding], whereas [Author] emphasizes [alternative finding].

Conclusion:

Overall, the literature reveals [main insight]. However, gaps remain in [area], indicating a need for further exploration.

What Most People Get Wrong

1. Listing Sources Instead of Synthesizing

Many writers present one source per paragraph. This weakens the argument because it lacks connection between ideas.

2. Ignoring Contradictions

Conflicting findings are often avoided, but they are essential. Addressing disagreements shows deeper understanding.

3. Overloading with Quotes

Excessive quoting reduces originality. Paraphrasing and analysis should dominate.

4. Weak Structure

Without clear themes, the review becomes difficult to follow. Organization is as important as content.

5. No Clear Purpose

Every section should serve a reason. Random information weakens the overall impact.

What Others Don't Usually Tell You

- You don't need dozens of sources—clarity matters more than quantity.
- Grouping ideas early makes writing much easier.
- Strong transitions are more important than perfect citations.
- Reading strategically saves time—focus on arguments, not entire texts.
- Your interpretation matters more than repeating others' ideas.

Practical Tips That Make a Difference

- Start with a question, not a topic.
- Take notes by theme, not by source.
- Write rough comparisons before refining language.
- Use simple sentences to explain complex ideas.
- Revise structure before grammar.

When You Need Extra Help

Writing a strong literature review takes time, especially when balancing analysis, structure, and formatting. If you're unsure how to refine your draft or want expert feedback, you can get personalized support.

[Get expert help with your literature review](#)

FAQ

What is the difference between a literature review and an annotated bibliography?

A literature review and an annotated bibliography may seem similar at first glance, but they serve very different purposes. An annotated bibliography lists sources individually, each followed by a short summary or evaluation. It focuses on describing what each source contains.

A literature review, on the other hand, is a cohesive piece of writing that integrates multiple sources into a unified discussion. Instead of treating each work separately, it connects them through themes, arguments, or debates. This makes it more analytical and structured.

Another key difference lies in purpose. An annotated bibliography helps readers understand available resources, while a literature review demonstrates how those resources relate to one another and contribute to a broader understanding of a topic.

How many sources should an MLA literature review include?

There is no fixed number of sources required for a literature review in MLA format. The appropriate number depends on the depth of analysis, the scope of the topic, and the academic level of the assignment.

For shorter essays, 5–10 well-chosen sources may be enough. For more advanced work, such as research papers or theses, the number can increase significantly. However, the key factor is not quantity but relevance and quality.

Using too many sources without proper synthesis can weaken the review. It is more effective to analyze a smaller set of high-

quality studies in depth rather than briefly mentioning many sources without clear connections.

Can I use direct quotes in a literature review?

Yes, direct quotes can be used in a literature review, but they should be limited and purposeful. Overusing quotations can make the writing feel fragmented and reduce your own analytical voice.

In most cases, paraphrasing is preferred because it allows you to integrate ideas more smoothly into your argument. When quoting directly, it should be because the original wording is particularly important or precise.

Each quote must be properly cited using MLA format, including the author's name and page number. It should also be followed by analysis that explains its significance rather than leaving it unexplained.

How do I choose themes for organizing my review?

Choosing themes is one of the most important steps in writing a literature review. Instead of organizing sources by author, you should look for patterns across multiple studies.

Common ways to identify themes include recurring arguments, shared methodologies, similar findings, or ongoing debates. As you read, take notes on key ideas and group them based on similarities.

Themes should reflect meaningful divisions within the topic. For example, you might organize by theoretical perspectives, chronological development, or contrasting viewpoints. The goal is to create a logical flow that helps readers understand the landscape of research.

What makes a literature review strong and convincing?

A strong literature review is defined by clarity, depth, and coherence. It does not simply present information but builds a clear argument about the state of research.

One of the most important elements is synthesis. This means connecting sources in a way that highlights relationships, patterns, and contradictions. A convincing review also evaluates the quality of research rather than accepting all sources equally.

Structure plays a critical role as well. Well-organized sections, clear transitions, and a focused conclusion make the text easier to follow. Finally, originality matters. Even though it is based on existing research, your interpretation and perspective should guide the discussion.

How long should an MLA literature review be?

The length of a literature review can vary depending on the assignment or project requirements. For a typical academic paper, it may range from 1000 to 3000 words. For larger projects like dissertations, it can be much longer.

Rather than focusing on word count alone, it is better to ensure that the review fully addresses the topic and provides sufficient analysis. Each section should contribute meaningfully to the overall argument.

A well-written literature review avoids unnecessary repetition and focuses on clarity. If every paragraph adds value and supports the central idea, the length will naturally align with expectations.