Analyzing and Synthesizing the Literature

After you have collected the articles you intend to use in your literature review, you're ready to analyze each one (break it down and identify the important information in it) and then synthesize the collection of articles (integrate them and identify the conclusions that can be drawn from the articles as a group).

Analyze

- Skim the articles to get an overview of each one.
- Based on your overview, group the articles by categories. It is common to group by topic and subtopic and then chronologically within each subtopic.
- Take detailed notes on each article. Use a consistent format. Example:
 - 1. Authors' names:
 - 2. Article title:
 - 3. Publication year:
 - 4. Main point of article:
 - 5. Method:
 - 6. Participants: How many were there, what were their demographics, and how were they sampled?
 - 7. IV or quasi-IV: Were participants randomly assigned to groups or divided into groups based on a pre-existing variable? If there was an IV, how was it manipulated?
 - 8. DVs: How were they operationalized and measured?
 - 9. Results:
 - 10. Conclusions:
 - 11. Specific details that are especially relevant to your study:
- Look for explicit definitions of key terms in the literature. Note whether different authors use different definitions.
- Look for key statistics that you might use in your introduction. Example: "Analyses of police reports indicate that approximately 40% of assault victims were legally intoxicated when attacked (Caldwell, 2012), underscoring the need for research examining the effects of alcohol on eyewitness memory."
- Identify short notable quotations that might be used (sparingly) in your review because they make a point very succinctly.
- Look for methodological strengths and weaknesses.
- Distinguish between an author's assertions and evidence in support of the assertions.
- Identify gaps in the literature.

- Identify relationships among studies.
- Note how closely each article relates to your topic.
- Evaluate your reference list for currency and coverage.

Synthesize

- Create an outline that puts your topics (and subtopics) in a logical order.
- For each subtopic you identified during your analysis, determine what the articles in that group have in common.
- For each subtopic you identified during your analysis, determine how the articles in that group differ.
- If there are contradictory findings, you may be able to identify methodological differences that could account for the contradiction (e.g., differences in measurement or participant demographics).
- Determine what general conclusions you can report about a subtopic, given the entire group of studies related to it.
- As you begin to write your introduction, follow your outline and remember to use transitions between topics.

Adapted from

Galvan, J. L. (2006). *Writing literature reviews* (3rd ed.). Glendale, CA: Pyrczak Publishing.