Writing a Literature Review

In a review of the research, the writer:

- defines and clarifies the issue(s) or problem(s) specified
- summarizes previous investigations in order to inform the reader of the state of current research
- identifies relations, contradictions, gaps, and inconsistencies in the literature,
- and suggests the next step or steps in solving the problem

Unlike the writer of a researched report, who tends to formulate a question and research answers for it, the review writer develops a question and then looks at how other researchers in published studies have answered this and related questions. The writer then analyzes the points these studies have made and determines how each has addressed the question(s). Finally, the writer synthesizes (brings together) information from the other studies as evidence for each of the points that s/he is going to make.

Here are some steps to follow when writing a literature review:

1. Identify and develop a research question/main idea.
   a. Example: Research shows that diversity training often fails in workplaces. In what ways does it fail? What needs to be done to have successful diversity training?

2. Read the research studies on your topic critically. Look for the author's main purpose, the points s/he makes, how the points are supported (what kinds of evidence is used), whether the evidence seems strong and persuasive, and the conclusions that are reached.

3. Look for the points that emerge as you read the research studies relevant to your question. Based on the ideas you see being repeated, outline some main points to address in your review.
   a. Example: Some key points in the literature on why diversity training programs are not working are 1) organizations are not managing diversity, 2) diversity training is focused on differences and not on the "valuing" of diversity, 3) training programs are not inclusive of the organization's entire workforce.

4. Decide what studies support each of the points you have outlined. You may use studies more than once if they are relevant to more than one point in your outline.

5. Use material from the studies as evidence for your points, bringing together material from multiple sources to show the ways in which various studies have addressed the same or similar points.

6. Organize your review, e.g. Overview of Issue, Review of Literature, Conclusion, References/Works Cited Page.

7. Cite and document sources appropriately. Be sure to introduce the research studies appropriately in your text as well, using a documentation style relevant to your field, e.g. APA, MLA, Chicago, CSE.

Adapted from the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (4th ed) 
Last updated 6/12/2014