What should a Review of Literature Accomplish?

The purpose of this section of the research paper is to discuss the background information necessary to understand your topic. The Review of Literature includes an explanation of the progression of research and experiments of your problem, what motivated study in this area, and mostly, what methods were used by predecessors who have already studied this topic and the results of their work. Compare and contrast your method to methods done by others. Your review of literature should help you formulate a good problem statement and give you a basis from which to model your experimental testing. Consider your target audience and define or explain any scientific terms and concepts that are critical to understanding your project.

Scientists build upon or challenge prior knowledge and theories. Most inventions and advancements in science come from building upon or branching out from work done by previous researchers. This is how we move ahead instead of reinventing the wheel each time.

The review of literature provides you with the opportunity to learn as much as you can about your topic and what studies have already been done in the area. Become an expert! Be clear and thorough, not redundant. If you quote, paraphrase or summarize someone else’s work you must give credit to the source of that information. If you do not give proper credit you are guilty of plagiarism – stealing someone else’s ideas and thoughts. Anything you write that is not GENERAL knowledge MUST be cited. In order to give proper credit, use the MLA style of parenthetical citation described in the MLA Handbook of Writers of Research Papers, located in the IDS classroom.

The Review of Literature should be about 3 pages in length, and comes after the Introduction in your paper. Margins are 1.5” on the left and 1” on the other 3 sides. Tense may alternate between present (when talking about an established law or concept or someone else’s discovery) and past (when mentioning current research (your research)). For example: “Newton’s first law of motion states that a body at rest remains at rest unless acted upon by a net force.” “This experiment tested how mass affects the inertia of an object.”

Don’t forget that any good writing has an introductory paragraph, a body, and a summary paragraph that transition from one another smoothly and coherently. The review of lit is NOT just a list of random facts. General concepts and facts should be stated but then also related to the project at hand.