What is the purpose of the literature review?

“The purpose of the literature review is to place your research question in the context of the existing scientific literature” (Findley, 1989). In other words determine what is the problem you wish to investigate, describe what information about the problem is available, and reflect on what are the gaps in the literature and how your study will address those gaps.

How do I begin a literature search?

If you don’t know where to begin then try looking at what is said about your research topic in textbooks. Remember that textbooks are a decent beginning but even if it is a good textbook it only provides a guide to a select sample of the literature up to two years before the publication date of the textbook. You need to supplement this literature substantially. Refer to the references cited in the textbook and at least start with those articles in order to identify key concepts, theories and terms.

How do I know I have found enough of or the right articles?

The highly relevant articles you find will speak to whether someone else has already done a study similar to the one you would like to do. Don’t despair if you find an article that addresses your question specifically. Use this as an opportunity to develop a research project that is even better. In other words, the highly relevant articles will help you to refine, redefine, or refocus your research question.

You may find a tradeoff between thoroughness of the literature search (both relevant and potentially relevant articles) and precision (percent of relevant articles retrieved). Some might suggest that if you just search title, abstract, and topic you will probably find about 50-70% of the appropriate articles with a precision of 20-30% (Findley, 1989). You can start by doing a literature search over the past 5 year until 30% of all your articles found are at least potentially relevant (Findley, 1989).

If you are having difficulty finding articles take a look at the ones that are highly relevant and redo your search using the key terms they specify for a greater number of years.

If you find a few relevant articles in a specific journal, check the table of contents of other issues of the journal for other relevant articles.

Scan the reference list of the highly relevant articles. Do you have all the articles referenced relevant to your research question? If not find out how the articles you have missed are indexed or their key terms and repeat your search with any new search terms.

What can I do to help me to begin to write?

Try to identify key theories or concepts early in the review process otherwise it is easy to become lost in the mass of articles and embark on reading tangents that take you away from your research focus.

Record specific details about what was investigated, how it was investigated, and what was found in the most relevant articles. Some folks like to write these details on the front page of the journal article, others keep index cards, and others keep a succinct summary of each article in Word on their computer. For the latter two make sure you put the reference for these summaries in APA format and put in quotation marks around any statement you are copying.
work for word. You will be thankful you have done this when you have 100’s of articles and all you want to do is find a specific result and the researcher who reported it.

Develop an outline indicating the points you wish to make. Perhaps start with your research question addressing points in your outline to specific variables of interest in your research question.

Write about what is known in the literature by describing the overall trends in the findings reported in the literature and identify common or diverse findings. Make sure you draw attention to the gaps in the literature and how your study will address these gaps.

Write the major sections of your literature review. Make sure paragraphs flow from one to the other and you have provided summary statement at the end of major sections and appropriate transition sentences between sections.

Finally, make sure it is all written using APA style.

Reference:
Most of the information above has been gleaned from my years of experience. The one article I had that spoke to this specific subject was actually written directed toward medical doctors. But the essence of what was written that I thought appropriate to pass on to undergraduate students I have included herein.