Comparing “literature review” to “introduction sections”

In psychology, there are two forms of research papers or articles. When thinking about sources this is sometimes referred to as “secondary” (stand alone literature reviews) and “primary” (empirical research reports) sources. However, you will often hear people refer to the introduction to a primary article (where one proposes or discusses empirical research) as a literature review. Thus, the difference between a literature review and an introduction to a research report are minor but important. Hopefully this guide helps you to distinguish between the two.

**Gap in knowledge**
The most common type of literature review in psychology is the “gap in knowledge” literature review. This review shows what is known and what is not known about an empirical problem or an area of research. This type of review is easily turned into an introduction for research (in a research proposal, research article or grant proposal) because it justifies why a specific study or groups of studies should be done.

**State of the art**
A “state of the art” literature review is common in applied research where experts apply their knowledge and skills to specific problems. The review outlines the current thinking about issue or question. Then, the writer applies the current cutting edge research to a specific problem or issue. In psychology this might take many forms. A writer may wish to apply a new experimental procedure to a specific research question, apply a new statistical or measurement procedure to a question or issue, or use the best research to recommend specific therapies to clients. In general, this type of literature review summarizes and synthesizes cutting edge research and applies it to a specific problem, question, or issue. This type of review may be used to justify research addressing the problem or issue.

**Establishing a controversy**
This kind of review establishes a controversy by summarizing scholarly works that take competing views and then stakes out a claim that supports one side of the controversy (but adds something new), takes a synthesis position, or reframes the debate. This can be used to justify research that tests competing hypotheses, or research that helps solve the controversy.

**Stand alone literature reviews:** Literature review papers can stand alone. In psychology, these reviews will often have a theoretical focus (proposing a new theory or framework with which to view previous work). You can see examples of literature review papers in psychology by browsing Psychological Bulletin, Target articles in Psychological Inquiry, Current Directions in Psychological Science, Perspectives on Psychological Science, and Personality and Social Psychological Review.

When writing a stand-alone literature review ensure

1) That the thesis statement is clear. Also, include a discussion of the theoretical or practical importance of the review.
2) Include an introduction and body (this section will depend somewhat on what type of review you are conducting—see above)
   a. Provide a context by defining the general topics or issues
   b. Explain the organization of the review and why certain literature is not included in your review
   c. Discuss trends in what has been published about the topic
   d. Discuss disagreements in theory, methodology, evidence, and conclusions
   e. Discuss gaps in the research
3) Include conclusions that provide insight into the relationship between topics of the review and the larger area of study
a. Don’t simply paraphrase existing literature reviews, use more than one or two quotes, or discuss each article separately as if writing an abstract on each one
b. Do rely heavily on primary, empirical, peer-reviewed research articles, provide strong transitions between your discussion of one idea and the next to help create “flow,” and use references appropriately.

**Literature reviews as introduction sections:** Literature reviews may also be used as introductions to psychological research reports (and proposals). However, there are added requirements for introduction sections. According to the APA style manual (6th edition) a complete introduction addresses four issues:

1) describes why the topic or issue is important  
2) describes how the study relates to previous work in the area  
3) describes the hypothesis  
4) describes how the study will answer the research question

Another way to think about the requirements for an introduction is to look at the requirements for publishing reports in *Psychological Science*, the flagship journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

1) What will a reader of this paper learn about psychology that she or he did not know (or could not have known) before?  
2) Why is this knowledge important for the field?  
3) How are the claims in the article justified by the methods used?

When writing an introduction keep the following guidelines in mind:

a. Start the paper off broadly and provide a context for your topic. Next, clearly explain the problem to be investigated.  
b. Describe previous research in enough detail so that the relation between research studies to theoretical and methodological issues is clear for the reader. Make clear when a statement refers to a hypothesis, a result of a specific study, or a general conclusion. The review should be in your own words and it should focus on the research. Limitations of prior research and contrasting views should be presented.  
c. Provide a brief summary of the literature, and provide a specific description of what is missing or what is not yet known.  
d. State your hypotheses clearly. State directional predictions and make sure these hypotheses/predictions follow from the literature review (i.e., they are justified by literature discussed). Ensure that hypotheses are testable. Describe (broadly) experimental groups and/or what will be measured.