

On Literature Reviews¹

A literature review is a critical component of high level research and scholarship. It demonstrates to the reader that the writer has taken the necessary time to consider other arguments and discussions that have been had regard the major issues he or she purports to examine. In that regard, a well done literature review gives a level of legitimacy to the scholar's work.

A literature review summarizes and critically analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of research on a topic or research question. To write a literature review, you first collect and read the research that has been written on the topic. You then summarize this research's specific questions, hypotheses, method of analysis, and conclusions. The best literature reviews then analyze the existing research by drawing conclusions about what parts of it are most valuable and important, and about how future research could be conducted to have the most substantial influence on the field.

Literature reviews can stand on their own or serve as part of a larger paper. "Stand alone" literature reviews are useful for bring the reader up to speed on the state of the art of research. Most research projects, such as research papers or theses that you may be assigned, also contain a literature review. Here the purpose is to demonstrate to the reader the specific areas in which your project contributes to or builds upon existing research.

What a Literature Review Is Not

Many find the word "literature" confusing in this context because they associate literature with great works of fiction or poetry. A literature review summarizes the state of knowledge on a topic or research question. So the relevant "literature" consists of publications that contribute to existing knowledge on the topic or question.

The literature review is also not the place to present your main argument, your hypotheses, your data, your findings, or your conclusions. Keep it focused on summarizing and evaluating existing research on your topic.

You are most likely to find the relevant literature in books, articles in scholarly or policy journals, or research papers. You are unlikely to find cutting edge research in other sorts of publications, so in general avoid newspaper and magazine articles, commentary, many government publications (unless they are works of legitimate research sponsored or carried out by a government agency), and most web pages. Of course you should ensure that the specific assignment you are preparing is consistent with the advice offered here; when the two conflict, consult your instructor.

¹ Adapted from Indiana State University Department of Political Science, "A Guide to Writing Literature Reviews in Political Science and Public Administration," (accessed online, July 29, 2014), www.indstate.edu/polisci/grad/appendix1.htm.

Finding Relevant Literature

So where do you find the literature? It is tempting to begin by typing a few key words into an internet search engine. This is likely to be a poor use of your time. It will generate links to many web pages, but few will be research literature of the type discussed above.

The Snowball Method

The most efficient approach is the “snowball” method. Here you first identify one or more publications for your literature review. Textbooks for your current or previous classes are often a good way to find at least a few sources for your literature review. Textbooks usually cite the most influential and important works on a topic. So find the section of the text that discusses the topic or question that is the subject of your literature review. Read the footnotes carefully and obtain copies of the sources cited there.

Once you have a handful of sources, repeat the process. Most of these sources should have a brief literature review. You can mine the sources cited in the footnotes in these literature reviews for additional important sources. Finding the literature review section of a book or article can be surprisingly difficult. Few authors include a section entitled “Literature Review.”

New to Old Method

Some are reluctant to directly criticize (and thus cite) earlier work in great detail. Both the earlier work can be of great value. Others avoid including lengthy literature reviews so that they will have more space to make a new contribution to the stream of research. One method for finding the literature review section is to look for a section or paragraph that highlights the novel contribution that the book or article makes to existing knowledge. Typically at about this point the author will cite other work in the field that you will want to read for your review. In an article, this is likely to occur in the introduction or the first full section; in a book, the literature review likely will be in the preface, the introduction, or the first chapter. Note that at this point it is not necessary to read the entire book or article. Right now you are just mining the source for additional sources.