

WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW

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A literature review provides an overview of the state of knowledge on a particular subject. It therefore performs a valuable role in the accumulation of knowledge by contextualizing what we do and do not know. This requires you to balance the need to focus your research question with the equally important goal of situating it within a broader body of research.

If the subject is new to you, preparing an **annotated bibliography** is probably a very good idea before you start writing. The more work you put into your annotated bibliography, the easier it will be to write your literature review.

- Research! This means that you have to find the existing research on the subject. Students rely far too much on Google for searches and not enough on the library's databases. Become familiar with JSTOR, Project Muse, and other subscription databases and consult a reference librarian if you are not familiar with these resources.
- Summarize key points from the material, and start to get a sense of how information on the subject is organized.
- An annotated bibliography is also a vehicle to help you identify the major debates, concepts, and names within the existing body of research.
- If your topic still seems fragmented after you do all this, don't panic. Try re-framing the topic or changing your online search technique before you give up. And do not forget that there are books in the library too!

In general, your **introduction** should offer the reader a "roadmap" to the rest of the paper. In particular, your introduction should aim to:

1. State a clearly formulated research question. It should describe the scope of your topic and probably justify your inclusion or exclusion of related research areas.
2. Provide a succinct overview of the existing research on the subject. If you have organized the material around common themes, arguments, approaches, or methodologies, you should characterize them here. (Do not simply list them.) This can be difficult to do well because you have to aggregate ideas and generalize without sounding vague. Avoid using long sentences and plan on rewriting this section later.
3. Explain why your topic is important. In fairly concrete terms, convince readers why the subject deserves attention. This might involve mentioning some general facts about the subject or some information about broader, unexplained trends.

Next, you want to **describe the existing knowledge on the subject**. This is the heart of your paper and you should focus on three objectives:

1. Summarize – What have other scholars said about the question? What are the key findings and unknowns?
2. Organize – This is often the most difficult (and most important) part of a literature review. Concentrate on organizing your material thematically rather than chronologically. What are the major debates on the topic? Who is arguing with whom? Are there unnoticed links or similarities among different research areas which you plan to bring together? Are there other common threads? It is very easy to underestimate this task!
3. Criticize – identify inadequacies or shortcomings with the existing research on the subject. If you have identified a “gap” in the literature, this is where you describe overlooked evidence or unanswered questions.

Unlike many other papers you have to write, I do not require you to state a thesis. BUT the tasks of framing your topic and describing how you will limit the scope of your research should not be underestimated. Your position toward various scholars will come through in your critiques, and you might want to hint at this in your introduction. Your conclusion should be clear about describing possible avenues for future research.

Other resources:

- Guy, Rebecca et al. 1987. Chapter 2: “Choosing and Formulating a Research Question,” in *Social Research Methods*. Boston and London: Allyn & Bacon.
- The AU Library’s literature review tips:
www.library.american.edu/Help/tutorials/lit_review/
- AU’s writing center: www.american.edu/cas/lit/writingcenter.cfm
- Style and citation guides: www.library.american.edu/e_ref/citation.html
- “How to Read a Book:” www.si.umich.edu/~pne/PDF/howtoread.pdf

In addition to the examples on the library’s website, take a look at these:

Brownlee, Jason M. 2002. "Low Tide after the Third Wave: Exploring Politics under Authoritarianism." *Comparative Politics* 34 (4):477-98.

Dellepiane-Avellaneda, Sebastian. 2009. "Good Governance, Institutions and Economic Development: Beyond the Conventional Wisdom." *British Journal of Political Science* 40:195-224.

Bennett, Andrew and G. John Ikenberry. 2006. "The Review’s Evolving Relevance for U.S. Foreign Policy, 1906 – 2006." *American Political Science Review* 100 (Nov.): 651–658.