

What is a Literature Review? (and How Do I Write One?!)

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Today's Agenda

- What a literature review is and is not
- Purposes of a literature review
- Types of literature reviews in the social sciences
- Starting a literature review
- Organizing sources and notes before writing
- Writing a literature review
- Conclusion

What a Literature Review is and is Not

- What a literature review is:
 - An overview of research on a given topic and answers to related research questions
 - Features of such an overview:
 - Organizes literature
 - Evaluates literature (<= higher-order critical thinking)
 - Identifies patterns and trends in literature
 - Synthesizes literature (<= higher-order critical thinking)

What a Literature Review is and is Not

- What a literature review is:
 - An overview of what we know and of what we do not know about a given topic
 - Not necessarily exhaustive, but up-to-date and includes all major work on the topic
 - Intellectual context for your original research
 - Motivation for your original research
 - Structure of review guided by your objectives
 - Continually refers back to your thesis or research questions

What a Literature Review is and is Not

- What a literature review is not:
 - A “laundry list” of everything written on a topic, where each source gets its summary paragraph
 - Lacks organization guided by thesis or research questions
 - Lacks synthesis of literature
 - Lacks critical evaluation of literature
 - An annotated bibliography
 - A literary or book review

Purposes of a Literature Review

- Learning about research on a given topic and answers to related research questions (<= read broadly)
- Learning about how a body of research evolved
- Displaying your understanding of research on a given topic
 - Identification of important works
 - Points of agreement, consensus
 - Points of disagreement, controversy
 - Identification of areas for further research
- Providing readers with the intellectual context and some motivation for your original research (<= narrow focus)

Types of Literature Reviews in the Social Sciences

- “Literature”: Typically primary sources, scholarly works
- Chapter in a thesis or dissertation
- Explicit section in a grant or research proposal
- Explicit section in a research report
- Full-length, stand-alone review article
 - Examples: Articles in *Journal of Economic Literature* and *Journal of Economic Perspectives*

Starting a Literature Review

- The necessary first step:
 - Select a topic and formulate a few well-defined research questions
 - Examples:
 - Auction theory (far too broad)
 - Research on single-unit auctions (still a bit broad)
 - Empirical research on wholesale electricity auctions in the US (manageable)

Starting a Literature Review

- Early back-and-forth:
 - Select a topic and formulate a few well-defined research questions
 - Brainstorm a list of search terms related to your topic and then search for sources
 - Keyword searches
 - Text/bibliographic databases
 - Reviewing reference sections
 - Briefly review sources and use what you learn to refine your topic and research questions

Starting a Literature Review

- Working backwards:
 - Begin with a collection of recent research on a given topic
 - What authors or papers appear in the texts' introductions, literature reviews, or references sections?
- Identifying core literature, the “classics”:
 - What authors or papers do researchers keep citing?
 - What works do researchers identify as “classic,” “landmark,” “pioneering,” or “path-breaking?”
- Search out this preceding literature

Starting a Literature Review

- Preliminary checklist:
 - ☐ Have I formulated a topic and well-defined set of research questions?
 - ☐ Have I discussed my topic and research questions with a library staff member that can assist me with searching for sources?
 - ☐ Have I carried out some early searching to learn about the topic and to help me narrow my topic and sharpen my questions?
 - ☐ Have I talked to a faculty member about my topic, my research questions, and the results of my early searching?
 - ☐ Have I identified the core research on the topic, the “classic” works?

Organizing Before Writing a Literature Review

- First and foremost:
 - “Filter” your set of sources: Review abstracts, introductions, conclusions
 - Determine the scope of your literature review: What you will cover and what you will not cover
- Prioritize among your sources:
 - “Classics” and other studies you identify as more relevant or important warrant closer reading

Organizing Before Writing a Literature Review

- Key questions to answer in your reading and note-taking:
 1. What is the source's topic, research questions, methodology, and central results? (Summary)
 2. How is this source related to my topic, thesis, and research questions? Does it support or contradict my thesis? (Synthesis and Organization)
 3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the research in the source? Are there biases or flaws? How important or influential is this source? (Evaluation)

Organizing Before Writing a Literature Review

- Key questions to answer in your reading and note-taking:
 4. How is the source related to other research on the same topic? Does it employ a different methodology? Does it pertain to a different population, region, time span? Does it work with a different data set? (Synthesis and Organization)
 5. What are the points of agreement or disagreement between the source and other research on the same topic? (Synthesis)

Organizing Before Writing a Literature Review

- Getting a sense of the big picture:
 - What are the trends and themes in the literature? What are the points of consensus? What are the points of controversy? Which debates are on-going? Where does my research weigh in?
 - Where are the areas on which there is ample research? What are the areas that need further research?
 - Which studies offer support for my thesis? Which studies contradict my thesis?
 - Where does my research fit into the larger literature on the topic?

Organizing Before Writing a Literature Review

- Checklist for notes on each source:
 - ☐ Full citation information
 - ☐ What is the author's discipline and credentials?
 - ☐ What is the topic? What are the research questions?
 - ☐ What is the methodology employed? Theoretical framework? Empirical framework?
 - ☐ What are the study's main results? What are the answers to the research questions?
 - ☐ What are the strengths and limitations of the study?
 - ☐ How is the study related to other research on the same topic?

Writing a Literature Review

- Elements of the introduction:
 - Statement of thesis and/or research questions
 - Motivation for and importance of the research
 - Statement of scope of literature review: Note your selection criteria for the review
 - Hint of how you will organize the literature and your discussion of it

Writing a Literature Review

- Potential organizing principles:
 - Methodology: Theoretical perspective, empirical framework
 - Studies that agree with one another
 - Studies that disagree with one another
 - Extent of support for your thesis
 - Regional focus
 - Data range, sample
 - Chronological
- Tip: Organize studies according to “common denominators”

Writing a Literature Review

- Musts for your writing:
 - Linkage I: Continually link your discussion of the literature back to your thesis and research questions
 - Linkage II: Link studies to one another; stress relatedness of research on your topic
 - Prioritize/Classics: Identify “classic” studies and discuss them accordingly (i.e., with more detail, and with an eye for their influence)

Writing a Literature Review

- Musts for your writing:
 - Evaluate/Gaps: Identify shortcomings of particular studies and/or the body of research as a whole; be critical!
 - Frontier: Identify areas for further research; where can research on your topic go from here?

Writing a Literature Review

- Mechanics of writing:
 - Audience:
 - Scholarly, but avoid jargon
 - Wants to know about literature
 - Wants to know what you have to say about the literature
 - Wants to know where your research fits
 - Short paragraphs can help to keep writing crisp
 - Subheadings can help to clarify structure of review (for full-length literature reviews)

Writing a Literature Review

- Mechanics of writing:
 - Use direct quotations sparingly; paraphrase studies
 - Prioritize studies in the literature:
 - Signal importance by discussing relatively more important studies with more detail
 - Signal importance by noting influence on subsequent studies

Writing a Literature Review

- Rhetorical moves:
- Similarity: also, again, in addition to, additionally, similar to, similarly, alike, like, agree, agrees with
- Disagreement: contradicts, counter, opposite, differs, debate, at odds, on the other hand, disagree, disagrees with
- Evaluation: classic, pioneering, important, influential, lacks, fails to consider, ignores, overlooks, limited by/to, confined to, restricts attention to

Writing a Literature Review

- Writing checklist:
 - ☐ Did I include a clear statement of my topic's importance, the research questions I am seeking to answer, and my thesis?
 - ☐ Did I include a clear statement of the scope of my literature review and what criteria I used for including studies in it?
 - ☐ Did I identify the “classic” works on my topic and give them priority in my discussion of the literature?
 - ☐ Did I summarize the studies and link them to one another as well as back to my thesis and research questions?
 - ☐ Did I critically evaluate the literature, identifying its limitations and areas where further research is needed?

Literature Review Resources

- Online Writing Lab at Purdue University:
 - <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/workshops/hypertext/apa/interact/lit/index.html>
 - A sample APA-style literature review with comments
- University of Wisconsin-Madison Writing Center:
 - <http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/ReviewofLiterature.html>
 - An outline of tips on writing a literature review

Literature Review Resources

- University of Melbourne Information Division:
 - <http://dydo.infodiv.unimelb.edu.au/index.php?view=html;docid=2679;groupid>
 - An outline of tips on writing a literature review in economics; sources for further reading
- University of Toronto Writing Center:
 - <http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/litrev.html>
 - An outline of questions to ask yourself while writing a literature review

Literature Review Resources

- American University Library:
 - http://www.library.american.edu/Help/research/lit_review/index.html
 - A constellation of sites with tips on writing a literature review, a sample literature review, checklists, and sources for further reading
- University of California-Santa Cruz Library:
 - <http://library.ucsc.edu/ref/howto/literaturereview.html>
 - An outline of the definition and purposes of a literature review as well as its key components

Conclusion

- A literature review is an overview of research on a given topic and answers to related research questions
- Literature reviews are an important part of research and should be treated as such
- A well-written literature review:
 - Organizes literature
 - Evaluates literature
 - Identifies patterns and trends in literature
 - Synthesizes literature

Resources for Writing in Economics

- Steven A. Greenlaw *Doing Economics: A Guide to Understanding and Carrying Out Economic Research*. Houghton Mifflin Company. New York. 2006.
- <http://college.hmco.com/economics/greenlaw/research/1e/students/index.html>
- Deirdre N. McCloskey *Economical Writing*. Waveland Press, Inc. Prospect Heights. 2000.
- <http://www.waveland.com/Titles/McCloskey.htm>
- Robert H. Neugeboren *The Student's Guide to Writing Economics*. Routledge. New York. 2005.
- http://www.routledge-ny.com/shopping_cart/products/product_detail.asp?sku=&isbn=0415701236&parent_id=&pc

Remaining Talks in the Series

- “Outlining, Organization, and Cohesion”
Monday, March 12, 7:00-8:30pm
Monteith 339
- “The Analytical Essay”
Tuesday, March 20, 3:00-4:30pm
Monteith 339
- “Presenting Statistical Evidence and Graphical Information in Written Work”
Wednesday, April 4, 3:00-4:30pm
Monteith 339