

Literature Review Advice

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This document contains some general advice. I emphasize that the ideas below are intended to help you; they are decidedly not prescriptions that you need to follow.

1 Breadth of your review

When doing your literature review, focus on papers in good outlets. The list below applies to questions related to labour or development economics. Although not exhaustive, it includes most journals worth attention in these fields.

- American Economics Review
- Quarterly Journal of Economics
- Review of Economics and Statistics
- Review of Economic Studies
- Journal of Political Economy
- Journal of Labor Economics
- Labour Economics
- Economic Journal
- European Economic Review
- Journal of Development Economics
- Management Science
- Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization

If your question is interdisciplinary, focus your review in research published in top journals in the relevant fields.

2 Writing the your review

The primary objective of the literature review is to place your contribution in the literature. Lit reviews shouldn't just be a long and boring summary of papers. The idea is for you to sell your work while describing what we know about the topic you are researching.

1. **Summarise:** Your job with the lit review is to give a high-level overview of the previous literature. Your job here is to extract the main ideas in previous papers. Detailing every single detail of previous paper makes a lit reviews unclear and a bore to read. Curate the amount of information you give to the reader.
2. **Sell your potential contribution:** This is counter-intuitive, but you should treat the lit review as an opportunity to sell your work while describing what we already know. In a good lit review the emphasis is on the selling. Think of yourself a seller that is trying to convince the reader of why your research is worth their time. Your contribution should be front and centre, and previous work should take a back seat. To illustrate what I mean, the two sentences below convey almost the same information but presented in different ways:
 - *Option A:* All previous Toyota models include plenty of safety features like airbags, enhanced braking, etc., but this new model includes collision sensors.
 - *Option B:* This new Toyota model includes a new collision sensor along with the extensive list of safety features of previous models.

Many people use option A when writing a literature review. Although this is not wrong, this style puts a lot of emphasis on what previous papers did, and it obscures the novelty. Instead, option B puts the new features front and centre while acknowledging what is already there. The last paragraphs of the introduction of this paper provide an example of a lit review written using style option B.

3. Things I would avoid:
 - Lit reviews that are just a disconnected list of paper summaries. Try to relate papers to each other, placing into “buckets” and highlight the contribution you are making to each bucket.
 - Writing that dismisses previous research. You can always write your contribution using a constructive tone.