

Literature Reviews

While literature reviews are part of just about every single scholarly manuscript, I thought I'd put together a collection of blog posts that I have been writing to teach my students how to undertake a literature review. This page links all the posts associated with how to write a solid literature review, from searching for information, to assembling a mind map.

How to map a new body of literature or a new field of scholarship.

My students and research assistants often come to me and ask me "how do I systematically delve into a field that is not even mine" or "how do I go about learning about an entire new body of works that I have not looked at before?" This blog post attempts to answer these questions by offering a systematic process of mapping (based on a combo of [AIC Content Extraction](#) + [Conceptual Synthesis Excel Dump](#) and [mind-mapping](#) techniques).

6 questions and answers on depth and breadth of literature reviews

This post compiles six questions I often get asked (such as "how many sources should my literature review have?" and "when should I start writing?") when undertaking a literature review.

How to write an annotated bibliography

As I have written before, there are differences between literature reviews, banks of rhetorical precis, conceptual synthesis matrices and annotated bibliographies. Of these, the annotated bibliography is one of the most underrated scholarly outputs. It helps the reader get a lay of the land of which scholarly works are available out there, and it also enables a researcher to veer into specific pathways of research. This post describes how I write my annotated bibliographies, as well as a few examples.

Writing a literature review assignment (for students, RA) and providing guidance on how to conduct a LR (for instructors)

In this blog post, I explain the importance that supervisors' guidance on how to write a literature review has, and I showcase a few ways in which a LR can be conducted, with an example of my interactions with one of my doctoral students.

Moving from Having Read All The Things to Writing Paragraphs of Your Literature Review

In this blog post, I walk through the reading, scribbling, highlighting, note-taking, systematizing, mind-mapping of the literature and then, through the process of writing paragraphs that can be used in a literature review.

What are the differences between banks of rhetorical precis, conceptual synthesis matrices, annotated bibliographies and literature reviews?

When doing research, we read a lot of material. I use a systematic approach to constructing banks of rhetorical precis, to building worksheets with a conceptual synthesis, to creating an annotated bibliography, and all these are intermediate steps to constructing a literature review. This post of mine offers a few suggestions on how to go about creating an annotated bibliography, writing a literature review, and using project products such as banks of rhetorical precis and databases of citations to improve your research pipeline production.

Making your research "dialogue" with other scholars' in your literature review

This blog post shows how we can situate our work within the broader landscape of scholarly literatures.

Writing a literature review based on the Cross-Reference column of the Conceptual Synthesis Excel Dump (CSED)

This post explains how we can use one of the key columns in my Conceptual Synthesis Excel Dump (CSED) spreadsheet method, the Cross-Reference one, to write the literature review section of a paper.

From review of the literature to mind map of the field

In this blog post, I show how one can, from a published literature review, create a mind-map of a field of study. This is the reverse process of the one I outline on this blog post ([going from readings to mind map to full paragraphs of the literature review](#)).

How to write synthetic notes of readings (books, journal articles, reports, book chapters)

This post explains how I write my own synthetic notes. These notes are more detailed than a rhetorical precis, but less extensive than a memorandum. One can generate an annotated bibliography by collecting and systematizing these synthetic notes into a single document.

How to undertake a literature review

Once you know how to write an annotated bibliography, how to summarize journal articles, books and book chapters, you can now easily turn to creating full-fledged literature reviews. Since the literature review is a critical document that not only lists scholarly works but also makes judgments about their relevance, it's an important scholarly product, and one that students and faculty need to know how to do. In this post, I share my own process for doing a literature review.

Mind-mapping as a strategic research and teaching tool

I use mind maps as tools to create a broad overview of a field of research, or to map ways in which my thinking should be going, or to create new research projects, or also to describe the different ways in which themes and topics are interconnected. This post describes how I use mind-mapping with a detailed description of MindJet's MindManager 2017 (which is a paid, proprietary mind-mapping tool).

How to write a systematic review, a scoping review, a meta-analysis

While I write about the mechanics of writing a literature review, I don't really write about systematic, scoping or narrative reviews, or meta-analyses. BUT in this blog post I link to resources I found and articles that explain how to write those types of reviews.

Writing effective memorandums

One of the biggest challenges I have found in my career is teaching my students how to assemble information and preserve it in a way that makes sense for their own purposes. One of the most powerful tools to synthesize data and information is the memorandum. In this post I explain how I write my own memorandums, linking to a chapter on memos and diagrams from a well-known qualitative research methods textbook.

Using the rhetorical precis for literature reviews and conceptual syntheses

I am more of a fan of long-form, detailed, extensive memoranda when doing research or conducting a literature review. Nevertheless, I wanted to find out how do other professors teach the rhetorical precis (a much shorter version of a memo). The rhetorical precis allows me to do precisely this.

How to do a literature review: Citation tracing, concept saturation and results' mind-mapping

One of the first questions my students ask me is "Professor, how do I go about finding scholarly articles that might be useful for my literature review?" This blog post intends to answer this question. In the blog post, I focus on the technique of finding relevant citations (citation tracing), making sure your literature review search is extensive enough (concept saturation) and mapping the results to make sense of how they relate to each other (results mind-mapping).

Forward citation tracing and backward citation tracing: Searching through the literature.

I wrote this blog post to complement the one on citation tracing, concept saturation and mind-mapping of results, and here I explain how to do forward and backward citation tracing.

My #AcWri Strategies: Write reflective memos

Touted by some scholars as a "game changer", this method allows you to synthesize ideas from a journal article, a book, a book chapter, by summarizing and including specific quotes that you can cite. Creating memorandums and storing them in your computer's hard drive or on the cloud (e.g. on Evernote) allows you to have text ready that you can swiftly insert into your papers' literature review (or in the Excel synthetic dump described below).

Synthesizing different bodies of work in your literature review: The conceptual synthesis Excel dump technique

This is a method I've been using for many years to assemble my literature review. What I do in this technique is write a memorandum for each book, article, book chapter I read, and then dump the contents into an Excel worksheet. This method allows me to have specific quotes handy and at the ready, and to see when I haven't reached sufficient concept saturation.

My own workflow: Strategically reading and summarizing the literature

One of the first questions I get when my students need to write a literature review is – how do I make the time to Read All The Things? They need to balance coursework, labwork, research, fieldwork, etc. While I loved doing my comprehensive exams when I was doing my PhD because I had the time to read everything, as a professor on the tenure-track, it's hard for me to block enough time to read. So what I do now is I read more strategically. Depending on the work I am doing, I choose what to read and to which depth. I don't attempt to read everything, but I triage what I read and assess what needs much more time to process and comprehend and what can be quickly skimmed. In this post I explain my process.

Highlighting and note-taking on journal articles, book chapters and books as a mode of engagement

When doing a literature review, or writing a paper, you'll probably need to summarize articles, books, and book chapters. I usually engage with content by highlightingn and scribbling on the margins. This post explains my rationale.

Color-coding your highlighting when reading articles and book chapters

Related to the previous post, I use different colors of highlighters to mean different ideas and degrees of relevancy. This post explains my color coding.

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By [Raul Pacheco-Vega](#) 11:00 pm

4 Responses

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Matt says

Thank you so much for these essays! These are enormously helpful for a first-year PhD. Really appreciate that you invest precious time and energy in writing these during your busy academic life.

July 14, 2020, 4:40 pm

Continuing the Discussion

[Writing a literature review assignment \(and for instructors: providing guidance\)](#) – [Raul Pacheco-Vega, PhD](#) [linked to this post on August 9, 2019](#)
[...] one over Twitter prompted me to reflect, first of all, if the structure of my Resources page and Literature Reviews subpage was not clear enough (I have written A TON of blog posts on the topic of reviewing the [...])

[The rhetorical precis, with an example – colourless green ideas](#) [linked to this post on April 11, 2020](#)
[...] are many ways to approach a literature review (here Raul Pacheco-Vega gives an excellent overview), but here I just want to introduce a useful way of reviewing and summarising what you learn from a [...]

[A eading techniques for undergraduate students' primer: Learn how to write arguments first, then how to read in depth, then how to skim](#) – [Raul Pacheco-Vega, PhD](#) [linked to this post on May 1, 2020](#)
[...] how to synthesize their research in an Excel dump and a whole lot of reading strategies, literature review writing processes and note-taking techniques. I do this because I know they'll be confronted with [...]

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About Raul Pacheco-Vega, PhD

I am an Associate Professor with the Methods Lab at the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO) Sede Mexico. My research is interdisciplinary by nature, although I consider myself more of a political scientist and geographer, as those are the two major fields I studied during my doctorate. My research lies at the intersection of [...] [more](#) →

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