

# A Literature Review

## I. What is a literature review?

A literature review is a compilation, classification, and evaluation of what other researchers have written on a particular topic. A literature review normally forms part of a research thesis but it can also stand alone as a self-contained review of writings on a subject. In either case, its purpose is to:

- Place each work in the context of its contribution to the subject under review;
- Describe the relationship of each work to the others under consideration;
- Identify new ways to interpret, and shed light on any gaps in, previous research;
- Resolve conflicts amongst seemingly contradictory previous studies;
- Identify areas of prior scholarship to prevent duplication of effort;
- Point the way forward for further research;
- Place an original piece of research in the context of existing literature.

You can think of the above points as goals to be achieved in the process of writing a literature review. Before you can achieve any of these goals, however, you need to narrow down the possible subject areas into a relatively well-defined problem/issue, research question, or research objective.

## II. Selecting the topic and the literature

### A. Pick a topic

Picking a topic for the project tends to be a daunting task for many students because it is difficult to pick a topic in an area that you don't know much about. A common mistake is spending too much time trying to pick the perfect topic. It is therefore best to do some exploring, than pick a topic and go with it. In the end, the worst that can happen is that you have picked up some valuable research skills, but realize the topic you chose is not one you wish to pursue in the future. That is information you did not have at the beginning of the semester, so it is not a loss at all!

To help yourself with the topic selection here are some things you should definitely do before the first midterm:

1. Think about topics you have found interesting while taking economics elective courses. This will be a good starting place but keep in mind that topics in discussed in your economics classes are very broad and within each there is likely to be a wealth of literature to pick from. If you can think of something that interested you at this stage, you will have to narrow down your topic further.
2. Go to the library and look at the main field journal (for example, in International Trade, the main field journal is *Journal of international Economics*). Each issue of the main field journal will have several articles in potential areas of interest.
3. Browse through some websites that deal with the issue of interest and look at any data sources they may reference (for example, the World bank or the WTO websites have extensive databases with useful articles and data).
4. Once you have selected a topic, your main challenge is to formulate a research question or thesis statement that will help guide you through the process of writing the literature review. This is the part where you really narrow down your topic. The more well-defined your research question (topic, problem/issue) is, the easier it will be to select the papers or texts to be reviewed. In the end, a well-defined topic will allow you to write a literature review that forms a ***focused*** and carefully structured outline of what others have done in the area. Without a well-defined topic your literature review is in danger of becoming a useless "shopping list" of previous research.
5. After you have gone through the above steps, schedule a 30 minute appointment with me during which we can discuss your topic, your research question, and any other questions you may have. This needs to happen within the first three weeks of this class.

## **B. Selecting the literature**

The literature review itself does not constitute *new primary scholarship*. However, it will constitute an *important part of your final project*. In the literature review section of your project you need to demonstrate that you are able to:

- determine what has already been written on a topic
- identify previous approaches to the topic
- identify central issues in the field
- integrate what previous researchers have found
- identify important issues still unresolved

Carefully selecting your papers for review will both necessitate and demonstrate the first three skills mentioned above. Once you have a topic the main way to find related papers is to follow references in the papers you already have. Another way is to do a search on *Econlit* available under the “Databases and Full-Text Resources Link” at <http://www.pdx.edu/library>. Undergraduate texts often have important references in their bibliographies too. If after all these steps you still cannot find more than a handful of articles on your topic, talk to me and we can discuss whether your topic is too narrow.

A common problem at this stage is that students become overwhelmed by the amount of literature they uncover even with a narrowly defined topic. In deciding which papers are important in the literature, one signal, (though not a perfect one by any means) is the quality of the journal in which a paper was published. Top general interest journals that publish a decent amount of trade articles include (in alphabetical order with PSU library call numbers in parentheses):

- American Economic Review (HB1.E26)
- Economic Journal (HB1.E3)
- International Economic Review (HC10.I46)
- Journal of Political Economy (HB1.J7)
- Quarterly Journal of Economics (HB1.Q3)
- Review of Economics and Statistics (HA1.R35 and online through EBSCO Host)
- Review of Economic Studies (HB1.R4 and online through JSTOR)

Other general interest journals include:

- Canadian Journal of Economics (HB1.C255)
- *Economica* (HB1.E5 and online through EBSCO Host)
- European Economic Review (HB1.E94 and online through Science Direct)
- Economic Inquiry (HB1.W45 and online through Highwire)
- Southern Economic Journal (HC107.A13 A67 and online through EBSCO Host)
- Other international trade field journals may also be appropriate. Please consult with me if you are not sure whether a given publication or journal is an appropriate source for your review.

At this point it may be useful to have a checklist of the steps you must take in preparing to write a literature review. You need to:

- formulate a problem in your field of study
- familiarize yourself with a broad range of texts that deal with that problem
- decide on the texts you wish to include in your review
- decide on the most appropriate way to classify the texts
- identify the key issues
- critically analyze what you have read
- identify important issues that are still unresolved
- write a draft of the review
- read and think about what you have written and then rewrite.

### III. What is the structure of a literature review?

In writing a literature review you need to demonstrate your intellectual ability to recognize relevant information and to synthesize and evaluate it according to the tentative guiding research question/thesis statement you have developed. Your reader wants to know: a) what literature exists, but also b) your informed evaluation of the literature. While reviewing the literature, you need to be answering questions such as:

1. What are the main ideas and contributions that form the core of the literature?
2. Which papers are important and which ones are not?
3. Have there been controversies and how have they been resolved?
4. What are the common assumptions made in the papers you are reviewing?
5. What are the current deficiencies/mistakes and unresolved issues as you see them?
6. Are there important connections to other topics?
7. Has the emphasis been more empirical or theoretical? Why?

In your literature review you should:

- group research studies and other relevant literature according to a common theme
- summarize each item of the literature appropriately according to its significance
- compare and evaluate each item of the literature
- provide topic sentences at the beginning of paragraphs and summary sentences at the end of sections to help the reader understand what the main issues are.

Some students find that the most difficult part at this stage is to group the papers they have chosen for review so that their analysis weaves a logical story of how the literature fits together and has progressed over time. For this reason, I have provided below some general guidelines on how you might classify different writings on your topic. You may use the following sub-headings to classify what you have read, or you may narrow the focus of your review to deal with some of these categories only. Or there may be still other categories that are more appropriate for your research. For example:

- research outcomes
- research methods
- theories
- applications
- integration of the works of others
- criticism of previous work
- building of bridges between related topics
- identification of central issue(s).

### IV. Avoid these mistakes

- Remember that your literature review is a highly considered list and that you make reference to published literature only where necessary. Therefore, your objective in writing a literature review is NOT to do the following:
  - list as many articles and names as possible;
  - try to refer to every piece of literature in the area (this is not possible anyway).
- Remember that, when writing the literature review, you need to demonstrate that you can scan the literature efficiently and appraise information critically. It is, therefore, a bad sign when every paragraph begins with the names of the researchers: "Smith (1992) said...", "Jones (1995) claims...", etc. Instead, organize your review into useful, informative sections that present themes or identify trends (for more information on this see Taylor, D. (2001) "Writing a Literature Review" at <http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/litrev.html>).

## V. What makes a good literature review?

A good literature review:

- clearly delimits the subject matter to be reviewed
- covers all important relevant literature
- is up-to-date
- provides an insightful analysis of the ideas and conclusions in the literature
- points out similarities and differences, strengths and weaknesses in the literature
- identifies gaps in the literature for future research
- identifies the context for which the literature is important.

