

## **Topic 2: Conducting Literature Reviews**

Sophie Mitra

ECON 8600 Research & Writing in Economics

**Required readings:**

Galvan, J.L (2013) Writing Literature Reviews: A guide for students of the social and behavioral sciences. Pyrczak Publishing 5<sup>th</sup> edition.

Thomson, W. (2011) A Guide for the Young Economist 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. The MIT press. Pages 50-51

Clines and Cobb (2015). Research writing simplified (selected sections).

**Additional resources:**

University of Melbourne Information Division [literature review guide](#)

American University Library [literature review tutorial](#)

Various resources of the [Online Writing Lab at Purdue University](#)

Interdisciplinary Field-specific reviews

Example: [For a typology of reviews in health](#): Grant & Booth. A typology of reviews: an analysis of 14 review types and associated methodologies.

*“As it is no easy matter to root out prejudices ... it became requisite to exhibit a full and impartial view of what had hitherto been published on the scurvy ... by which the sources of these mistakes may be detected. Indeed, before the subject could be set in a clear and proper light, it was necessary to remove a great deal of rubbish”.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> This quote from a medical researcher of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is still relevant today. It is from Lind, J. (1753) *A Treatise of the Scurvy* from: [http://www.jameslindlibrary.org/trial\\_records/17th\\_18th\\_Century/lind/lind-experiment.pdf](http://www.jameslindlibrary.org/trial_records/17th_18th_Century/lind/lind-experiment.pdf)

## Definition

A **literature review** is an overview of research on a given topic. It ***synthesizes and critically reviews*** answers to related research questions.

Conducting a literature review is a **KEY** part of research (especially for researchers in training!)

A well-written literature review: organizes the literature; identifies the patterns and trends in literature; synthesizes the literature; evaluates the literature.

It is not necessarily exhaustive, but it has to be up-to-date and include all major works on the topic. It also motivates your research and provides the intellectual context.

## **Six Components:**

- 1. Problem formulation**—which topic or field is being examined and what are its component issues?
- 2. Read dedicated review papers/encyclopedia entries.**
- 3. Literature search**—finding materials relevant to the subject being explored
- 4. Reading and evaluation**—determining which literature makes a significant contribution to the understanding of the topic
- 5. Analysis and interpretation**—discussing the findings and conclusions of pertinent literature
- 6. Writing**

*Note that these are components, not stages/steps (given that this is not a linear process). There is a lot of back-and-forth!*

**1. Problem formulation:** which topic or field is being examined and what are its component issues?

**2. Read dedicated review papers/encyclopedia entries.**

The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics

International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences

Journal of Economic Literature (JEL)

Journal of Economic Perspectives (JEP)

Occasional reviews in field journals (e.g. Journal of Health Economics, Health Economics)

Consult the relevant college textbooks.

### 3. Literature search

Search appropriate databases: Econlit and may be more (e.g. SocIndex)

Specify a set of parameters that will yield somewhat focused results.

- Limit your search to journal articles.
- Specific a range of publication dates. Don't use stuff that is too old: recommend going back 10 years (20 years max).

#### ***Limit the scope of your search:***

- prioritize top quality journals: not all journals are created equal.

#### ***Later only: Expand the scope of your search***

- go back in time
- Perhaps some relevant literature from other disciplines (business risk management) extend to other databases
- Proquest Dissertation & Theses Global.
- You can also contact authors.
- Search for unpublished studies

- Comb lists of references: If you judge a recently published article relevant to your topic, check the list of references. Will provide useful clues for your search. You could do that for other recently published articles and then compare the lists of references.

The outcome of your search: your reading list!

#### **4. Reading and Evaluation**

**Pre-read:** Scan the articles to get an overview; do not get caught up in any of the details. Start with the most recent research and work backward.

**Organize yourself** before reading the articles in detail:

- develop a consistent format for your notes (the **Annotated Bibliography!**) such as: reference, research question (RQ), methodology (e.g. identification strategy, data source, sampling, measures), main results (e.g. not just significance; also coefficient values), anything else notable.



Read in order to:

- Summarize
- Look for definition of key terms in the literature e.g. sex and gender differences
- Identify the classic works in the literature
- Group articles by categories (synthesize and organize)
- **Evaluate:** What are the strengths and weaknesses of the research in the source? Are there biases or flaws? How important or influential is this source?

**5. Analysis and interpretation**—discussing the methods, findings and conclusions of pertinent literature

- Assess methodologies (look for strengths and weaknesses)
- Identify major trends or patterns in earlier studies: similarities (agreements, consensus), differences (controversy)
- Identify gaps in the literature
- Reassess the reference list to ensure it is complete/up-to-date.

At this stage, considerable critical thinking is required.

## 6. Writing

### Before you start writing:

- What is the **purpose** of the literature review?
- What is your audience? This will influence your **style** of writing.  
Note: this is academic writing: use first person sparingly (attached handout p. 73/74)

How do you develop your literature review narrative?

- Develop **the big picture**: Reassemble your notes: how will you describe the forest? Do not describe the trees sequentially. How do the pieces relate to one another? What are the patterns. What is the story?
- Prepare **outlines**: road map of the argument
- within each topic heading, note differences among studies look for obvious gaps/areas needing more research

## **Now the writing:**

### Introduction:

- identification of a broad problem, why the topic is important
- 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

### 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 hypothesis
- Geographical focus
- Data range, sample
- Chronological

Tip: Organize studies according to common denominators

Musts for your writing:

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

Conclusion:

- present implications: it suggests that a particular intervention or policy might be useful given the results (optional)
- further research: suggest directions for future research, including of course the one upcoming in your paper

“more research is needed in the future”: too broad, unhelpful, inadequate!  
Calls for research using other data, measures, models. **Emphasize the need for your study.**

Other:

Use references carefully (Galvan pages 90/91)

- Avoid long lists of nonspecific references
- Be precise

**Narrative, NOT Enumeration** (see handout page 7 of Thomson’s book): Not a laundry list!

If inconsistent findings in earlier studies, speculate on reasons.

Check the **flow of your review** and argument for coherence: coherence refers to how well your writeup holds together as a unified document. How do the various elements of your review connect with each other?

Analyze several rhetorical elements of your review that tell the reader about its structure and the relationships between its elements. Navigational tools needed, especially if the details of the review are complex:

- structure initially
- subheadings
- transitional words: “in the next example”, “a counter-example”, “the most recent study”

**Citing sources and Academic Honesty (Clines and Cobb) (Galvan pp. 107):**  
Take great care to **avoid plagiarism**

**Check style manual for correct use of citations.** In economics journals, use the author-date citation guidelines of the Chicago Manual of Style.

[http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools\\_citationguide.html](http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html)

**Paraphrasing (Clines and Cobb)**

## Direct citations (Clines and Cobb)

Common writing conventions (Galvan pp. 105)

### **Homework**

1/ Write into your log/journal in weeks 2 and 3 save in your private drive by Sunday each week

2/ **Due Feb 21st**: Your **1<sup>st</sup> presentation** (10 min on your research topic): 8 slides (not more than 10 slides) with the following recommended structure:

Two slides: Topic and Background; tentative research question

Two slides: Motivation

Two slides: literature on this topic so far: identify the “classic” works on my topic; indicate how you searched the literature; identify the strengths and limitations of the literature and where further work is needed.

Two slides: your concerns, questions

Thank you!