A Guide to Writing Literature Reviews in Political Science and Public Administration
Department of Political Science
UNC Charlotte
July 2006

What A Literature Review Is

A literature review summarizes and critically analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of research on a topic or research question. To write a literature review, you first collect and read the research that has been written on the topic. You then summarize this research's specific questions, hypotheses, method of analysis, and conclusions. The best literature reviews then analyze the existing research by drawing conclusions about what parts of it are most valuable and important, and about how future research could be conducted to have the most substantial influence on the field.

Literature reviews can stand on their own or serve as part of a larger paper. "Stand alone" literature reviews are useful for bring the reader up to speed on the state of the art of research. Most research projects, such as research papers or theses that you may be assigned, also contain a literature review. Here the purpose is to demonstrate to the reader the specific areas in which your project contributes to or builds upon existing research.

What a Literature Review Is Not

Many find the word "literature" confusing in this context because they associate literature with great works of fiction or poetry. A literature review summarizes the state of knowledge on a topic or research question. So the relevant "literature" consists of publications that contribute to existing knowledge on the topic or question.

The literature review is also not the place to present your main argument, your hypotheses, your data, your findings, or your conclusions. Keep it focused on summarizing and evaluating existing research on your topic.

For a literature review in political science or public administration, you are most likely to find the relevant literature in books, articles in scholarly or policy journals, or research papers. You are unlikely to find cutting edge research in other sorts of publications, so in general avoid newspaper and magazine articles, commentary, many government publications (unless they are works of legitimate research sponsored or carried out by a government agency), and most web pages. Of course you should ensure that the specific assignment you are preparing is consistent with the advice offered here; when the two conflict, consult your instructor.

Finding Relevant Literature

So where do you find the literature? It is tempting to begin by typing a few key words into an internet search engine. This is likely to be a poor use of your time. It will generate links to many web pages, but few will be research literature of the type discussed above.

The Snowball Method

The most efficient approach is the "snowball" method. Here you first identify one or more publications for your literature review. Textbooks for your current or previous classes are often a good way to find at least a few sources for your literature review. Textbooks usually cite the most influential and important works on a topic. So find the section of the text that discusses the topic or question that is the subject of your literature review. Read the footnotes carefully and obtain copies of the sources cited there.

Once you have a handful of sources, repeat the process. Most of these sources should have a brief literature review. You can mine the sources cited in the footnotes in these literature reviews for additional important sources.

Finding the literature review section of a book or article can be surprisingly difficult. Few authors include a section entitled "Literature Review." Some are reluctant to directly criticize (and thus cite) earlier work in great detail. Others avoid including lengthy literature reviews so that they will have more space to make a new contribution to the stream of research. One method for finding the literature review section is to look for a section or paragraph that highlights the novel contribution that the book or article makes to existing knowledge. Typically at about this point the author will cite other work in the field that you will want to read for your review. In an article, this is likely to occur in the introduction or the first full section; in a book, the literature review likely will be in the preface, the introduction, or the first chapter. Note that at this point it is not necessary to read the entire book or article. Right now you are just mining the source for additional sources.

Library Book Catalogues

Books will be a very important source for your literature review in most fields in political science and public administration. Here I want to give you a few tips on how to search online library catalogues to find relevant books. Note that for a scholarly literature review you are best served by working in a university library; local or municipal libraries are unlikely to hold many of the research books that you want.

Most library catalogues allow you to search for books by author, keyword, title, and so on. These search fields are straightforward and operate in a manner similar to a search engine. Perhaps the most valuable but least used search field is "subject". All books are assigned one or more subjects that they cover. The useful thing for a literature review about the subject is that once you find one book on a topic, you can easily search for all the other books on the same subject.

Here is an example using UNC Charlotte's Atkin's Library Catalog. Let's imagine that the topic of your is the relationship is the creation of the European Union's single currency (out of a combination of hubris and convenience, I am going to cite my own work in this and the following examples). Through the snowball method, you have identified my book (James I. Walsh, *European Monetary Integration and Domestic Politics*, 2000) as likely to be relevant to your review. You look this book up in the library's catalog (available here), which produces the following:

| Author | Walsh, James I. |

Title	**European monetary integration & domestic politics : Britain, France, and Italy / James I. Walsh.**
Imprint	Boulder, Colo. : Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000.

LOCATION	CALL #	STATUS
General Collections	HG3943 .W34 2000	AVAILABLE

Call #	HG3943 .W34 2000
Descript	x, 182 p. : ill. ; 24 cm.
Bibliog.	Includes bibliographical references (p. 169-175) and index.
Subject	Foreign exchange rates -- Government policy -- Great Britain.
	Foreign exchange rates -- Government policy -- France.
	Foreign exchange rates -- Government policy -- Italy.
	Monetary policy -- European Economic Community countries.
	Economic and Monetary Union.
Alt title	European monetary integration and domestic politics
ISBN	1555878237 (hard : alk. paper)

Notice towards the bottom the "Subject" heading. These are all of the subject classifications for which this book qualifies. The last heading—"Economic and Monetary Union"—seems most relevant to your work. If you click on this it brings up a link for the topic as well as the number of entries (i.e. other books) that fall under this heading. Clicking on this link will bring up a list of all the titles that the library holds on this subject heading.

You can now look through this list to identify additional books that will be of interest to you for the literature review. Note that many of these books will have similar call numbers and be shelved together in the same section of the library. So you may want to actually visit the library (FYI—it is the tall brick building), find the shelves containing these works, and quickly skim through them to determine which books you need and which books you do not.

You may also want to search the catalogs of other university libraries that have larger collections of books. Libraries with particularly comprehensive collections include the Library of Congress, Harvard University (click on the link for HOLLIS catalog), and Yale University. If you find a book that our library does not own, you can request to borrow it through our library's Inter-Library Loan service. Note that Inter-Library Loan books often take a week or more to arrive, so make sure you search other library's catalogues well before your paper is due.

Library Article Databases

Articles in scholarly journals are another important source of literature for your review. Atkins library subscribes to databases that allow you to search for articles and, in most cases, to download the full text of articles that you find.

The library frequently changes the databases to which it subscribes, so it is more difficult to give precise instructions about how to search for articles than for books. Here I will focus on a few general tips. You should consult a research librarian with more specific questions. Click here to see how to contact a librarian.

Note that to access these databases, you must either be using a computer that is located on campus, or have logged into remotely to the library's server. You can log in with your Novell username and password here.

The library organizes its databases by subject category here. The categories most likely to be relevant to your search include Africana Studies, Government and Legal, Political Science, Public Administration, and Public Policy. Clicking on these links will bring you to a web page that lists all of the relevant article databases to which the library subscribes.

Many of these databases mix the scholarly journals that you want to search with other publications such as newspapers and magazines. How can you tell what is a scholarly journal and what is not? Some databases allow you to restrict your search to "scholarly" or "peer reviewed" journals; if so, select this option. You may also want to ask your instructor for a list of the most important journals that cover your topic, or if a specific publication would be appropriate for your literature review.

Google Scholar

Google Scholar is a new and valuable tool for finding relevant works. It includes books, scholarly articles, unpublished research papers, and other sources. You might be able to find sources here that do not appear in our library's catalog and article databases.

The best place to start is with Google Scholar's Advanced Search. This allows you to search for keywords and phrases, to eliminate results that contain particular words, and to limit your search to certain dates.

Organizing Your Review

Once you have located the relevant scholarly literature, how should you review it? In general, it is a bad idea to review the literature work by work or in chronological order. Most such reviews are far too lengthy. They are also pretty boring.

A better way to organize the literature is by what I will call schools of thought. Here you group the existing literature by some criteria and discuss each of these schools of thought. For example, the literature might fall into distinct theoretical traditions. Or the methods used might vary in important ways across publications. Or the literature might be addressing different research questions, or providing different answers to the same research question.

Organizing your literature review by schools of thought has a number of advantages over other approaches. It means that you may not need to discuss each work cited in any detail. Instead, you can summarize the elements that these works share in common. It is much more interesting to read a review organized in this way than one organized by each work or chronologically. A schools of thought literature review is also much easier to write. The reason is that you can, at least initially, treat each school of thought as its own mini-literature review by analyzing its questions, methods, and conclusions. You are less likely to be overwhelmed by the need to summarize many disparate research publications if you organize your work in this way. Organizing by schools of thought also makes it a bit easier to decide how future research can be conducted in a way that best contributes to our collective knowledge of a topic or research question.

All literature reviews MUST properly cite the research that it discusses and analyzes. This is particularly important in literature reviews because your reader many be interested not only in what you write about the existing work on a topic, but also may want to use your list of references to begin investigating the topic in greater detail. For details on how to cite sources, as well as other information on organizing your work, consult the Department of Political Science's Student Handbook for Writing Papers.

An Example

To make things more concrete, let me give an example from a recent paper of mine that you can read here. The literature review for the paper starts on page 492 and ends on page 495. Here is the first paragraph:

> When does the failure of a policy lead decision makers to alter or replace it? How does policy failure influence the form and content of subsequent policy? Three streams of research address these questions.

So this paragraph reminds the reader of the research question that motives the entire article, that I am about to review what existing research has to say about this question, and that I have organized this research into three schools of thought.

The article terms these schools of thought the accountability, ideas, and garbage can approaches. For each school, I first identify how works within this school answer the research question, and then identify what I see as gaps or weaknesses with this school. The purpose is the set the stage for the subsequent section's discussion of how these weaknesses and gaps can be resolved more satisfactorily. Note that the discussion of each school of thought is in effect a miniature literature review of those works, and that the citations combine many works rather than address them sequentially or chronologically.