4 Conducting a Literature Review

Dawn Brancati (2018).
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Objectives

- describe the purpose and content of a literature review
- explain how to organize literature reviews either chronologically or thematically
- discuss how to summarize and synthesize research for a literature review
- provide guidance on practical issues regarding how to identify and format literature

A literature review is an essential component of any research project. The purpose of a *literature review* is to summarize and synthesize the existing academic and non-academic literature on a particular subject in order to characterize the strengths and weaknesses of this literature.[1] A literature review may be undertaken as part of a larger research project or as an independent exercise. In the case of the former, the ultimate goal of the literature review is to demonstrate the theoretical and empirical contribution of the research project at hand to the existing literature. In the case of the latter, it is to identify future avenues of research. The ultimate objective of the literature review affects both the content and structure of the review, but it does not determine the best practices and principles used to identify, discuss, and present literature in a review. These are the same regardless.

Identifying the Literature

A literature review should contain all the relevant and prominent literature on a particular subject regardless of quality. In general, quality is not a criterion for inclusion because quality is evaluated through the literature review. The criteria used to evaluate research quality are discussed at length in subsequent chapters. The criteria for evaluating the empirical contribution of any research endeavor is based on the type of method used as well as the execution of the method, while the criteria for evaluating the theoretical contribution are the same across methods.

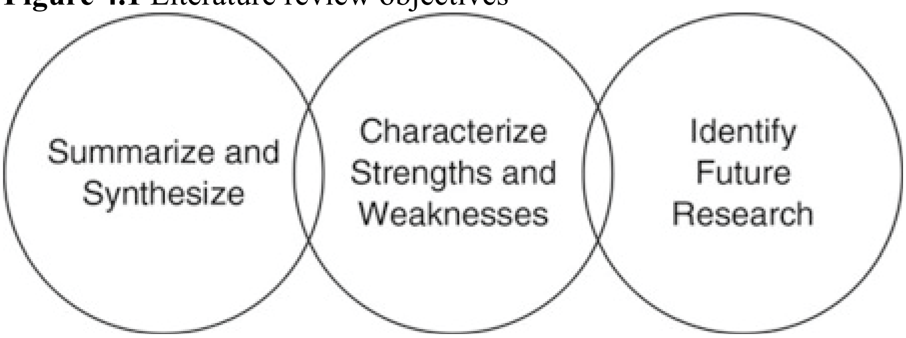
Quality is not necessarily linked to prominence, which is a criterion for inclusion. Research may be influential for many reasons other than quality. Research may be influential because it has been published by a well-known scholar affiliated with a prestigious institution or in a prominent outlet with a wide circulation. Research may also be influential because it proposes a very controversial idea that has provoked a backlash.

The prominence of a research project is typically evaluated in terms of its influence on subsequent research and public discourse. It is generally measured in terms of the number of times that a research project, whether it is a book, article, conference paper, and so forth, is cited by other research. Several options exist to track the number of times that written work is cited by other research. They include: Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and Altmetric. Some of these tools track published as well as unpublished research, while some only detect references to the former, resulting in lower overall citation counts.

Citation counts vary significantly across fields. While 500 citations may indicate a very influential article in one field, it may signify only a modestly influential one in another. Thus, in using citation counts as a measure of influence, one must consider them in terms of the field in which the cited work is written, and even the subfield. Citation counts can vary across subfields of the same discipline because more research is undertaken in certain subfields than in others, resulting in higher citation counts in the former than in the latter. Citation counts also vary quite obviously based on publication date since it takes years once research has been published for other research citing it to be published as well.

Relevance is much harder to identify and measure than prominence. It depends significantly on the scope of the literature review. Literature reviews that are stand-alone articles tend to have a broader scope than literature reviews that are a part of a larger research project. The former generally focus on a particular research topic, such as foreign aid, corruption, stereotypes, or income inequality. The latter tend to focus on a specific research question or puzzle. A stand-alone literature review on foreign aid might examine, for example, the political dimensions of foreign aid distribution, while an in-text literature review may look specifically at whether states can use foreign aid to win the 'hearts and minds' of aid recipients.

Figure 4.1 Literature review objectives



Literature reviews that are focused on a specific question may be framed in one of a number of different ways based on the subject and/or object of the research question. A literature review that is framed in terms of the subject and object of a research question would only include literature written on the specific research question at hand. For the aforementioned question regarding winning the hearts and minds of aid recipients, a literature review that takes this approach would only include research specifically about the effectiveness of foreign aid generating favorable attitudes towards donor countries.

This approach is the preferred approach. It is more pointed and provides for a deeper analysis of the research question posed. However, there may be very little written about a particular research question. Very little may have been written on a question because the question is very narrow and attracts very little scholarly interest as a result, or because the question is original and not a question that others have thought of yet. If the literature is scant, researchers may take one of two other approaches to situate their research within the larger literature.

> Box 4.1 Highlighting Absence
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> If the literature on a particular research question is scant, researchers ought to highlight this fact in the literature review. The dearth of immediately relevant literature is an important indicator of the contribution of the research question at hand to extant knowledge.

The first is to focus on only the subject of the research question. The subject of the aforementioned question regarding winning the hearts and minds is foreign aid. A literature review that takes this approach, instead of focusing on the effectiveness of foreign aid in currying favor with aid recipients, would review all of the outcomes associated with foreign aid in the literature. These outcomes may include, but are not limited to, generating favorable attitudes towards donor countries.

The second approach is to frame the research question in terms of the object (or outcome) of the question. In the aforementioned example of foreign aid, the object (or outcome) is winning the hearts and minds of aid recipients. A literature review that takes this approach would focus on all the strategies besides foreign aid used to win the hearts and minds of others, and what is known about their effectiveness. These strategies may include propaganda, impersonal exchanges, charity, and so forth.

The process of deciding what literature to include in the literature review is often an iterative process in which researchers first identify the literature very broadly related to their research question, decide on how to frame their research question within this literature and then seek out further literature relevant to their question and the way in which they have chosen to contextualize it.

Locating the Literature

However the literature review is framed, there are a number of useful strategies researchers may use to locate research to include in the literature review. The first approach involves a basic keyword search of a library or other database. It is best to start with a narrow set of terms to first find the research that is most closely related to the question posed, and then to broaden the search to include more general terms in order to find related literatures. This approach is less likely to overwhelm researchers and is more efficient because there may be sufficient literature very closely related to the research question at hand so that a broader search is unnecessary.

The efficiency of the search also depends on the databases searched. Certain databases allow users to view all types of literature in a single search. This includes books, journal articles, magazine articles, and unpublished research. Other databases, though, only allow users to view certain types of literature, while even narrower databases only allow users to view certain types of literature issued by specific publishers. Certain databases can also provide researchers with information about the citation counts of the literature located in the search, so that researchers can sort through the literature in terms of influence.

It is important for researchers to be aware of the types of resources available to them through a given database, so they do not overlook literature that would require them to search another database. Databases such as Google Scholar, which provide researchers with access to multiple types and sources of literature and their citation counts, allow for the most efficient search possible. The specific databases available to researchers will depend on their institutions since access to library databases is generally based on paid institutional subscriptions.

Online repositories for academic research, including commercial ventures such as Academia.edu, Research Gate, and Mendeley, as well as non-commercial platforms, such as GitHub, are also searchable using keywords. These repositories allow researchers to create profiles, upload their research as well as their data and replication code, and to connect to other scholars with common research interests. GitHub is not only an online repository, but it is also a tool for software development.

Much of the research included in these online repositories is produced by young early-career scholars and is unpublished. Researchers may include abstracts of their published research in these repositories, but they generally cannot upload copies of their published research due to copyright protections. Unpublished research is not necessarily of a lower quality, and even low quality research can have interesting ideas to impart. However, research that is unpublished has not been vetted through a peer review process and is not subject to the same standards regarding replication as published research.

An equally important way to identify research to include in a literature review is to peruse other researchers' bibliographies looking for relevant literature, and then to read the literature mentioned in these bibliographies and follow the trail of research from one study to the next until the trail runs cold or too far from the original path. Finally, it can be very useful to ask advisors, professors, or colleagues for suggestions. Like a bibliography search, this strategy is effective in identifying research which is not directly related to the research question at hand, but that has obvious parallels or implications for it.

Structuring the Literature Review

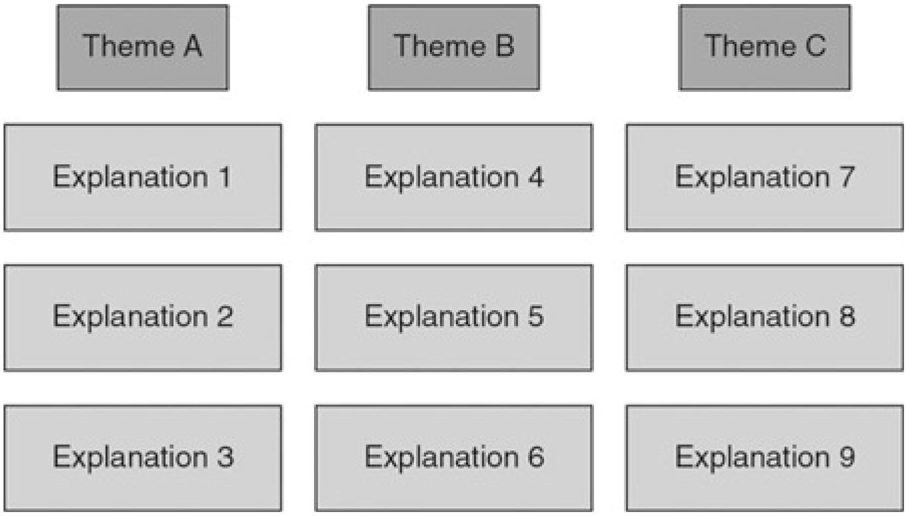
Literature reviews may be structured either chronologically, according to the publication dates of the research, or thematically. Unless the goal of the literature review is to discuss the historical development of a field, as is more typical of stand-alone literature reviews, it is best to organize the review thematically. A literature review that is organized chronologically may neglect to include important works that do not fit the trend in a field at a given time. It may also be repetitive because literature written at different periods of time may include similar themes. Moreover, a literature review that is organized thematically is better suited for synthesizing, as opposed to just summarizing, the existing literature.

Regardless of the way in which a particular research question is framed within the larger literature, a thematic literature review should be organized into layers, where the layers represent themes, subthemes, and sub-subthemes of the literature. If, for example, the literature contains a debate between opposing views on an issue, the literature review may be organized into two layers. The first layer would relate to the particular side of the debate on which the research is situated. The second layer would consist of the reasons why the research falls on either side of the debate.

Figure 4.2 depicts schematically how a literature review organized around a three-sided debate may be structured.

The themes that structure the literature review should not be presented as a laundry list of ideas, as would be the case if a researcher introduced the ideas using numbers, such as 'first', 'second', 'third', and so forth. Instead, they should be linked together according to features that they have (or do not have) in common. These features may be theoretical or empirical. Grouping the literature in this way facilitates the synthesis and the analysis of the literature.

Figure 4.2 Thematic organization of the literature



Box 4.2 Rhetorical Devices

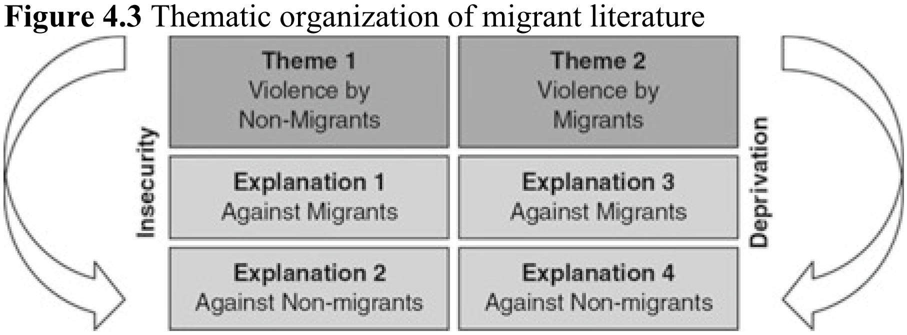
In order to draw connections between the literature reviewed, researchers may use different rhetorical devices. One of the most common ways to do this is to use particular language that emphasizes the similarities or differences between the ideas or methods presented in the literature (e.g., 'similarly', 'as in', 'unlike', or 'in contrast'). Alternatively, researchers may simply repeat a word or phrase used in different sentences to connect two ideas, or they may use words or phrases with similar structures (e.g., noun-preposition-noun rather than possessive-noun as in 'the owner of the dog' rather than 'the dog's owner') to draw parallels between them.

To better understand how to organize a thematic literature review and how to draw links among themes, consider the literature on refugees and crime as an example (Bucerius 2011). The literature on crime and refugees is divided principally between two opposing camps. The first camp claims that refugees increase crime and the second claims that refugees have no effect on crime. Those within these camps offer different explanations for why refugees either increase crime or have no effect on it.

For the sake of simplicity, the discussion below focuses on the side of the debate which argues that refugees increase crime. Figure 4.3 depicts one way in which the literature on this side of the debate may be organized.

In this example, the literature arguing that refugees or migrants increase crime is organized into two themes based on who commits the crime – the refugee or the local non-migrant population – and whether the victims of the crime are refugees or non-migrants. The themes are linked together theoretically based on two characteristics of the explanations offered to explain the increase in crime perpetrated by either the migrants or non-migrants, regarding security and deprivation.

Figure 4.3 Thematic organization of migrant literature



Theme 1: The increase in violence is not due to violent acts perpetrated by migrants but to violence perpetrated by non-migrants.

- Explanation 1: The crime is perpetrated against refugees, especially children and women who are subject to sexual assault in camps, because of the insecurity (e.g., unlocked shelters and a lack of guards) of camps.
- Explanation 2: The crime is perpetrated by nationals outside camps, largely against other nationals, because the presence of police outside of the camps is stretched thin by the need for police at camps, making it easier to commit crimes outside camps.

Theme 2: The increase in violence is due to violence perpetrated by migrants, but not due to innate characteristics of the migrants but to characteristics of the environments in which they live.

- Explanation 3: Limited provisions within camps provoke violence among refugees in competition over scarce goods.
- Explanation 4: Shortages in food, medicine, clothing and other supplies in camps provoke anger towards and uprisings against governments and aid agencies over sub-human living conditions.

In this example, Theme 1 and Theme 2 are linked rhetorically because they begin with the same language except for the word ‘not’. Under Theme 1, Explanations 1 and 2 are connected by the fact that the crime is perpetrated by non-migrants – against migrants according to Explanation 1 and against non-migrants in Explanation 2, and both due to insecurity – insecurity within camps in the case of Explanation 1 and insecurity outside camps in Explanation 2. Under Theme 2, Explanations 3 and 4 are connected by the fact that they are both about conditions within camps although the target of the violence is different – against other migrants in the case of Explanation 3 and against non-migrants, namely government and aid agencies, in the case of Explanation 4.

How to Discuss the Literature

Since a literature review should not merely summarize but also synthesize the existing literature, the review should only present the key arguments and findings of the research presented as they relate to the subject of the review. It should not describe every aspect of the research as in an annotated bibliography.

> Box 4.3 Talking about Others
>
> Quote sparingly. Use quotes only where the language used by another person is particularly vivid, eloquent or poignant, or when the person quoted is notable and their exact words, even if not especially articulate, are important to document. Quotes should not make your points for you, but rather heighten interest in them.

In synthesizing the literature, researchers should discuss the major strengths and weaknesses of the research reviewed. Researchers should not point out each and every strength or weakness of a research project, such as a minor error in historical fact, insufficient attention given to a particular example, or an insufficiently detailed codebook. Instead, researchers should focus on only those strengths and weaknesses that are central to the issue at hand, and that affect the extent to which the argument and evidence provided in the research are persuasive.

To illustrate how to effectively discuss research in a literature review, below are two examples of descriptions of the same article on the relationship between immigration and crime in Italy – Bianchi et al. (2012). For a literature review, the first example is preferable to the second. It summarizes only those aspects of the research relevant to the question of refugees and crime, frames the research to make the relevance of these aspects apparent, and identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the research in terms of the question posed.

Example 1

> Bianchi et al. (2012) find only weak evidence that immigration, which includes but is not limited to refugees, increases crime. In their statistical analysis of the relationship between crime and immigration in Italy, the authors find that immigration significantly increases only one type of crime – robberies. This finding is consistent with arguments that suggest the refugees commit crimes in order to acquire needed provisions lacking within refugee camps. These results may underestimate, though, the impact of refugees on robberies since the level of economic deprivation of refugees is typically greater than for immigrants in countries. Although the findings are weak, they are robust – based on an analysis of a long time period (1990–2003) and an estimation technique designed to address concerns regarding causal direction.

The second example is the abstract written by the authors. The abstract summarizes all aspects of their research, not just those relevant to the question of refugees and crime. It also mentions the strengths and weaknesses of the authors' research in terms of the method employed and the applicability of the findings to other cases, but not in relation to the question posed regarding refugees and crime. While this is an appropriate strategy for an abstract, it is not an effective entry for a literature review.

Example 2

> We examine the empirical relationship between immigration and crime across Italian provinces during the period 1990–2003. Drawing on police administrative records, we first document that the size of the immigrant population is positively correlated with the incidence of property crimes and with the overall crime rate. Then, we use instrumental variables based on immigration toward destination countries other than Italy to identify the causal impact of exogenous changes in Italy's immigrant population. According to these estimates, immigration increases only the incidence of robberies, while leaving unaffected all other types of crime. Since robberies represent a very minor fraction of all criminal offenses, the effect on the overall crime rate is not significantly different from zero.

This discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the existing literature should also lay the groundwork for a presentation of avenues for future research in the case of a stand-alone literature review, or the contribution of a given research project to the extant literature in the case of an in-text literature review. In the case of the latter, the presentation of the weaknesses ought to emphasize those weaknesses in the existing literature that the research project will rectify.

Generally, researchers present the contribution of their research to the existing literature at the conclusion of the literature review section. However, as previously suggested, it is very helpful to build up to this discussion by hinting at the project's contribution throughout the literature review in discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the existing literature, and connecting them rhetorically to the researchers' contribution in the conclusion of the literature review.

Box 4.4 Talking about Yourself

In introducing your contribution to the literature, avoid trite language and phrases, like this project will ‘fill in the gap’ or ‘make a novel contribution’. If the literature review is well written, these phrases are unnecessary as the contribution to extant knowledge will be apparent.

In defining their contribution to the extant literature, it is important that researchers do not oversimplify, distort, or downplay other researchers’ work in order to make their contribution seem more significant. It is also important that researchers avoid hyperbolic and pejorative language. Researchers should avoid words such as ‘poor’ (as in this research does a ‘poor’ job answering this question), or ‘fail’ (as in this research ‘fails to take into account’). The temptation to use this kind of language to make social scientific writing more exciting or to make one’s contribution to the literature more obvious is understandable, but the language is derisive nonetheless.

Formatting References

In general, the author-date system of the *Chicago Manual of Style* is used in the social sciences for references. According to this system, sources are cited within the text with the name of the author and the year of the publication associated with a particular statement at the end of the sentence. Multiple citations are separate by semicolons and are ordered sequentially, according to the date of publication rather than alphabetically according to the name of the author. In the reference section, only articles, books, and other material that are cited in the text of the research project are included in the Chicago style.

The Chicago style is very efficient but it has certain shortcomings. For sentences making distinct points, it may not necessarily be clear to which point the citation refers. In this case, it is useful to split a sentence into parts so that each point is its own sentence. This strategy is consistent with the simple and straightforward diction of writing in the social sciences. In practice, page numbers are also used sparingly in the Chicago style. Generally, they are only used when material is directly quoted in a sentence. For references to article-length papers or shorter material, this is not particularly problematic. However, if the citation is to a book, it is much harder for the reader to locate the material referenced in the citation without page numbers.

Below are examples of the proper formatting for basic types of references using the *Chicago Manual of Style*. For other types of documents, consult the most recent addition of the manual. References using the Chicago style and alternative formats, such as the American Psychological Association (APA) style and the Harvard style, can also be generated automatically using programs, such as such as BibDesk, Endnote, and CiteULike.

Book (single author):

Brancati, Dawn. 2016. *Democracy Protests: Origins, Features, and Significance*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Book Chapter:

Hertel, Shareen. 2017. “Re-Framing Human Rights Advocacy: The Rise of Economic Rights.” In *Human Rights Futures*, edited by Jack Snyder, Leslie Vinjamuri, and Stephen Hopgood, 237 –260. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Conference Paper:

Birnir, Jóhanna Kristín and Nil S. Satana. 2010. "One God for All: Fundamentalist Religious Groups and Terrorism." Presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association, New Orleans, Louisiana, November 21–24.

Edited Collection:

Falleti, Tulia G. and Emilio Parrado, eds. 2017. *Latin America Since the Left Turn*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Electronic Sources:

Brancati, Dawn. 2007. *Global Elections Database*. Accessed 21 November 2017. http://www.globalelectionsdatabase.com.

Journal Article:

Rosas, Guillermo. 2006. "Bagehot or Bailout? An Analysis of Government Responses to Banking Crises." *American Journal of Political Science* 50(1): 175–191.

Working Paper:

Herrera, Yoshiko M. and Andrew H. Kydd. "'Take A Chance: Trust-Building Across Identity Groups." Unpublished manuscript, last modified July 2017. Latex file.

Key Points

- Literature reviews should summarize and synthesize the literature on a subject and also characterize its strengths and weaknesses.
- Literature reviews can also present avenues for future research or define the contribution of a research project to the extant literature.
- The best structure depends on the purpose of the literature review. Literature reviews may be structured either chronologically or thematically.
- Common sources for identifying the literature on a subject include: library databases; online repositories; bibliographies; and faculty and colleagues.

Further Reading

All three readings are informative guidebooks about how to compose literature reviews.

Galvan, Jose L. 2017. *Writing Literature Reviews: A Guide for Students of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*. New York: Routledge.

Machi, Lawrence A. and Brenda T. McEvoy. 2016. *The Literature Review: Six Steps to Success*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Ridley, Diana. 2012. *The Literature Review: A Step-by-Step Guide for Students*. London: Sage Publications.

Exercise 4.1

Design an alternative way in which to organize the literature depicted in Figure 4.3 regarding the reasons for an increase in crime due to the presence of refugees in countries.

Exercise 4.2

For either one of the two examples below, identify at least two themes that link each of the six explanations together and then categorize each of the six explanations by theme. Explain how the themes are related to each other and why you categorized each explanation as you did.

Example 1: The link between oil and violent conflict within states.

1. The looting of oil by rebels provides start-up costs for war.
2. The profitableness of war due to the ability of the victor to control oil sales reduces the incentives for peace.
3. Oil extraction produces grievances among locals (who often do not benefit financially from oil extraction and are dislocated from their homes and exposed to health and environmental hazards as a result of it) that rebels exploit for support.
4. Foreign countries help finance on-going wars by purchasing the rights to extract oil resources in the future ('booty futures') from the winning side.
5. Oil resources provide incentives for violent separatist movements to form because they enable regions to sustain themselves as independent states.
6. Oil makes governments less likely to agree to peace agreements, which require them to give regions political and fiscal autonomy and, thus, control over oil.

Example 2: The quality and longevity of personal relationships.

1. Relationship longevity depends not only on the specific qualities of each partner, but also on the way these qualities intersect.
2. How partners communicate about and cope with problems both internal and external to their relationships affects the quality and stability of their relationships.
3. The qualities, personalities, and temperament that individuals bring to their relationships influence their own and their partners' wellbeing in the relationship.
4. Partners bring certain goals and needs to their relationships. The dynamics between partners affect whether each partner is able to achieve their goals and, in turn, their satisfaction with their relationship.
5. The presence of attractive alternatives to a current relationship, including the option of not being in a relationship, threatens the quality and longevity of the relationship.
6. Social norms, practices and traditions can lead partners to remain in unhappy relationships.

Exercise 4.3

Select an academic article within your discipline, locate the literature review section, and identify the themes of the research discussed within it. Try to draw a diagram as in Figure 4.3 of the way in which the literature is organized in the literature review. If it is not possible, discuss why this is the case and what problems this presents.

Exercise 4.4

Using your own research, identify at least two different themes running through the literature relevant to your research question. List the arguments that belong to each theme and draw a diagram demonstrating how they are linked to each other, as in Figure 4.3.