

Guidelines for Literature Review

13 March 2002

The purpose of a literature review is to establish the context for your research agenda. A good review clarifies what makes your research plan unique, and educates the reader on the distinctive features and values of the new knowledge that will be produced as a consequence of your research proposal.¹

In some lines of inquiry, the steps involved in writing a literature review are absolutely clear. Your research question may be specialized, and is the undisputable, logical next step in a series of a limited number of previous studies. In this case your literature review is short and focused, often with a single sentence describing the purpose or finding of each relevant prior work. At the other end of the continuum is synthetic scholarship that draws on broad themes from several discrete traditions or disciplines. In these cases the “literature review” is often the point of the entire enterprise -- for instance, to make the case that entire fields of scholarship must be integrated in new and innovative ways in order to provide genuine advances in knowledge and understanding. In between these two extremes is a very broad range of possibility, and this middle ground is where most of our colleagues in this seminar will be. Here, the task is to review key themes in previous scholarship, sometimes in distinct quarters of the discipline or in different fields entirely. Most of the literature reviews we will be reading will be more specific than a broad, synthetic book-length treatise on twentieth century geographic thought, but will not be limited to specialized discussions of only five or ten key studies. Follow the middle path.

Just a few simple tips on the literature review. I apologize if some of these are self-evident, but given the wide variation in specializations, I must keep things general to be of any relevance whatsoever.

1. Be clear on the purpose of the literature review, with an explicit statement in the first paragraph of the review. Are you reviewing the literature in order to advance certain key studies, books, or articles? To correct misunderstandings about them? To challenge them? To synthesize them into a new approach?
2. Very early on in your literature review, provide a short, concise summary of the key themes that provide the context for your work. Make your fundamental assertion up front in the literature review, and then back it up in the rest of the literature review. For example, “my proposed research is situated at the intersection of environmental history, land-use planning, and recent advances in Geographic Information Sciences. Prominent streams of inquiry in each of these areas, however,

¹ Your research plan should lay out a map for acquiring new scholarly knowledge, and it should do so in a unique way. But you should not have too much stress attempting to make everything about your research unique; some parts of your plan, for instance, should follow previous contributions so that you do not have to reinvent the wheel for every single step. Moreover, in some lines of inquiry it is all too easy to work yourself into the counterfactual conundrum (you can spend many, many months trying to verify or falsify the assertion that “no-one has ever used spatial econometrics in a GIS environment to measure local variations in fertilizer use in American suburbs where a majority of the houses were built between 1950 and 1960.”) Unless you plan otherwise, your research will inevitably be somewhat different from prior contributions, even if you are studying the same topic with a similar methodology; the key point of the literature review is to explain to the reader how you plan for it to be different in ways that generate valuable new knowledge and understanding.

have not yet been integrated in ways that address the critical questions driving my research...” Lay out the supporting evidence for your assertion, drawn from the literature, in the remaining paragraphs.

3. Maintain rigor *and* flexibility in reviewing the literature. By this, I mean that you should be inclusive, and cast a broad net in your specific subject area; but you should not exceed your own expertise. Be clear on which “mode” of citation is being used to support specific parts of your argument or analysis. Thus, if you need to make the case that a large body of previous research has been done on a particular topic, it’s fine to include a dozen citations to make the case that beachfront condo and hotel development is recognized as a serious environmental problem in many parts of the world (Alonso, 1989, 1994; Beaverstock, 1998; Edgington, 1994, 1995, 2001; Jackson, 1979, 1984; Kendricks, 1999; Smith, 1974; Wilson, 1978, 1983, 1988). For each of these citations, you have at least looked at the abstract to see its main point and general approach; but you may not have read every word of every page of every single citation. If, on the other hand, your research is based on an explicit challenge to the simplistic theoretical and empirical approach used by Wilson, a leading figure in this area, then you need to say that explicitly, and you need to be able to tease out specific problems with what Wilson (1983) describes in his chapter on environmental assessment.

Specifics: Your literature review should be no more than four pages, double-spaced. The body of the review should include citations (Alonso, 1989, 1994; Wilson, 1983), and at the end (not counted in the four pages) include a bibliography. This bibliography will overlap with your working annotated list, but will likely be much shorter, and may include several new sources you’ve read in recent weeks. Bring three copies of your literature review to class on March 27.