

**What goes in a literature review?
How to go about doing one?
Tips & strategies***

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- A literature review for the purposes of a comprehensive exam, research proposal or dissertation/thesis should be based *primarily* in the academic literature. This does not mean that there is not a role for documents of other sorts (e.g., government documents, newspaper & magazine accounts, and first-person accounts). You should be clear in your own mind and in the review about the role of non-academic sources (e.g., does a newspaper article or series contribute specific information? Indicate community concern with/ perspective on a particular issue?). Don't use academic references and these other kinds of references as if they are the same kind of reference.
- What is "academic"? Is it published by a scholarly journal or press? Does its author base her/his arguments in other scholarly literature (vs., for example, first-person experience)? Does it clearly spell out theoretical positions, methods of gathering data?
- In general, your sources should be recent - within the past 15 years or so. Take a look at the dates of the literature you are using. If your sources are not 85% or so from the last 15 years, think about why. The central question here is whether or not you are using contemporary ideas & theories; if you're using older ideas & theories, you should be doing it on purpose & be prepared to explain why.
- Use older references when they are "classic" works or establish a benchmark against which you are comparing things - or for other good reasons!
- If you have lots of "older" references, look at who else is referring to those older works - are you being sure to cite recent critiques and/or developments of those older references?
- Figure out the major authors & arguments in the field. Who cites whom? Can you discern circles of references (e.g., authors A, B & C cite each other but rarely cite authors M, N & O, even though all are ostensibly talking about the same thing)?
- You should be able to describe the relationship between each item that's included in your lit review and every other item. (e.g., Does X argue with or support Y? Does A make a point overlooked by most other authors? Do G & F build on H? Does M make an argument from another field but present an insight that should be considered here?)
- Don't overlook major authors or arguments just because you disagree with them. Be able to explain the difficulties you find in their work.

- In presenting a literature review to readers, be sure to summarize the argument and data (to the extent relevant to the point at hand) of an author before proceeding. This makes it possible for readers to do some important things:
- Understand your point if they haven't read the work cited,
- Figure out if you are coming from a similar or different position on the topic. (For example, if you write "X documents the shocking rates of divorce permitted by decadent modern society," I have a clue about where you stand on the question of divorce & how you're interpreting X).
- Figure out the context and be sure that they think you're using the citation correctly.
- Read the authors whose theories are central to your work. If you want to use Marxist theory, be sure to read *Marx* as well as later theorists who use his theories. (This is really really important.)
- More is not necessarily better. The point of gathering together lists of things to read and of presenting a review of the literature is to find the pieces most important to your thinking & argument, *not* to document everything that might be written on or close to the topic. Although it can be useful to use library search engines, be careful with them as they can quickly give you mountains of information whose relevance to your work is not easy to discern. Ways to build reference lists:
- Who is cited by authors you already find important?
- Who cites the authors you find important (look in Social Sciences Citation Index for this)?
- Look for review articles in the AERA publications *Review of Research in Education* and *Review of Educational Research* and in similar major journals in your field (e.g., *Annual Review of ...*).
- If you find you're not comfortable in the field that's "supposed to be" yours, think about this. Often this is a time when you discover a previously-unarticulated critique of the literature. If you can articulate it, you may be better able to guide your continued lit search and you have a perspective on the literature to contribute.
- Look for the overall frame of the literature you're working with. What is the key metaphor used?
- Who, especially among authors you're "supposed to" want to cite, bores or offends you? Why?

- Overall, what you're trying to do is to
- Articulate overall patterns in the literature, especially the literature closest to your areas of interest. Can you group authors and arguments together? Contrast them?
- Add your own perspective to the literature. What's missing? What "bias" or tendencies to emphasize or underemphasize can you find (do the studies all look at older men & neglect younger men? All look at men & neglect women? Mostly look at urban settings but neglect rural, Etc?)
- What are the strengths of the literature? What tools are there already in the literature (ideas, information, theories, strategies) ready for you to use? How do you need to modify them?
- What do *you* know (as a person like the people you want to study, as a practitioner, as someone different from the authors you've cited....) that makes you wonder, challenge or think about the literature & ways we need to add to or develop our ideas?
- Is there literature that *you* think is relevant that's overlooked by other people in this field? Why do you think it's relevant? What will we gain from adding it?

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- This was written by Allison Tom with input from Shauna Butterwick & Deirdre Kelly. Feel free to distribute but © Allison Tom 2001.
 - These are thoughts I'm assembling & should not be taken as more than thoughts put down as a beginning place. They are at different levels of advice - some things are goals, others are strategies, etc.
 - Also note that these suggestions are specifically intended for thinking about writing a lit review for sociology/anthropology-type research in education.