

How to conduct a review of the literature

The main objective of a literature search is to find out what other researchers have discovered about your research topic. There are numerous resources on the internet on how to write a literature review; one good place to start is the resource provided by the BC library:

<http://bc.edu/libraries/help/howdoi/howto/step/1.html>

This handout should help you in your work on the literature review for your project.

I. Finding the materials.

One good place to start your search is the comprehensive list of Sociology research sources at <http://libguides.bc.edu/cat.php?cid=40>

When locating the materials for your review, you can examine three types of sources.

1. BOOKS. Search for the books using the keyword search function in the Quest library catalog: http://library.bc.edu/F?local_base=BC_CATALOG

In this and other searches, select your keywords carefully, and try a variety of combinations to identify the most appropriate ones. In your search, be systematic. Keep track of where you have looked, what words you used for searching and your results. When you find an article or book that is directly related to your subject, look at list of keywords for that article or book to see what other keywords you should be using to find similar materials.

2. ACADEMIC JOURNAL ARTICLES. You can search for journal articles using the online databases listed under Sociology and Anthropology on <http://databases.bc.edu/V>

I would especially recommend the *Sociological Abstracts* database listed on that page. You could also try using *Google Scholar*: <http://scholar.google.com/>. If using Google Scholar, use it on campus – that will make it much easier for you to open the articles that you find.

3. OTHER SOURCES.

In rare (!) cases, you can also use news articles or internet resources. For news articles, a good source is Lexis Nexis which provides complete texts of newspaper and magazine articles. You can find it by following a link for Current News from <http://databases.bc.edu/V>

If you decide to cite a web page that relates to your topic, you need to evaluate its credibility. These sites are good resources for learning how to evaluate information on the Web:

<http://www.library.cornell.edu/olinuris/ref/research/webeval.html>

<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/Evaluate.html>

I advise that you primarily rely on the first three sources of information, and if you do include a Web site reference in your literature review, you should first confirm that it is a credible site.

II. Reading the materials.

Here are some basic rules to follow when reading the materials.

1. Evaluate each book, article, or website critically. Assess:
 - Provenance—What are the author's credentials? Are the author's arguments supported by evidence (e.g. primary historical material, case studies, narratives, statistics, recent scientific findings)?
 - Objectivity—Is the author's perspective even-handed or prejudicial? Is contrary data considered or is certain pertinent information ignored to prove the author's point?
 - Value—Are the author's arguments and conclusions convincing? Does the work ultimately contribute in any significant way to your understanding of the subject?
2. Take careful notes while you read. If you are quoting some material directly in your notes, make sure you use quotation marks and indicate the page number. This will facilitate your ability to use such quotes in your paper later on.
3. When reading a relevant book or article, ALWAYS look at their bibliographies to see whether there are other relevant materials cited there.
4. When you find books that are relevant for your topic, try to skim them to find the central arguments, and identify what data are used to support them. In many cases, you won't need to read the whole book to do that – but if it appears that the book is central to your topic, you might want to read large parts of it.
5. For an article or book based on author's research, ask the following questions (Adopted from Schutt, Russell K., 2004, Investigating the Social World):
 - What is the basic research question or problem? Try to state it in just one sentence.
 - Is the purpose of the study explanatory, exploratory, or descriptive? Did the study have more than one purpose?
 - What research design was used -- experimental, survey, participant or non-participant observation, intensive interview, content analysis, other? How well was this design suited to the research question posed and the specific hypotheses tested, if any? Why do you suppose the author chose this particular research design?
 - What prior literature was reviewed? Was it relevant to the research problem? To the theoretical framework? Does the literature review appear to be adequate?
 - Was a theoretical framework presented? What was it? Did it seem appropriate for the research question addressed? Can you think of a different theoretical perspective that might have been used?
 - Were any hypotheses stated? What were the independent and dependent variables in the hypotheses? Were those hypotheses justified adequately in terms of the theoretical framework? In terms of prior research?
 - How well did the study live up to the guidelines for science? Do you need additional information in any areas to evaluate the study? To replicate it?
 - Was a sample or the entire population used in the study? Was it a truly random sample (i.e., so called probability sample where elements are drawn randomly from the list of all elements in the population to be studied)? Did the authors think the sample was generally representative of the population from which it was drawn? Do you?

- Was the response rate or participation rate reported? Does it appear likely that those who did not respond or participate were markedly different from those who did participate? Why or why not?
- Summarize the findings. How clearly were statistical and/or qualitative data presented and discussed?
- Did the author adequately represent the findings in the discussion and/or conclusions sections? Were conclusions grounded in the findings? Are any other interpretations possible?
- Compare this study to others addressing the same research question. Did the study yield additional insights? In what ways was the study design more or less adequate than the design of previous research?
- What additional research questions and hypotheses are suggested by the study's results? What light did the study shed on the theoretical framework used?

5. Never cite articles or books solely on the basis of the abstract – in most cases, abstracts will only present some portion of the findings, and also will not allow you to evaluate the quality of the study.

III. Writing the review.

A literature review for your paper should be a story about the literature, not a list describing or summarizing one piece of literature after another. You should organize the literature review into sections that present themes or identify trends. You are **not** trying to list all the material published, but to synthesize and evaluate it according to how it is related to the controversy you are addressing.

Here's the suggested structure for your literature review:

- Introduce the subject of your review.
- Divide the literature under review into categories (e.g. those in support of a particular position, those against, and those offering alternative theses entirely).
- For each category, describe the findings and mention any potential problems with the studies. Make it clear how various articles or books are similar/different.
- Conclude what the combined body of evidence suggests on your issue.

Important: In your review, identify all of your sources. In the text, refer to publications by the name of the author and the year (e.g. Smith 2009). Then, in the end of your paper, list all your references using complete citations -- author, year, title, source (including page numbers for articles). If citing websites, use complete URLs.