

Writing a Literature Review in the Social Sciences

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Writing a literature review is one of the more mysterious parts of writing in the social sciences. This brief guide is designed to help explain the process of writing a literature review—and explain what a literature review is, and what it isn't.

What is a Literature Review?

A literature review is designed to demonstrate your familiarity with past research on the topic you are studying and closely-related topics. It also helps show how your research improves our understanding of the topic you are studying, and thus can indicate the importance of your topic—by showing that other scholars have had an interest in researching the question you are studying, that helps show others that your topic is worthwhile.

A literature review should not be confused with an *annotated bibliography*. Annotated bibliographies are typically organized by presenting a single paragraph per “chunk” of knowledge¹ that is being reviewed in the bibliography, and each paragraph is treated as a single distinct unit from the next. A literature review, on the other hand, is written in a more continuous style, with proper transitions between ideas and paragraphs.

How Should I Organize It?

A literature review is typically either organized *thematically* or *chronologically*. If you are reviewing the literature on a single topic, you will find that current knowledge is a culmination of past knowledge, and thus a chronological approach will tend to make the most sense.

On the other hand, if you are dealing with multiple topics or streams of research, a thematic discussion is probably best. Within each theme, however, you will often find that using a chronological approach makes the most sense.

It may at times make sense to revisit previously-discussed “chunks” when talking about new ones; e.g., one might write the following to introduce a discussion of another work, several paragraphs after first discussing *The American Voter*:

*I appreciate the helpful suggestions received on previous drafts of this document by Chris Chiego (U.C.S.D.). All errors and omissions, alas, remain my own.

¹Each “chunk” is typically an article, a book chapter, a whole book, or a research paper—in other words, a single work by an author or set of authors that presents an argument.

In contrast to Campbell et al.'s (1960) finding of widespread political apathy among citizens, Verba, Nie and Petrocik (1979) argue that voters have become increasingly interested in politics since the 1950s.

As discussed above, the literature review should *flow* with transitions between the discussion of each “chunk” of knowledge that is being reviewed, and there should also be transitions between each distinct topic.

What Should I Include?

A common issue students have is that they cannot find very many “chunks” that do exactly what they are doing in their papers. Overcoming this problem requires a bit of creativity: you should also locate “chunks” that employ similar techniques to analyze related questions.

For example, if you are researching why women are more likely than men to vote for Democrats, you could include articles and books in your literature review that look at other differences in voting, attitudes, and opinions between men and women; you could also include books and articles that look at other reasons why some people prefer the Democrats to the Republicans (and vice versa). Similarly, you are unlikely to find much existing research on why students drop out of school in Laredo, but if you broaden your search you'll find ample research on factors that lead to dropping out of school in other settings.

Finding Good Sources

Many social science journals publish issues focused on a particular theme on a semi-regular basis; these issues of the journal will have multiple articles on related topics, often with contributions from the leading experts on those topics.

In addition, many books in the social sciences are known as “edited volumes” (you can usually identify these because they will be listed in the library database, or in the book, as having “editors” rather than authors). These are similar to theme issues of journals, but typically are larger and have more chapters. Textbooks called “readers” can often be used as well, although you will usually find that the chapters in the reader have been abridged (edited) to cut content; you may want to find the original source (usually listed at the beginning) instead.

Google has a separate index of scholarly sources, called *Google Scholar*, at <http://scholar.google.com/>, including full-text indexing of most recent social science journals of note, as well as direct links to the articles in JSTOR and other databases that TAMIU subscribes to.

In political science, you may also find the *Annual Review of Political Science* to be a great help in locating good sources; the same publisher also produces annual reviews in anthropology, economics, law and social science, and sociology, that may be helpful for papers touching on those subjects.

Note: When citing chapters from an edited volume or articles from theme issue of a journal, make sure you cite the authors of the chapters/articles, not the editors of the book or journal, and make sure each article or chapter you cite is listed separately in your list of works cited.

Where Can I Find Examples of a Literature Review?

The short answer to this question is that virtually all good research includes a literature review as part of the book or article. It may not necessarily be labeled as a “literature review,” but by convention the literature review is usually at the beginning of the piece, immediately after any introduction. In a book or dissertation, the literature review may be an entire chapter (or more!); in an edited volume, you’ll typically find a literature review in each chapter.

Books on writing in the social sciences, such as *The Political Science Student Writer’s Manual* (Scott and Garrison 2008), will often include a sample literature review as well.

Works Cited

- Campbell, Angus, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes. 1960. *The American Voter*. New York: Wiley.
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- Scott, Gregory M. and Steve M. Garrison. 2008. *The Political Science Writer’s Manual*, 6th edition. New York: Longman.

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