

Policy Research: The Art of Creating Convincing Evidence

Literature Reviews

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What is a Literature Review?

In some ways, a literature review is something straight-forward - a review of the literature on the topic we are researching.

However, literature reviews serve a few specific purposes:

- 1 Teach the reader about the topic and context of your research.
- 2 Summarize what we do *and don't* know about a topic.
- 3 Assess and synthesize the evidence we have about a given topic or policy

Putting together a good literature review involves balancing providing enough information to be comprehensive and unbiased while fitting the information into a give set of space constraints. One thing you'll learn is on any given topic there is a lot work that has been done either directly or on related issues!

Teach the Reader

Generally, in policy research, you want to teach readers three things:

- 1 What is the policy change being examined?
 - 1 What problem is the policy trying to solve?
 - 2 When was it passed?
 - 3 What does the policy change do, specifically?
 - 4 What was the target population of the policy?
 - 5 Who passed it?
- 2 What is the theory driving the policy?
 - 1 What are the theoretical or rhetorical arguments for why the policy is necessary?
 - 2 What do we know from related policies/problems about what should happen and why?
 - 3 Are there any potential spillovers from the policy change?
- 3 What do we know about the policy and the problem it is trying to solve?

Summarizing Knowledge

A few things to keep in mind about summarizing knowledge:

- Be clear about the boundaries of your study: the policy (and **closely** related policies), the outcome, and the problem
- Decide on a narrative order - in this class, typically either temporal or why/what
- Keep in mind the purpose is to summarize and not report
- Use your own words in place of quotes
- Provide details about the most closely related papers to what you are doing
- Highlight gaps in our knowledge
 - Hint: A good starting point for finding gaps is reading the conclusions sections of the 3-4 most recent and closely-related studies
 - Kinds of gaps: i) design limitations ii) data context iii) conceptual limitations iv) target population

Assess and Synthesize

Ending each section of your literature review, include a paragraph or two that assesses and synthesizes key points of the section.

Often, this involves making note of everything we know, the evidence on which that knowledge is based, and the limitations of that evidence.

Authors are sometimes straightforward in noting the limitations in their studies; however, sometimes you need to think critically about the case they made and evidence they presented.

A rich body of work documenting an association answers the question of whether two important variables are associated, but you must consider the nature and causality of that association.

You must also connect this work and knowledge back to your fundamental research question: “Having established that outcome Y matters for these reasons, does policy X change outcome Y?”

Example

Paper

Types of Literature Reviews

There are, of course, a wide variety of literature reviews. However, there are four main types to focus on here:

- 1 Generic Literature Review
- 2 Critical Literature Review
- 3 Systematic Literature Review
- 4 Meta-analysis

Generic Literature Review

- Nearly every paper in the social sciences conducts a literature review
- The purpose of a standard literature review is what we have focused on thus far: to contextualize an individual study
 - What do we know about the policy
 - What do we know about the theory
 - What do we know about the outcome
- The generic literature reviews of the most recent studies on a topic are a treasure trove of information for assessing what's out there and building starting point reading list

Critical Literature Review

- Most disciplines will have a mainline set of theories and a set of scholars critical of those theories
- A critical literature review will assess the arguments in a theory and the state of the evidence and draw on them to form a critical thesis about the theory, evidence, or both
- Often critical assessments will have an explicit normative position or lens through which they view the literature
- Some critical literature reviews use the criticism to posit a modification of the mainline theory
- In the context of this class, this can serve two ends:
 - Provide a clear summary of the literature and some potential gaps
 - Inspire an additional hypothesis to test in your study (if possible)
- Example

Systematic Literature Review

- Some bodies of work have built a vast array of empirical studies
- Systematic literature reviews are descriptive and summative: they attempt to categorize and summarize the state of evidence in a large body of work
- They include a clear protocol for identifying studies, parameters that will define which studies are included and why, and a protocol for categorizing the studies
- These can be very helpful starting points for some literatures with a lot of research because it can collect a large set of works for you to read and assess in one place
- Example

Meta-Analysis

- A meta-analysis is similar to a systematic literature review in that they follow a strict inclusion protocol, BUT
- Meta-analyses differ in that they use statistical techniques to pool the evidence from the existing studies and estimate a “meta” effect
- These can be useful for finding well-established relationships in the literature or on points related to your study
- Example

Basics of Doing A Lit Review

- 1 The search for research.
- 2 Reading research
- 3 Organizing research

The Search

- 1 Google Scholar
 - Use 4-5 combinations of key words/search terms
 - Identify one or two highly cited articles on the topic and one or two recent articles and read the introduction to see how the topic is discussed
 - Once you have your search parameters, so an “Any time” search and a search in the last five years
- 2 Journal specific searches
 - Go to journal websites and use the same search parameters to identify articles
 - Repeat the search both unfiltered and in the last 5 years

Journals By Discipline

- 1 Economics
 - American Economic Review
 - AEJ: Applied
 - Journal of Human Resources
 - Journal of Public Economics
 - Economics of Education Review
- 2 Public Administration and Policy
 - Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory
 - Journal of Policy Analysis and Management
 - Public Administration Review
 - Public Management Review

Journals by Discipline (Cont.)

- 1 Sociology
 - American Sociological Review
 - Annual Review of Sociology
 - Journal of Organizational Behavior
 - Journal of Personality and Social Psychology
- 2 Political Science
 - American Political Science Review
 - Journal of Politics
 - Political Behavior
 - American Journal of Political Science

Think Tanks

- Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
- Urban Institute
- Brookings Institute
- RAND Corp
- PEW Trust
- American Enterprise Institute
- Niskanen Center
- Mercatus Center

Reading Research Quickly

Collecting research is a multistage process:

- 1 Read the abstract and decide how directly relevant it is to your project
 - Be expansive in this stage to consider a wide swath of work!
- 2 Use the ACID method to get a summary of the most important take-aways
 - ACID - Abstract, Conclusions, Introduction, Discussion; not necessarily in that order, but focus on those components.
 - Highlight key components in each: thesis/research question, outcomes examined, main findings, data used, method used.
- 3 File the work into your project folder, when relevant, as you go

Organizing Research for Writing

- Using the notes/highlights that you took, populate a spreadsheet to help organize your thoughts
- Spreadsheet should have 5 columns:
 - ① Authors last names
 - ② Year
 - ③ Data used in the article (national or from specific areas/pops) and outcomes examined
 - ④ Main findings
 - ⑤ Notes to yourself on point you plan to make with the article