Writing a Literature Review

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How do we build knowledge?

Lots of ways! The most common would likely be the ad hoc and idiosyncratic methods developed by individual researchers that often focus on influential articles they have read, conference presentations they have attended, or what they were exposed to in graduate school. The second would be review articles that analyze of a few influential books or articles that can appear in the *Annual Review of Political Science*, *Oxford Handbooks*, or political science journals. The third and fourth would be quantitative approaches either through sensitivity analysis (Leamer 1985; Sala-i-Martin 1997) or meta-analyses (Smets and van Ham 2013). The fifth would be systematic reviews, which involve researchers use a transparent, replicable means of searching research databases (e.g., Scopus or Web of Science) using specific keywords and reading the articles the databases return (Dacombe 2018).

What these different ways of knowledge formation share is a process of finding and reading existing research that precedes efforts to contribute to this body of research. Hopefully, it is clear that conducting research and writing a good political science paper (like any written work) is as much art as science.

By this stage of your studies you have probably read hundreds of authors from a number of academic fields writing about a wide variety of topics. All of these authors wrote with a particular audience in mind and were trying to tell this audience something they felt was important. In doing so, they built on a foundation of existing research on the same or related topics. It is also likely that you have recently written research papers that involved conducting research, formulating an argument, examining evidence, and reaching conclusions. Like published scholars you also likely started the research process by reading existing research.

With the ease and availability of online research databases, we can all feel paralyzed sometimes by the sheer volume of research on almost *any* topic under the sun.[1] Understanding the extent and conclusions of the relevant and significant research can be a difficult and idiosyncratic process. In this brief guide I highlight several ways scholars build knowledge and how you can build on their techniques to write your own literature review for this class.

Elements of a literature review

Most papers consist of the following six sections: introduction, literature review, argument, evidence, conclusion, and bibliography. Some papers (indeed entire journals) are entirely dedicated to reviewing a particular literature. In several research areas I follow, there have been several very influential articles that review the state of a particular literature. For instance, Blattman and Miguel (2010) and Kalyvas (2007) on civil conflict and Koubi (2019) on climate change and conflict.

[1] For example, see Alonso et al. (2017) on shouting and swearing while driving and Liang et al. (2018) on the effectiveness of voodoo dolls as a means of retaliating against abusive bosses. Both articles were winners of the 2018 Ig Nobel Prize (https://www.improbable.com/ig/winners/).

In normal research papers, the literature review is the foundation upon which you build your argument. Rarely does a writer come up with an idea (like Athena from Zeus' head) completely divorced from the writer's experience. Rather, we stand on the shoulders of other researchers. Regardless of the research topic, you want to build your theoretical argument on a strong foundation. This is not to say that you should include every article, book, or press clipping that you could possibly think of. Rather it consists of the literature (often building on class readings) relevant to your subject area. For example, if you were writing on the causes of the 1998-2002 Congolese civil war, you might start with the literature on post-colonial Zaire, the spillover effects of the Rwandan genocide, or other topics relevant to your particular paper—whether they be natural resources, state failure, or the regional spread of conflict.

In general, six steps are involved in writing a literature review. I mention them here and then discuss each in more detail.

1. Find a starting point—a main topic of interest and a few central authors for this topic.
2. Read sources at your starting point and take notes summarizing your reading.
3. Find who these sources cite and who cites them, read them and take notes.
4. Look at your notes and think back on your reading. What big themes keep repeating themselves?
5. Chose three or four themes you find most compelling.
6. Create a paper outline focused on those themes.

This is clearly a time-intensive process, and you can paradoxically get stuck there as you feel like you have not done enough research to start writing. The key is to write and research at the same time.

1. Find a starting point—a main topic of interest and a few central authors for this topic.

Figure out what you want to research. The third-year classes I teach involve a variety of interrelated literatures and topics. What literature (that has at least some connection to the political actors, processes, or outcomes we cover in this class) interests you? Course guides provide a handy list of potential topics and readings. For every week of the semester I provide (1) a list of assigned readings and (2) a list of additional readings. Both lists are possible starting points for your literature review and include reputable and influential research. There must be some reason why I thought these readings are worth including!

2. Read sources at your starting point and take notes summarizing your reading.

It is important to follow a consistent system of reading and notetaking. This is especially important for keeping track of bibliographic entries and verbatim quotes. Any words copied and pasted from a source should have quotes around them in your notes. I cannot tell you how many times I have had to speak to students about blocks of text in their papers that are not attributed correctly. Most say they did not realize were taken word for word; however, the ANU takes plagiarism very seriously and so do I; being careless is not an excuse for using others' words without proper attribution. The time you may think you are saving by a quick copy and paste is not worth the risk of incorrect attribution.

There are several things to look for when reading your starting sources.

- Is a publishing outlet, author, or argument credible as a source? Do your due diligence and let me know if you are unsure about a particular source. All sources listed in the course guide I would consider credible.

- What are the important concepts and jargon that keep reoccurring or that you had not come across before?

- What causal mechanisms (explanations for a particular outcome) keep reoccurring? For example, economic capacity as an explanation for civil conflict. Are the disagreements in

the literature about relative importance of a consistent list of factors (e.g. greed or grievance) or are people adding new factors?

- What are the main findings? How important (substantively) are they to explain a particular outcome?

- Can you group different approaches in a table? Tables are often intuitive ways of quickly glancing at causal factors.

3. Find who these sources cite and who cites them, read them, and take notes.

Published research on a particular topic often evolves into something like a social network. While most published research is not widely read or cited, there are some works that help shape fields and are the nodes from which future research radiates out from. By looking at a finished work's bibliography you can find additional sources that had an influence on a work or may be relevant to your topic. Then looking at Web of Science or Google Scholar you can see who cited a particular work. While most articles in political science have less than twenty citations, influential works can have hundreds or thousands. Google Scholar is a common research tool in political science to find the most influential works that cited works you care about. Most academics also have Google Scholar profiles (me included), which is useful in finding other works by an author doing relevant research.

4. Look at your notes and think back on your reading (as it progresses). What big themes keep repeating themselves?

Over the course of this class you will see political, economic, and social issues that keep cropping up. These and other themes will likely appear in the literature you are reading. While there may be a multitude of relevant factors, the key is to both keep track of these themes as you come across them, and then narrow your focus to those that you find the most compelling. A list of relevant factors explaining an outcome can quickly get overwhelming. For instance, for a paper I wrote recently (Frank & Martinéz i Coma 2023), my coauthor and I read forty articles explaining national-level voter turnout. In these articles, there were over 130 factors the authors argued shaped voter turnout. In the end though, after running over fifteen million regressions, we found only eleven factors robust predictors of voter turnout.

For your literature review (and your own sanity), creating a Word table or Excel spreadsheet of the readings and their causal mechanisms may help you keep track of things.

5. Chose three or four themes you find most compelling.

Certain literatures may focus on only one or two themes (e.g., economic development or democracy), which may be enough for you to really dive into a topic. Others (e.g., Blattman and Miguel 2010) find many more. For the purposes of this class, I would suggest covering in depth no more than three or four themes. These can include the most important factors for your topic and/or ones you think are the most interesting, compelling, or the most overlooked. This gives you 300-400 words on each theme as well as space to discuss their relative importance or interrelatedness. You can also think about topics not just as a characteristic or actor shaping an outcome but the research questions that surround these topics or themes.

This also connects to the next step (and assignment) of looking for any gaps in the literature. For instance, I am currently working on a meta-analysis of election violence. After reading 205 articles (and dismissing over 5,000 as outside the scope of our study), I found two clear gaps—an appreciation of the both systematic and idiosyncratic parts of a particular election cycle and an overly broad (often implicit) definition of the outcome under study.

6. Create a paper outline focused on those themes.

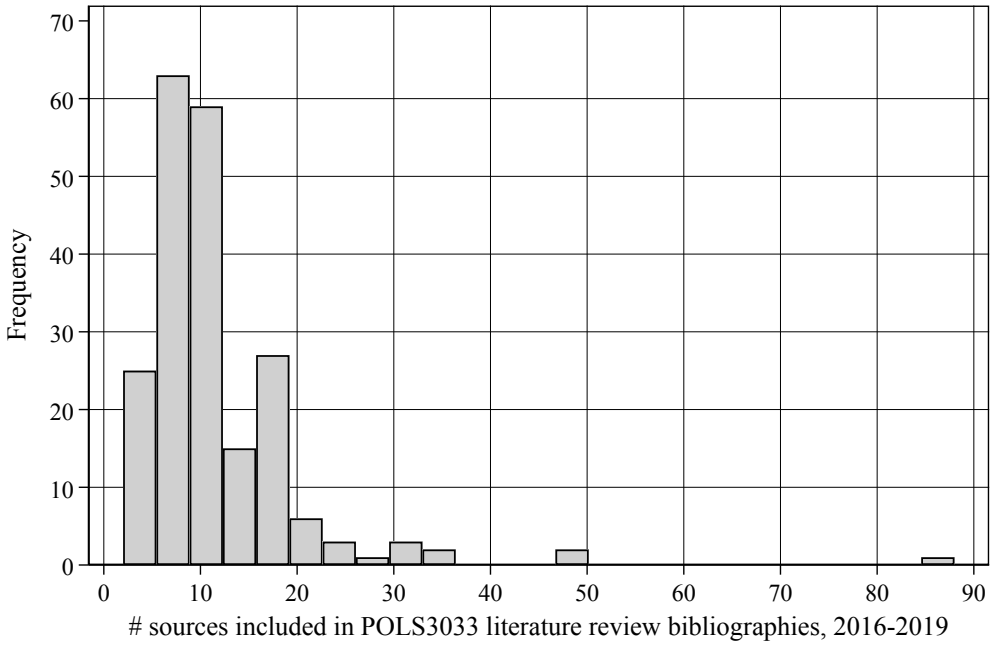
Creating an outline before you start writing allows you to think and write clearly with an explicit goal in mind and a clear story to tell the reader. While it may be tempting to just summarize particular works, resist this temptation. Having a series of paragraphs each summarizing a particular work is both tedious to write and tedious to read. One of the hardest but most important skills to develop while at the ANU is thinking and writing critically. To step beyond summary to synthesis. This takes thinking, analysis and writing beyond summary and is at the heart of what we do as researchers and is one of the most important contributions we can make.

How many articles do I need to discuss?

This is the question I get asked the most about this process. There is no one answer.[2] The important thing is to be detailed, systematic, and thorough in your reading and writing. For some topics there are a few essential works that you can build your themes around, for other topics it may take a bit more. Think thematically and the sources will come naturally.

For those of you interested in hard numbers, see Figure 1 below. Note that I did not include the grades that these literature reviews received. The relationship between number of sources and grades is traditionally not strong in the classes I teach. For example, the correlation between the number of sources and grades for 2019's POLS3033 literature reviews was 0.14. As I suggested above, there is no one answer for all projects, so be detailed, systematic, and thorough in your reading and writing and the rest will flow from that.

Figure 1. Distribution of number of sources included in 213 POLS3033 literature reviews



[2] Unless you are Douglas Adams. Then the answer is clearly forty-two.

Literature review structure

Hopefully by now you will have noticed similarities across the readings in the way that writers structure their work. A focus on a clear and logical structure is essential to getting your point across. For this task, I would suggest something approximating the following:

Introduction—Why you are writing a review on this topic and why it is important? What is the scope of your review and what topics are discussed? What were your selection criteria for your sources? Outline the rest of your paper including your main thesis statement and any gaps you found. By the end of the introduction the reader should have a clear idea of what is to follow. This is not a mystery novel, so surprises are not the goal.

Thematic sections—Each section should have a particular theme and one or a few main points. Feel free to use headings for these sections. What are the main questions asked about these themes? What are the literature's main conclusions? Do you find these conclusions plausible? Why or why not?

Gaps—Here is where you get to hint at the areas or conclusions that you find the most problematic or overlooked. It is also where you might start narrowing your thought process to what you might want to focus on in your research proposal. This is not an easy process and requires really reading and understanding the literature you cover above. Indeed, it is at the heart of what we do as researchers and is one (if not the) essential contribution to the accumulation of knowledge. Luckily some authors are clear in their contributions the limitations of their own work or areas for future research. These nuggets at the end of published work can help you understand where it might be useful to mine topics and approaches for your research paper. Do not overthink the gap, however. The important part is to try and use critical thinking to come to your own conclusions about the strengths and weaknesses of the published research you have read.

Conclusion—The main conclusions and debates in the literature that you cover in the section above. You should reiterate the themes and gaps you discussed above.

Bibliography—All the works you cited in your essay and only the works cited in your essay. You will likely have read or skimmed more than this list. What is crucial is not showing the reader how many sources you collected but what sources you used and where the reader can find them. See below for additional discussion of the bibliography.

Rubric

The rubric for all assessments in this class is available on Wattle. The core elements are discussed in more detail below.

Topic (40%): *The literature review identifies a relevant and suitable topic and clearly demonstrates why it constitutes an important concern in the areas covered in this class. The literature review is further able to state with clarity the specific research questions the literature addresses, which is appropriately linked to the motivating topic.*

The mark for this part of the rubric is not determined by whether or not I like the topic but by whether you can describe why the topic is important and relevant to this class and the depth of thought and creativity and clarity of description and argumentation.

Essay plan (40%): *The literature review critically engages both with the relevant course material, and with the student's own independent research, to identify and discuss the explanations put forth by the relevant literature for the outcome under examination.*

This part of the rubric is an assessment of the paper's engagement with the relevant literature and the execution of the main parts of the essay.

Structure and presentation (20%): *The literature has clear sentences, is well-structured, and paragraphs are clearly organised. The research is appropriate, sufficient and properly attributed through references, and footnotes, references, and bibliography are properly set out. The document has clearly been proof-read and drafted and contains no/few grammatical errors.*

This part of the rubric captures the quality of the structure and presentation of the literature review. To what extent is the paper clearly written, organized, and repeatedly edited.

Word Count

The university allows for a 10% buffer (in both directions) of words for the word count before penalties may apply. I do not count bibliographies towards word counts. Fight the natural urge to focus obsessively on the word count. Rather think about first outlining your paper then fleshing out your paper's sections as suggested above. If you have an interesting subject and a good argument the length will take care of itself.

Sources

The *Annual Review of Political Science* (https://www.annualreviews.org/loi/polisci) publishes one issue a year filled with reviews of a wide variety of political science topics. The 2023 edition for example includes articles on political economy, bureaucratic politics, supply chain governance, and gender and international relations.

The bibliography is where you cite *each and every* resource you actually mention in the text. Do not mention sources you might have read while doing research for your paper but that did not find their way into the final draft. Unlike rest of the paper the bibliography can be single spaced as I am less likely to want to leave comments on the sources and its pages do not go towards the minimum page length. Most importantly, use a consistent format for your bibliography. Most political scientists use the *Chicago Manual of Style*[3] although the Modern Language Association's (MLA) Handbook is both acceptable.

In addition, be sure to *never* paste a hyperlink into a footnote or your bibliography without full citation information preceding it. A hyperlink suggests very little about the internet source you used. Recent style manuals provide clear outlines for how to cite web sources.

Formatting

Your paper should have a regular set of margins on all sides. Double-space all text. This allows sufficient room to make comments on your work. Using other margins or font sizes looks like you are trying to pad your paper—or (less likely) are trying to fit a longwinded paper under the maximum page limit. Further, please use Times New Roman or Calibri in twelve-point font. Other fonts might be the default in your word processing software or ones you prefer, but nonstandard fonts are distracting to read and can make it harder to focus on your argument. In addition, be sure to delete the extra space in between paragraphs that is now standard in Microsoft Word. A cover page is not necessary. Taking up half of your first page for the title and your name looks like a blatant effort to take up space.

It is okay (indeed often preferable) to have section headings breaking up your paper. Section headings make it easier for the reader to understand the paper's structure as well as flip back and forth between sections.

[3] They have an online quick citation guide that describes their citation style for most sources you are likely to use.

Common Errors

- *Using the passive tense*—This is one of the easiest traps to fall into. A first draft is bound to be filled with the passive tense. This is why leaving time for a revision is crucial.

- *Over-quoting*—Fight the urge to pad your paper with quotes from other writers. It is natural to think that others have made your point for you, so you can just quote their work. However, a research paper is the venue for you to make your argument. Relying on excessive quotations is a lazy way to fill pages.

- *Not planning ahead*—It is virtually impossible to write a thorough and complete paper at the last minute (trust me, I have tried). It always helps to make a plan for your semester and break your research and writing into manageable chunks.

- *Insufficient word count*—It is always important to follow instructions. The word count mentioned in the course guide refers to the number of words *of text* and does not include any cover page, footnotes, or bibliography.

- *Using conjunctions*—A research paper is not an appropriate venue for conjunctions like "isn't," "didn't," "wasn't," etc. Please spell the words out: "is not," "did not," "was not," etc.

- *Not including page numbers*—One of the ways readers often provide feedback is by referring to particular parts of your paper (e.g. "On page 6, paragraph 2 you confuse Georg Welhelm Friedrich Hegel with Katherine Marie Heigel"). Without page numbers, it becomes much harder to tie feedback to blocks of text.

- *Not formatting the bibliography*—Always alphabetize your bibliographies by the first letter of the first author's last name. The bibliography should also start on a new page and have a consistent style. A lack of attention to detail in a bibliography often indicates a lack of attention paid to the rest of the paper. Never paste a hyperlink into a footnote or your bibliography without full citation information preceding it. DOIs and hyperlinks are not necessary for peer-reviewed journal articles or books.

Writing tips

The following tips are suggestions that I have found to be useful in writing a paper—whether a five-page book review or a 300-page book manuscript. Hopefully, they will make your semester a bit smoother. They are far from revolutionary, but I have found it helpful to refer repeatedly to this list.

- *Read the assignment*—It might seem obvious, but the assignment description contains important information about the instructor's expectations.

- *Give yourself enough time*—Procrastination is a human impulse, but in the long run it will stress you out and make your job more difficult.

- *Start with an outline*—Beginning the writing process by constructing an outline is a good way to get the writing process started. It also helps decrease stress by enabling you to easily fill up several pages. It also helps you avoid staring at an empty Word document—unable or unwilling to begin the writing process. Just having a document started and saved on your computer can make it easier to start plugging ideas or facts into the outline as your research progresses. Before you know it you are on your way towards a complete first draft.

- *Proofread*!—The first draft of any work is but the beginning of a well-written paper. It takes time to revise your thoughts and words both for meaning as well as for clarity.

- *Have others read your paper*—Nothing beats a fresh set of eyes to help find errors in spelling or of logic. Be sure to reciprocate!

- *Read your writing aloud*—Often hearing your words aloud you to spot tortuous grammar or highlight more direct and clear ways of making your argument.

- *Use the present tense whenever possible*—Active verbs written in the present tense are much easier to read and comprehend. For example, write "Frank (2019) argues that..." rather than "It is clear from his article that Frank (2019) believed that…"

Learning how to write a good literature review or research paper will help you in many ways long after your time at ANU has ended. When applying to honours or graduate school having a writing sample can come in handy both in demonstrating writing proficiency and highlighting your skills as a researcher and writer.

Useful Resources

These books, articles, and websites were useful in putting together this guide and provide much more detailed analysis and suggestions.

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