

Writing a Literature Review

A Handout from the EcoTeach Center, Duke University

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Literature reviews are staples of scholarly economics articles. They tell your readers what research has already been done on your topic and, more important, what research has *not* been done. A literature review may be as short as a single sentence or as long as several pages (in which case it is usually presented in a section of its own headed “Literature Review” or something similar). In many journal articles, the literature review appears as part of the introduction.

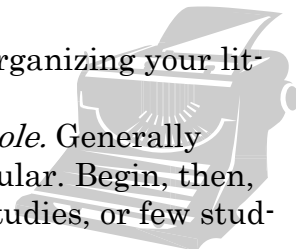
A literature review should do at least four things, the first three of which are related.

- First, it should *analyze critically a body of research*. To analyze critically does not mean to point out what is wrong or flawed about other studies or to simply report what other studies say or do. Rather, it means to identify and perhaps briefly discuss the strengths and weaknesses of previous studies as they relate to your own project. This last is important: the details in your review should be selected to put in the clearest light possible the contribution or value of your own study.
- Second, the literature review should *put your own study in the context of others*. Is yours one more in a long line of studies about a given topic? Or is it one of the few? Have most other studies been theoretical, while yours is the one of the few empirical analyses? Is yours the first study of the topic to appear in some time? Is it the first to ask a certain question?
- Third, your review should *highlight your study’s contribution*. Do you use a richer data set heretofore unavailable to researchers? Do you use an estimation technique that others have not? Do you answer a question that has not been addressed before? Do you examine a population or time period or geographic region that has not been examined before? There are any number of ways your paper may make a contribution.
- Fourth, the literature review *establishes your scholarly credentials* by showing you have done your homework. It is also the field’s way of giving credit where credit is due.

You will find it helpful to read the literature reviews in published economics papers. Pay attention to the kinds of information given in reviews and to any principles of organization the author uses. How does the author construct the review to emphasize his or her contribution?

Here are some guidelines to consider when writing and organizing your literature review.

Begin with comments about the body of research as a whole. Generally speaking, a review should progress from the broad to the particular. Begin, then, by assessing the literature as a whole. Have there been many studies, or few stud-



ies? Do the studies focus on methodological issues, or data issues, or some other issue? Have the studies been mostly empirical, or theoretical, or both? Have they focused on a similar set of questions? Do they mostly date from a certain period? (Perhaps a topic was popular in, say, the 1970s but has been ignored since then.) Do the studies fall naturally into certain large categories (so-called strands of research)?

Organize your review according to a theme (data, methodology, results, etc). More precisely, have *some* principle of organization, whatever it might be; do not discuss studies in a random or arbitrary order. Your principle of organization should make sense for your particular research project. You may, for instance, find it best to discuss a set of studies from the point of view of the data sets, or the methodologies, or the explanatory variables, they use. Or perhaps reviewing the studies in chronological order makes sense. The point is that it depends on your study's contribution. If your study differs from others in that it, say, studies a unique population, you will likely want to discuss other studies in terms of the population they analyze.

Begin paragraphs with a sentence that puts in explicit context what follows. Don't leave it to your reader to infer the point you are making. In the example that follows, the first sentence states the main point the paragraph is making: "*The sources of data used in the studies vary greatly. Smith (1999) uses data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation. As he explains, the SIPP is well-suited to explore the relationship between hourly wages and participation in the Food Stamp Program. Jones (2000) uses data from the High School and Beyond Survey. . . .*"

Explain the merits, and the shortcomings, of the existing studies. Be explicit about this. Do not leave it to your readers to infer this information. "*Although Rodriguez (2001) and Dudley (2000) ask the right questions, their studies are hampered by data sets with an insufficient number of observations.*"

Explain how your study will make a contribution. You may have already done this in your introduction, but it never hurts to remind readers. The second sentence of the following passage does that precisely: "*Although Rodriguez (2001) and Dudley (2000) ask the right questions, their studies are hampered by data sets with an insufficient number of observations. The present study hopes to avoid the flaw in Rodriguez's and Dudley's analyses by using a new data set with over 1,600 observations.*"

Important: Please note that it is not necessary or desirable to discuss every study in detail. Focus on those elements that most relate to your own study.

For more on writing literature reviews, please schedule an appointment with the EcoTeach writing tutor (www.econ.duke.edu).