Identifying Materials for a Literature Review

A Handout from the EcoTeach Center, Duke University

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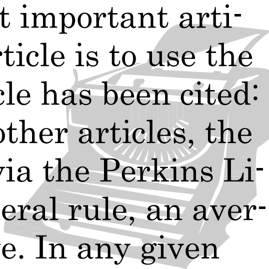
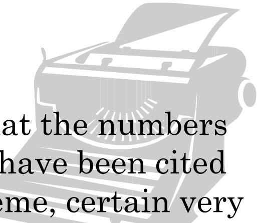
Your literature review should discuss articles in the professional economics literature, that is, articles published in scholarly economics journals, written almost always by economists on university faculties (as opposed to, say, staff economists working for a corporation or the government). Generally speaking, articles in popular news magazines, newspapers, and the like are *not* considered part of the professional literature, nor, usually, are articles in other fields (psychology, sociology, political science, et al.).

You will be best positioned to identify and select materials for your review once you have narrowed your topic. Once you have done that, you may find the following step-by-step process helpful.

- Begin by reading entries on your topic in economics encyclopedias. The entries will give you an overview of your topic, including an indication of the important papers and books, as well as the leading authorities, on it. Some encyclopedias you may wish to consult are the *New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics* and the *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*. (Incidentally, you will also find these helpful in identifying and narrowing a topic.)
- Search the contents of two journals that normally contain surveys of topics in the economics literature, the *Journal of Economic Literature* and the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*. If you find a survey article on your topic, pay attention to the articles and researchers who are mentioned. Notice who wrote the survey article; that person is likely to be a leading scholar in the field. Are several of the articles in the survey written by the same person? That person is likely to be a leading scholar as well.
- Last but not least, search *EconLit*. *EconLit* is a database that is devoted to economics only. It indexes all of the major scholarly journals in economics, as well as working papers and book reviews. Unlike some other databases—JSTOR, for instance—*EconLit* always includes the very latest articles and books. *EconLit* is *not* a full-text database; it provides instead only bibliographical information. But you can use that information to find or retrieve the article itself. When you search *EconLit*, look especially for literature reviews or survey articles—full-length articles that summarize and assess the literature on a particular topic.

Your review, ideally, should contain references to the most important articles on your topic. One way to determine the importance of an article is to use the Web of Science database to look up the number of times the article has been cited: generally speaking, the more times an article has been cited by other articles, the more important it is. The Web of Science database is accessible via the Perkins Library Web site. So, how many citations are impressive? As a general rule, an average of eight or more citations a year can be considered impressive. In any given





year, twelve or more citations is a goodly number. Keep in mind that the numbers are relative. For your particular topic, the most-cited articles may have been cited "only" twenty times over, say, a five-year period. At the other extreme, certain very famous articles may have been cited literally hundreds of times over the past decade or more.

If your search yields a large number of results (say, twenty or more), you will need to select a manageable subset of articles to review. Begin by browsing the reference lists and skimming the literature reviews in the articles you have found. Are there any articles that are cited repeatedly? Those are likely to be among the most important in the field.

Keep in mind that you may not always find articles that deal exactly with your topic. If your topic is income mobility among teenage single mothers in the 1990s, you may find that there are studies of that topic in the 1980s (or earlier), but not in the 1990s. Or you may find that there have been studies of the income mobility of single mothers, but not necessarily of *teenage* single mothers. That's OK. Use whatever studies are most relevant, even if they do not deal with your precise subject. When you write your literature review, simply remember to point that out ("As far as I can determine, there are no studies that look at income mobility in the 1990s, but there are several that examine it in the 1980s, and I will discuss those studies now . . .").

A final note. Many inexperienced scholars first formulate a research question, then hunt for articles that are related to that question. But seasoned scholars are apt to do just the opposite: they are first familiar with a body of literature, and the questions they pursue arise out of that literature. Once you have a topic, broadly defined—school vouchers, or income taxes, or currency crises—spend a few days browsing the literature, getting familiar with the kinds of studies and the issues that are investigated. Let a growing knowledge of the literature inform your research agenda.

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