

Literature Review Notes, Tips, and Tricks

By [Dan Hirschman](#)

v1.0, October 12, 2010

Four Kinds of Articles

Articles (and books) come in many different shapes, sizes, lengths, quality, credibility, prestige, and so on. Different articles will be useful for your literature review in different ways. Roughly speaking, there are four kinds of articles that will be helpful for a literature review. You don't need all four types, especially in a shorter literature review, but thinking about the different kinds of articles may be helpful in assessing whether or not an article "fits" into your story and, if it does, how. Note, these four kinds of articles do not exhaust the sorts of citations we use. For example, authors will frequently cite official statistics (from the *Bureau of Labor Statistics* for unemployment, say), or other sources of facts (history texts, textbooks, etc.). The kinds of articles discussed here are all articles "similar" to the one you are writing – a research article trying to make an argument.

1. Review Articles – Perhaps the most useful article for assembling a literature review is.. someone else's literature review! If you are interested in, for example, music, then you might start with a 2010 article in the [Annual Review of Sociology](#) entitled "What's Sociological about Music?" Look around the Annual Review, as it's the best source for review pieces by far. Even a literature review from 10 or 15 years ago can be useful, as it will tell you what people were interested in back then, and can help you trace how debates have emerged. Also, you can track who has cited an annual review piece by looking it up on Google Scholar or another database (see resources below). Almost any article about the sociology of music written in the next 10 years will probably cite the review piece above somewhere. The most highly cited pieces that cite a given annual review piece rate to be the most important articles on the topic. You can also check out other disciplines' Annual Reviews (and similar journals) if your topic is somewhat multi-disciplinary.

If you are unfortunate, and you can't find an annual review article (or similar work) on your topic, you may still find a comprehensive literature in the beginning of another article on a related topic. Sometimes, we cite articles for their review of the literature, not their substantive findings, and that's just fine.

We cite literature reviews for almost any purpose, but specifically, we cite them to make claims about the state of scholarship as a whole like "Most scholars in this field argue ..." or "The big debate in this field is X vs. Y..." and so on.

2. Citation Classics – Citation classics are usually the best, high profile, most awesome, agenda-setting articles about your topic. Often, they are only loosely connected to your specific empirical project. You may be interested in why some people don't like using Facebook, but the seminal articles on online social networks are mostly talking about the emergence of Instant Messenger and Friendster and were written before Facebook even existed. No problem! As we'll

discuss below, your literatures are often much broader than your case. The citation classics are places to look for overarching frameworks for how to think about many different related questions. Authors that share the same citation classics can quickly understand each other's work because they are oriented around the same questions and using some of the same ideas.

We cite citation classics to frame our particular empirical story within a much bigger theoretical debate. We also cite them to position ourselves within a field as someone who knows what the big debates are, and often to take a side on controversial issues. For your literature reviews and papers, you may want to find one or two citation classics and adopt some of their theoretical language. In other words, you may want to work “within a tradition” established by some article or combination of articles.

3. Research Frontier – The research frontier consists of the most recently published work on your topic or things very close to it. Often, the research frontier is not as well established and it can be hard to judge the credibility or usefulness of articles on the frontier (see the section on credibility below). The most important part of the research frontier is published in the top journals. For sociology, the top “general” journals include:

American Journal of Sociology
American Sociological Review
Social Problems
Social Forces

Then, various subfields have specialty journals that are also quite prestigious. For example, *Demography*, *International Migration Review*, *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *Gender and Society*, *Theory and Society*, *Sociological Theory*, *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, *Social Science and Medicine*, and so on are high profile journals for their respective subfields (see below on credibility for more about status and journals).

Any article published in the past few years in one of these high profile journals may be considered part of the research frontier. Beyond this top tier of journals, there are gobs and gobs of smaller journals. It's sometimes difficult to assess the quality of work in these journals, and sometimes it's just not very good, but often there are articles much closer to your precise topic. Many articles in smaller journals are very high quality, but simply do not make a very interesting argument, and thus do not end up in one of the high profile journals. These can be great citations, especially for specific facts or to compare against your exact case.

In general, we cite articles on the research frontier because they are the most relevant to our projects and to show that we haven't missed any work that makes the same argument we are making.

4. Boutique Articles – Some authors just love certain articles. They aren't particularly new, they aren't particularly prominent, but maybe they have some amazing quote, or fun fact, or make an especially useful critique of a more prominent article. These citations add flair to an article, and

sometimes act almost like a “signature move”. These are the least important kinds of citations, but they are often the most important to the author who holds a particular article dear and loves to quote some brilliant turn of phrase from it.

What are my literatures?

Throughout the process of conducting a literature review, you should ask yourself the question, “what are my literatures?” In other words, what do I want my research to be interesting to? To start with, you’ll likely have a very narrow topic. You want to make sure your literature review includes articles that are asking very similar questions, with similar methods, and in similar times and papers are included. So, if you are interested in how people use Facebook to find romantic partners, you want to include every other study that asks that question. But that’s not enough! If your paper is simply about Facebook and dating strategies, very few people will be interested in it. Instead, you should ask yourself, what other kinds of questions are similar to mine? What broader literatures does my question address?

For example, Facebook and dating might be interesting to scholars interested in dating, relationships and marriage more broadly, it might be interesting to scholars focused on the role of communication technology and how it affects social relationships, and it might be interesting to scholars who are interested in gender and technology. These three groups might well be distinct literatures, with their own theories, prominent authors, classic papers, etc. You won’t know until you start looking around, and until you think about who might be interested in the answer to your questions. At a minimum, anyone working on a similar case – say, dating websites in the US – should be included as a possibility in your set of literatures to review.

Note that often a project could speak to tons of different literatures. Authors tend to pick and focus on 2-3 – there simply isn’t time to talk to everyone who might possibly find something interesting. Often, you will revise what literatures you are speaking to as you conduct a project. Maybe you hoped you’d have something fascinating to say about how men and women differ in their use of Facebook, but it turns out there are few differences, or the differences you see have been discussed by many other authors. On the other hand, maybe you spot a new trend that has to do with age or race, etc.

More generally, keep an open mind as you search through existing scholarly works. An article might not seem relevant because it’s not speaking to your exact topic, but it may be very useful anyway. It might give you a lens to see your case through, or a theory you can apply in a new context.

Search Strategies

Searching for articles is more of an art than a science. There are a lot of different approaches, probably as many as there are scholars. Everyone has their favorite go-to resource, and everyone ignores at least one useful strategy because they don’t know about it or don’t like it. Also, every author eventually has to stop searching and start writing – otherwise they wouldn’t be an author!

– and thus no literature review is ever complete. The goal with a literature review is to find enough articles that we have enough material to work with – enough theories, enough similar cases to compare ours against, and so on. We also want to make sure not to miss any articles that are very similar to our own, and that we might be accidentally duplicating. It's just fine to repeat a study – scholars call this “replication” and it's a key part of verifying a finding - but we should acknowledge previous similar work, and also compare our findings against theirs.

When beginning a literature search, it's important to keep in mind that we often are still defining the literatures we are searching (see above)! So, we may end up finding about an entirely new subfield in the process of conducting a search.

The most common tools for searching are the various scholarly databases, especially:

JStor

Sociological Abstracts

Google Scholar

Social Science Citation Index (SSCI)

Each of these three databases has its strengths and weaknesses. JStor has the fewest journals, but every journal is high quality, and you can access the articles immediately. Sociological Abstracts has a good search interface, but searches a lot of very low status journals. Google Scholar finds working papers and other unpublished work, which is both a strength and a weakness. Google Scholar also is nice because it is not limited by discipline, but that can also make it hard to use if your search terms have multiple meanings (e.g. “equilibrium” in Chemistry vs. Physics vs. Economics...). Last, Google Scholar and SSCI are both great for tracing articles that have cited an article you are reading.

The good news is that running a search query is free and nearly painless. You should feel free to search all of these resources in many combinations!

Once you've started your search, you'll begin to find articles that are at least a little relevant. From any relevant article, you can either go forward or backward by tracing articles that it cites or that cite it. The various databases are useful for tracing what articles have cited a known article. The article itself will contain a bibliography that will have lots of hopefully relevant works. If you have an especially good article, you should trace it both backwards and forwards. Backwards tracing will help you find *citation classics* and key *review pieces*, as well articles that might end up being *boutique* (for example articles that were once on the frontier but never quite made it big). Tracing forwards in time will help you find newer *review pieces* and the *research frontier*. Again, these activities are relatively painless, and for each article you find that is extremely relevant, you should do both. For articles that are less useful, it may be best just to backwards trace by glancing through the bibliography for anything relevant that it cited. The articles that cite it rate to move you in the wrong direction.

On Wikipedia

Never, ever cite Wikipedia in a scholarly article. It looks sloppy, and it's risky business.

Wikipedia is a wild no-man's land, with inconsistent quality control. On the other hand, Wikipedia is often right, and almost always incredibly useful. You should definitely glance over the Wikipedia page on any new concept or topic you encounter, and you should follow the links on the Wikipedia page back to much more credible sources – newspaper articles about events, encyclopedias and journal articles, etc.

Some Wikipedia pages are indispensable resources, especially for tracing the details of recent current events. Other pages are nearly meaningless or hopelessly outdated or incomplete. Once you become an expert, you might consider going back and fix some of those pages up – add links to the articles you found in literature review and make Wikipedia better!

To reiterate: Do not cite Wikipedia. Do look at it as a guide and reminder and as a place to start hunting down citations to verified sources. And give back to the Wikipedia community when you can!

How Good is an Article?

Not all articles are created equal. The biggest distinction is between peer-reviewed articles and non-peer reviewed articles. Newspapers, news magazines, blog posts, reports by think tanks or political parties, and so on are all useful sources – but you cannot treat them the same way you treat peer-reviewed journal articles. Blogs, think tanks, and so on are often highly political – sometimes overtly, sometimes covertly – and thus their opinions and facts are often stylized to meet a certain agenda. Newspapers often attempt to be unbiased, but they are usually a “first draft” of history, subject to revision and error. If you need a source that says what date a particular event happened on, or a quote from a high-profile figure, newspapers are often fine. Similarly, if you want to quote a particular political party's position on an issue, go to the think tanks. But for the purposes of an academic literature review, none of these sources rates to be very helpful. Remember, the purpose of a literature review is to place yourself in a larger scholarly debate and highlight the theories you are drawing on or critiquing. For this assignment, you should limit your literature review to peer-reviewed journal articles (unless you are citing a particular fact, like the unemployment rate or a statistic on marriage, from a government agency, etc.).

Within the set of peer-reviewed articles, some are more tightly screened than others. Articles in top journals undergo much closer scrutiny by a wider range of academics than articles in less-prestigious, more specialized journals. You can tell, in general, how “good” or “respected” or “rigorous” a journal is by how highly ranked it is in the Journal Citation Reports produced by the ISI Web of Science (linked below). Journals with high impact factors are usually hardest to get into, and the most rigorously screened.

Apart from how tightly they are screened, some articles are just more powerful than others. For whatever reason, some articles make a big impact and totally reshape a field or a debate, while others languish unread and uncited. You can tell which kind of article you are looking at by checking out how many other scholarly works have cited it in Google Scholar, Soc Abstracts, or

SSCI. If an article is more than a couple years old, and only has a few citations, it probably didn't make much of an impact. It might still be incredibly helpful and relevant, and you should not avoid citing it simply because no one else has. But if you are trying to make sure you review the most important works, you should look for the most-highly cited pieces on your topic.

More recent work is hard to judge – will an article eventually be a big success? You can't know in advance, but you can sometimes guess by using your own judgment of its quality and by looking at what journal it's in.

All that being said, no system is perfect, and errors creep into even the best publications. If a fact is crucial to your argument, or seems suspicious, try to verify it through multiple sources.

Resources

MLibrary Proxy (Allows you to access online resources as if you were on campus):

<http://www.lib.umich.edu/mlibrary-labs/proxy-server-bookmarklet>

JStor – <http://www.jstor.org>

Sociological Abstracts - <http://mirlyn.lib.umich.edu/Record/004527936>

Google Scholar - <http://scholar.google.com/>

Social Science Citation Index (SSCI): <http://mirlyn.lib.umich.edu/Record/000678060>

Journal Citation Reports: <http://searchtools.lib.umich.edu/V?func=native-link&resource=UMI01287>