

RESEARCH METHODS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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4 Writing a Literature Review

Now that you have settled upon your research question, thought about your **research design**, and reflected upon the ethics of your research, you are almost ready to embark upon the data collection and analysis phase of your research project. Scholarly research is much more than a barrage of monologues on the part of scholars, although sometimes you might feel this might be the case. Scholarly literature is always part of a wider dialogue among scholars. In order to have a dialogue we must acknowledge what others have said before us when we make our own interventions. Absent this acknowledgment, those who we wish to engage in dialogue with might say, ‘but you haven’t heard what I have said’ or ‘you weren’t listening to me’. As scholars, we need to ensure that we communicate our engagement with those who have already ‘spoken’ on our topics of interest. Therefore, at this point, one crucial element of the research and writing process remains missing – the **literature review**.

Literature reviews constitute a sometimes underappreciated, yet essential component to any research essay, thesis, dissertation, or scholarly publication. Indeed, a thorough literature review is the foundation upon which your data analysis, either empirical or interpretive,¹ and your conclusions will be built. To be sure, many of the early stages of the research process, such as research topic selection, research question development, and questions of research design, will require you to turn to existing literature on your topic; however, the literature review requires you to approach existing literature systemically so that it can be organized in a manner that communicates how your research project relates to extant scholarship. The literature review also demonstrates, the relevance, importance, or novelty of your research question. Without a literature review none of these things will be visible to your readers.

You are most likely already familiar with literature reviews as they are part of almost every **peer-reviewed** journal article that you will have read up to this point. In fact, if your instructor has assigned review essays in your course reading lists, you will have read what amounts to a lengthy literature review. Alternatively, if you have read a scholarly monograph, you will notice that one of the first chapters always dwells on how others have approached a particular topic in the past. You might also have noticed that literature reviews assume many different forms and can be organized in a number of different ways. Indeed, given the breadth and extent of literature on pretty much any topic of interest in International Relations, and the diverse forms that literature reviews sometimes assume, the task of condensing potentially massive bodies of literature into a concise literature review may at first appear to be daunting.

Despite the literature review’s crucial importance, you may encounter difficulties in knowing just what to include, or leave out, when writing your

literature review. You might also be troubled by the question of where to begin the process of background reading for your literature review. Here, it is helpful to point to two essential purposes of a literature review that can help guide you in negotiating the aforementioned questions. The first purpose is simply to *situate your research question in the context of existing scholarly literature on your topic*. Abstractly, you might want to think about research traditions that have attempted to grapple with your research topic, and how have they done so in the past. For example, if your interest is on understanding Just War theory, you will likely need to identify, and demonstrate your familiarity with, canons in the literature such as Michael Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars* (1977). The second purpose is to justify *why the question you posed remains at the center of a scholarly debate or why it is of policy interest*. For the second purpose, you should go back to the initial puzzle that triggered your research question. How did you learn of this puzzle? Why did it remain puzzling even after a cursory survey of scholarly literature?

Background reading for your literature is of crucial importance to your ability to conduct research on your topic. Absent adequate background readings, you might not be able to collect data using the most effective means or sources. Has the data that interests you already been gathered by someone else? Has your particular case study already been explored in the context of your research question? What research methods have researchers working on your topic used? You should be able to answer all of the above questions before going on to the data collection and analysis phase of your research project.

Furthermore, you should always be aware that the task of a literature review is both *organizational* and *analytical*. Thus when exploring how authors have addressed your research question, start making lists that will help you organize literature into particular categories or theoretical traditions. The more thorough your background readings are, the more you can be sure that you will be able to set out for the reader the major perspectives that exist in terms of responses to your question.

Responding to these questions in a well-organized and analytically coherent literature review early in your work is necessary to prevent the reader from dismissing your piece as uninformed at the outset. Keep in mind, the literature review, while often placed early on in your essay, is distinct from the *Introduction* of your essay, which will be dealt with in [Chapter 10](#) on Writing Up.² A well-written literature review will help your reader place your academic writing in the wider context of literature on your topic, will demonstrate your familiarity with existing scholarship, and it will help you to avoid simply reinventing the wheel in your essay through exploring a question that has already been addressed at length in a manner that does not add a new perspective to the particular question. Now that we have addressed the nuts and bolts of the literature review, we can move on to the task at hand: conducting a literature review.

Literature Review: What is it? And What is it not?

A literature review is an analytical overview of existing scholarly research on a certain topic of scholarly interest that establishes, organizes, and identifies gaps in existing concepts and theoretical frameworks for the reader. It provides your reader with a concise snapshot or *state of the art* of existing scholarly engagement with your research topic, and establishes major theoretical debates of relevance to your research question and the methods others have used to respond to your research question. It is a component part of every piece of scholarly writing. Depending on the length of your research project, it may constitute a few paragraphs after the Introduction, but before you go into justifying your methods, or it could be its own stand-alone chapter in a large thesis or dissertation project.

The best way to understand the elements of a good literature review is to attempt to look at literature reviews written by scholars in your field. [Table 4.1](#) will ask you to find a literature review in a peer-reviewed journal article and determine whether or not the core elements of a literature review are present. **Table 4.1 What is a Literature Review?**

| Article reference information: author, title, journal, volume & issue, year published, page numbers | How long is the literature review? Paragraphs, page number(s)? | Does the literature review provide an analytical and theoretical overview of how the topic has been addressed in existing scholarship? | Does the literature review provide any sense of what methods were used in existing scholarship? |
|--|---|---|--|
|--|---|---|--|

Often, when tasked with writing a short essay your literature review will need to be particularly concise, so you should not dwell on describing in detail the arguments of others, but distill their contributions into one or two key sentences that highlight their perspectives to the extent they are relevant to your own research question. When undertaking a more lengthy piece of writing, your literature review should provide a more comprehensive overview of how scholars have addressed your wider topic area, in addition to highlighting how their works interact with your own. However, when in doubt about expectations, in terms of length, for your literature review, always

consult with your supervisor or course instructor.

One resource that you should make use of are introductory textbooks on your topic area for a survey of relevant literature, but as a word of warning, you should not rely on these textbooks in themselves for your literature review, but you should use them as a point of reference for key literature that you will locate and read. You can also use books written on your topic area as a resource, because often, if scholarly, they will preface their own main arguments with a literature review. For example, if you are writing an essay on International Political Economy, you could organize competing approaches into liberal, realist or Marxist approaches.³ You will be familiar with the main authors from each theoretical perspective, and you can sum up their arguments in a few short concise sentences. Or, if writing on international justice or international human rights, one could contrast realist-based explanations that see international human rights commitments as only being taken to the extent that they reflect underlying national interests, or constructivist norm-based approaches that reflect changing underlying norms of appropriate behavior.⁴ One characteristic you should glean from other scholars' treatment of their literature reviews is that a literature review is not a literature summary. You are expected to organize the existing literature and not simply provide short article summaries of various works that you have read.

In fact, the importance of your literature review to your essay, thesis, or dissertation cannot be overstated. In addition to a literature mapping exercise that introduces you to scholarly literature on your topic, and familiarizes yourself with major debates or points of contestation, the literature review provides a conceptual framework that will allow your reader to understand the research choices you have made. Indeed, an effective literature review should set the stage for your discussion of **methodology** through establishing how your particular question has, or has not, been addressed in existing scholarship. Sometimes you will find that applying a different research method or research design to a question that has been addressed at length in the scholarship can yield new insights.

Furthermore, a poorly constructed literature review will give your reader the impression that you lack familiarity with existing scholarship. Poorly constructed literature reviews usually are the result of the author falling into one of two common traps. The first common error that students make is that they present a list of literature on their topic with no analysis. The purpose of a literature review is not to provide readers with a list of everything you have read on the topic. You should analytically engage with existing scholarship through organizing the literature into analytical categories. The section on how to organize your literature review presented later within this chapter will provide you with further guidance on how to place literature into analytical categories.

The second common mistake is to provide a detailed summary of a few articles or books that have been written on your topic. In this case the literature review will come to resemble a review of a particular set of articles or books, but provide little analytical support for the arguments that are developed later in the work. The best way to avoid falling into this mistake is to ask yourself whether or not your literature review has established clear analytical categories that places your research question, and if applicable, your hypotheses, in the context of existing literature. And, if so, does your literature review provide an analytical framework through which points of contestation within your field have been effectively presented to the reader? If your response is negative, then you might have written a concise literature summary rather than a literature review.

Before moving on to discuss how to go about researching and writing your literature review, two additional points of clarification are necessary. First, given a literature review's scholarly focus, you should target your background reading toward scholarly research outlets such as peer-reviewed journals, scholarly edited volumes, research monographs, and other peer-reviewed academic publications.⁵ Before you start writing your literature review, it is essential to first come up with a reading list on background literature for your topic. The techniques noted above, looking back to textbooks or scholarly monographs for guidance, should provide assistance. When you begin your background readings, keep in mind that you already have some familiarity with the literature, particularly if you have been asked to write a research proposal for your project.

A research proposal is often a required part of the research process that serves as a bridge between you becoming interested in a potential research topic and the research process itself. A research proposal is usually no more than 1–2 pages. While requirements for what you should include in a research proposal differ across academic programs, all research proposals should include your main research question, why it matters, how – in terms of methods – you will go about answering your research question, and some form of indicative reading list. For more on research proposal writing turn back to [Chapter 2](#).

Dual Purposes of a Literature Review

1. Situate your research question in the context of existing scholarly literature on your topic.
2. Justify the importance of knowing the answer to your research question, and its implications for existing scholarly debates.

A Literature Review is NOT

1. A *list* of everything written on your topic
2. A *summary* of articles and books written on your topic

The Literature Review: Getting Started

When beginning your literature review process, keep in mind that the research process is not always a linear step-by-step process. As noted above, you will have started reading on your topic long before you have consciously started with the literature review writing process. In fact, in good research proposals, you might even foreshadow elements of your literature review at the proposal stage. Nevertheless, the next two sections will go over two important skills that you will need to hone to write an effective literature review: conducting effective literature searches and taking good notes.

Searching the Literature

The first step in searching the literature is to first identify key works on your topic. As mentioned earlier, often you can find these works on your course syllabi or you can find references to them in course textbooks. Sometimes when beginning a literature review, the useful aforementioned starting point of first turning to prominent scholars who have addressed your topic or the seminal works in your field, might not be an option because you have chosen to write on a relatively narrow topic, or a relatively new phenomena such as cyber warfare, which lacks a long history of scholarly debate due to the relative newness of the phenomena under study.

When, as in the case of cyber security, the topic is both entirely new to you, and you are not familiar with those scholars who have written on your topic, there are also numerous online electronic journal databases that you can search by *topic* or *keyword*. Make sure that you don't give up, or formulate your final reading lists on the basis of a single keyword search. Different authors might have used different terminology to describe the same phenomena. So, for example, when searching for literature on cyber security, you might search for, in addition to cyber security, cyber wars, cyber warfare, cyber terrorism, cyber attacks, or cyber defense.

In the past, one technique that was often used by students searching for literature was to go to the journal stacks in a library and take out the most current and back issues of journals in your field and flip through the tables of contents of the journals to see what has been published in the leading journals in your field on your topic. While resources such as *Google Scholar* might provide shortcuts to finding articles, you should still survey the tables of contents of scholarly journals in your field of interest. For example, for many essay topics addressed by students of IR, *International Organization*,

International Studies Quarterly, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, *World Politics*, and *International Security* are a few examples of journals in the field that might contain articles relevant to your research.

Don't forget that your supervisor or course lecturer is also a resource that you should not hesitate to approach for assistance if you find yourself lost in the literature review process. To be sure, it may be that the best place to start your search, and to seek consultation, is your research adviser or course lecturer. Indeed, your adviser or lecturer will often prepare you early on for your literature review. In fact, you might find yourself asked to include an indicative bibliography in your research proposal so that your lecture or supervisor can provide suggestions for further readings or see if there are any significant omissions in your reading list that they can point out.

Finally, in the event you are writing on a topic dealt with in a lecture or seminar class, your class reading lists will be a good starting point for your literature review. From this point, by using the technique of mining the references from these readings, you will be able to quickly identify other relevant readings. You also should have a good sense of the overarching scholarly debates on your topic.

Keyword Searches: Google Scholar and E-Journal Databases

Being able to conduct effective keyword searches is an essential skill for any researcher. Using the example of cyber warfare try to conduct your own keyword search using *Google Scholar*. *Google Scholar* is a valuable electronic resource that catalogues a wide range of scholarly articles of varying quality from a broad range of sources. Often access to these articles will be restricted, but if using a computer on a University network, or if subscribed to major electronic journal and book databases through your Library, you should be able to access works you find on *Google Scholar*. Nevertheless, a word of caution is in order. Unlike electronic journal archives such as *JSTOR*, or *EBSCOhost*, you cannot be sure what you are accessing through *Google Scholar* is indeed scholarly. Second, e-journal databases that your University library subscribes to often contain more options to narrow down your search, and therefore produce results that are often more relevant to your research topic. On the other hand, you might find yourself looking through a large number of search results on *Google Scholar* that have little relevance to your topic.

Try to practice your own keyword search for scholarly literature. You can start by using the keywords provided on cyber security: cyber security, cyber wars, cyber warfare, cyber terrorism, cyber attacks, and cyber defense.

Now think about your own topic. What other keywords can you think of that

might help guide a keyword search of the literature?

Taking Good Notes

Now that you know where to go to find literature, you will be faced with the task of reading a wide range of literature and condensing often lengthy and complex arguments into a few key points that will form a sort of organizational compass for your literature review. Given the breath and of background reading for your literature review, it is important to ensure that you take careful notes. Taking good notes for your literature review will also help you develop good note taking skills, which are essential for the research process as a whole.

As mentioned in [Chapter 3](#), good notes serve multiple important functions. First, good notes guard against unintentional **plagiarism**. In addition, good notes ensure that you accurately represent arguments you come across in your readings. It is essential that once you begin writing your literature review you accurately relay key arguments raised by other authors. It is also important that you do not oversimplify these arguments into a *straw man* that you tear down in the course of your essay, thesis or dissertation. The deliberate misrepresentation of an opposing view on a topic not only harms your own credibility before the reader, but also devalues your own contribution, as it will do nothing to advance scholarly debates in your field of interest. Of course, creating a straw man representation of existing literature is not always a deliberate act of misrepresentation, but can also be the result of sloppy work, in which you make reference to a piece of scholarship, which itself contains a straw man representation of an opposing view. The best way to avoid this is to always read an author's argument before making reference to it in your literature. Never rely on summaries of an argument provided by others.

Now that we have established taking good notes is important, how do we know we are taking good notes? In fact, you might be asking yourself at this point what are good notes? Good notes come in many different forms that can range from notes taken on notecards to notes written in notebooks, but they all include a few common key characteristics. The first is the full bibliographic reference of the work cited. This includes full citations and relevant pages numbers.⁶ Then, for the purpose of your literature review, record the author's key arguments, perspective and how they went about responding to the question. This will give you a baseline on the work itself that will help you in organizing the literature. Then look for how the author(s) positions their work in relation to other scholars. Is there someone, some perspective that the author(s) take issue with? This question will help you identify the next important component of good notes, record keeping on how the work relates to your own piece of writing.⁷ And, it will also help you to begin thinking analytically about the literature you are reading.

Things to Avoid: Straw Man Argumentation

A straw man in scholarship is a reference to the misrepresentation of another scholar's argument in order to make it easier to undermine or disprove. Given that in the literature review you are confronted with the task of summarizing complex arguments in relation to your research topic, it is important that you do not oversimplify another scholar's work to the extent that you leave out important characteristics or key observations.

Writing a Literature Review

Once you have completed your readings and taking your notes, you will be able to begin writing your literature review in earnest. A thorough and well-organized literature review establishes a strong foundation for the rest of your research paper. Once you have familiarized yourself with the relevant literature, you will need to begin to organize scholarly works into contrasting perspectives on your research topic. In some cases, after reading the literature, you might also find that the question you posed initially might be too broad. It could be that the concept or phenomenon in IR that you wish to explore might need further refining. For example, you might have started your project with a desire to explain the causes of conflict. However, once you began your background readings, you discovered that conflict has been addressed in the literature on two distinct levels: inter-state conflict and intra-state conflict. Explanations for intra-state conflict point to a number of different **independent variables** than explanations for inter-state conflict. These include, for example, state failure, internal ethnic divisions, resource allocation. Or perhaps you wanted to write on cyber security. Once you started your readings you might have discovered there are distinct bodies of literature that deal with inter-state cyber warfare, cyber terrorism by non-state actors, and cyber-crime. Each of these have triggered their own distinct set of policy responses, and you might find that focusing your essay on a particular subset of issue areas within the broader issue of cyber security will help you to more effectively write a cogently argued piece of academic writing.

Organizing your Literature

You can organize your literature review in a number of ways. However, there is a basic structure common to most literature reviews. This includes an introduction, or for shorter literature reviews an introductory sentence or two. The body of the literature review, that reflects the organizational structure you have decided upon, and a conclusion. The conclusion of your literature review differs from other conclusions you may have written in the past in that it both provides a summary of the major points of contestation in the literature, or theoretical debates, that you have presented, but also once again highlights to

the reader the importance of your research question, and how a response to your question will impact existing debates, or in some cases policies.

If writing a longer literature review, you will need to provide an introductory paragraph in which you clearly set out the focal area of literature for your review, and how this relates to your topic. For shorter literature reviews, which are part of research essays or journal articles, you will provide this information in a sentence introducing the review. For example, if writing an essay that aims to explain why states voluntarily signed the Rome Statute, which established the International Criminal Court, you should introduce your topic in a manner that makes clear to the reader that the target of your readings address existing scholarship on this question:

Scholars have long sought to understand why states submit to the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court.

Now using your own research question try to come up with a topic sentence for your literature review.

Once you have introduced your literature review, you will move on to the body of the review. All literature reviews reflect some form of organizational structure that is derived from characteristics scholarship either has in common or on significant points of divergence. In relation to the example noted above that aims to explain why states entered into the Rome Statute creating the International Criminal Court, you could transition into the organizational structure component of the literature review by making reference to a major point of disagreement within scholarship. For example you could state:

Scholars have long sought to understand why states submit to the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court. Rationalists argue that states join the International Criminal Court because it reduces transaction costs incurred when establishing ad hoc tribunals, whereas, constructivists argue that the norm of international justice, rather than material interests, has led states to join the Court.

In most cases, like the example above, you will find that your research question addresses a topic or issue that allows you to nicely organize literature into competing theoretical perspectives on a your topic. However, you might, depending on your research question, find another organizational criteria for your literature review such as contestations over methods, methodologies, interpretation of data, or conclusions.

For example, using the example of a research question closely related to

explanations of why states join international criminal courts: *what explains the causes of cooperation or non-cooperation with international criminal tribunals*, we find that IR theory offers three potential explanations for why states cooperate. These could range from more realist approaches that would argue that states cooperate because they are coerced to do so by more powerful states, to liberal approaches, which argue states cooperate out of self-interest rather than coercion, to constructivist approaches, which emphasize the role of norms of appropriate behavior dictating compliance. All three of the above explanatory pathways make reference to their own distinct bodies of literature to which you can make reference.⁸

Another common second strategy for organizing a literature review is to attempt to discern how others might have attempted to answer your question in the past. Are there substantial disagreements in terms of method? For example, if your interest is in democratic peace theory, you might find that depending on the methods used, scholars arrive at different conclusions. Has one group of scholars relied primarily on **large- n datasets**? Has another used more qualitative case study methods?

Once you have mapped the body of your literature review, you will provide a conclusion that will constitute the core analytical take home message for your reader. Highlight here your own evaluation of the existing literature. There are two opposing tendencies that students sometimes fall into when evaluating existing literature. The first is being over generous towards existing scholars and offering only platitudes. The second is being over dismissive and suggesting that you are the first who has anything worthwhile on your topic. In relation to these two tendencies, with regard to the first, there will always be room for criticism, no work is perfect, and with regard to the second, it helps to be humble and recognize the achievements of those who have gone before you.

In sum, your literature review should conclude by making responses to the following questions explicit to the reader: What key points of contestation have you identified? What have we learned about your topic thus far? What points have been clarified by existing scholarship, and what points remain obscure? And, most importantly, what gaps remain in the literature?

Chapter Summary

The literature review is an essential component of any piece of academic writing. The literature review is, in a way, analogous to an organizational map for the reader that provides an overview of key concepts, theoretical debates and major works on the topic at hand. It also demonstrates why scholars should take note of your work and clarifies what body of literature you see your contribution to be in dialogue with. The purpose of your literature review thus is to provide scholarly background so as to help situate your work, but it is also

analytical because you are expected to evaluate existing scholarship and make judgments as to contributions made by scholars.

The literature review research and writing process will in the end help improve your ability to critically evaluate scholarly literature. Through your critical reflection on how scholars have addressed your topic in the past, and through your evaluation, or weighing, of arguments advanced by these scholars, you will approach the literature with a much more critical eye. You will no longer read and just harvest information from texts, but you will also critically evaluate those texts, which you are reading.

Finally, the literature review process helps you guard against rehashing stale debates or collecting data that has already been collected. On the other hand, it also helps you identify important gaps in the literature, and if your research question is well thought out, you may find that the research project that you have embarked upon will serve to fill an important gap in the scholarly literature.

Suggested Further Reading

Laura Roselle and Sharon Spray (2012) *Research and Writing in International Relations*, 2nd edition. New York: Pearson. ‘Chapter 2: Getting Started on Your Literature Review’, pp. 15–31. This chapter provides some useful tips for searching the literature.

Alan Bryman (2008) *Social Research Methods*, 3rd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press. See ‘Chapter 4: Getting Started: Reviewing the Literature’, pp. 80–111, for a thorough overview of many different kinds of literature reviews.

Bruce L. Berg and Howard Lune (2012) *Qualitative Methods for the Social Sciences*, 8th edition. New York: Pearson, pp. 26–36. Berg and Lune provide a short section on literature reviews within ‘Chapter 2: Designing Qualitative Research’.

Notes

1 In fact, some interpretive research papers might have the feel of an elongated literature review in the sense that they might engage with how a particular piece of work has been interpreted by other authors.

2 [Chapter 10](#) will provide a detailed description of component parts of research essays.

3 See Robert Gilpin, *Global Political Economy: Understanding the*

International Economic Order. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001, for a mapping of major approaches to IPE.

4 See for example Christopher K. Lamont, *International Criminal Justice and the Politics of Compliance*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2010, [Chapter 1](#).

5 Similarly, Roselle and Spray note that a literature review ‘... should focus on scholarly resources – resources considered to be highly reliable by academic scholars and research professionals in the field of international relations.’ Laura Roselle and Sharon Spray, *Research and Writing in International Relations*, 2nd edition. New York: Pearson, 2012, p. 17.

6 For two common citation styles, Harvard and Cambridge, see [Chapter 3](#).

7 Berg and Lune make a similar observation when they pointed out that notes should be taken both to create a record of the content of the work itself, its main arguments, and a record of its use, or as Berg and Lune state, ‘how does this relate to me?’ See Bruce L. Berg and Howard Lune, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, 8th edition. New York: Pearson, 2012.

8 For an example, see [Chapter 1](#) of Lamont, *International Criminal Justice*.