

Research Methodology

Literature Review

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Why do we need a literature review?

- ▶ **To show the reader that you know the literature:** Yes, I am aware of so-and-so's results on this topic.")
- ▶ **To educate the reader about the literature:** If you want to know about this aspect of the topic, read so-and-so."
- ▶ **To motivate our research:** The literature has looked at this and that, but there is no good answer to this important question, which I address in this paper."

How to Find the relevant literature?

- ▶ There is so much out there. How do we find the relevant literature?
- ▶ Find one (or more) relevant journal articles.
- ▶ Trace papers **backwards**.
- ▶ Trace papers **forwards**.

How to Find the relevant literature?

- ▶ Finding one (or more) relevant journal articles: **Google Scholar** (www.scholar.google.com). **EconLit** (available through the library website).
- ▶ Search for the right keywords. How? Try some, and then try some more.
- ▶ The Journal of Economic Perspectives is particularly suitable for obtaining a broad, non-technical overview of a topic.
- ▶ The Journal of Economic Literature provides long surveys

How to Find the relevant literature?

Trace papers **backwards**:

- ▶ Look at papers' **references** (bibliography), and pick out what to search for next.
- ▶ If you want a quick hint at what is behind each title, skim the literature review (it is often embedded in the introduction, with no title).

How to Find the relevant literature?

Trace papers **forwards**:

- ▶ On Google Scholar, you can find a paper and then see all subsequent papers citing that paper. Take a look! ...then repeat.
- ▶ Sometimes, the number of times a paper is cited is a good indicator of its importance. Just remember, older papers have had more time to be cited.

How to Read Papers Quickly

The unfortunate truth is that academic papers in economics tend to be long, difficult, and very often boring.

How do we get around that?

The good news is that academic economics papers give you the bottom line in the abstract, the complete and non-technical version in the introduction, and the full rundown in the rest of the paper.

How to Read Papers Quickly

- ▶ Read the title and abstract. Then stop to judge whether or not to delve deeper.
- ▶ If you do decide to delve deeper, read the introduction. The introduction should suffice for you to get the main idea and understand what the author did, without going into much detail.
- ▶ If the paper is relevant to your research, skim the relevant sections. Pay special attention to tables and figures - they often tell the whole story.
- ▶ Only read an entire paper if it is very relevant.
- ▶ As you read papers - abstract, intro or more - take notes! You will need them.

Key Questions in Your Reading

- ▶ What is the paper's topic, research questions, methodology, and central results? (Summary)
- ▶ How is this paper related to my research questions? Does it support or contradict my thesis? (Synthesis and Organization)
- ▶ What are the strengths and weaknesses of the research in the paper? Are there biases or flaws? How important or influential is this paper? (Evaluation)
- ▶ How is the paper related to other research on the same topic? Does it employ a different methodology? Does it consider a different population, region, time span? Does it work with a different data set? (Synthesis and Organization)
- ▶ What are the points of agreement or disagreement between the paper and other research on the same topic? (Synthesis)

Key Questions in Your Reading

- ▶ Getting a sense of the big picture:
 - ▶ What are the trends and themes in the literature? What are the points of consensus? What are the points of controversy? Which debates are on-going?
 - ▶ Where are the areas on which there is ample research? What are the areas that need further research?
 - ▶ Which studies offer support for my thesis? Which studies contradict my thesis?
 - ▶ Where does my research fit into the larger literature on the topic?

How to Structure a Literature Review

After taking in so many papers:

- ▶ How do we make sense of it all?
- ▶ How do we convey the sense that we've made to someone else?

How to Structure a Literature Review

- ▶ Use your notes
- ▶ Seek common themes that tie together more than one paper.
- ▶ Can you lump papers together in multiple ways?
- ▶ Is there an order within each strand?
 - ▶ Is the chronological development important?
 - ▶ Do authors agree with one another in their conclusions, or do they contrast with each other?
 - ▶ Do they agree on methodology?
 - ▶ Are there papers that fit in more than one strand of literature?
- ▶ Now that you've figured it out, **tell the story!**
- ▶ You don't have to go into great detail about every paper.
- ▶ A sentence or two is often - but not always - enough.

Can you Given an Example?

- ▶ Of course!

Can you Given an Example?

- ▶ Of course!
- ▶ Every paper you read will have a literature review, either in it's own section, or embedded in the introduction, so once you have your research question spelled out, **start reading**.