
Writing a Literature Review

— by Social Science Librarian
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What is a Literature Review?

First, you'll want to address what counts as "literature" in your discipline and for your paper. Literature in this context typically refers to secondary sources that relate to your topic and field of study. Usually, this is a collection of scholarly publications.

The literature helps define a field of relevant scholarship, surveying consistent and emerging areas of interest and demonstrating your own research's relationship to the wider field or discipline.

Why Write a Literature Review?

There are two general types and purposes of literature reviews:

- Some are standalone pieces of writing--their purpose is to provide an overview of published scholarship on a particular topic in a discipline. The articles in *Annual Reviews* are examples of standalone literature reviews. Standalone review articles are more common in the sciences than in the humanities or social sciences.
- Other literature reviews are necessary parts of published articles, dissertations, and, most importantly, senior theses! Depending on your department, many of you will have to include a literature review as part of your thesis.

Research for your Literature Review

Where you look for your literature (databases, library catalogs, indexes, etc) will depend on your discipline and subject area. Ask [your subject librarian](#) if you aren't sure where to look!

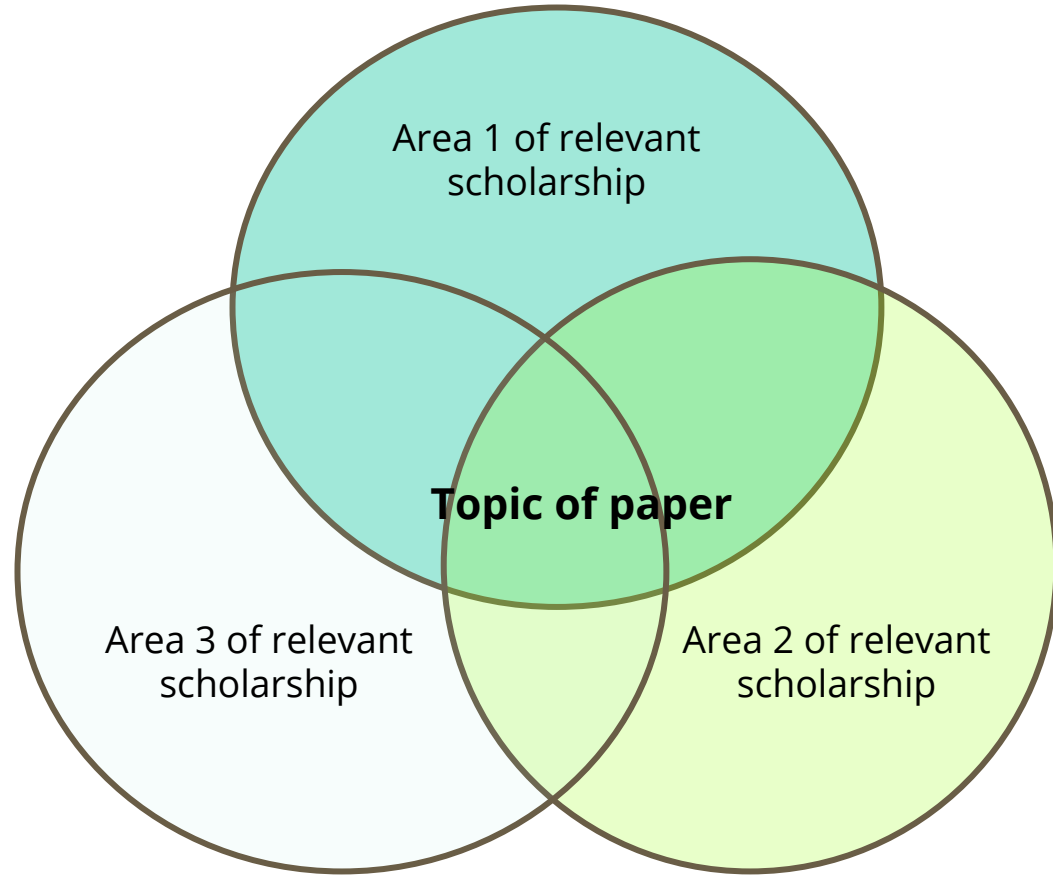
Generally speaking, you'll want to think in terms of both breadth and depth. Your literature review helps establish the parameters of your research, demonstrating its connection to adjacent issues and problems. You'll want to think of the bigger picture of your topic through your literature search. It also demonstrates your depth of knowledge of others' writing on the same topic, both in your discipline and in related scholarship.

Structuring your Literature Review

In the literature review you'll **categorize** relevant literature and **evaluate** the contributions of the material to your topic and field of study.

As you're doing your research, you'll want to be aware to ways you can group your literature. Visualize your topic at the center of a three part Venn diagram. What areas of scholarship does your topic sit at the center of? (See next slide.)

Literature reviews are typically narrative in structure, explaining relationships between different publications and their arguments. Individual publications may be very briefly summarized, but more space is given to analysis and making connections between particular pieces of scholarship.



Venn diagram of a literature review

Additional Considerations

- Sometimes your discipline, department, or faculty member will want your literature review to differ from what's included in this guide, either in form or content. Make sure you're following the guidance your faculty member gives you and reach out to them if you're not sure what's expected.
- The process of researching for your literature review might transform how you're thinking about your research topic--that's an important part of the process!

Questions?

If you have questions, feel free to reach out to Social Science Librarian Brie Gettleson, who created this guide: bgettleson@haverford.edu

You can also reach out to the subject librarian for your class or department. The list can be found here: <https://www.haverford.edu/library/research>

As an additional resource, the libraries of VCU have created a [comprehensive guide](#).

Also see additional information in the tutorial, [Finding Literature Reviews](#)