

USF GIA - General guidelines for the literature review course for MA students, opting for the non-thesis option

1. The end result should be a paper approximately 50 pp. in length, including bibliography
2. In consultation with the instructor, the student should focus on the scholarly literature for a substantial subfield including major books as well as articles, and it should include the most recent work on the topic [not textbooks, but original sources]
3. The student is responsible for compiling the list of works to be included in the review and submit this to the instructor for approval no later than the third week of classes
4. The paper should identify and discuss major issues, methods, controversies, trends, differing perspectives in the literature;
5. The deadline for handing in this literature review is the last day of classes;
6. This class will be graded S (satisfactory) or U (unsatisfactory). An S grade is needed for graduation.

What is a literature review?

"A literature review is an account of what has been published on a topic by accredited scholars and researchers. [...] In writing the literature review, your purpose is to convey to your reader what knowledge and ideas have been established on a topic, and what their strengths and weaknesses are. As a piece of writing, the literature review must be defined by a guiding concept (e.g., your research objective, the problem or issue you are discussing, or your argumentative thesis). It is not just a descriptive list of the material available, or a set of summaries."

(from "The Literature Review: A Few Tips on Writing It,"
<http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/specific-types-of-writing/literature-review>)

Strategies for conducting your own literature review

- 1. Use this guide as a starting point.** Begin your search with the resources linked from the political science subject guide. These library catalogs and databases will help you identify what's been published on your topic.
- 2. What came first? Try bibliographic tracing.** As you're finding sources, pay attention to what and whom these authors cite. Their footnotes and bibliographies will point you in the direction of additional scholarship on your topic.
- 3. What comes next? Look for reviews and citation reports.** What did scholars think about that book when it was published in 2003? Has anyone cited that article since 1971? Reviews and citation analysis tools can help you determine if you've found the seminal works on your topic--so that you can be confident that you haven't missed anything important, and that you've kept up with the debates in your field. You'll find book reviews in JSTOR and other databases. Google Scholar has some citation metrics; you can use Web of Knowledge ([Social Sciences Citation Index](#)) for more robust citation reports.

4. Stay current. Get familiar with the top journals in your field, and set up alerts for new articles. If you don't know where to begin, APSA and other scholarly associations often maintain [lists of journals, broken out by subfield](#). In many databases (and in Google Scholar), you can also set up search alerts, which will notify you when additional items have been added that meet your search criteria.

5. Stay organized. A citation management tool--e.g., RefWorks, Endnote, Zotero, Mendeley--will help you store your citations, generate a bibliography, and cite your sources while you write. Some of these tools are also useful for file storage, if you'd like to keep PDFs of the articles you've found. To get started with citation management tools, check out [this guide](#).

How to find existing literature reviews

1. Consult Annual Reviews. [The Annual Review of Political Science](#) consists of thorough literature review essays in all areas of political science, written by noted scholars. The library also subscribes to Annual Reviews in economics, law and social science, sociology, and many other disciplines.

2. Turn to handbooks, bibliographies, and other reference sources. Resources like [Oxford Bibliographies Online](#) and assorted handbooks ([Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics](#), [Oxford Handbook of American Elections and Political Behavior](#), etc.) are great ways to get a substantive introduction to a topic, subject area, debate, or issue. Not exactly literature reviews, but they do provide significant reference to and commentary on the relevant literature--like a heavily footnoted encyclopedia for specialists in a discipline.

3. Search databases and Google Scholar. Use the recommended databases in the "Articles & Databases" tab of this guide and try a search that includes the phrase "literature review."

4. Search in journals for literature review articles. Once you've identified the important journals in your field as suggested in the section above, you can target these journals and search for review articles.

5. Find book reviews. These reviews can often contain useful contextual information about the concerns and debates of a field. [Worldwide Political Science Abstracts](#) is a good source for book reviews, as is [JSTOR](#). To get to book reviews in JSTOR, select the advanced search option, use the title of the book as your search phrase, and narrow by item type: reviews. You can also narrow your search further by discipline.

6. Cast a wide net--don't forget dissertations. [Dissertations and theses](#) often include literature review sections. While these aren't necessarily authoritative, definitive literature reviews (you'll want to check in Annual Reviews for those), they can provide helpful suggestions for sources to consider.