WRITING A RESEARCH PROPOSAL OR PAPER: IDENTIFYING AND USING THE LITERATURE[1]

A. READING ABOUT YOUR TOPIC: IDENTIFYING SOURCES

Once you have identified a general topic that you are interested in researching, your next step is to start reading more about it. This will help you narrow your topic to a well-defined question, if you have not already done so. This is also the first step in developing a literature review, which will be central not only to your research proposal, but to your final research report as well.

How can you figure out what you need to read? The first step is simply to find some interesting articles and books on your topic, and start reading them. Make sure that they are written by researchers from respected institutions. If reading articles, make sure they are from peer-reviewed journals. If your research interest is very specific or obscure or focuses on a very recent phenomenon and you cannot find publications that address it directly, look for articles and books that deal with related topics.

Here are a few ideas for getting started:

Make a list of books, articles, or authors you already know about, and start there.
Is there a book or article that you've already read, or do you know the names of anyone who is doing research in the same area you're interested in? If you can identify a couple titles or authors early in your research, you can use these as keys to find other resources.

Seek advice from a faculty member or graduate student who studies your topic or something related to it.
This is an especially good idea if you have not studied this topic before. They will help you identify some of the most important authors, books, and articles. Then, these will undoubtedly lead you to many more.

Read through some recent Annual Reviews in your fields of interest.
You can find a list of current Annual Reviews at:
ht/tp://turing.library.northwestern.edu/login?url=http://arjournals.annualreviews.org/action/showJournals.
Annual Reviews provide an overview of current research in the field, and they have extensive bibliographies. Reviews for several disciplines in the sciences and social sciences can be found through the link above. Checked items are available full-text online. The tables of contents of the others are also available online, but full-text will need to be requested through the Library's Interlibrary Loan service. A couple similar resources in the humanities are: *The Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory*
https://turing.library.northwestern.edu/login?url=http://www3.oup.co.uk/ywcct/contents/
and *The Year's Work in English Studies*
https://turing.library.northwestern.edu/login?url=http://www3.oup.co.uk/ywes/contents/
Though not online, *The American Historical Association's Guide to Historical Literature* can provide an overview of topics and subtopics within the field of history. This two-volume set can be found in the Reference Room at call number 016.9 G946 1995.

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[1] This handout was written by Jennifer Hirsch, Study Abroad Office, Northwestern University, 2005. It includes sections written by Christopher Hager, Office of Fellowships, and Scott Garton, Northwestern Library. Barbara Shwom, The Writing Program, and Kara Godwin, Searle Center for Teaching Excellence, also contributed. Some material was adapted from an earlier draft on literature reviews written by Northwestern undergraduate Olajumoke Warritay.

Browse through encyclopedias, handbooks, and country guides.
These general reference resources can provide you with background on your topic, inform you of current research in the field, and serve as an entryway into the literature (they generally include short bibliographies). Handbooks—such as the *Handbook of Social Theory*—also provide specific tools on how to do research in a discipline. Finally, country guides provide a variety of information specific to a country. For example, for Italy, the Northwestern Library has the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Italian Culture;* a bibliography called *Italy*; and a publication on Italian statistics called *Annuario statistico italiano*. These types of resources are available for every country. Print copies of these publications can be found in the Reference Room, and many can also be accessed online. Make sure to review at least one item from each category. These materials will also help teach you the vocabulary of the fields you're interested in—which is crucial to identifying more sources.

As you search for sources, you will undoubtedly use NUcat and the library's electronic resources. Here are some pointers for doing these searches:

NUcat (http://nucat.library.northwestern.edu/)
When you find an item in NUcat, look at the "Library of Congress Subject Headings." Click on the subject headings that seem related to your research topic, and browse the list of books that comes up. Are any of these relevant? Think about what fields might be relevant to your topic. Keep a list of the subject headings that seem relevant, and then do a search by those headings.

Einstein (http://einstein.library.northwestern.edu/**)**
The Einstein system allows you to search across multiple journal article databases simultaneously. This means that you can cover a lot territory with a single search. Because you'll be searching such a vast amount of material, it will be particularly important to use focused search terms. Try a couple searches under the "QuickStart" link in Einstein and see what comes up!

Article Indexes and Databases
One of the disadvantages of a system like Einstein is that you lose the ability to do a complex, focused search that utilizes limits, controlled vocabulary (subject headings), and other advanced features of the specialized databases. Northwestern subscribes to several hundred of these specialized journal article indexes and databases, and you should definitely use them! Start by looking at the subject areas listed at http://er.library.northwestern.edu/browse.php. Make a list of the subjects that correspond to your areas of interest. Click on one or two subject areas. Look at the list of databases. To choose which ones to search in, think about the type of information you will need. The following types of information are available from different databases—circle the ones that you need, and then look for databases that will lead you to these types of information:

Books
Newspapers
Popular magazines (*Time, Newsweek*, etc.)
Scholarly journals
Statistics
Government reports
Web sites

Different databases also deal with different timeframes, so identify the timeframe you are interested in and choose journals based on this criteria.

Subject Guides (http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/**)**
Another way to identify specialized resources is to look at the Northwestern Library subject guide pages for the subjects you're interested in. These pages, which are coordinated by Northwestern librarians, include links to all sorts of resources related to their subjects. They also often have links to the librarian responsible for these subjects. For example, the Anthropology page lists the Northwestern bibliographer for anthropology, as well as a "Guide for Research" that has links to bibliographies, indexes, encyclopedias, and guidebooks related to anthropology.

Finally, as you begin to identify and read sources, keep the following tips in mind:

Learn the vocabulary of the literature.
As mentioned earlier, you need to know the vernacular of your field so that you can search for sources using common terms. As you begin to read, make a list of words that are commonly used to talk about your topic. These will be the words you will use when you conduct searches and when you write your proposal.

Use both print and electronic sources.
While much is available electronically, there are a lot of resources that are still accessible only in print. Go explore the library! Looking through the stacks is also a great way to identify sources because undoubtedly you will discover interesting materials surrounding the ones that you originally set out to find. When using electronic resources, make sure that they come from reputable sites and authors. Keep in mind that anyone can post anything on the Internet.

Choose your sources according to your needs.
Think about the type of information you need, and choose your sources accordingly. Google is a good search engine for obtaining certain types, such as government publications, statistics, popular magazines, etc. But it will not bring up most scholarly sites. Google Scholar, on the other hand, will lead you to many scholarly sites, as will the databases that you can search from the Northwestern Library homepage. While you will most likely want to include some statistical or practical information, such as background, statistics, etc., most likely you will focus on scholarly sources.

***Skim* the sources—don't read them in full!**
Read the introduction, browse the Table of Contents, skim through a chapter or two that sounds relevant, and then read the conclusion. While this may not be as interesting or satisfying as reading in full, your objective at this step in the research process is to develop a broad understanding of the fields in which you are interested. Once you are actually doing the research, you will go back and read the most relevant sources from beginning to end.

Always glance at bibliographies and footnotes, even if the source itself seems only tangentially relevant.
Using this search method, you will probably find a few related sources that will end up being exactly what you need. This is also a great way to . . .

Identify the core works and authors in your field—articles, books, people, etc. that everyone references.
Make sure to read these yourself; do not just rely on the secondary sources to understand them.

Since you will eventually need to analyze and synthesize the materials that you read, it is a good idea to take notes on them.

As you read each source, jot down the answers to these three questions, to the best of your ability at that point in time:

1. *What is this source about?*
   Explain the general topic, e.g., immigration policies in Italy. If the source is specialized—in other words, if it isn't a straightforward academic journal or book, or a newspaper article, etc.—make sure to explain its nature. Examples of specialized sources include reports issued by think tanks, Web sites of organizations, court cases, etc.

2. *What does it argue?*
   Summarize the issue that the source addresses in more detail and explain what it concludes.

3. *How is this source helpful to your research?*
   Does it support your research, indicate a gap that you would like to fill, suggest a different angle that you plan to follow through on? Does it help you to narrow and refine your project? In what ways do you foresee relying on this source as you proceed?

These are the questions that you will have to answer in your annotated bibliography. Taking notes on these questions as you read will help you focus on the main points and determine whether and how the source is valuable to your research. Basically, you will be writing your annotated bibliography as you go along; to finish it up later on, all you'll have to do is fill in more details for sources that end up being the most relevant and eliminate sources that turn out to be irrelevant. If you answer these same questions about all the materials that you read, you will also have an easier time later on analyzing them as a whole, when you write your literature review (see the final section of this document).

Individual Research Consultations

Towards the beginning of your search, set up an individual consultation with a research librarian at the Northwestern library. During this one-hour, one-on-one session, the librarian will teach you where to look for materials on your topic, and you will learn how to navigate through the multiple resources at Northwestern and on the Web. You will learn about databases that you never knew existed. You also will learn advanced search techniques. To schedule a consultation, see www.library.northwestern.edu/reference/services/index.html#Rcs.
Did you know that you can also do live online chats with a librarian—and s/he can guide you visually to different Web sites? Check out Answers Online at www.library.northwestern.edu/reference/virtual_reference/

B. Defining Your Literature Fields (or, What is a "Field," anyway?)

Throughout this document, you will notice various references to "fields." What does this mean, in relationship to research and research proposals? The term "field" refers to a body of literature. But what is a body of literature, exactly?

It is helpful to think of the answer to this question on three levels. The first level is a field in the most general sense of the term, which is a *discipline* or *subject*, such as history, English, biology, etc. For research, this use of the term "field" is only relevant at the very beginning of the research process, when you are starting to look for sources. When searching in NUcat or article indexes and databases, you may initially search by subject headings or choose a subject from a list. This is the level indicated by sentences such as the ones above that say, "general reference resources . . . inform you of current research in the field" and "Read the Annual Reviews in your fields of interest."

However, more relevant to developing and conducting a research project is the second level of "field," which is still broad but much narrower than an entire discipline. This level can be thought of as a research topic—and thus we will refer to it as a *research field*. To get a feel for the scope of a research field, it is helpful to look at annual review articles. For example, the *Annual Review of Anthropology* in 2004 includes articles titled "Christianity in Africa," "New Technologies and Language Change," "Anthropological Perspectives on Clothing, Fashion, and Culture" (by a Northwestern professor!), and "The Evolution of Human Skin and Skin Color." The *Annual Review of Political Science* in 2004 includes articles titled "The Relationship between Theory and Policy in International Relations," "Immigration and Politics," "Making Sense of Religion in Political Life," and "Theorizing the European Union." Fields of this scope will provide the background and context for your research question. The *Annual Review of Psychology* in 2004 includes articles titled "Personnel Psychology," "Personality Development," and "Work Motivation Theory and Research at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century." These research fields comprise your literature fields—the narrower bodies of literature within which you will situate your research question and to which your research will contribute. Reading the literature within these fields will help you move from a broad research topic to a focused research question.

The third level of the term "field" is much narrower: this is the level of your research question. Your question will address very specific issues, which can be thought of as *sub-fields* of your broader research field. Once you have a good idea of what your research question is, you will read primarily within these sub-fields—this is the literature that you need to know best. To understand the scope of these sub-fields, browse through the long bibliographies at the end of annual review articles of interest to you. For example, articles cited in "Anthropological Perspectives on Clothing, Fashion, and Culture" include, among many others, "Dress and Politics in Post World War II Abeokuta (Western Nigeria)," "T-shirts, Translation and Humour: On the Nature of Wearer-Perceiver Relationships in South Auckland," and "'Why Do Gringos Like Black?': Mourning, Tourism, and Changing Fashions in Peru."

When you write your literature review, you will focus primarily on your literature sub-fields, which you will place within the broader context of your research fields. You also will address your research fields when discussing the broader significance of your project, or its larger contributions. How many fields you address will depend on your research question, which must address a "gap" in the literature. Sometimes researchers find this gap within a few related sub-fields. For example, a Northwestern student interested in researching Turkish immigration in Denmark found that, while much had been written about this topic, almost none of it explored Turks' actual experiences with the immigration and assimilation processes. Rather, most of the literature focused on these processes from legal and structural perspectives. Thus, she proposed to study Turkish narratives of immigration in Denmark, in essence to put real people into this story. She addressed two sub-fields:

> **Literature Sub-Fields:** 1) Danish attitudes towards immigrants, 2) identification and integration of Turkish immigrants in Denmark

She then addressed the broader research fields in explaining the significance of her project:

> **Significance:** The research will seek to show how stereotypes and xenophobia might contribute to the creation of bicultural identities. […] This research will answer the questions, how do Turkish second-generation immigrants in Denmark identify themselves, as Danes or as Turks, or maybe as Turkish-Danes or ethnic Danes? How do Danish stereotypes and prejudices influence the formation of ethnic categories? How might the answers to such questions tell us if complete integration of ethnic minorities is possible in Denmark? And further, how might full integration be equivalent to multiculturalism in Denmark?

In other cases, research questions span a wider array of fields: fields that are not so immediately related, and are not all sub-fields. This happens regularly when researchers use a particular theory or method to examine a phenomenon in a new way or bring different theoretical perspectives together in an analysis. Consider these examples:

- A graduate student in anthropology studied Japanese women working in management positions at American companies in Japan. She found that the best way to analyze these women's experiences was to look at them from a theoretical perspective called cultural models—a branch of psychological anthropology. In her literature review, she addressed scholars in three fields: psychological anthropology (a research field), gender and work in Japan (a sub-field), and globalization (a research field). In her analysis, she used the Japanese women's experiences to critique arguments in each field and also expanded on the different theories by bringing them into conversation with each other.

- A Northwestern student interested in studying the influence of the far-right on citizenship policy in Switzerland found that the only way to begin to understand this issue was to draw on literature from three fields: second-generation naturalization processes, xenophobic movements, and governmental structures. She explained the significance of her study in this way: "Since Switzerland provides a unique case for all of these issues, my research will provide key insight into the interaction of different political policies, structures, and actors within the realm of second-generation citizenship."

You will come to understand which fields you need to address as you read and discover which scholars, in which disciplines, are writing about your research topic. As you identify this literature, you will move closer to defining your research question.[2]

[2] For more information on literature reviews and identifying "gaps" in the literature, see the last section of this document, "Writing a Literature Review."

C. Writing an Annotated Bibliography

Once you have hit the library, collected sources, and begun reading them, you face the task of processing all that information. Two common steps in the research process — writing an annotated bibliography and a literature review — will help you progress from a mountain of books and articles to a focused understanding of how your work relates to existing research.

Like a standard bibliography, an annotated bibliography lists your sources in whatever citation protocol is appropriate to your field — MLA, APA, etc.[3] — and includes a short *annotation* for each source. A good annotation, while only the length of a short paragraph (approximately 3-4 sentences), answers the questions explained earlier in the section on "Reading About Your Topic: Identifying Sources" (see that section for more detail on the questions):

1. What is this source about?
2. What does it argue?
3. How is it helpful to your research?

Here is a sample annotation, for a research project on the Chilean military:

> Silva, Patricio. Soldier and State in South America: Essays in Civil-Military Relations. Gordonsville, VA: MacMillan, 2001. 7 Feb. 2005 <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/northwestern/Doc?id=10044072&page=174>.
>
> This collection of essays investigates the current state of civil-military relations in South America. In regards to Chile, it finds that strong military institutions, a high degree of professionalism, and increasing involvement of civilian leadership in defense and security are the foundation for democratic consolidation. This source will help me frame how military service reform could assist in democratic transition.

Some of your annotations likely will tilt more heavily toward one or two of these questions than the others, but in general, you should set out to report on each source in all three ways.

One of the most difficult parts of putting together an annotated bibliography is deciding how much reading to do and when to stop. There is no definitive answer. You should expect your search for good sources to continue even after you have completed your annotated bibliography. However, you should probably feel comfortable completing it and moving on to your literature review once you have:

- Covered the most recent and relevant publications available;
- Familiarized yourself with the key writers and contributors to the field (those cited most often);
- Reviewed studies similar to the one you wish to perform;
- Reviewed adequate background information necessary to understanding your topic and question.

If your literature search seems to encompass many different fields, your research question may be too broad. In this case try to refine your question to create a more focused and manageable study.

If you wish to read further about annotated bibliographies, see the following Web sites:

- University of Wisconsin-Madison: http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/AnnBib_style.html
- University of North Carolina: http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/annotated_bibliographies.html

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[3] To learn about different bibliographic styles, see the Northwestern University Writing Place Web site at www.writing.northwestern.edu/links.html (scroll down to the section on "Documenting Sources") or the following Web pages:
APA style www.library.northwestern.edu/reference/instructional_services/electronic_handouts/apa_style.html
Chicago style www.library.northwestern.edu/reference/instructional_services/electronic_handouts/chicago_style.html
MLA style www.library.northwestern.edu/reference/instructional_services/electronic_handouts/mla_style.html.
Multiple styles: www.liunet.edu/cwis/cwp/library/workshop/citation.htm

D. Writing a Literature Review

Once you have written an annotated bibliography, you have translated your stack of books and papers into a more manageable form — a concise inventory of what you have read and how it may apply to your project. These annotations represent the raw material for a literature review, which is an analytic essay on your sources.

Literature reviews are unlike research papers in that they do not present new research; rather, they discuss research that others have already done. However, a literature review goes beyond merely listing and summarizing: it presents a coherent account of the state of scholarship in a specifically defined area and situates your project within that scholarship.

Your literature review should do three things:

1. Provide context and key background information on your research question,
2. Contextualize your study in relation to past research, and
3. Demonstrate the need for your particular project.

Number 3—demonstrating the need for your project—deserves a bit of an explanation. Your analysis should reveal *gaps and important oversights* in current and past research and discuss how your study will make a contribution (generally original) to its scholarly fields. For example, recall the proposal mentioned earlier by a Northwestern student for a project that would focus on the immigration experiences of Turkish immigrants. The gap in existing research was that no one was looking at immigration from the perspective of the immigrants themselves. Here is one more example of a literature "gap," taken from the introductory paragraph of a literature review in another Northwestern student's proposal:

> Much has been written about the "collective amnesia" of Spain concerning the Franco era under the broader category of collective memory studies. [….] Scholars in multiple disciplines have written about the role of remembering and disremembering in national transitions and the institutionalization of collective memory through nationally-sanctioned commemorations and the media (Aguilar, 2002; Olick, 1999; Phillips, 2004; Rigby, 2000). However, little has been written about the role of secondary school education in perpetuating and producing collective memory, and almost nothing has been written specifically about the role of education in Spain's collective memory of 20th century history.

As you work to turn your annotated bibliography into a literature review, you will not be able simply to string your annotations together into an essay. Rather, you must discover how your sources relate to each other and argue for the significance of the relationships you identify. Your job is to tell the story of how scholarship on the topic has developed and changed and explain where it stands now. Then, you will situate your research question within this story.

Follow these steps to make an outline for your literature review:

1) Make a list of the most important sources that you have read, in terms of their relevance to your project. Make sure that your list includes 1-2 sources that are central to the literature (i.e., they and/or their authors are mentioned all the time).
2) Group these sources into research fields or sub-fields (as defined earlier in this document). Give each field a descriptive name.
3) Answer these questions about each field:
    a. What are the 3-4 key ideas or themes?
    b. What do the researchers seem to agree on? What are the central controversies in the field?
    c. How do the key ideas or themes relate to your research?
    d. What is missing in this field that you want to know about? Where's the *gap*?
    e. How will your project help to fill this gap?

Once you have completed this outline, you will probably be ready to start writing your literature review. In the review, you will: 1) analyze your literature fields in relation to each other, and 2) situate your research question in relation to your analysis.

Like many other writing forms, literature reviews are typically organized into three main sections: an introduction, body, and conclusion. The introduction presents the general concepts of the research topic and question and the central points to be made in the literature review. The body of the literature review presents background information and discusses the most important sources. There are several ways to organize this section. You may be able to divide the studies you examined by chronology, theme, trend, school of thought, or methodology. There are of course other ways to categorize or group research; you just need to choose one. Do not simply list one random study after another. Pick and choose the relevant features of each source; for some, you may need to describe the research methodology and unforeseen obstacles, and for others the outcomes may be more important.

The conclusion of a literature review includes a brief summary of the main points and then makes more definitive suggestions about where research should proceed. Now that you have laid a foundation and context for your study, you can delve into the details of your own methodology, hypotheses, analyses etc. Your literature review is complete!

The best way to know if your literature review meets the standards of your discipline is to read other literature reviews in your field. As you are reviewing various sources, pay attention to the ways they review literature. Identify one or two that seem particularly strong to you—and are written in styles that you feel you could emulate—and use them as models for writing your own review. If you'd like to read a strong literature review unrelated to your research topic—which can be helpful, since you won't get bogged down in the content—take a look at the literature review included in the article, "Evaluation across Cultures: National Perspectives Explain Differences between Singaporean and US Evaluators," by Colin M. Clark and Priscilla S. Rogers.[4] Note that the authors discuss not just the questions that their sources *answer*, but also the ones they *raise*: for example, of the Rogers and Rymer findings discussed on pages 3-4, the authors ask, "Would this hold true across countries?" The authors have found a way for their own research to push forward the frontier of knowledge.

One final but important note about literature reviews in proposals and proposal writing in general: You need to write for laypeople, and not for experts in your field. This is because grant proposals are generally reviewed by scholars or practitioners from multiple fields, including people know nothing about the subject being discussed—but they do know how to identify whether a research idea is sound. Thus, generally you should avoid using complex, vague language that might sound like jargon, such as phrases like "political identity," "ideology," "collective memory," etc. That said, there are times when you might want to use a vague phrase like this, for instance, if you want to address a central concept used regularly in your literature. When you do use this type of language, though, you need to define exactly what you mean by it. Otherwise, not only do you risk sounding pretentious, but your readers might literally not understand what you are trying to say.

A clear and well-written literature review is important not only for your readers, but also for your research. A literature review often serves as a compass that continues to guide research and writing. If you refer back to it occasionally, it will keep your project pointed in the direction you want it to go.

For more tips on writing literature reviews, browse through the following Web sites:

- University of Toronto: http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/litrev.html
- Central Queensland University (Australia): http://www.library.cqu.edu.au/tutorials/litreviewpages/
- University of Wisconsin-Madison: http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/ReviewofLiterature.html
- University of California, Santa Cruz: http://library.ucsc.edu/ref/howto/literaturereview.html
- Deakin University (Australia): http://www.deakin.edu.au/library/findout/research/litrev.php

[4] Downloadable from http://www.businesscommunication.org/conventions/2003proceedings.html. See the final category, "Culture's Impact on Communication," second to last article listed.