

Conducting Literature Review

Topics Covered:

- How to read articles and reports
- Sources of literature
- Tips for writing a good literature review
- How to search for literature?

How to Read Articles and Reports*

Step 1: Evaluate the content of the article

- What research was conducted, why it was conducted, and what are its findings?
- What is the concept behind the methodology? Why did the author choose this method? What relationships are being represented by any equations used in the paper?
- Are the assumptions reasonable?
- Are the sources of data reasonable?
- What are the findings of the research? Do they make sense?
- Does the author's explanation of the findings make sense?
- Do the conclusions flow logically from the data?

**This section summarizes the handout prepared by Professor Weinstein Agrawal for the Spring 2005 URBP 256 class. Some parts of this section are picked verbatim from that handout.*

Step 2: Evaluate the credibility of the publisher/publication

- What to ask or evaluate:

- Who is the publisher?
- Is the publisher likely to be impartial and unbiased given its reputation, mission, membership and ownership?
- Does the publisher often publish research on this topic (i.e., does the publisher have expertise in the subject matter)?

- How to evaluate:

- If the publication is a periodical, is it peer-reviewed? For an overview of various types of periodicals and tips on how to distinguish scholarly periodicals from others, go to:
<http://www.library.cornell.edu/olinuris/ref/research/skill20.html>
- Does the periodical specialize in a particular kind of research?
- For research published by an organization, learn more about the organization's reputation or likelihood of being impartial and unbiased.

Step 3: Evaluate the credibility of the author

- What to evaluate:

- Author's reputation for impartiality and/or bias
- Author's organization's reputation for impartiality or bias
- Funding agency's reputation for impartiality or bias

- How to evaluate

- Google the author's name to see what you can find. For example, check the author's personal webpage, and others' comments about the author.
- Search for other writings by the author through a large university's catalogue (e.g., the University of California's Melvyl catalogue) or through electronic databases (ProQuest, ScienceDirect, TRIS, Expanded Academic ASAP, EconLit, Lexis/Nexis, etc.).

Sources of Literature

Peer-reviewed scholarly journals (JAPA, JPER, Journal of Urban Design, Journal of Planning History, etc.)

Books (check the reputation of the author and publisher; look at the reviews received)

Book chapters in edited books (check the reputation of the publisher, editor/s, and contributing authors)

Conference proceedings (check the reputation of the conference and the author)

Theses and dissertations

Reports published by government, research think tanks, professional associations, non-profits,

etc. (check the reputation of the publisher – see earlier section for further details; check whether peer-reviewed)

Newspapers (NYT, Washington Post, LA Times, San Jose Mercury, etc.)

Magazines (TIME, Readers Digest, Vogue, etc.)

Web (with web-based material, be especially careful to thoroughly check the credibility of the individual/organization/group hosting

the web site – remember, there is a lot of JUNK on the web!).

Tips for Writing a Good Literature Review**

- Remember why you are writing the literature review
- Read the literature with a purpose (see the earlier section on how to read articles and reports, and also think about how the review will inform your own research)
- Write the review with a purpose (synthesize the material in order to inform your own research; do not just summarize the literature)
- Keep your own voice
- Starting every paragraph of the literature review with the name of the author is not a good sign! Remember to organize the review by major themes and debates (see the Literature Review Assignment Sheet)
- Do not try to read everything – try to read everything that is “relevant and important” to *your research project*

- Try to review as much recent literature as possible. Unless you are writing a paper about the historical evolution of research on a topic, it is not a good sign if all the articles were published before 1970!
- Write as you read – do not wait till you finish reading “everything”
- Keep bibliographic information

** This section borrows heavily from the following articles: a) “Writing up Research: discussion,”

<http://www.clet.ait.ac.th/EL21LIT.HTM> (accessed September 1, 2005) ; and

b) “Literature Reviews,” which can be accessed by going to: http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts_pdf/Literature_Review.pdf

How to Search for Literature?

Please see the handout titled “Finding Planning Information – SJSU URBP 298A” prepared by Professor Asha Weinstein Agrawal.