Three strategies for writing a literature review

(for undergrads and grads in empirical social science disciplines like sociology, political science, urban studies)

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Before we start, lets ask ourselves, 'what is a literature review, what is it for'? Maybe you are even asking, 'what is literature'?! So lets keep it simple – the literature is what other people have said about your topic (preferably in academic papers, books). The literature review, or as I prefer it, *literature analysis*, is your attempt to contribute and engage in a conversation with this literature. It is a dialog, like writing a story of the literature, telling the reader what the literature is about, what the main themes are in the literature. It is not about writing a list of the literature. Here are some strategies to get you started.

1. **To start reading, ask yourself what is this a case of**: The first step is to look at your topic and ask yourself 'what is this a case of'. Each topic represents itself, but is also is a case of a broader phenomenon. This type of thinking is particularly useful for qualitative research where defining the 'case' is a key component of the research, but it is important for quantitative research as well. If you are studying educational attainment in Mexico, then first, of course, you can look for the literature or studies conducted on educational attainment in Mexico, or to take it a little further the education system in Mexico. This research is directly relevant to your topic so you must start here. When reading the literature, identify the key questions asked by the authors, note the types of data they draw on, the arguments and findings in their work, the concepts that they use, and the mechanisms that are proposed as explanations for their research questions. Look for how the authors frame their questions, and what debates exist in the field. Then ask yourself again 'what *else* is this a case of?' Staying with the educational attainment example, your question might also touch on class inequality or intergenerational inequality, and you could then expand your literature search into those topics as

well. While you read the literature, take note of what types of data are used by different authors, what types of questions and findings, and in this way you will see how your study fits (or is 'situated') in the literature.

2. **To start analyzing, distinguish between the different types of literature:** - *substantive vs. theoretical vs. paradigmatic / frame vs. foil.* The literature that is closest to your topic can be seen as the substantive literature – it directly addresses your topic. There is also a broader literature that is perhaps about your discipline, more theoretical, addressing broader phenomena, more abstract and less applied. There might be an even deeper layer of literature, that is a textbook layer that represents the assumptions and paradigmatic basis of your discipline. This 'textbook' layer of literature includes the ideas and concepts that are so self-evident and paradigmatic that they need no citation. Any single research paper such as your study will first and foremost contribute to the substantive literature. This is the literature that you can most directly address, and this is your primary audience. People working on educational attainment in Mexico will definitely be the first to be interested in your work, followed by people interested in inequality in Mexico, inequality anywhere, people with interests in education and so on.

    a. A second point related to types of literature is what I like to call the *frame vs the foil*. The paradigmatic assumptions of your field are like a frame - they help you look at the world, and they perhaps even impact where you direct your attention. However, the frame is not always the part of the literature that you can directly contribute to. It might be too abstract or theoretical, and your findings about your specific topic might not directly contribute to this wider theory. However, the foil (referencing the weapon used in the sport of fencing) is the literature that you can directly engage with. You can say things like 'Someone (2012) said that educational attainment in Mexico is more influenced by class than rural/urban divide, but I find that ...'. This is the level of engagement with the literature that you want to aim for. To put it more simply, the foil, the substantive literature, is where you draw your hypotheses. The frame, the theoretical or paradigmatic literature is where you derive your ontologies. Ontologies cannot be disproved, or proved, or extended, or tweaked – they just are. In other words, stick to the substantive literature for your hypotheses, expectations and interpretations of your findings.

3. **To start writing, draw out the observable implications:** This is the final step, and now you are ready to write. Read a few good examples of social science research in your field, or someone whose writing you admire. See how they write their papers - where in their papers is the 'theory', where are the findings? Do they foreshadow the findings from the beginning or do they follow a more expository style? For at least some of the readings in your literature analysis, you could attempt to draw out the 'observable implications', i.e. ask yourself 'what do I need to see in the real world in my case for this argument in the literature to hold'. In other words, you are linking the literature to your case either through hypotheses or by exploring the empirical referents that the literature suggests.

   The purpose of the literature review/ analysis is not to show that you have read and know the literature. Rather, the purpose is to place your work and your case / topic, *within* the literature. There are multiple ways you can do this (differing a little between qualitative and quantitative studies). One popular way in quantitative research is to use the literature to draw out hypotheses that you will test in your case. Given what you know about the cases that are used in the literature, you can draw out hypotheses that link the findings in the literature to your case, your topic, your study, your data, and your methods. For example, if the literature tends to focus on the United States, and you study Mexico, then you can point out that a particular finding based on the United States might or might not work in Mexico because of this or that reason. In this way, every paragraph about the literature can end with a link drawn to your own case or study. By doing this, you are drawing the reader's attention to how your study relates to the literature (rather than just telling them what the literature is about). Each paragraph (more or less) of your literature review, must end with some information about your case, whether that is a hypothesis, an expectation, an observable implication, or a reflection. The literature review is thus not a list. In fact, it is not even really a 'review' but an analysis where you read and digest the literature and then tell the reader what the main debates and interesting themes are. The review is not an account of 'someone said this, and another person said that'. No, it is a *story* that has a point, and the point is to show how your research fits into the existing literature on a topic.

Finally, when should you write the literature review? All the time! Since the literature review involves situating your case or topic within the literature, and since your understanding of your case evolves as you do the research, your interpretation of the literature will also evolve. When you read a part of the literature at the start of your research, it will mean something very different to you compared to if you re-read it again later. I would recommend identifying a few readings that you find most useful and to read and re-read these throughout your research. Good luck!