LITERATURE REVIEWS

Literature reviews are a common academic genre, but you may not be familiar with them from your undergraduate or other previous education. You have probably read literature reviews in journals, either as a component of a larger article or as stand-alone texts. Your general purpose in performing the literature review is to dig into the research on your topic to distill the most important arguments and identify key theorists or authors. This task can be daunting, so we have put together a four (4) step process for you to work through as you begin your research.

STEP 1: IDENTIFY IMPORTANT TERMS

Take a few moments and make a list of the terms that you imagine would be associated with your topic. Include similar ways to express the same thing or very similar ideas, i.e. “nonprofit,” “not-for-profit,” and “non-governmental organization (NGO).”

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STEP 2: DRAFT RESEARCH QUESTIONS

With your terms in mind, you can draft the research question(s) you want to address with your literature review. For any research project, you will have one primary research question, but you may also have supporting questions that help you narrow the scope of your search. These questions will be revised and refined as you complete your literature review; however, drafting them now provides a frame for your research to keep you focused on your primary areas of interest.

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STEP 3: START GENERAL

Your subject and specific question will determine where you look for your information; however, start with a general web search to 1) make sure your list of key terms includes the terminology others are using to discuss your topic and 2) see if the topic is timely and relevant. Draft some questions or lists of key terms to use as you search.

STEP 4: FORMULATE KEYWORDS & SEARCH TERMS

Using the keywords, you gathered in Step 1 and the questions you drafted in Step 2, create search terms. Use Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) and the other research tips from our video From Keywords to Database to develop several search statements. For example, if you have multiple interchangeable terms but want to exclude certain keywords from your results, you might search using:

(environment) AND (nonprofit OR not for profit) NOT (NGO OR non governmental organization)

STEP 5: SEARCHING LIBRARY COLLECTIONS & DATABASES

Use the library’s collections and databases to find books, journals, magazines, and other web-based resources for both current and foundational information on your topic. More established topics will likely have several books or journal articles that are considered “required reading.” Look in the references lists of current sources to see if there are recurring citations for important texts. For topics that are more current, you may not be able to find many books, and journal articles and web-based resources may be most useful. After you have gained some context from your general web search in Step 3 and used the Summon search to get a sense of the library’s collection regarding your topic, choose databases to further your search. Below are several suggested databases, but others may also be helpful.

Select Databases to Narrow Your Search:

- Business Source Complete
- Factiva
- Legal Collection
- ABI/Inform Global
- IBIS World
- Lexis Nexis Academic