

Literature Review

Making sense of what has been written on a topic.

Before doing work in primary sources, historians must know what has been written on their topic. They must be familiar with theories and arguments--as well as facts--that appear in secondary sources.

Before you proceed with your research project, you too must be familiar with the literature: you do not want to waste time on theories that others have disproved and you want to take full advantage of what others have argued (as well as facts they have presented). You want to be able to discuss and analyze your topic.

Your literature review will demonstrate your familiarity with your topic's secondary literature.

LENGTH: 6-8 pages of text, excluding footnotes and bibliography.

NUMBER OF WORKS: A guess? Around 6-10 (see below), but there is *NO MAGIC NUMBER*.

CHOOSING WORKS:

Your literature review must include enough works to provide evidence of both the breadth and the depth of the research on your topic or, at least, one important angle of it. The number of works necessary to do this will depend on your topic and your thesis about it. For most (but not all) topics, AROUND eight-to-ten works (usually monographs but also in some cases critical scholarly articles—or, rarely, such sources as films and novels) are necessary to describe and make sense of the literature on a topic, although you will not necessarily give all of them equal treatment in your paper (e.g., some might be mentioned in passing or appear in notes rather than the essay).

WARNING: Pay close attention to focus. This essay is *not* an evaluation of sources that you have chosen to use in your project, and it is not an essay on how you plan to use sources. It is a description and explanation of the major, defining sources on a topic. Think of it the way you did your 297 lit review, i.e., not as, in effect, part two of your proposal.

ORGANIZING/ARRANGING THE LITERATURE:

As you uncover the literature (i.e., secondary writing) on your topic, you should determine how the various pieces relate to each other. (As Prof. O'Brien advised a HIST 485 student: "See it. Describe it.") Your ability to do so will demonstrate your understanding of the nature and evolution of the literature.

You might determine that the literature makes sense when divided by time period, by methodology, by debate, by sources, by author's discipline, etc.—or some combination. You might also decide to subdivide categories based on other criteria. There is no "rule" on divisions—historians wrote the literature without consulting each other and without regard to the goal of fitting into a neat, obvious organization useful to students in HIST 298.

Whatever categorization you choose, you might be missing critical angles. For the purposes of HIST 298, that is not particularly important. Your goal is to read and study the sources (*after using solid research skills to find them*) and come up with **a logical thesis** about them. You do not know all of the elements or facts affecting the literature, so any theory that you assert has a good chance of being incomplete, if not incorrect. **NEVERTHELESS, your effort should demonstrate solid research and solid thinking.**

The key step after solid research is to see what is there. Then, **FIGURE OUT** the most logical, clarifying angle, i.e., **your thesis**. Do not arbitrarily choose a categorization and then hammer your sources into it; use the one that the literature falls into by itself. How do you do that? For every source, you should note its thesis, date (and events surrounding it), author background, methodology, sources. Does a pattern appear when you consider such information from each of your sources??? If so, you have a possible **thesis about the literature**. If not, you might still have **a thesis**.

Consider: Are there missing elements in the literature? For example, no works published during a particular (usually fairly lengthy) time period? Do studies appear after long neglect of a topic? Do interpretations change at some point? Do scholars challenge each other's interpretations? Does the major methodology being used change? Do interpretations vary based on sources used?

More specifically: Does the literature change because of the availability of new sources? Does a new interpretation come after a major social event? Are changes in the discipline followed by a new interest in your topic? Is there disagreement that develops after a new theory is advanced?

CONTENTS OF LITERATURE REVIEW:

The literature review is a research paper with three ingredients:

- 1) a brief discussion of the issue (the person, event, idea)
While this section should be brief, it is necessary to identify your topic, provide context, and set up **your thesis**.
- 2) **your thesis about the literature** (Do more than provide a single-sentence statement. *Explain* your thesis so that readers know what to look for in terms of angles, development, problems, etc.)
- 3) evidence supporting your thesis/topic, using the works on topic as evidence, i.e., you discuss the sources in relation to your thesis, not as a series of separate topics (and not in relation to the research project due later in the semester. *An easy strategy is to pretend that there is no later paper; the literature review is your final assignment as it was in HIST 297.*)

Obviously, these ingredients are presented in an essay with an introduction, body, and conclusion.

ARGUING YOUR THESIS:

Within each group, you should provide essential information about each work: the author's thesis, the work's full title and date, the author's supporting arguments and major evidence.

TIP: do not fixate on whether later works include earlier ones in their bibliographies. Later historians know and use earlier works (in support or rejection of their ideas)—and they certainly list them in their bibliographies—but the key to later works is generally their id
In most but not all cases, arranging the sources chronologically by publication date makes the most sense because earlier works influenced later ones in one way or another. Reference to publication date also indicates that you are aware of this significant historiographical element.
eas and their study of primary sources.

When discussing a particular work for the first time, you should refer to it by the author's full name, the work's full title, and year of publication.

As in any piece of writing, information can be included in a variety of ways, e.g., date of publication:

“David Smith’s **1965** text . . .” OR “David Smith’s *The History of War* (**1965**) . . .” OR
“David Smith’s *The History of War*, **published in 1965** . . .” OR

Recall that publication dates are dates of *publication, not writing.*

As you discuss each work, DON'T FORGET WHY YOU ARE DISCUSSING THEM: YOU PRESENTING AND SUPPORTING A THESIS ABOUT THE LITERATURE.

You are NOT stringing together mini-summaries or mini-reviews of individual, albeit related, works.

You are not explaining the sources that you are using in your paper.

Begin each paragraph with the connection of the new material/evidence to your thesis.

Your paper should always note sources' *relationship* to each other, particularly in terms of **your thesis about the literature**, e.g.,

“Unlike Smith’s work, Mary Brown’s analysis reaches the conclusion that” and “Anderson’s reliance on the president’s personal papers leads to an interpretation different from Barry’s.”

The various pieces of the literature are “related” to each other in some way, so you need to indicate to the reader some of that relationship. THAT is what your literature review is about. (It helps the reader follow **your thesis**, and it convinces the reader that you know what you are talking about.)

DOCUMENTATION:

Each source you discuss in your paper must be documented in footnotes. Providing author and title and date in the paper is not sufficient.

In addition, supporting but minor sources should be included in notes.

Obviously, use correct Chicago Manual form.

The footnotes do not affect the length of the essay.

CONCLUSION OF LITERATURE REVIEW:

Your conclusion should not only reiterate **your argument (thesis)**, but also discuss questions that remain unanswered by the literature, although some or all of these may have already been addressed in your paper. What has the literature accomplished? What has not been studied? What debates need to be settled? What direction does study of the topic seem to be taking?

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Compile a list of all sources referred to in the review, either in the text or in the footnotes.

Simply title the list Bibliography. Center it; no punctuation/underlining.

SUBMISSION:

Submit to the instructor AND your peer reviewer in the SAME Slack message.

Title file/document:

Name “lit review” topic
e.g., Beth lit review Versailles

Title of rewrite’s file/document:

Name “lit review” topic “rewrite”
e.g. Beth lit review Versailles rewrite

PEER REVIEW:

Complete peer review and submit to the instructor through Slack.

Title of peer review file/document:

Paper’s author “lit review” topic “reviewed by” your name
e.g., Beth lit review Versailles reviewed by Ann

FINAL REMINDERS:

DON’T FORGET WHY YOU ARE DISCUSSING SOURCES:

You are presenting and supporting a thesis about the literature.

DO NOT WRITE A PAPER THAT IS ESSENTIALLY PART II OF YOUR PROPOSAL:

You are not trying to persuade a reader that sufficient sources exist to support your final research paper;
you are not explaining how sources will be useful for your paper or how they will be used in particular parts of your project/paper.

You are describing and explaining what has (and has not) been written on a topic.

You are also not writing a string of mini-book summaries or reviews.