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# Untangling the literature review:

A guide for undergraduate and  
graduate students in economics



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### **Untangling the literature review: A guide for undergraduate and graduate students in economics**

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The Textbook Publication Project of the Centre for Academic Documentary Services is an example of many academic activities that represent an integral part of the Academic Development Plan at the Faculty of Economics. The purpose of the Project is to promote and publish a larger number of good-quality textbooks used for courses taught in the Bachelor and Graduate Programs at the Faculty of Economics, Chulalongkorn University.

The Faculty of Economics would like to express gratitude to Assoc. Prof. Dr. Chantal Herberholz for her endless efforts writing this textbook and publishing an updated, second edition as an ebook. We would also like to sincerely thank Asst. Prof. Dr. Sineenat Sermcheep, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Pochamana Phisalprapa and Asst. Prof. Dr. Nantararat Tangwithoontham for reviewing the content of the second edition of this textbook. It is hoped that this textbook will contribute to an ever-expanding pool of high-quality textbooks disseminated by the Faculty of Economics.



Assoc. Prof. Dr. Sittidaj Pongkijvorasin

Dean

# Preface

Teaching research methodology, as well as other courses that use the literature review as one of the assessment methods, at the Faculty of Economics, Chulalongkorn University, made me realize how undergraduate and graduate students struggle with doing a literature review. Problems often arise from a lack of understanding of what a literature review is, the purposes it serves, what it takes to write a literature review, and how the final product should look like.

The challenges students are facing when writing a literature review have also been documented since graduate, and increasingly also undergraduate students, are required to write literature reviews during their time at university (Badenhorst, 2018; Chen et al., 2016). These are commonly either stand-alone literature reviews or literature reviews for research (Ridley, 2012). A literature review for research is an integral component of any research paper assignment, thesis or dissertation. Stand-alone reviews of the literature, on the other hand, are reviews on certain topics that are required for term papers or other course assignments. Especially since the start of the coronavirus disease in late 2019 (COVID-19) and the shift to online learning, traditional exams have increasingly been replaced with online exams and term papers, including literature reviews. Many students, however, are ill prepared to do literature reviews and, therefore, overwhelmed by the complexity of the task. Using a fishing analogy (Rocco & Plakhotnik, 2009), the problem is that students are asked to cast nets around specific topic areas with fishing nets that are all too often tangled up. Motivated by these observations, this book aims at helping students to untangle their fishing nets by providing guidance on how to conduct literature reviews. Although this book focuses on literature reviews for research, its content is also relevant for stand-alone reviews of the literature.

The merits of writing literature reviews for research, and in academic writing more generally, have been debated since literature reviews are prone to mistakes such as

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misrepresentation and bias (Phelps, 2018; Vaganay, 2018). Driven by the desire for more standardization and academic rigor, the number of systematic reviews of research has increased dramatically since the late 1980s and some scholars are developing automated evidence mapping systems, based on machine learning and natural language processing (Chalmers & Fox, 2015; Turning Research Into Practice [TRIP]). Writing literature reviews has nevertheless remained indispensable in tertiary education. Students do not only gain in-depth knowledge of a particular topic when doing a literature review, but they also develop critical thinking and analytical skills. In addition, doing a literature review increases students' ability to synthesize and communicate the results of the synthesis. Last not least, by doing a literature review, students learn how to conduct literature searches and acquire an understanding of how to assess the quality of the literature, which is particularly important in today's digital age.

Several excellent books have been written on how to do a literature review, but students seem to be hesitant to use these. Preference is often given to short online guides that break down the literature review into a few distinct steps (or bullet points). While these typically offer useful first guidance, they lack depth and breadth. Importantly, many of these resources are either not discipline-specific or focus on disciplines other than economics. Examples from other disciplines, however, may only be partially relevant or not relevant at all for economics students.

This book, hence, aims at providing concise, step-by-step guidance for undergraduate and graduate economics students, using relevant examples. Given my own research interests, most examples given in this book pertain to the field of health economics. The examples, however, are chosen such that economics students can relate to these and do not need to have a background in health economics. A few examples are from other subspecialties within the field of economics though such as, for example, economic development.

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The first chapter of this book aims at demystifying the literature review by explaining what a literature review is, the purposes it may serve, as well as the major ethical issues that arise when doing a literature review. Searching for literature in today's digital era is discussed in the second chapter. Chapter 3 guides students how to review, read and analyze the literature, whereas the synthesis of the literature is discussed in the fourth chapter. The book concludes with the fifth chapter, in which guidance is given on how to write up the synthesis.

Key pedagogical aids include chapter previews, examples and summaries. Key terms are highlighted and listed at the end of each chapter and in the back-of-the-book index.

In contrast to the first edition of this textbook, the second edition is published as an ebook for easy access, which has increasingly become important since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The content of the textbook has essentially remained the same, but some examples and new content were added in the third, fourth and fifth chapters. The materials were also updated to keep the textbook current.

The author is grateful to Asst. Prof. Dr. Sineenat Sermcheep, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Pochamana Phisalprapa and Asst. Prof. Dr. Nantarat Tangwithoontham for providing thoughtful and constructive comments on the second edition of this textbook. Support obtained from the Faculty of Economics, Chulalongkorn University, is also gratefully acknowledged.

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## List of abbreviations

APA	American Psychological Association
API	Application programming interface
CONSORT	Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease which started in late 2019
DOAJ	Directory of Open Access Journals
DOI	Digital object identifier
IDEAS	Internet Documents in Economics Access Service
IRB	Institutional review board
JEL	Journal of Economic Literature
JSTOR	Journal Storage
OOP	Out-of-pocket health expenditure
PEO	Population, exposure, outcome
PICO	Population, intervention, comparison, outcome
PRISMA	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses
Q1	Quartile 1
RePEc	Research Papers in Economics
RIS	Research Information Systems
RSS	Really Simple Syndication
SJR	SCImago Journal Rank
SQ3R	Survey, question, read, recite, review
TREND	Transparent Reporting of Evaluations with Nonrandomized Designs
URL	Uniform resource locator
VPN	Virtual private network

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# Understanding meaning and purpose of a literature review

The literature review is a task that undergraduate and graduate students inevitably have to deal with during their time at university since a literature review is needed for any type of research. Doing a literature review is a complex task. It is a process that requires careful planning and organization. Before embarking on the task, it is, therefore, important to understand what a literature review is and what purposes it serves, which this chapter explains. This chapter also provides an overview of the different types of literature reviews that can be done, although the focus of this book is on the traditional (narrative) literature review, that is the type of literature review *inter alia* written for an undergraduate research paper, a master's thesis or a doctoral dissertation. Since the requirements of a literature review vary across academic levels, some guidance is given on assessment criteria that are used to evaluate literature reviews. This chapter ends with an introduction to the major ethical issues that arise when doing a literature review to increase students' awareness before embarking on the task.



### ***1.1 What a literature review is (and what it is not)***

Fink (2014, p. 148) considers the literature review a “data-gathering activity” to obtain information that is “correct, comprehensive, and unbiased”. While it has been defined in several ways, common to most definitions is that the literature review involves several activities, of which analysis, critical evaluation, and synthesis of prior work on a specific topic are predominant (Fink, 2014; Hart, 2018; Machi & McEvoy, 2012; Nunan, 1992; Rowe, 2014).

According to Hart (2018, pp. 3-4) the literature review is “the analysis, critical evaluation and synthesis of existing knowledge relevant to your research problem, thesis or the issue you are aiming to say something about”. When doing a literature review, “the researcher extracts and synthesises the main points, issues, findings, and research methods which emerge from a critical review of the readings” (Nunan, 1992, p. 217). Similarly, Rowe (2014, p. 243) explains that “a literature review synthesizes past knowledge on a topic or domain of interest, identifies important biases and knowledge gaps in the literature and proposes corresponding future research directions”. Apart from the analysis, critical evaluation and synthesis of prior work, the identification of knowledge gaps in the literature is an additional important characteristic of many literature reviews. Knowledge gaps permit positioning a new research within the chosen field to demonstrate its academic contribution (Kamler & Thomson, 2014). In fact, some scholars view the literature review as an argument that serves to defend a thesis statement based on the identified knowledge gap (Machi & McEvoy, 2012). The thesis statement often takes the form of a sentence that introduces the main point or claim to the reader of the literature review. Machi and McEvoy (2012, p. 4), hence, define the literature review as a “written document that presents a logically argued case founded on a comprehensive understanding of the current state of knowledge about a topic of study”.

The defining characteristics of a literature review for research consequently are (i) analysis, (ii) critical evaluation, (iii) synthesis of prior work, as well as (iv) the

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identification of knowledge gaps. The analysis of prior work entails dissecting research to extract relevant information. Deciding what data to extract depends on the purpose of doing the literature review. When analyzing prior work, critical assessment of the research read is important to evaluate if studies should be included in the review and in what way. After having analyzed prior work, the extracted information is combined, that is synthesized, to give a bigger picture (Hammersley, 2013). Through the synthesis, a new perspective is offered that addresses the stated purpose of the literature review. Each literature review, hence, is unique as it serves a particular purpose. When synthesizing existing research, students should think about knowledge gaps in the literature. As mentioned above, these gaps in the literature are areas that have not sufficiently been researched yet. In other words, the literature review is not only about assessing what is known in a particular area, but also about what is *not* known and how new research could fill observed gaps. Identifying gaps in the literature is, hence, particularly important for students who do a literature review for an undergraduate research paper, a thesis or a dissertation as the identified knowledge gap is used to defend their research direction. Literature reviews take considerable time to conduct and cannot be mastered without developing critical thinking skills. Having established what a literature review is, it becomes apparent that a literature review is not simply a list or an amalgamation of abstracts put together without grouping these and without considering possible interconnections.

### ***1.2 Different types of literature reviews***

The term literature review is a generic term that is used to refer to many different types of reviews. Which type of literature review is appropriate depends on the purpose of conducting it. Although several taxonomies exist, no consensus taxonomy has emerged to date.

An early taxonomy for literature reviews in education and psychology categorized literature reviews on the basis of their focus (methods, outcomes, theories, applications),

goal (integration, criticism, identification of key issues), perspective (neutral, non-neutral), coverage (inclusion and exclusion of research), organization (historical, conceptual, methodological) and audience (researchers, practitioners, policy-makers, public) (Cooper, 1985). The typology proposed by Paré et al. (2015), shown in Table 1, distinguishes reviews found in information system journals on the basis of four major goals, (i) summarizing literature, (ii) aggregating or integrating data, (iii) building explanations, and (iv) evaluating critically.

Reviews that aim at summarizing the literature include descriptive, traditional (narrative) and scoping reviews. Qualitative systematic reviews, meta-analyses and umbrella reviews, on the other hand, are reviews that seek to aggregate or integrate prior findings. Synthesis by aggregation is based on empirical results from primary studies, whereas synthesis by integration combines findings from primary studies that use two or more data collection methods (Dixon-Woods et al., 2005; Rousseau et al., 2008). Systematic reviews answer explicitly stated review questions using specific methods. Cochrane ([cochrane.org](http://cochrane.org)) and Campbell ([campbellcollaboration.org](http://campbellcollaboration.org)) collaborations are well-known international research networks that produce systematic reviews in healthcare and social interventions. Guidance on the minimum content to be reported in systematic reviews and meta-analyses can be obtained from the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) checklist, which was developed to improve the reporting quality of systematic reviews and meta-analyses (Moher et al., 2009). The PRISMA checklist is a useful tool not only for systematic reviews but also for other types of literature reviews since it increases awareness of the challenges and pitfalls when doing a literature review.

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**Table 1** *Types of reviews and their key features*

Type of review	Goal	Key features
Descriptive review	Summarize prior work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Used to identify trends or patterns in the empirical literature, possibly using some quantitative tools (e.g. frequency analysis)</li> <li>- Aims to be representative</li> <li>- Involves a systematic selection of prior work</li> </ul>
Traditional (narrative) review		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Used to summarize or synthesize information on a specific topic; often in support of an argument</li> <li>- Typically involves a subjective selection of prior work</li> </ul>
Scoping review		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Used to assess the extent and range of research available in a particular area</li> <li>- Involves a systematic selection of prior work</li> <li>- May be used to assess the potential of conducting a systematic review or further research</li> </ul>
Systematic review: Qualitative	Aggregate or integrate prior work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Type of systematic review used to answer a specific review question</li> <li>- Often supports evidence-based policy making by identifying what works</li> <li>- Involves a systematic selection of prior work</li> <li>- Uses a textual approach to draw inferences</li> </ul>
Systematic review: Quantitative (meta-analysis)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Type of systematic review used to answer a specific review question</li> <li>- Often supports evidence-based policy making by identifying what works, especially in the field of medicine</li> <li>- Involves a systematic selection of prior work</li> <li>- Uses statistical approaches to draw inferences</li> </ul>
Umbrella review		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Used to review and provide an overview of systematic reviews</li> <li>- Involves a systematic selection of prior work</li> </ul>

**Table 1** *Types of reviews and their key features (continued)*

Type of review	Goal	Key features
Theoretical review	Explanation building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Used to examine existing theories, often with the objective of extending these or developing new theories</li> <li>- Typically involves a systematic selection of prior work</li> </ul>
Realist review		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Theory-driven interpretative (possibly systematic) review used to understand complex interventions with a range of outcomes (e.g. in the area of social policy)</li> <li>- Focuses on why and how interventions work, for whom, and in what circumstances (Pawson et al., 2005)</li> <li>- Typically involves a systematic selection of prior work</li> </ul>
Critical review	Critical assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Used to assess prior work and identify shortcomings</li> <li>- May or may not involve a systematic selection of prior work</li> </ul>

*Note.* Adapted from Information & Management, 52(2), Paré, G., Trudel, M.-C., Jaana, M., and Kitsiou, S., "Synthesizing information systems knowledge: A typology of literature reviews", pp. 183-199, Copyright (2015), with permission from Elsevier.

Also available on the PRISMA website ([prisma-statement.org](http://prisma-statement.org)) is a generic flowchart that can be used to illustrate the inclusion and exclusion of research studies and help students to think more systematically in general. As pointed out by Hart (2018), a good literature review needs to be selective and focused. Thinking about which studies to include and why is, therefore, important – not only for systematic reviews, but also for other types of review.

Theoretical and realist reviews are used to build explanations, while critical reviews seek to critically assess the literature (Paré et al., 2015).

Other typologies have been identified through reviews of the literature. In the areas of health and health information, for example, fourteen common types of reviews

and the methodologies used for conducting these were analyzed to propose a typology (Grant & Booth, 2009). The authors conclude, however, that there is a "lack of unique distinguishing features for the most common review types" although some commonalities could be identified (Grant & Booth, 2009, p. 106).

Hart (2018), on the other hand, broadly distinguishes two main types of reviews. These are scholastic (traditional) and interventionist (systematic) reviews that differ in terms of both, goals (also shown in Table 1) and audience. The goal of the systematic review has traditionally been to synthesize the systematically selected evidence related to an intervention, a treatment or a policy for practitioners, policy-makers and researchers. Increasingly, however, systematic reviews have been used more generally to understand the contexts of a specific problem (Hart, 2018). The traditional (narrative) literature review, on the other hand, is interpretative and aims at providing an understanding of a body of literature related to a topic area. Traditional literature reviews differ in terms of their foci, but typically examine theories and applications, research methods, key arguments, findings and their interpretations. The scope of the traditional literature review is wider than that of a systematic review and it comprises, for example, reviews for undergraduate and graduate research, conceptual discussion, as well as argumentation (Hart, 2018). Similarly, Green, et al. (2006), focus on the main types of literature reviews. They distinguish three types of literature reviews, narrative reviews, qualitative systematic reviews, and quantitative systematic reviews (meta-analyses) (Green et al., 2006). Ridley's guide for students also centers on the main types of literature review, namely review of research (stand-alone literature review), review for research and systematic review (Ridley, 2012). The literature review for research is an essential component of an undergraduate research paper, a thesis and a dissertation. Stand-alone literature reviews, on the other hand, are often required for course assignments.