

Searching in a nutshell (I): **When to search for literature**

The library-based parts of research are often described as *reviewing the literature* or simply, the *lit review*, summarizing and evaluating the existing knowledge (“the literature”) that bears on your paper. Here I limit my advice to when you should *search* for literature within your larger research design and execution.

Many textbooks tell you to review a lot of literature at the beginning of your research, then come up with a research question and a research design informed by the existing scholarship. That model worked when sources were scarce and on paper. In a world too much information, that advice tells you to jump blindfolded into a flooded river of information and figure out how to get to the other shore.

Especially for research that is based mostly or entirely on textual material, there are *three* stages when you’ll want to find, interpret, and apply the literature:

1 The first pass: search “lite”

Scan the information environment *just enough* to get a sense of what sorts of researchable puzzles are out there, make some hunches about how to figure out one of those puzzles, and rough out what sorts of information – evidence – you need. This kind of “lite” lit search and review goes arm-in-arm with your planning or designing your research project. Your goal is to articulate a *research question* that you can actually research with the resources (information, skills, time...) you have available. (*For advanced researchers, this is also the stage for situational awareness assessment: is your idea “interesting,” a contribution to knowledge? If not, this is the time to re-think it.*)

- Think of this as picking a spot to enter the river, identifying where you hope to get out on the other side, going in ankle-deep to test the flow, and stepping back to decide what need to do next.

2 The main event: carry on systematically

Discover and harvest the literature that is relevant to your research question. You want literature that bears substantively on the question – more likely, on one aspect of your initial question. It may well also bear on the theory and methodology you consider, especially if your project involves using (or perhaps even gathering on your own) quantitative or qualitative data.

- Think of this as crossing the river of information to get as close as you can to the destination you picked. You must keep your eyes on your goal but also watch your step and be mindful of debris floating in your direction. You may need to stop a couple times to catch your breath and reassess. You may need to change your direction to get around obstacle. You may discover you picked the wrong place to wade in and have to find a different point of departure or another technique (like swimming and/or using a boat) to cross successfully.

3 Mopping up: circle back

Give an account of the literature you used. The written lit review (even an annotated bibliography) shows how your project and the existing, relevant scholarship fit together. As you draft your paper, you may discover holes to fill in your write-up: insights that put new light on arguments and sources you encountered earlier; hunches about how other disciplines’ literature might apply to your findings; you might even need to confirm citations. Now search the literature with your specific needs in mind.

- Now that you crossed a particular river at a particular place and time, think about how your journey would be useful knowledge for other people. What information that other people told you about crossing rivers was useful or useless or harmful? What lessons did you learn (including about how you’d make the crossing differently the next time) that other people should learn? What would you tell people you left on the riverbank? What would you tell people trying to cross similar rivers in

other places or other conditions?

Or, to mix metaphors, use the literature to answer the **Riddle of the Sphinx**:

*"A thing there is whose voice is one;
Whose feet are four then two then three."*

From the literature about doing lit-reviews:

Practical how-to advice oriented to grad students

- Jeffrey W. Knopf (2006). "Doing a Literature Review". *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 39(1): 127-132. doi:[10.1017/S1049096506060264](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096506060264).
- Iain McMenamin (2006). "Process and Text: Teaching Students to Review the Literature." *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 39(1): 133-135. doi:[10.1017/S1049096506060306](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096506060306).



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