

# Econ 191: Writing a Literature Review

Issi Romem

February 7, 2012

# What is the purpose of a literature review?

## Why do we need a literature review?

- **To show the reader that you know the literature:**  
“Yes, I am aware of so-and-so’s results on this topic.”)
- **To educate the reader about the literature:**  
“If you want to know about this aspect of the topic, read so-and-so.”
- **To motivate our research:**  
“The literature has looked at this and that, but there is no good answer to *this* important question, which I address in this paper.”

# What is the purpose of a literature review?

Why do we need a literature review?

- **To show the reader that you know the literature:**  
“Yes, I am aware of so-and-so’s results on this topic.”)
- **To educate the reader about the literature:**  
“If you want to know about this aspect of the topic, read so-and-so.”
- **To motivate our research:**  
“The literature has looked at this and that, but there is no good answer to *this* important question, which I address in this paper.”

# What is the purpose of a literature review?

Why do we need a literature review?

- **To show the reader that you know the literature:**  
“Yes, I am aware of so-and-so’s results on this topic.”)
- **To educate the reader about the literature:**  
“If you want to know about this aspect of the topic, read so-and-so.”
- **To motivate our research:**  
“The literature has looked at this and that, but there is no good answer to *this* important question, which I address in this paper.”

# How to find the relevant literature?

There is so much out there. How do we find the relevant literature?

- Find one (or more) relevant journal articles.
- Trace papers **backwards**.
- Trace papers **forwards**.

# How to find the relevant literature?

There is so much out there. How do we find the relevant literature?

- Find one (or more) relevant journal articles.
- Trace papers **backwards**.
- Trace papers **forwards**.

# How to find the relevant literature?

There is so much out there. How do we find the relevant literature?

- Find one (or more) relevant journal articles.
- Trace papers **backwards**.
- Trace papers **forwards**.

# How to find the relevant literature?

Finding one (or more) relevant journal articles:

- I prefer using **Google Scholar** ([www.scholar.google.com](http://www.scholar.google.com)). **EconLit** is useful, too, and is available through the library website.
- Search for the right keywords. How? Try some, and then try some more. We'll talk about how to read an article quickly in a moment.
- The *Journal of Economic Perspectives* is particularly suitable for obtaining a broad, non-technical overview of a topic.
- Limit yourself to journals in economics. They will also tend to cite and be cited by journals in economics.



# How to find the relevant literature?

Finding one (or more) relevant journal articles:

- I prefer using **Google Scholar** ([www.scholar.google.com](http://www.scholar.google.com)). **EconLit** is useful, too, and is available through the library website.
- Search for the right keywords. How? Try some, and then try some more. We'll talk about how to read an article quickly in a moment.
- The *Journal of Economic Perspectives* is particularly suitable for obtaining a broad, non-technical overview of a topic.
- Limit yourself to journals in economics. They will also tend to cite and be cited by journals in economics.

# How to find the relevant literature?

Finding one (or more) relevant journal articles:

- I prefer using **Google Scholar** ([www.scholar.google.com](http://www.scholar.google.com)). **EconLit** is useful, too, and is available through the library website.
- Search for the right keywords. How? Try some, and then try some more. We'll talk about how to read an article quickly in a moment.
- The *Journal of Economic Perspectives* is particularly suitable for obtaining a broad, non-technical overview of a topic.
- Limit yourself to journals in economics. They will also tend to cite and be cited by journals in economics.

# How to find the relevant literature?

Finding one (or more) relevant journal articles:

- I prefer using **Google Scholar** ([www.scholar.google.com](http://www.scholar.google.com)). **EconLit** is useful, too, and is available through the library website.
- Search for the right keywords. How? Try some, and then try some more. We'll talk about how to read an article quickly in a moment.
- The *Journal of Economic Perspectives* is particularly suitable for obtaining a broad, non-technical overview of a topic.
- Limit yourself to journals in economics. They will also tend to cite and be cited by journals in economics.

# How to find the relevant literature?

Trace papers backwards:

- Look at papers' **references** (bibliography), and pick out what to search for next. **Repeatedly.**
- If you want a quick hint at what is behind each title, skim the literature review (it is often embedded in the introduction, with no title).

# How to find the relevant literature?

Trace papers backwards:

- Look at papers' **references** (bibliography), and pick out what to search for next. **Repeatedly.**
- If you want a quick hint at what is behind each title, skim the literature review (it is often embedded in the introduction, with no title).

# How to find the relevant literature?

Trace papers forwards:

- On Google Scholar, you can find a paper and then see all **subsequent papers** citing that paper. Take a look!  
...then **repeat**.
- Sometimes, the number of times a paper is cited is a good indicator of its importance. Just remember, older papers have had more time to be cited.

# How to find the relevant literature?

Trace papers forwards:

- On Google Scholar, you can find a paper and then see all **subsequent papers** citing that paper. Take a look!  
...then **repeat**.
- Sometimes, the number of times a paper is cited is a good indicator of its importance. Just remember, older papers have had more time to be cited.

# How to read so many papers quickly?

The unfortunate truth is that academic papers in economics tend to be long, difficult, and very often boring.

How do we get around that?

The good news is that academic economics papers give you the bottom line in the **abstract**, the complete and non-technical version in the **introduction**, and the full rundown in **the rest of the paper**.

So...



# How to read so many papers quickly?

The unfortunate truth is that academic papers in economics tend to be long, difficult, and very often boring.

How do we get around that?

The good news is that academic economics papers give you the bottom line in the **abstract**, the complete and non-technical version in the **introduction**, and the full rundown in **the rest of the paper**.

So...

# How to read so many papers quickly?

The unfortunate truth is that academic papers in economics tend to be long, difficult, and very often boring.

How do we get around that?

The good news is that academic economics papers give you the bottom line in the **abstract**, the complete and non-technical version in the **introduction**, and the full rundown in **the rest of the paper**.

So...

# How to read so many papers quickly?

The unfortunate truth is that academic papers in economics tend to be long, difficult, and very often boring.

How do we get around that?

The good news is that academic economics papers give you the bottom line in the **abstract**, the complete and non-technical version in the **introduction**, and the full rundown in **the rest of the paper**.

So...

# How to read so many papers quickly?

- Read the title and abstract. Then stop to judge whether or not to delve deeper.
- If you do decide to delve deeper, read the introduction.
- The introduction should suffice for you to get the main idea and understand what the author did, without going into much detail.
- If the paper is relevant to your research, skim the relevant sections. Pay special attention to tables and figures - they often tell the whole story.
- Only read an entire paper if it is very relevant. Expect 3-5 such papers.

# How to read so many papers quickly?

- Read the title and abstract. Then stop to judge whether or not to delve deeper.
- If you do decide to delve deeper, read the introduction.
- The introduction should suffice for you to get the main idea and understand what the author did, without going into much detail.
- If the paper is relevant to your research, skim the relevant sections. Pay special attention to tables and figures - they often tell the whole story.
- Only read an entire paper if it is very relevant. Expect 3-5 such papers.

# How to read so many papers quickly?

- Read the title and abstract. Then stop to judge whether or not to delve deeper.
- If you do decide to delve deeper, read the introduction.
- The introduction should suffice for you to get the main idea and understand what the author did, without going into much detail.
- If the paper is relevant to your research, skim the relevant sections. Pay special attention to tables and figures - they often tell the whole story.
- Only read an entire paper if it is very relevant. Expect 3-5 such papers.

# How to read so many papers quickly?

- Read the title and abstract. Then stop to judge whether or not to delve deeper.
- If you do decide to delve deeper, read the introduction.
- The introduction should suffice for you to get the main idea and understand what the author did, without going into much detail.
- If the paper is relevant to your research, skim the relevant sections. Pay special attention to tables and figures - they often tell the whole story.
- Only read an entire paper if it is very relevant. Expect 3-5 such papers.

# How to read so many papers quickly?

- Read the title and abstract. Then stop to judge whether or not to delve deeper.
- If you do decide to delve deeper, read the introduction.
- The introduction should suffice for you to get the main idea and understand what the author did, without going into much detail.
- If the paper is relevant to your research, skim the relevant sections. Pay special attention to tables and figures - they often tell the whole story.
- Only read an entire paper if it is very relevant. Expect 3-5 such papers.



# How to read so many papers quickly?

Econ 191:  
Writing a  
Literature  
Review

Issi Romem

If you find yourself slogging through every paper or never passing the abstract, adjust your standards and revisit the previous slide.

As you read papers - abstract, intro or more - **take notes!** You will need them.

# How to read so many papers quickly?

Econ 191:  
Writing a  
Literature  
Review

Issi Romem

If you find yourself slogging through every paper or never passing the abstract, adjust your standards and revisit the previous slide.

As you read papers - abstract, intro or more - **take notes!** You will need them.

# How to read so many papers quickly?

Econ 191:  
Writing a  
Literature  
Review

Issi Romem

If you find yourself slogging through every paper or never passing the abstract, adjust your standards and revisit the previous slide.

As you read papers - abstract, intro or more - **take notes!** You will need them.

# How to structure a literature review?

After taking in so many papers:

- How do we make sense of it all?
- How do we convey the sense that we've made to someone else?

# How to structure a literature review?

After taking in so many papers:

- How do we make sense of it all?
- How do we convey the sense that we've made to someone else?

# How to structure a literature review?

- Use your notes (see why they are important?).
- Seek common themes that tie together more than one paper.
- Can you lump papers together in multiple ways?
- Is there an order within each strand?
  - Chronological development?
  - Do authors build on each other's work sequentially?
  - Do they contradict each other?
  - Do they agree or disagree?
  - Are there papers that fit in more than one strand or strand?
- Now that you've figured it out, **tell the tale!**
- You don't have to go into great detail about every paper. A sentence or two is often - but not always - enough.



# How to structure a literature review?

- Use your notes (see why they are important?).
- Seek common themes that tie together more than one paper.
- Can you lump papers together in multiple ways?
- Is there an order within each strand?
  - Is the chronological development important?
  - Do the authors build on each other's work in a way that is important to your topic?
  - Do they contradict each other?
  - Do they complement each other?
  - Do they have different perspectives on the same topic?
  - Do they have different methods?
  - Do they have different conclusions?
- Now that you've figured it out, **tell the tale!**
- You don't have to go into great detail about every paper. A sentence or two is often - but not always - enough.



# How to structure a literature review?

- Use your notes (see why they are important?).
- Seek common themes that tie together more than one paper.
- Can you lump papers together in multiple ways?
- Is there an order within each strand?
  - Is the chronological development important?
  - Do authors agree with one another in their conclusions, or do they contrast with each other?
  - Do they agree on methodology?
  - Are there papers that fit in more than one strand of literature?
- Now that you've figured it out, **tell the tale!**
- You don't have to go into great detail about every paper. A sentence or two is often - but not always - enough.

# How to structure a literature review?

- Use your notes (see why they are important?).
- Seek common themes that tie together more than one paper.
- Can you lump papers together in multiple ways?
- Is there an order within each strand?
  - Is the chronological development important?
    - Do authors agree with one another in their conclusions, or do they contrast with each other?
    - Do they agree on methodology?
    - Are there papers that fit in more than one strand of literature?
- Now that you've figured it out, **tell the tale!**
- You don't have to go into great detail about every paper. A sentence or two is often - but not always - enough.

# How to structure a literature review?

- Use your notes (see why they are important?).
- Seek common themes that tie together more than one paper.
- Can you lump papers together in multiple ways?
- Is there an order within each strand?
  - Is the chronological development important?
  - Do authors agree with one another in their conclusions, or do they contrast with each other?
  - Do they agree on methodology?
  - Are there papers that fit in more than one strand of literature?
- Now that you've figured it out, **tell the tale!**
- You don't have to go into great detail about every paper. A sentence or two is often - but not always - enough.

# How to structure a literature review?

- Use your notes (see why they are important?).
- Seek common themes that tie together more than one paper.
- Can you lump papers together in multiple ways?
- Is there an order within each strand?
  - Is the chronological development important?
  - Do authors agree with one another in their conclusions, or do they contrast with each other?
  - Do they agree on methodology?
    - Are there papers that fit in more than one strand of literature?
- Now that you've figured it out, **tell the tale!**
- You don't have to go into great detail about every paper. A sentence or two is often - but not always - enough.

# How to structure a literature review?

- Use your notes (see why they are important?).
- Seek common themes that tie together more than one paper.
- Can you lump papers together in multiple ways?
- Is there an order within each strand?
  - Is the chronological development important?
  - Do authors agree with one another in their conclusions, or do they contrast with each other?
  - Do they agree on methodology?
  - Are there papers that fit in more than one strand of literature?
- Now that you've figured it out, **tell the tale!**
- You don't have to go into great detail about every paper. A sentence or two is often - but not always - enough.

# How to structure a literature review?

- Use your notes (see why they are important?).
- Seek common themes that tie together more than one paper.
- Can you lump papers together in multiple ways?
- Is there an order within each strand?
  - Is the chronological development important?
  - Do authors agree with one another in their conclusions, or do they contrast with each other?
  - Do they agree on methodology?
  - Are there papers that fit in more than one strand of literature?
- Now that you've figured it out, **tell the tale!**
- You don't have to go into great detail about every paper. A sentence or two is often - but not always - enough.

# How to structure a literature review?

- Use your notes (see why they are important?).
- Seek common themes that tie together more than one paper.
- Can you lump papers together in multiple ways?
- Is there an order within each strand?
  - Is the chronological development important?
  - Do authors agree with one another in their conclusions, or do they contrast with each other?
  - Do they agree on methodology?
  - Are there papers that fit in more than one strand of literature?
- Now that you've figured it out, **tell the tale!**
- You don't have to go into great detail about every paper. A sentence or two is often - but not always - enough.

# Can you give an example?

Of course!

**Every paper you read will have a literature review**, either in it's own section, or embedded in the introduction, so once you have your research question spelled out, **start reading**.

Good luck!



# Can you give an example?

Of course!

Every paper you read will have a literature review, either in it's own section, or embedded in the introduction, so once you have your research question spelled out, **start reading**.

Good luck!

# Can you give an example?

Of course!

**Every paper you read will have a literature review**, either in it's own section, or embedded in the introduction, so once you have your research question spelled out, **start reading**.

Good luck!

# Can you give an example?

Of course!

**Every paper you read will have a literature review**, either in it's own section, or embedded in the introduction, so once you have your research question spelled out, **start reading**.

**Good luck!**