

Researching Existing Sources

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we will take a closer look at the second step of the scientific method for sociology, which is the research of existing sources, also known as the literature review. We will discuss how it is important for sociologists to review the work of previous researchers before they begin. We will also discover how conducting a literature review further strengthens our problem solving skill. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. The Literature Review

Sociologists are lucky to be able to learn from the work of their peers and generations of sociologists before them. When beginning a new research project, the second step after picking a topic and formulating a question is to see what other researchers have written about your topic.

By reviewing the existing research, you'll see what questions have already been raised and potentially answered. You'll find new angles and ways to approach your topic that might not have occurred to you before. You may identify gaps in existing scholarship that your work can help fill, or read an interesting theory that could apply to your work. All of these insights will be valuable as you move forward with your research plan and focus on **problem solving skills**. Additionally, they prepare you to draw conclusions and solve problems by arming you with information about the topic.

This phase of background research is called a **literature review**, which is a survey of any existing similar or related studies on a topic of study. A visit to the library or a thorough online search of research databases will uncover existing research about the topic of study.

➔ **EXAMPLE** To study hygiene and its value in a particular society, a researcher might sort through existing research and unearth studies about child-rearing, vanity, obsessive-compulsive behaviors, and cultural attitudes toward beauty.

It's important to sift through this information and determine what is relevant. Using existing sources educates researchers and helps refine and improve studies' designs.



BIG IDEA

Conducting a literature review helps researchers gain a broad understanding of work previously conducted on the topic at hand and enables them to position their own research to build on prior knowledge. The literature review might also prompt the researcher to revisit their research question, if they discover it has already been answered or if they find an interesting new angle.



Literature Review

A survey of any existing similar or related studies on a topic of study.

2. Conducting a Literature Review

The literature review is not just the process of doing this background research; it is also an important section in your final research report, whether it comes in the form of a paper, a presentation, or an article. As a researcher reviews the existing literature, they organize their notes in a way that allows them to build an argument and support their point.

The final literature review is an examination and discussion of the sources used in a research study. It is written in paragraph form and sources are grouped together by trends found in the literature.

There are seven steps to writing a literature review:

1. Narrow your topic by defining your research question.

2. Search for literature on your topic of choice at the library or using an online database of scientific journals. Sometimes, popular science and news articles will be relevant as well. As you search, you may have to refine your search terms to narrow down a big pool of material to the sources that are most useful for you, or you may have to broaden your search to pull in related ideas.

↪ **EXAMPLE** If you are researching the impact of new bike lanes on rates of cycling among poor urban communities, you may want to look up existing scholarship on urban cycling and urban street safety. But if you will be researching small American cities, a previous study on cycling in Amsterdam might not be very helpful, so you may want to narrow your search to studies in similarly sized cities in North America. Alternatively, you may find that your specific interest in cycling in poor urban communities is too specific to have been studied very much, so you might broaden your search to include studies of urban cyclists that don't classify them by income.

3. Read the selected articles thoroughly and evaluate them. Take notes and copy down relevant quotes and data to support your topic. Track down any new leads that might come up in your reading.

↪ **EXAMPLE** If you read an op-ed by the mayor of a small city, arguing for more investment in bike lanes, that might not be a very useful source for your study because it is an opinion piece. But in writing the op-ed, the mayor might have referred to recent studies from the public health department about the rates of cycling in the community, or statements from the department of public works about the cost of resurfacing streets. These might be fruitful, so you would see if you can find the sources referenced in the op-ed to read for yourself.

4. Organize the selected readings by looking for patterns among them or by topic. If you are researching something that has changed over time you might organize them chronologically. Other researchers organize by main topic, or issue and how it relates to the main problem. Other ways to organize your review is from general information to specific information, unknown information to known information, by comparison and contrast, or even by problem-cause-solution order.

➔ **EXAMPLE** After collecting your sources on bike lanes and bike ridership, you might find that there is a clear trend of lower cycling rates among urban low income communities, while high income neighborhoods sometimes have a lot of cyclists and sometimes have none at all. Meanwhile, most bike lanes in small American cities are found in commercial or touristic districts or in wealthy neighborhoods.

When deciding how to organize this background information in your literature review, you might choose to first present the information about the location of bike lanes in residential neighborhoods and how their presence correlates to average income. Then you might move to sharing information about how many high income communities have very low rates of cycling, thus implying that having a high income is not the determining factor in whether someone rides a bike or not. Finally you might bring in the data about lower cycling rates in low income communities, to tighten the focus into your actual research topic.

5. Develop a purpose statement and form an introduction to your review. The introduction should pose the research question clearly for the reader. You should tell your reasons or rationale for doing the review. It should also explain how the sources are organized and point out the limit of your research.

➔ **EXAMPLE** For your literature review on cycling, you might write a purpose statement about how you are drawn to the topic due to inequities in urban infrastructure, and a curiosity about whether the rules of supply and demand can apply to something like bike lanes in neighborhoods where the residents don't traditionally ride bikes, but might begin riding bikes if it was seen as safe and normal.

6. Write the review. Each source should get its own paragraph. Make sure you tie it all together with an introduction and conclusion.

7. Use APA format for in-text citations, direct quotations and your source page. Add a cover page before turning it in. Researchers—including student researchers—are responsible for correctly citing existing sources they use in a study or that inform their work. While it is fine to borrow previously published material (as long as it enhances a unique viewpoint), it must be referenced properly and never plagiarized. When deciding what to include in your review, it is important to consider the date of publication of an existing source and to take into account attitudes and common cultural ideals that may have influenced the research.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd gathered research for their book *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* in the 1920s. Attitudes and cultural norms were vastly different then than they are now. Beliefs about gender roles, race, education, and work have changed significantly since then. At the time, the study's purpose was to reveal the truth about small U.S. communities. Today, it is an illustration of attitudes and values of the 1920s.



Problem Solving: Apply Your Skill

Imagine that you work in education and you want to examine the achievement gap between low-income students and high-income students. There is a great deal of literature to review on this topic; however, there are still a lot of aspects to research. How would you use a literature review and your problem solving skills to approach this issue?



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you were introduced to the purpose and use of **the literature review** as a step in the sociology research process. You explored the individual steps of **conducting a literature review** and writing up your review for the final paper. Finally, you discovered how a literature review strengthens your problem solving skill.

Best of luck in your learning!

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TERMS TO KNOW

Literature Review

A survey of any existing similar or related studies on a topic of study.