POLI 343
Introduction to Political Research

Session 8-Finding and Using Background Literature

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Finding Background Information for a Research Study:

It is important to settle on a general idea for a research study. The next step is to go to the library to gather background information on the topic you have identified. In addition to gaining general knowledge about the topic area, your goals are among others to determine the current state of knowledge and to become familiar with current research and to find a specific research hypothesis or research questions. Once you are familiar with what is currently known and what is currently being done in the research area, the task is simply to extend current research one more step.

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Using Background Literature

Sometimes this requires a bit of logic in which you combine two or more established facts to reach a new conclusion or prediction. Usually the authors of a research report literally will give you ideas for new research. It is common for researchers to conclude a discussion with suggestions for future research. You can turn one of these suggestions into a research question. Allow the literature to lead you to a new idea. In political science section of the library, there are books and journals. The mass of published information is referred to as *the literature*.

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Searching for Literature

It is your job as a research student to search the literature to find a handful of items that are relevant to your research idea. This may, at first, appear to be an overwhelming task; fortunately the literature is filled with useful aids to guide your search. Specifically all the individual publications are interconnected by cross referencing and there are many summary guides providing overviews that can send you directly to specific topic areas. By following the guides and tracing the interconnectedness, it is possible to conduct a successful literature search without undue pain and suffering.

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Background and Secondary Sources:

Before going through the actual process a literature search there is need to understand some terms. Individual items in the literature can be classified into two broad categories: (a) *primary sources* and (b) *secondary sources*. A primary source is a first hand report in which the authors describe their own observations some of which might have been obtained through interviews using a questionnaire. Typically a primary source is a research report, published in a scientific journal or periodical, in which the researchers describe their own research, including why the research was done, how the study was conducted, what results were found and how these results were interpreted.

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Secondary Source

In contrast a secondary source is a secondhand report iŶ ‖hiÐh the authors disÐuss soŵeoŶe else's observations. Examples of secondary sources include:

a. Books and textbooks

b. The introductory section of research reports in which previous report is presented as a foundation for the current study and

c. Newspaper and magazine articles

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Role of Primary and Secondary Sources

Both primary and secondary sources play important roles in the literature search process. Secondary sources can provide summaries of past research. A textbook will often summarize ten years of research citing several important studies. Secondary sources can save the student hours of library research. Note that secondary sources are always incomplete and can be biased. In a secondary source the author has selected only bits and pieces of the original study. In general secondary tell only part of the truth and can distort the truth.

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Role of Primary and Secondary Sources (Co^t'd)

Reading primary sources however can be a tedious process because they are long and detailed reports focusing on a narrowly defined topic. It is recommended that the research student should plan to use secondary sources to gain an overview and identify a few specific primary sources for more detailed reading. Secondary sources provide a good starting point for a literature search, but you must depend on primary sources for final answers.

The Purpose of the Literature Search

Each research is part of an existing body of knowledge, which builds on the foundation of past research and expanding the foundation for future research. Ultimately the goal of the literature review is to find a set of published research reports that define the current state of knowledge in an area and to identify a gap in that knowledge base that your study will attempt to fill. When the research is complete you will write your own report.

The report begins with an introduction that summarizes past research (from the literature review) and provide a logical justification for your study.

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The Literature Search:

Assume you are starting your literature search with only a general idea for a research topic. Your purpose therefore is to narrow down your general idea to a specific research question and to find all the published information necessary to document and support that question. There are many different ways to begin a literature search.

One of the best places to start is with a recently published secondary source such as a textbook in an area appropriate for your idea (e.g. Politics in Ghana or International Politics textbook). Use the chapter headings and subheadings to help focus your search on a more narrowly defined area.

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The Literature Search ;CoŶt'd:

In addition make notes of the following items, each of which can serve as an excellent starting point when you begin to search for primary sources (journal articles) relevant to your topic.

Make a list of the correct terms or subject words used to identify and describe the variables in the study and the characteristics of the participants. Researchers often develop specific set of terms to describe a topic area e.g. you may have trouble finding articles on eleÐtoral |iÐtories uŶless LJou use the aÐÐepted terŵ, elections.

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The Literature Search-Author Naŵes ;CoŶt'd⍰:

A small group of individual researchers is responsible for much of the work being done in a specific area. They are the leading researchers in the area. As you develop your list of subject of subject words and author names, keep in mind that any single secondary source is necessarily incomplete and probably and probably selective. It is wise to repeat the list making process with two or three different sources, then combine the lists. When this is finished you should have an excellent set of leads to help you move into the primary source literature.

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The Literature Search-Using Online Databases ;CoŶt'd):

Although there are thousands of research articles in political science published every year there are many tools available that help you to search through publications to find the few that are directly to your research topic. Most of these tools now exist in computer databases. A typical database contains about one million publications or records that are cross referenced by subject words and author names. You enter a subject word (or author name) as a search term and the database will search through all of its records and provide a list of the publications that are related to that subject (or author).

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The Literature Search-Using Online Database ;CoŶt'd:

Soŵe dataďases are full tedžt ||hiÐh ŵeaŶs that eaÐh record is a complete, word for word, copy of the original publication. Other databases will provide only a brief summary of each publication. The typical summary will include the title, authors, name of the journal or book in which the publication appears, a list of the subject words that describe the publication and an abstract. The abstract is a brief summary of the publication, usually about 100 words. A good example of a database in political science is the *CSA Worldwide Political Science Abstracts* Database Guide.

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