

HONORS COLLEGE GUIDE

WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW

The Senior Project is the single most important requirement for earning the Honors degree, and a central element of a good Senior Project is a literature review. A literature review can best be described as a focused account of previous work that has been done on a research topic. The goal and value of the review is to show readers what others have already said about that topic, and thus how your work participates in, and contributes to, a growing body of knowledge in the discipline.

Literature reviews vary by discipline, just as publishing varies by discipline. But as a general rule, a literature review will survey published research in scholarly books and articles. As you begin working on your Senior Project topic, you should ask your mentor to help you identify the appropriate sources in your field.

Here are some questions to help you begin working on a literature review:

1. What are the main journals in my field of study?
2. What are the most influential book-length studies or edited collections?
3. Where is a relatively recent published bibliography on my subject of study?

Once you start looking for these sources, it is easy to find yourself overwhelmed by the amount of material. Remember that it is probably unreasonable to expect an exhaustive literature survey in an Honors Senior Project. Rather, the goal is to help you develop a scholarly habit of mind, in this case the habit of explaining your approach to a research problem in relation to the approaches that have been taken by others. Like any other scholar, you may find yourself agreeing with, building on, or partially or completely rejecting previous work. In any case, you should be ready to suggest how, even when you largely agree with previous scholarship, your Senior Project extends or refines that work.

If you have questions about the literature, please feel free to contact a member of the Honors staff.