Using the Ideas of Others
Literature Review Guidelines

The goal of a literature review is to accurately report others’ ideas about a given topic, in a framework that makes clear the connections and contrasts between various arguments, and to critique each argument based on its logic, evidence, and usefulness in building our understanding of the issue.

A successful literature review:

1. **Has its own argument.** The thesis of a literature review generally takes one of the following three forms: one of the arguments is more convincing than the others; all arguments are valid and can be reconciled; or no argument fully explains the issue at hand.

   *Example:* I will argue that none of these articles satisfactorily addresses the issue, because none accounts for recent findings that….

   *Non-example:* Each of the following authors makes a claim about the topic…

2. **Accurately restates other authors’ arguments.** Provides context for all evidence and quotes, and acknowledges any caveats the author adds to his argument. Avoids simplifying or exaggerating to make the argument easier to criticize.

   *Example:* Though he acknowledges that there are some conditions under which politicians will favor their loyal core voters, Smith argues that under most circumstances, politicians will prefer to use government resources to “buy off” voters who are undecided.

   *Non-example:* Smith claims that politicians will always give goods to swing voters, an argument that is clearly falsified by the existence of political machines like Tammany Hall.

3. **Selects evidence that is relevant** to the question at hand, rather than summarizing each author’s entire article.

   *Example:* Johnson argues that the recent increase in aid to various developing countries has undermined the ability of the public to hold their leaders accountable. He cites the findings from his ongoing study, which correlates foreign aid flows with voter participation….

   *Non-example:* Johnson argues that the recent increase in aid to various developing countries has undermined the ability of the public to hold their leaders accountable. He provides a background of the issue, starting with colonialism…

4. **Explains how evidence from the articles supports the thesis.**

   *Example:* Brown criticizes the literature on democracy by pointing out that key countries have been left out of the analysis. When he includes data from these countries, he finds that democratic countries do not have better welfare indicators than autocracies. This evidence challenges prior findings and lends support to my claim that the benefits of democracy do not reach the poorest in society.

   *Non-example:* Brown criticizes most literature on the subject by pointing out that key countries have been left out of the analysis. He shows democracy does not help the poor.

5. **Clearly indicates whether a given statement is the argument of an author** or is the reviewer’s own claim.

   *Example:* Jones suggests that ethnic diversity harms growth because conflict between groups undermines the stability of the state. I argue that this hypothesis is problematic because it
assumes that conflict is inevitable in diverse societies, an assumption that is challenged by countries like Zambia.

*Non-example:* Jones suggests that ethnic diversity harms growth because conflict between groups undermines the stability of the state. On the other hand, countries like Zambia have high diversity, but little history of ethnic conflict.

6. **Constrains review to assessments of the authors’ arguments,** and does not wander into the reviewer’s own beliefs about the topic. Refrains from ideological jabs, self-righteousness, and condemnation of ideas or the people who hold them.

   *Example:* Williams argues that most scholars believe globalization to be a good thing, while ignoring all the harm that globalization has caused. I would suggest that this is a straw man argument; criticisms of globalization are everywhere, even in academia. Nevertheless, he provides a helpful frame for…

   *Non-example:* Williams argues that most scholars believe globalization to be a good thing, while ignoring all the harm that globalization has caused. I agree. Globalization has done more harm than good and people should recognize this.

   *(Real!)* *Non-example:* Williams argues that most scholars believe globalization to be a good thing, while ignoring all the harm that globalization has caused. I agree. Economists need to realize that their narrow-mindedness has harmed a lot of people. Maybe if they would go experience developing countries instead of just telling people what to do, they would do a better job.