

HOW TO CONDUCT A LITERATURE REVIEW

What is a literature review?

A literature review is a brief survey of what has already been written by scholars about your research topic. It is not a detailed examination or exhaustive cataloging of said material, but only a preliminary collation of resources that are relevant to your research topic and/or themes. Do note that the resources included in a literature review are scholarly sources. Furthermore, a literature review can either be a section within a larger paper or a self-contained paper in itself.

What is the purpose of a literature review?

The main purpose of a literature review is for you, as a researcher, to become acquainted with the current state of knowledge production and the research paradigm in your chosen area of research. Thus, a literature review enables you to historicize and contextualize your own research; to place your work in conversation with others'; identify lacunas in current research in order to meaningfully address them; narrow down your research avenue; draw connections between the various themes and disciplines relevant to your research; and, deepen your understanding of the research topic by way of paying homage to, and reflecting on the work done before you.

How does a literature review differ from an annotated bibliography?

A literature review primarily concerns itself with the work that is being reviewed. It is written in an expository manner with a proper introduction, body, and conclusion. Whereas, an annotated bibliography is an alphabetical listing of the sources consulted followed by a sustained, but brief, engagement with them and how they inform your research.

Is doing a literature review a prerequisite for constructing an annotated bibliography?

You need not have prepared a literature review before making an annotated bibliography, as the two are neither mutually exclusive nor inclusive. Depending on your research project, you may not even need to prepare an annotated bibliography, as a literature review will suffice for the project's needs, or vice-versa.

What is a good length for a literature review?

There is no ‘good length’ as such, since it is dependent on the needs of your project, time constraints, and sources available to you. Thus, for example, while a five page essay would generally require you to undertake a literature review of four to six resources, your literature review can include ten resources as well. That is why, please keep in mind the needs of your paper and the constraints under which you are working.

How do I conduct a literature review?

Summary:

How to conduct a literature review in 5 easy steps:

1. Determine a few keywords (for example, masculinity, sexual violence, feminist film theory).
2. Open an online scholarly database (Google Scholar, eBrary, Taylor and Francis, Project MUSE, SAGE Journals, etc.), go to advance search options, and enter your keywords. When entering your keywords, you can further refine your search results by making use of the Boolean operators (AND, OR, and NOT) to pair up different keywords. Additionally, you can further refine the search results by selecting the academic disciplines appropriate for your research work, such as Film Studies, Gender Studies, Indian Studies, etc.
Note: it is imperative that you thoroughly search various databases as some of them might yield results that you will not find in other databases.
3. After you press the search button, various results will show up. Download the ones that either make direct reference to your object of study or address the themes that you are interested in addressing yourself.
4. Having finished downloading all the journal articles, review them by way of identifying the argument, theoretical framework, methodology, the major themes, strengths and weaknesses of the article, and the validity of the argument being made. Do this for each individual journal article that you download.
5. Ensure that your literature review is written in an expository manner with a proper introduction, body, and conclusion. This means that you should organize your literature review along thematic, chronological, or methodological, etc. lines to ensure overall coherence.

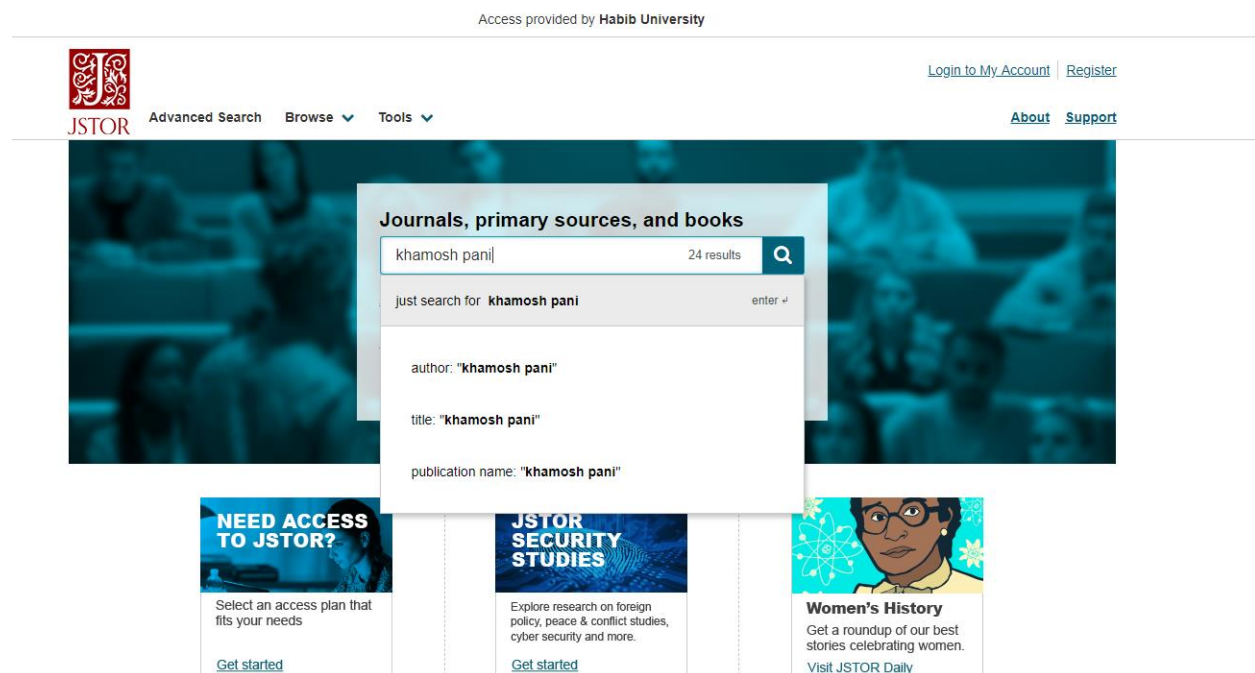
Doing a Literature Review: a sample

The key to conducting a literature review is determining the keywords for your research. Ensure that these keywords are representative of the key areas of research on which you wish to focus. For example, I happened to watch *Khamosh Pani* (2003) recently: a classic partition movie that situates the individual (in this case a widow and her son) in relation to the wider socio-political upheavals that are taking place in Pakistan during the late 1970s. Of interest to me in this film are the themes of gendered violence, increasing bouts of religious violence, and how Partition continues to haunt and significantly influence the lives of people living on both sides of the border. While these themes, as articulated right now, are too broad to be used as keywords for research purposes, they are still a starting point and we can further refine them from here.

Having determined the key words, you can start searching for scholarly articles on any of the online scholarly databases such as Google Scholar, eBrary, Taylor and Francis, Project MUSE, SAGE Journals, etc. For this sample, I will be using JSTOR for demonstrative purposes.

When you open JSTOR and start your search, your first keyword should always be the name/title of the text under study. As such, my first keyword, when searching scholarly work only, will be “khamosh pani” itself.

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As you can see, I typed “khamosh pani” in the search option and it shows that there are 24 results. I press enter and see what results come up.

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Subject:
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JOURNAL ARTICLE
[Floating on Silent Waters: Religion, Nationalism, and Dislocated Women in Khamosh Pani](#)
[Shahnaz Khan](#)
Meridians, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2009), pp. 130-152
Topics: [Women](#), [Sexual violence](#), [Hindus](#), [Men](#), [Sikhism](#), [Jihad](#), [Buoyancy](#), [Muslims](#), [Religious terrorism](#)

JOURNAL ARTICLE
[Review: "Silent Waters" and "Skeleton"](#)
Khamosh Pani by Sabiha Sumr
Pinjar by Chandra Prakash Dwivedi
Review by: [Priya Verma](#)
Off-Shore Books, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2009), pp. 10-50

Instead of 24, there are 17 results now, and that’s fine. Sometimes it happens that an online database will display a different number of results than what it generates. There’s nothing we can do about it and it does not significantly affect our research either.

As there are only 17 results available to me through JSTOR, I shall peruse them all. After going through all of them, I find that only a few of them are relevant to the themes in which I am interested in. As you go through these articles, you should be thinking about the keywords that these published articles have used as they can help you identify keywords for your own paper.



JOURNAL ARTICLE

**A NATION PARTITIONED OR HOMES DIVIDED? THE SEVERED
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE STATE, COMMUNITY AND
ABDUCTED WOMEN IN THE POST PARTITION PERIOD**

Rachna Mehra

Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, Vol. 73 (2012), pp. 1391-1397

Topics: [Women](#), [Hindus](#), [Kidnapping](#), [Sexual violence](#), [Human extraterrestrial encounters](#),
[Indian literature](#), [Sikhism](#), [Ordinances](#), [Written narratives](#)

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JOURNAL ARTICLE

The Two Punjabs: A Cultural Path to Peace in South Asia?

Alyssa Ayres

World Policy Journal, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Winter, 2005/2006), pp. 63-68

Topics: [Sikhism](#), [Indian culture](#), [Hindus](#), [Indian literature](#), [Peacetime](#), [Countries](#), [British
literature](#), [Musical games](#), [Territorial disputes](#)

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JOURNAL ARTICLE

**Revisiting 1947 through Popular Cinema: A Comparative Study of
India and Pakistan**

GITA VISWANATH, SALMA MALIK

Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 44, No. 36 (SEPTEMBER 5-11, 2009), pp. 61-69

Topics: [Movies](#), [Melodrama](#), [Narratives](#), [Riots](#), [Motion picture industry](#), [Indian literature](#),
[Hindus](#), [Film criticism](#), [Love](#), [Women](#)

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JOURNAL ARTICLE

Gendered Casualties: Memoirs in Activism and the Problem of Representing Violence

Sudarat Musikawong

Meridians, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2011), pp. 174-204

Topics: [Women](#), [Massacres](#), [Sexual violence](#), [Left wing politics](#), [Violence against women](#), [Student movements](#), [Masculinity](#), [Men](#), [Feminism](#), [Gender roles](#)

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JOURNAL ARTICLE

ANNUAL BIBLIOGRAPHY OF WORKS ABOUT LIFE WRITING, 2013–2014

Biography, Vol. 37, No. 4 (fall 2014), pp. 974-1132

Topics: [Written narratives](#), [Memory](#), [Bibliographies](#), [Memoirs](#), [Women](#), [Autoethnography](#), [Slave narratives](#)

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JOURNAL ARTICLE

Punjabi: Search for Roots

V.N. Tewari

Indian Literature, Vol. 24, No. 6, ANNUAL SURVEY OF THE 22 LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES OF INDIA (November-December 1981), pp. 114-120

Topics: [Theater](#), [Literary criticism](#), [Novels](#), [Poetic movements](#), [Novelists](#), [Marxism](#), [Anthologies](#), [Short stories](#)

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Thinking back to the broad themes that interest me (gendered violence, increasing bouts of religious violence, and, of course, how Partition continues to haunt and significantly influence the lives of people living on both sides of the border) it can be observed that the “sexual violence”, “territorial disputes”, and “masculinity” are keywords that can help me in my paper.

After downloading all the journal articles, review them by way of identifying the argument, theoretical framework, methodology, the major themes, strengths and weaknesses of the article, and the validity of the argument being made. Do this for each individual journal article that you download. However, do not list each individual journal article and proceed to analyze them, rather ensure that your literature review is written in an expository manner with a proper introduction, body, and conclusion. This means that you should organize your literature review along thematic, chronological, or methodological, etc. lines to ensure overall coherence.

For example, I have decided to write a literature review using only three journal articles from my search on JSTOR, namely Viswanath & Malik (2009), Khan (2009), and Palmer (2011). Furthermore, after reading all of the articles I have decided to use ‘film’ as the common thread to hold my literature review together. Please do note that a literature review will generally include more than only three sources; this is only for demonstrative purposes:

In face of the Pakistani State’s staunch refusal to admit to the loss of lives and cultural ties involved in the two watershed and traumatic events in South Asian history - the Partition 1947 and the Independence of Bangladesh 1971 - films provide us with a way of collective remembering and mourning (Khan 2009; Viswanath and Malik 2009).

Viswanath & Malik (2009) and Khan (2009) document how films are singularly powerful cultural artifacts for multiple reasons, and chief among them is their ability to forge a sense of nationalism and an understanding of citizenship. Consequently, and quite necessarily, films also do the work of informing us who is not a citizen, as the viewer must possess the knowledge of ‘what to do’ along with ‘what not to do’. Therefore, to explicate the link between nationalism and citizenship, Viswanath & Malik (2009) and Khan (2009) turn to *Khamosh Pani* (2003), as the film remind us of the importance of remembering and mourning because in order not to repeat the horrors of the past, we must first be willing to look at them. We must will ourselves to pay respect to, by way of acknowledging, the pain and suffering of all those precious lives that were lost. And we must be willing to build bridges where so many have burned. However, Palmer (2011) in her visual analysis of *Khamosh Pani* (2003) notes, unlike Viswanath & Malik (2009) and Khan (2009), that certain bodies are more prone to violence, specifically sexual violence, and that the body is decidedly feminine. As many post-colonial historians, like Chatterjee and Veena Das point out, the sites upon which masculine power dynamics were played

out were in fact women's bodies. Thus, it is imperative that citizenship and nationalism be analyzed from a gendered lens as well.

That's why, even as the Pakistani State (and it is no coincidence that States are discursively constructed in masculine terms) continues to crunch out one anti-Indian military conquest movie after another, refusing to recognize the horrors of Partition, there are films, with *Khamosh Pani* (2003) being an example par excellence, that say otherwise. Even if there are only a handful of films by directors such as Deepa Mehta, Sabiha Sumar, Mehreen Jabbar, Srijit Mukherji, Shyam Benegal, and Nandita Das, that address the horrors of Partition and potentially provide closure and healing, these films continue to provide us with alternative narratives and ways of living.

Note how in the above example the three scholarly articles, Viswanath & Malik (2009), Khan (2009), and Palmer (2011), have been incorporated to provide context for how the film, *Khamosh Pani* (2003), has been analyzed up till now. Recall how the purpose of a literature review is to inform the read as to what has been said about the text under discussion. Furthermore, note how a summary or individual listing of each of the journal articles is not given, but rather the strengths and differences of each article has been underscored by bringing them into dialogue with each other through comparison (see how in the sample it is written that while Viswanath & Malik (2009) & Khan (2009) talk of remembrance and mourning on a communal level, Palmer (2011) take focuses on the enactment of visibility of violence to analyze how violence is gendered). Lastly, notice how throughout the sample the link between the themes that had been initially identified (masculinity, nationalism, and sexual violence) and how the journal articles address these themes through an analysis of *Kahmosh Pani* (2003), is elaborated upon.

Thus, when writing your own literature review please ensure that it is written in an expository manner with a proper introduction, body, and conclusion.

Pro tip:

Try and search for literature reviews (on scholarly electronic databases) that have already been done in your specific area of research. If your topic of research is broad enough and well documented, you will face no difficulty in finding literature reviews.

Bibliography

Khan, Shahnaz. 2009. "Floating on Silent Waters: Religion, Nationalism, and Dislocated Women in Khamosh Pani." *Meridians* (Duke University Press) 9 (2): 130-152.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40338789>.

Palmer, Lindsay. 2011. "neither here nor there: the reproductive sphere in transnational feminist cinema." *Feminist Review* (Sage Publications, Ltd.) (99): 113-130.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41288879>.

Sumar, Sabiha. 2003. *Khamosh Pani*. Directed by Sabiha Sumar. Produced by Vidhi Films, Unlimited, Arte, Flying Moon Filmproduktion. Performed by Kiron Kher, Aamir Ali Malik and Arshad Mahmood.

Viswanath , Gita, and Salma Malik. 2009. "Revisiting 1947 through Popular Cinema: A Comparative Study of India and Pakistan." *Economic and Political Weekly* (Economic and Political Weekly) 44 (36): 61-69. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25663519>.

Other Useful Sites for Learning How to Write a Literature Review:

1. https://sociomama.wordpress.com/2018/02/08/sociomamas-checklist-for-good-academic-writing-at-least-in-sociology/?fbclid=IwAR0Um3tNwVtCnP3PcXjhYrINgGGoURZNA1scdG511_O4-LcIzvBKJD73I5I
2. <https://www.lib.sfu.ca/about/branches-depts/slc/writing/assignments/lit-review>
3. <https://libguides.bc.edu/litreview/gettingstarted>
4. <https://www.duluth.umn.edu/~hrallis/guides/researching/litreview.html>
5. <https://libguides.uwf.edu/c.php?g=215199&p=1420520>
6. <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/literature-reviews/>