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Higher-Level Overviews: Review Articles

Researchers are especially well advised to look for a particular type or subset of journal articles called review articles. These should not be confused with book reviews. Review articles are a “type of literature” unto themselves (see Chapter 15) in which an author tries systematically to read all the relevant literature on a subject, sometimes also to interview experts in the field, and then to organize, synthesize, and critically evaluate the range of information. His or her goal is to provide a state-of-the-art assessment of knowledge in the particular field, and sometimes to indicate areas that need further research. A literature review article is somewhat like an encyclopedia article in trying to present an overview of a subject, but there are two important differences: (1) a review article is usually written for specialists rather than lay people and so may assume familiarity with technical jargon; and (2) its bibliography will usually be exhaustive rather than selective or merely introductory.

In other words, if you are doing serious research and can find a literature-review article on your subject, you’re in great shape. The important point is that you have to look specifically for this type of literature; if you don’t focus your search, review articles can easily be overlooked or become lost in the retrieval of much larger sets of citations. There are several ways to focus your inquiries.

Web of Science database. The configurations of this file have been described in Chapter 6. Briefly, it merges three smaller indexes, the *Science Citation Index* (1945–), the *Social Sciences Citation Index* (1956–), and the *Arts & Humanities Citation Index* (1975–) into a single pool, indexing about 8,500

journals internationally in all scholarly disciplines. What is particularly relevant here is that its Search pages (either General Search or Advance Search) allow you to limit your results, via a drop-down menu of options, to any of three-dozen specific types of literature, among them:

- Article
- Art Exhibit Review
- Bibliography
- Book Review
- Chronology
- Database Review
- Editorial Material
- Film Review
- Hardware Review
- Item About an Individual
- Letter
- Music Performance Review
- Poetry
- Record Review
- Review**
- Software Review
- TV Review, Radio Review, Video
- Theater Review

The crucial element to select here is simply “Review”; this is the designation, in this database, for “literature review” or “state-of-the-art” overview articles.

Using this feature of this database is the best way to find such articles quickly, across the whole range of scholarly disciplines.

Other databases with “Review”-type limit features. The *Web of Science* is the best overall database for finding reviews because its cross-disciplinary reach in scholarly sources is unmatched. Many other databases that are more focused on particular disciplines or subject areas, however, have comparable features allowing you to limit your searching to review articles. Several files offered by EBSCO, for example, allow limitation of searches for review articles. In *Academic Search Premier* or *MasterFILE Premier*, look

in the "Document Type" drop-down menu for "Literature Review." In *PsycINFO*, look in the "Form/Content Type" menu box for "Literature Review/Research Review." If a database offers this option at all, it will usually show up in the "Advanced" search mode; once you get to this screen, look for a further menu of "Document Type" or "Form" options. Most researchers never bother to look for these; but they can be extremely useful in turning up articles that enable you to see the forest amid all the trees.

Annual Review of . . . (series). Various publishers (especially Annual Reviews, Inc.) produce different series of review articles in many fields. They have titles such as *Annual Review of Anthropology*; *of Astronomy and Astrophysics*; *of Biochemistry*; *of Energy and the Environment*; *of Information Science and Technology*; *of Language Acquisition*; *of Materials Research*; *of Physical Chemistry*; *of Political Science*; *of Psychology*; *of Sociology*. A good (although somewhat dated) overview of these publications is Tony Stankus's *Special Format Serials and Issues: Annual Review of -, Advances in -, Symposia on -, Methods in -* (Haworth Press, 1995).

Bibliographic Index (H. W. Wilson Company; print, 1937-; Web, 1984-). If your library does not have access to the ISI citation indexes or *Web of Science*, it may still have this basic Wilson index, which is a subject guide to published bibliographies, including those at the ends of books and journal articles, in more than a dozen languages. It indexes more than 2,800 periodicals and 5,000 books each year. Its criterion for including a bibliography is that it must contain at least 50 citations, so this *Index* is useful for finding review articles or literature reviews, since any article that has at least 50 footnotes is likely to be a review.

Library Literature (H. W. Wilson Company; print, 1921-; Web, 1984-). This index covers hundreds of journals in the fields of library and information science. It is useful in finding review-type articles because reference librarians often publish for each other annotated bibliographies or bibliographic essays that discuss all the best sources (including Web sites) or finding aids on particular subjects (e.g., on women in religion; on novels set in academia; etc.). They are sometimes not picked up by *Bibliographic Index* because fewer than 50 sources are discussed. Unfortunately, nobody except reference librarians uses this source for this purpose; but it deserves a wider

audience because the articles and annotated bibliographies to which it points are often first-rate starting points for research.

The Syntopicon Index. This comprises volumes 1 and 2 of the set *Great Books of the Western World*, 2nd ed., 60 vols. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1990). It provides 102 review articles on philosophical subjects, with indexing of relevant passages from all of the 517 works included in the set. A kind of shortcut to many of the indexed passages is provided by Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren's *Great Treasury of Western Thought* (Bowker, 1977), which provides in one volume long quotations of the actual texts of many of the philosophical and literary works that are referred to in the *Syntopicon's* review articles.

Institute for Philosophical Research monographs. This organization, founded by Mortimer Adler to expand on the reviews done in the *Syntopicon*, produced several articles and full-length books that summarize the history of thought on various important ideas. Among these publications are:

- *The Idea of Freedom* by Mortimer Adler, 2 vols. (Doubleday, 1958-61). This massive 1,443-page study is skillfully digested by Charles Van Doren in "The Idea of Freedom," Parts One and Two, in *The Great Ideas Today* (1972), pp. 300-392, and (1973), pp. 232-300.
- *The Idea of Justice* by Otto Bird (Frederick A. Praeger, 1968). This book-length study is summarized in Bird's "The Idea of Justice," *The Great Ideas Today* (1974), pp. 166-209.
- *The Idea of Happiness* by V. J. McGill (Praeger, 1967); summarized by McGill in "The Idea of Happiness," *The Great Ideas Today* (1967), pp. 272-308, and updated by Deal W. Hudson's "Contemporary Views of Happiness," *The Great Ideas Today* (1992), pp. 170-216.
- *The Idea of Love* by Robert G. Hazo (Praeger, 1967).
- *The Idea of Progress* by Charles Van Doren (Praeger, 1967).
- "The Idea of Religion," Parts One and Two, by Jonathan Edward Sullivan, O.P., in *The Great Ideas Today* (1977), pp. 204-76, and (1978), pp. 218-312. (An even better overview of religious frameworks, both theistic and secular, is provided by Roy Clouser's *The Myth of Religious Neutrality* [U. of Notre Dame Press, 1991]).

- “The Idea of Equality” by Mortimer Adler in *The Great Ideas Today* (1968), pp. 302–50.
- “On the Idea of Beauty” by Donald Merriell in *The Great Ideas Today* (1979), pp. 184–222.

Each of these studies spells out very articulately what might be called “the range of options” of thought that has been covered on these most important topics. Especially recommended are the extraordinarily insightful overviews of *Freedom* by Van Doren (following Adler), *Justice* by Bird, and “Religion” by Sullivan and Clouser.

Congressional Hearings. These are frequently overlooked by academic researchers, but they can be real gold mines of information. Congressional investigations and oversight reviews extend into an amazing range of subject areas in the social sciences and sciences. (One estimate is that twenty hearings are held every day. For a sample of the topics covered, see Chapter 13.) When the U.S. Congress wishes to find the best information on the current state of any situation, it generally gets it, for it can readily summon the best experts to testify. Moreover, hearings usually bring out all points of view on the subject at hand—although, of course, they can also be manipulated for political purposes. Especially important is the fact that Congress has the power of subpoena, a most useful investigative tool not generally available to other researchers. The best index to hearings since 1970 is the *CIS U.S. Congressional Index*, available in printed volumes and as a subscription Web site through *LexisNexis*. The same publisher, Congressional Information Service, also produces other indexes (both print and online) covering hearings all the way back to the beginnings of Congress. Microfiche sets of the hearings themselves, keyed to the index citations, will often be available in university or large public libraries that subscribe to the indexes.

Congressional committee prints and CRS reports. In addition to drawing on hearings for information, Congress can use the Congressional Research Service (CRS) of the Library of Congress, which often produces book-length “state of the situation” reports on public policy issues. The virtue of these studies is that they are strictly objective, factual, and non-partisan; CRS analysts are not allowed to advocate particular positions—they can only present to Members of Congress the range of facts and issues that need to be consid-

ered. The same print and Web index that covers hearings, the *CIS U.S. Congressional Index* (1970–), also covers committee prints, the form in which CRS reports are sometimes made public. The *C.I.S. U.S. Congressional Committee Prints Index: From the Earliest Times to 1969* picks up earlier years. Again, research libraries that own the indexes may also own microfiche sets of the prints themselves. Another good source of CRS reports is a printed index called *Major Studies and Issue Briefs of the Congressional Research Service*, available from the UPA subdivision of LexisNexis Academic & Library Solutions; it is issued quarterly and has a 1916–1989 cumulative index. Other sources for CRS reports, as of the present writing, are Web sites maintained by one or more individual Members of Congress; these can be located by typing the phrase “Congressional Research Service reports” (in quotation marks) in Google. Note an important qualification here, however: the CRS studies mounted on these Member sites are often not updated in any systematic fashion, and so the reports as given online may not be their latest revision. A better and more up-to-date list is mounted by Penny Hill Press at www.pennyhill.com. As of the present writing, again, the Congressional Research Service (a section of the Library of Congress) is not allowed to mount its own reports online; CRS can provide its research studies *only* to Congressional offices. These same offices, however, are usually happy to obtain copies for constituents who request them; but the requests must be made to the Members’ offices, not to CRS itself.

Doctoral dissertations. These are sometimes useful for review-type surveys of particular subject areas, especially in areas of the humanities and social sciences—although sciences are covered, too—that don’t get picked up by the *Annual Review*–type series. Frequently writers will begin their dissertations with a survey of the literature of a field, to present a background and context for their own contribution to it. The best index is *Dissertation Abstracts International* or a variant form entitled *Digital Dissertations*, both published by UMI, which also sells copies of individual dissertations in either microfiche, bound-paper, or electronic formats; the index is available in either print, CD-ROM, or Web versions. (Check your local library to see which form it offers.)

Review articles or overviews located through any of the above sources can often be updated by running them through the citation indexes to see if there has been any subsequent discussion of them.

The overall point to remember is that reviews, like encyclopedia articles, are often excellent starting-points for research projects; but you have to look for them specifically—otherwise they can easily get overlooked in the jumble of results from larger, unfocused computer searches.

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Published Bibliographies

One of the best ways to get an overview of work that has already been done on your topic is through subject bibliographies. Those that are published in book form are especially important because they usually cover citations to important studies that are not picked up by any computer databases. Indeed, published bibliographies offer several advantages over their computerized cousins: they are usually compiled by experienced scholars who can judge the relevance and importance of the items listed; they often include nuggets that can be found only by serendipity, focused browsing, and persistent searching in obscure sources not digitally searchable; and they may include types of materials and dates of coverage that are blind spots to computers. In some cases they approach the goal of offering “everything” available (up to a certain year) much more closely than do computer databases; and in others they may provide a selective distillation of only the highest quality material to consider, chosen in light of an expert compiler’s deep appreciation of a subject.

A bibliography can give you much more extensive and more specific information than a library catalog; it can save you a great deal of browsing time by rounding up in one place citations to works that are widely scattered in bookstacks; and it can list journal articles on a subject all in one place, so that you won’t have to repeat the same searches in dozens of relevant databases. It may also pick up “fugitive” sources such as dissertations, theses, pamphlets, manuscripts, or government documents that are not covered by most online sources. Further, it can alert you to the existence of relevant works not held by your local library but still available to you through inter-library loan.