

PLS 395
Literature review instructions (Africa stream)

The first project that you will undertake in the course is a review of the scholarly literature on the postcolonial African state and its evolution published by leading publishers of academic books and in top journals in the last five to ten years. Its primary purpose is to help you to develop a broad understanding of the current state of the art in the scholarship on the African state. The topic is intentionally broad; I leave the determination of the scope of your literature review to you, but given the large number of relevant publications I encourage you to focus on books and journal articles that explicitly address the nature and internal organization of postcolonial African states and their evolution in the decades since independence. In this project, you will need to:

- 1) Identify the research topic (and, in particular, its scope) and explain its importance.
- 2) Locate the academic books and journal articles on the African state published in the last five to ten years by:
 - a. University presses such as Cambridge University Press, Princeton University Press, Oxford University Press, etc.
 - b. Reputable trade (non-university) publishers of academic books, especially James Currey and Lynne Rienner (known for their extensive African Studies catalogues), but also Palgrave Macmillan, Routledge, etc.
 - c. Top Political Science journals such as the *American Journal of Political Science*, *American Political Science Review*, *Annual Review of Political Science*, *British Journal of Political Science*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *Comparative Politics*, *Democratization*, *Electoral Studies*, *Journal of Politics*, *Perspectives on Politics*, *World Politics*, etc.
 - d. Leading African Studies journals such as *Africa*, *African Affairs*, *African Studies Review*, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, *Review of African Political Economy*.
 - e. Good interdisciplinary journals such as the *Third World Quarterly* or *World Development*.
- 3) Explain the current scholarly consensus on the topic, if any, and outline the main strands of the literature, such as theoretical perspectives or methodological approaches, as well as primary debates and disagreements among scholars.
- 4) Identify the main contributions that existing studies have made to our understanding of the topic.
- 5) Specify the themes on which the literature has focused to date and the primary methods of inference and data collection used in existing scholarship.
- 6) Identify any trends in the literature that can be discerned.
- 7) Using citation counts, determine the prominence of the individual contributions, strands, themes, and trends that you have identified and consider the implications of the prioritization of some aspects of the state.
- 8) Explain the limitations of and gaps in the literature.

There are many valid ways to structure a literature review. You can distribute the foregoing tasks in your literature review in any way that you think helps the reader to make sense of the scholarship that you outline. That said, the literature review should start with 1) a clear and concise overview of the literature and the main claims that you make in the review, followed by 2) the main body that explains the state of the literature, and conclude with 3) a final section that ties up the main threads of your argument. In other words, the literature should follow the basic structure of a university essay.

The literature review is an analytical assignment in which you should summarize, synthesize, and critically evaluate scholarship in your chosen topic. It outlines *your* assessment of the literature. As such, you should keep direct quotations to a minimum. Relatedly, you may need to paraphrase the arguments advanced in some scholarly sources, but your focus should be on analyzing—rather than restating—those claims.

Your literature search is likely to yield a large number of scholarly sources on the topic. To get a sense of the literature and be reasonably certain that you have not missed any important contributions, you will need to review a substantial amount of scholarship. There is no minimum number of scholarly sources on which you need to draw in the literature review. A very good literature review is, however, likely to be based on familiarity with several dozen relevant scholarly works, even if you focus your attention on a smaller number of the most important sources.

Likewise, there is no required word count. The content of the literature review should determine its length. Since you will need to consult a large number of sources, the review may be quite long. For reference, literature reviews in the *Annual Reviews of Political Science* are approximately 8,000 words long. Having said that, highest-quality literature reviews concisely explain the state of scholarship on a particular topic, providing only the information that the reader needs to develop an understanding of the literature, and avoiding superfluous information that detracts from the primary argument advanced by the author. As you can easily infer from the rubric, provided below, your grade will reflect the quality of your argumentation, rather than your review’s length.

The literature review should be double-spaced with one-inch margins in Times New Roman 12-point font. All citations should follow the American Political Science Association Style Manual (<https://connect.apsanet.org/stylemanual/>).

The literature review is worth 50% of the course grade. It is due at by 11.59 pm on June 30. I am open to amending the submission deadline if you think that additional time will help you prepare a much better review, but do keep in mind that you will need to submit an equally challenging assignment at the end of the summer semester.

Literature review rubric

	Failure	Below average	Average	Good	Excellent
Literature overview (introduction)	The literature review does not identify the research topic or outline the state of the literature. Alternatively, the literature overview is not comprehensible.	The literature review identifies the topic but does not clearly outline the state of the literature.	The literature review identifies the topic, but the argument overview could be stated better and in a more focused way. The outlined argument may not be compelling.	The literature review identifies the topic. An outline of a reasonably compelling argument is developed.	The literature outline is focused and clear. It directly identifies the topic and provides a compelling overview of the state of the literature.
Literature assessment (main body of)	The literature review fails to identify relevant	The literature review identifies	The literature review identifies relevant	The literature review provides a reasonably	The literature review effectively

the literature review)	scholarship or does not address the existing literature.	relevant scholarship but shows limited understanding of the literature and does not successfully explain its current state.	scholarship and provides evidence of a meaningful, but not entirely successful, effort to explain the current scholarly consensus, the main strands of the literature and scholarly debates. The author also makes an effort to identify the contributions and limitations of existing scholarship and the gaps that new research can address.	compelling explanation of the current scholarly consensus, the main strands of the literature and scholarly debates. It also correctly identifies some of the contributions and limitations of existing scholarship and the gaps that new research can address.	explains the current scholarly consensus, the main strands of the literature and scholarly debates. It also correctly and cogently identifies the contributions and limitations of existing scholarship and the gaps that new research can address.
Conclusion	The literature review contains no conclusion or the concluding paragraphs fail to encapsulate the author's assessment of the literature.	The author provides a conclusion, but it does not successfully convey their assessment of the literature.	Conclusion is indicative of the author's sincere attempt to encapsulate the main claims advanced in the literature review.	Conclusion offers a reasonably compelling encapsulation of the author's assessment of the literature.	Conclusion encapsulates the author's assessment of the literature clearly, effectively, and cogently.
Organization, writing style, spelling, and grammar	Weak or no organization. Random expression of ideas. Thoughts are expressed in a disjointed or incomprehensible way. Writing style, spelling, and grammar need major improvement.	The literature review needs better transition and flow between ideas. Some awkward and confusing passages detract from a thorough understanding of the literature review.	Mostly logical progression of ideas, but the writer must do more to make connections. Some awkward and confusing passages detract from a thorough understanding of the literature review.	Mostly logical progression of ideas, but the writer must do more to make connections. A few distracting errors or awkward phrasing.	Good flow or progression of ideas and good presentation of how the points made fit into a broader argument. Eloquent expression of ideas with no distracting or obvious grammatical or mechanical errors.
Citations, quotations, and bibliography	Missing or inadequate citations, insufficient number of sources.	Referencing does not follow the required citation style. In some cases excessive use of quotations. Sufficient number of sources.	Referencing follows the required citation style, with some errors. Sufficient number of sources.	Mostly correct referencing, with a few minor errors. Sufficient number of sources.	Correct referencing. Number of sources which is at least sufficient and likely exceeds the requirements.