



# Blackwell Compass

PEER-REVIEWED SURVEY ARTICLES FROM ACROSS THE DISCIPLINE

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## How to Write a Compass Article

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### ***Introduction***

Writing a good survey/review essay is just as challenging and rewarding as writing a research article. Anyone completing a thesis or writing a research grant application finds themselves writing a literature review that places their research in the context of previous works and identifies a research gap that is worthy of further research. However, just as chapters from a PhD seldom make publishable research papers, so your literature review chapter needs further work before it becomes a good review essay. Undoubtedly, you have the knowledge, the raw materials, to write a review essay. This section provides you with some pointers for how to produce a successful review essay.

### ***Getting the level right***

You need to think about the purpose of your review and its potential readership, which includes the novice reader (a senior level undergraduate or Masters student), as well as academic staff, from your discipline and outside, looking to familiarize themselves with a particular field or issue. One of the key differentiators of Compass is that the articles receive attention from readers in other fields. The different audiences require you to think carefully about the purpose and structure of your review essay.

## ***Purpose and structure***

Your review essay must have a clear purpose and structure to be successful. Simply using it as a vehicle to demonstrate how much you have read is not a recipe for success! A good Compass article should be accessible, but not too elementary; it should explain terminology that might not be generally familiar; it should minimize or bracket off technical notation or statistical discussion that might not be widely known or accessible to all readers. In other words, there's a middle ground between the sort of elementary presentation that one would expect to find in a textbook – even a relatively advanced one – and the actual scholarly literature on a particular debate. A good review essay should give a reader the background to go out and read the current scholarly literature with the appropriate background and context.

A review essay can have a number of purposes. They can be surveys of:

- recent debates,
- areas where there's been a recent surge of interest, or substantial new developments;
- areas where developments in one corner of the field might speak to (or lead to) developments in another corner of the field;
- areas that have been neglected, but need to be revived (and the reasons for that);
- areas where there has been recent interest from the popular media and that might serve as the basis of debate in the classroom;
- comparisons of topics across different schools of thought
- developments in other disciplines of interest to your field.

A clear sense of purpose will help you define the scope of your essay. In other words, how broad or narrow should a topic be? Cast the net too wide and you will struggle to deal with the key issues in sufficient depth, cast it too narrowly and you will not attract sufficient readership to merit publication. That said, topics can be fairly specialized, as long as they're presented with appropriate background and attention to different positions on the topic. Your Section Editor will help you to optimise the scope of your topic.

To succeed, a good review essay needs a clear structure. There is no single way of structuring your essay. Each of the purposes identified above demands a different structure. A good review is organised around themes and not individual publications. Review essays that demand attention are those that build on an authoritative review of the existing literature *to present a new argument*. In other words, they add value beyond a summary of the literature. The author need not be utterly neutral, but should be sure to do justice to the different approaches to the problem. An article that dismisses one or more current approaches to a problem or issue in a sentence or two and concentrates on a single approach is less valuable to the reader than one that gives reasonable attention to a wide range of alternatives, even if the author ultimately draws the conclusion that one alternative is the most promising, and gives more weight to that approach.

### ***The bibliography***

For the reader, the purpose of a review essay is to survey a particular issue, gain understanding and identify the key authors and outputs to pursue if they want to find out more. Thus, the bibliography is a critical component of any review essay and also a measure of how comprehensive and up-to-date it is. How wide-ranging should the bibliography be? Here, it's safe to say that more is better. The more you can include, the easier it will be for your reader to enter the debate or to figure out where to go next. (Note: the word limit agreed with your Section Editor does not include the bibliography.)

### ***In Conclusion***

A review essay is a good way for new researchers to get published for the first time. A successful review essay can be widely cited, often more so than a research article, and will get you associated with your area of research specialisation. But knowing the literature is the start of the process, not the end.

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