

## How to Write a Literature Review and Theory Section for a BA or MA Thesis

Prof. Jonas Bunte  
Institute for International Political Economy  
Vienna University of Economics and Business

Your introduction identified a puzzle and a research question. Now you need to introduce the most prominent explanations that already exist in the literature. This is the purpose of the literature review. Following the survey of the existing explanations (and their shortcomings), you need to introduce your own explanation. Your explanation should be an original contribution to the literature and not yet have been suggested by others. Here you need to outline the theoretical framework and derive a specific hypothesis summarizing the observable implications you should be able to see if your argument is correct.

**Identify existing explanations** In your introduction, you identified a puzzle and a research question. For example, you might have identified that Colombia and Ecuador are two neighboring countries that are seemingly very similar. They are located in the same geographical region, have the same political system, same culture and language, and same colonial history. In 2013, China offered loans to both countries. Yet, only one of the countries (Ecuador) has accepted these loan offers while the other (Colombia) has explicitly rejected them. You consequently ask “Why do some countries accept Chinese loan proposals while others do not?”

It is likely that you are not the first investigating this research question; many other scholars have already attempted to provide an answer to this question. And that is fine. The purpose of this section is to identify the most convincing types of explanations and briefly summarize them.

In order to obtain an overview over the existing work on this research question (and how to best summarize it), I strongly recommend that you follow the process outlined below.

### 1. Find relevant journal articles or books

First, you must obtain an overview over the existing explanations that scholars have already proposed. One common approach is the following:

- Identify an ‘anchor.’ This involved identifying a journal article  $A$  that is *directly* related to your topic — and by ‘directly’ I mean ‘99% fit.’ That is, do not be satisfied with an article that only tangentially talks about your research question; rather, spend a lot of time until you have found an article that tries to answer your exact research question (even if it uses different cases to motivate the question).
- Once you have found your ‘anchor’ article, you can use it to find additional relevant literature. First, ‘go back in time.’ This involves examining the articles that the authors cite in article  $A$ . This might lead you to additional articles  $B$  and  $C$  that might also be relevant.

- Second, ‘go into the future’ to find relevant articles. This involves examining papers that cite article *A* after it had been published. One way to do this is to google the title of article *A* in [scholars.google.com](https://scholars.google.com), and then click on the link “cited by XX” underneath the search result. This might lead you to identify articles *D* and *E* that might also be of relevance.
- Now repeat steps 2 (going back in time = look through references) and 3 (going into the future = look for citations) for articles *B* through *E* to identify even more papers that speak to your topic.

## 2. Classify the journal articles

Step 1 should result in about 20-30 articles. Read these articles and make notes on the different explanations that are proposed. Once you have a good idea of the explanations ‘out there,’ you must then classify these explanations into larger ‘schools of thought.’

- For example, the explanation proposed in articles *A* and *C* might be pretty similar, as they both assume that the outcome can best be explained by analyzing the self-interested decisions of domestic politicians. In contrast, articles *B*, *F* and *D* focus on international actors and argue that their interventions produced the outcome you are interested in explaining. Lastly, articles *E* and *G* propose an institutional explanation.
- In short, classify the articles you collected according to the *type of explanation* that they represent.

## 3. Evaluate the types of explanations

Step 2 should result in about 3 to 4 ‘schools of thought,’ each representing a different type of explanation represented by multiple articles. Each of these schools of thought have strengths, but also weaknesses. The literature review should briefly touch upon the shortcomings (as a way to introduce why your new explanation is superior to the existing explanations, or at least a good complement).

- For example, you might find that institutional explanations are not well suited to explain the phenomenon you are interested in. After all, institutions are slow to change, and once in place they typically remain in place for a long time. Yet, over the period of time under consideration, the behavior of actors changed multiple times. As the institutional context did not change, this type of explanation is less suited to explain the outcome you are interested in.
- You might also find that most explanations of an international phenomenon (say, international war) focus on international factors that might explain war. Those might be, for instance, migration flows across borders, security alliances between governments, or economic sanctions. In light of such a situation in the literature, you might argue that existing approaches ignore the role of domestic politics. Maybe there are some groups within the countries that might benefit from war, while others do not. Depending on the internal political dynamics, then, a country might declare war independent of possible international factors.

## 4. Write up

Now you can start writing your literature review. Make sure that you include the following points for each of the schools of thought:

- Shortly summarize the main argument of the school of thought (e.g., “It is all about self-interested politicians.”)
- Introduce starting points and assumptions that are common to all articles following this approach (e.g., “This approach assumes that politicians are office-motivated, rather than working for their constituencies. Instead of accurately representing their voters, this approach suggests that politicians pursue their own goals. These might include ...”).
- Explicitly describe the causal mechanism. That is, show how this school of thought assumes that  $a$  leads to  $b$ , which in turn results in  $c$ .
- Cite papers  $A$  and  $C$  as examples for the respective approaches to answering your question. Each citation should be accompanied by a single sentence summarizing the respective article.
- Provide evidence that the two units of analysis forming your research puzzle vary with respect to this factor — and that the corresponding values on the dependent variable vary in accordance with this hypothesis.

#### MOST COMMON MISTAKES:

1. Do not simply list the different papers  $A$  through  $F$  without classifying them. The purpose of this section is for you to identify the underlying *types* of explanations. Grading will be based less on the number of papers that you find, but value the intellectual work required for identifying common starting points, assumptions, and patterns across the various articles.
2. Make sure to summarize the type of explanation first, and only subsequently use articles  $A$ ,  $B$ , and  $E$  as *examples* of the two *types* of explanations. Do not simply summarize the articles and leave it to the reader to identify commonalities across them.
3. The worst approach to writing a literature review is to simply list the articles, such as “Article  $A$  says X. Article  $B$  states Y. Article  $C$  notes Z.” The literature review should consolidate existing work by identifying commonalities, not simply list them.

**Your own original Argument / new Explanation** Social science is about expanding the boundaries of knowledge. In other words, we are engaged in the business of findings *new* answers that have not previously been known. The main reason for requiring a Thesis at the end of your studies is that students should transition from the role of a passive ‘consumer’ of existing ideas to that of an active ‘producer’ of new ideas. The literature review required you to ‘consume’ existing literature, while the theory section will ask you to become a ‘producer.’

In your literature review, you identified several types of existing explanations. In addition, your task was to identify potential shortcomings of these existing explanations. Your own theory should attempt to fill at least one of the gaps you identified. Importantly, your *original* explanation that has not previously been suggested by other scholars. This third hypothesis has to be new — no other scholar must have ever proposed your explanation. This is a difficult task. However, this is the essence of (social) science.

The theory section should include two parts. First, you should outline your theoretical framework. Here you outline how you understand the world works. In other words, you detail the fundamental assumptions that you make. For example, do you assume that the behavior of states is primarily determined by the individual decisions made by their leaders; or is the state primarily an area for contestation where politicians implement whatever preferences by the strongest interest group? Do you assume that actors are primarily motivated by economic facts and make decisions by rationally examining the expected utility of the various options available; or are individuals driven by a logic of appropriateness which makes them adhere to moral and normative expectations, even if the resulting decisions are not technically rational? In this part, you should outline what overarching factors are likely to drive the explanation for your research question.

After outlining the the theoretical context of your explanation, you must how derive specific observable implications of your theory. In other words, you must specify the causal mechanism that connects the independent variable you identified in your theory with the variation in the dependent variable. This is key: Explicitly describe the causal mechanism that you propose. That is, show how *a* leads to *b*, which in turn results in *c*. In this context, you should also refer back to your motivating puzzle. Provide evidence that the two units of analysis forming your research puzzle vary with respect to this factor — and that the corresponding values on the dependent variable vary in accordance with this hypothesis. Lastly, you will need to state your hypothesis in the clearest of terms using the following format:

In comparing [unit of analysis], those having [one value on the independent variable] will be more likely to have [one value on the dependent variable] than will those having [a different value on the independent variable].

#### MOST COMMON MISTAKES:

1. There must be variation across the units of analysis with respect to the independent variable. In other words, trying to explain the difference in growth rates between country A and B with the fact that country A has good institutions and country B also has good institutions will not work.
2. There must be a plausible connection between the variation on the dependent variable and independent variables. Two patterns are generally acceptable:
  - If IV high, then DV high — if IV low, then DV low.
  - If IV high, then DV low — if IV low, then DV high.
3. The independent variable must be substantively different than the dependent variable. Hypothesizing that growth-promoting policies result in growth is tautological.
4. Make sure that your hypothesis is a plausible answer to the research question.