

# How to conduct a literature review

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# A literature review is a story, not a summary.

- A literature review is **not** a summary of sources on your topic.
- A literature review is **not** a list of data sources you might analyze to answer your research question.

Rather, references are used to **explain** a puzzle, are **highlighted** when discussing how previous work has failed to fully explain variation in your dependent variable of interest, and are **used** to build your theory.

*A strong literature review places your narrative front and center.*

# Literature reviews contain the following components:

- A brief explanation of your "puzzle": this phenomenon is happening, and it remains unclear what explains it
- A discussion of how "the literature" (articles, books, scholarly publications broadly) has failed to fully explain this phenomenon:
  - The predominant theories used to explain your dependent variable of interest have perhaps received a lot of attention but are insufficient for ultimately explaining your phenomenon
  - Empirical work is lacking on your phenomenon, was measured poorly, or measures a concept that is slightly differently from the one you want to measure
- A presentation of your theory

# How to conduct a literature review

If you have a research question already in mind, then your focus should be on finding articles that serve the purposes outlined:

1. Explaining your puzzle.
2. Discussing how the literature has failed to fully explain your dependent variable of interest.
3. Presenting your theory.

# How to conduct a literature review

Sample research question: *What explains variation in trade agreement violations?*

Let's say we know absolutely nothing about this topic and want to dive in. You have several options (none of which are mutually exclusive):

1. Ask a professor for reading recommendations (a major shortcut!).
2. Cold search academic databases.
  - a. Go to Google Scholar and type in "trade agreement violations"
  - b. Find databases offered through your university's library system, and navigate to the databases they flag as being particularly useful for your subject.

# Google Scholar

Google Scholar trade agreement violations

Articles About 517,000 results (0.04 sec) My profile My

**Any time**  
Since 2021  
Since 2020  
Since 2017  
Custom range...

**Sort by relevance**  
Sort by date

**Any type**  
 include patents  
 include citations

Review articles

Create alert

**Tariff evasion and rules of origin violations under the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement** [PDF] yorku.ca  
[A Stoyanov](#) - ... *Journal of Economics/Revue canadienne d'...*, 2012 - Wiley Online Library  
Using product-level data on **trade** between Canada and the US, this paper presents evidence of tariff evasion and violation of the rules of origin occurring under the Canada-US Free **Trade Agreement** (CUSFTA). It shows that more imports go unreported at the ...  
☆ 99 Cited by 33 Related articles All 9 versions



**The Andean Free Trade Agreement (AFTA) and labour conditions in Colombia: From the deepening of neoliberal policies to increasing human rights violations** [PDF] psu.edu  
[C Ahumada](#) - *Labour, Capital and Society/Travail, capital et société*, 2007 - JSTOR  
Between 2004 and 2006, two Andean countries, Colombia and Peru, signed bilateral **trade** agreements with the United States to make up the Andean Free **Trade Agreement** (AFTA). This article examines the impact of the AFTA on labour conditions in Colombia in the context ...  
☆ 99 Cited by 3 Related articles All 7 versions

**Investor-state dispute settlement between developed countries: reflections on the Australia-United States Free Trade Agreement** [PDF] uchastings.edu  
[WS Dodge](#) - *Vand. J. Transnat'l L.*, 2006 - HeinOnline  
... The rule recognizes that a state does not exercise complete control over every actor that may engage its international responsibility and gives the state an opportunity to redress **violations** by individuals or low-level officials before the dispute is taken to an international level.4 It ...  
☆ 99 Cited by 148 Related articles All 5 versions

**Labor Obligations in the US-Chile Free Trade Agreement** [PDF] uqam.ca  
[SE Martin](#) - *Comp. Lab. L. & Pol'y. J.*, 2003 - HeinOnline  
... This stands in sharp contrast with the enforcement mechanisms available under Chapter 22 for commercial **violations**, which include the possibility of imposing **trade** sanctions or monetary penalties.<sup>86</sup> Because politics is often a cost-benefit balancing act, it is questionable if this ...  
☆ 99 Cited by 20 Related articles All 5 versions

# ProQuest (make sure to filter for "Scholarly Journals")

The screenshot shows the ProQuest database interface. At the top, it says "Access provided by HARVARD UNIVERSITY". The search query "trade agreement violations" is entered in the search bar, resulting in 57,951 results. On the left sidebar, under "Applied filters", the "Scholarly Journals" filter is selected and highlighted with a red box. Other filters include "Show results outside my library's subscription" (unchecked), "Sorted by" (set to Relevance), and "Limit to" (with "Full text" and "Peer reviewed" options). The main results area shows two entries:

- 1**  **Tariff Evasion and Rules of Origin Violations under the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement** Citation/Abstract  
Stoyanov, Andrey. Canadian Journal of Economics Vol. 45, Iss. 3, (August 2012): 879-902.  
...and violation of the rules of origin occurring under the Canada-U.S. Free Trade...  
...a free trade agreement may in fact be due to less underreporting. Further, this...  
...data on trade between Canada and the U.S., this paper presents evidence...  
Abstract/Details [TRY HARVARD LIBRARY](#) Cited by (6) [Show Abstract](#)
- 2**  **Regional Trade Agreements with Non-WTO Members and the Most-Favoured-Nation Treatment Obligation: Are They Compatible?** Full Text  
Galagan, Dmytro.  
Estey Centre Journal of International Law and Trade Policy Vol. 15, Iss. 1, (January 2014): 33-46.  
...the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) justify this violation if all...  
...of regional trade agreements (RTAs) allows the parties to eliminate customs...  
...on trade between themselves, but necessarily results in violation of...  
Abstract/Details [Full text](#) [Full text - PDF \(85 KB\)](#) [Show Abstract](#)

# How to conduct a literature review

Lessons from the cold search:

- These databases have different algorithms, and thus are likely to present you with different articles. However, it doesn't hurt to simply open one with a relevant title and start reading!
- If you're looking for empirical articles, you may be interested in reading more recent articles (particularly if your phenomenon has been measured extremely frequently over a long duration). Use the date range function.
- Publications that provide foundational theory are often more timeless, and they are sometimes difficult to locate via cold searching.



# How to conduct a literature review

Let's say we use the following article located through a cold search to find additional literature on trade agreement violations:

Stoyanov, Andrey. "Tariff evasion and rules of origin violations under the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement." *Canadian Journal of Economics/Revue canadienne d'économique* 45, No. 3 (2012): 879-902.

**What articles does Stoyanov cite to illuminate why trade agreement violations occur?**

## Stoyanov (2012) literature review:

A method for detecting tariff evasion was first developed in a pioneering work by [Fisman and Wei \(2004\)](#). Tariff evasion is detected by comparing the source country's export data with the destination country's import data for a given product. Thus, Fisman and Wei argue that a negative correlation between Chinese tariff rates and the difference between Chinese imports from Hong Kong and Hong Kong's exports to China is evidence of tariff evasion. Later literature has confirmed this finding for other countries (see also [Mishra, Subramanian, and Topalova \(2008\)](#) on India and [Levin and Widell 2007](#) on Africa) and has shed light on some of the circumstances influencing the extent of tariff evasion. For instance, [Javorcik and Narciso \(2008\)](#), applying the same methodology to industry-level trade data between 10 East European countries and Germany, demonstrate that trade record discrepancies between countries are influenced by the degree of product differentiation. [Rotunno and Vezina \(2010\)](#) show that misreporting of Chinese exports is positively related to the share of Chinese immigrants in the destination countries. In a related study, [Ferrantino, Liu, and Wang \(2012\)](#) find a negative effect of the Chinese value-added tax (VAT) on the value of its exports to the U.S., as reported to local authorities by Chinese exporters seeking a VAT tax rebate.

## Stoyanov (2012) literature review:

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# How to find the big, foundational articles

Once you find articles that look promising for fulfilling one of the three objectives (explain puzzle, argue the literature has failed, present new theory), **open them in new tabs**. Read them and see whether they are worth citing!

You may notice that some publications are cited in multiple articles that you're reading. If that's happening, **read those articles**. They are probably worth including in your literature review.

# How to conduct a literature review

If you do **not** have a research question already in mind, then your focus should be on finding a research question!

This will involve:

1. Reviewing publications in a certain field to locate a phenomenon that has received insufficient scholarly attention or variation that has not been adequately explained.
2. Once you've then narrowed in on a research question, explain the puzzle, discuss the literature's failures, and present your theory


# Conducting a "literature review" with no research question


**Select** article titles that interest you or **search** for recent articles on a subject you care about in the *top journals* and *annual review journals* in your field.

- Access the [Annual Reviews database](#) to find literature reviews on a myriad of subjects.
- Journals are generally scored by their "Impact Factor," which measures how many times over a set number of years articles from a journal have been cited. The following slides will demonstrate one method of locating top journals in your field.

# What are the top journals in my particular field?



 My profile

 My library

## Google Scholar



Articles  Case law

Stand on the shoulders of giants

# What are the top journals in my particular field?

Google Scholar My library

- My profile
- My library
- Alerts
- Metrics**
- Advanced search
- Settings

Google Scholar

Articles  Case law

Stand on the shoulders of giants



# What are the top journals in my particular field?

## Top publications

Top cited publications over the last five years [Learn more](#)

Publication	h5-index	h5-median
1. Nature	414	607
2. The New England Journal of Medicine	410	704
3. Science	391	564
4. IEEE/CVF Conference on Computer Vision and Pattern Recognition	356	583
5. The Lancet	345	600
6. Advanced Materials	294	406
7. Cell	288	459
8. Nature Communications	287	389
9. Chemical Reviews	270	434
10. International Conference on Learning Representations	253	470

[VIEW ALL](#)

# What are the top journals in my particular field?

## Top publications

Categories ▾

English ▾

	Publication	<u>h5-index</u>	<u>h5-median</u>
1.	Nature	<u>414</u>	607
2.	The New England Journal of Medicine	<u>410</u>	704
3.	Science	<u>391</u>	564
4.	IEEE/CVF Conference on Computer Vision and Pattern Recognition	<u>356</u>	583
5.	The Lancet	<u>345</u>	600
6.	Advanced Materials	<u>294</u>	406
7.	Cell	<u>288</u>	459
8.	Nature Communications	<u>287</u>	389
9.	Chemical Reviews	<u>270</u>	434
10.	International Conference on Learning Representations	<u>253</u>	470
11.	JAMA	<u>253</u>	446

# What are the top journals in my particular field?

Top publications

Categories ▾ English ▾

	<a href="#">h5-index</a>	<a href="#">h5-median</a>
Business, Economics & Management		
Chemical & Material Sciences		
Engineering & Computer Science	<a href="#">414</a>	607
Health & Medical Sciences	<a href="#">410</a>	704
Humanities, Literature & Arts		
Life Sciences & Earth Sciences		
Physics & Mathematics		
<b>Social Sciences</b>	<a href="#">345</a>	600
6. Advanced Materials	<a href="#">294</a>	406
7. Cell	<a href="#">288</a>	459
8. Nature Communications	<a href="#">287</a>	389
9. Chemical Reviews	<a href="#">270</a>	434
10. International Conference on Learning Representations	<a href="#">253</a>	470
11. JAMA	<a href="#">253</a>	446
12. Neural Information Processing Systems	<a href="#">245</a>	422

# What are the top journals in my particular field?

Categories > Social Sciences > Subcategories ▾

Subcategories			Median
Academic & Psychological Testing	Educational Psychology & Counseling	Library & Information Science	
African Studies & History	Educational Technology	Middle Eastern & Islamic Studies	
Anthropology	Environmental & Occupational Medicine	Military Studies	59
Archaeology	Environmental Law & Policy	Paleontology	72
Architecture	Epistemology & Scientific History	<b>Political Science</b>	38
Asian Studies & History	Ethics	Public Health	47
Bioethics	European Law	Public Policy & Administration	28
Canadian Studies & History	Family Studies	Science & Engineering Education	28
Chinese Studies & History	Feminism & Women's Studies	Sex & Sexuality	30
Cognitive Science	Forensic Science	Social Sciences (general)	24
Criminology, Criminal Law & Policing	Geography & Cartography	Social Work	19
Development Economics	Health Policy & Medical Law	Sociology	14
Diplomacy & International Relations	Higher Education	Special Education	05
Early Childhood Education	History	Sustainable Development	
Economic History	Human Migration	Teaching & Teacher Education	11
Education	Human Resources & Organizations	Technology Law	14
Educational Administration	International Law	Urban Studies & Planning	4
	Law		02
			7

# What are the top journals in my particular field?

Categories > Social Sciences > Political Science ▾

	Publication	<a href="#">h5-index</a>	<a href="#">h5-median</a>
1.	American Journal of Political Science	<a href="#">68</a>	106
2.	American Political Science Review	<a href="#">65</a>	114
3.	Journal of European Public Policy	<a href="#">63</a>	87
4.	The Journal of Politics	<a href="#">59</a>	85
5.	JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies	<a href="#">52</a>	74
6.	Comparative Political Studies	<a href="#">52</a>	69
7.	British Journal of Political Science	<a href="#">51</a>	81
8.	Journal of Democracy	<a href="#">48</a>	86
9.	European Journal of Political Research	<a href="#">46</a>	68
10.	West European Politics	<a href="#">45</a>	72
11.	Annual Review of Political Science	<a href="#">44</a>	87

# In-class activity

Practice conducting a literature review for your research project! Use the slides from this project to begin searching for and building a literature review to explain your puzzle, describe gaps in the literature, and present the theory you hope to test.

Discuss logistical and other challenges you encounter, as well as strategies to tackle them.