

Systematic Review Service

GETTING STARTED WITH YOUR SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

A BASIC GUIDE



Getting started with your systematic review

This guide will help you think about some key issues before you start your research in any depth

I keep six honest serving men
(They taught me all I knew)
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who

From the Elephant's Child by Rudyard Kipling

| What | Why | When |
|---|--|---|
| <p>What do I need to know?</p> <p>What is the purpose of my research?</p> <p>What has been looked at before in my research area?</p> <p>What compromises in search terms and scope are there?</p> | <p>Why do I need to know?</p> <p>Why is there a need for my research?</p> <p>Why should I explore all options for resources before I begin my research?</p> <p>Why should I consider a contingency plan?</p> | <p>When do I need to know?</p> <p>When did my research area have a fertile period of time for similar research?</p> <p>When did my research area have arid periods of time when little research was done?</p> <p>When are my own targets and deadlines?</p> |
| How | Where | Who |
| <p>How am I going to structure my plan of action?</p> <p>How am I going to approach my research?</p> <p>How do I find resources?</p> <p>How will I address the difficult bits?</p> | <p>Where do I find help, advice, resources?</p> <p>Where do I find my core resources?</p> <p>Where do I find supplementary resources?</p> <p>Where else is my research area studied? (this could be a place/institution etc)</p> | <p>Who should be kept in the loop?</p> <p>Who is involved with my research? (core level)</p> <p>Who else could potentially be involved later into the research?</p> <p>Who else would my research be of interest to?</p> |

YOUR SYSTEMATIC REVIEW BROKEN DOWN

Getting Started

Once you've established your research scope, remit and parameters, think about your search terms and jot them down. If you are lost for words use the MeSH, thesaurus and other subject headings options available in the database platforms.

Think about words that could have other meanings depending on the context, eg you may want to search depression or low mood but not postnatal depression.

Then roughly divide your terms into groups of:

- words that you must have
- words you don't mind having and
- words you definitely do not want.

At this stage nothing is set in stone; it gives the flexibility for further investigation.

Early Searches

Initial early searches may begin to influence the future directions of your research. This could be due to a number of factors including a lack of relevant information, or even no information if the research area you are investigating is very new. This is partly to be expected at PhD level; the whole point of PhD research is to present something new and unique.

It should be noted that is not always possible to totally replicate a previous search (especially from years ago) even if the database is still hosted by the same platform.

Though systematic reviews are quite rigid in format, they can include both qualitative and quantitative data. If several data types are included in the review it is known as a mixed-method systematic review.

Revisit your parameters

After your initial searches you may wish to revisit and modify your parameters.

Write down all the points you need to consider:

- What's your main focus/plan/goal?
- Scope of study
- Like for like? What's been done before?

Think about:

- Age of previous studies
- Gaps in research? (Arid/"trendy" research periods)
- The use of meta-analysis? (several studies consulted to produce one over-view or summary of results)

The road less travelled...

If initial preliminary searches yield few results, go back to basics.

Work out if there is room to compromise in your search strategies

Think about the following:

- is there another way into my topic?
- does my topic cover several disciplines?
- is it just of interest to your profession?
- what resources would your profession use?
- what resources would other professions use?

Focus on one part of your research then add or change areas as required

Don't forget it is the end results (ie the articles/papers etc) that have to be compared like-for-like not necessarily the search terms.

Planning your route and staying on track

Before embarking too far down your research path, you should have had several discussions with your supervisor over the agreed direction of your study.

Often researchers feel a little overwhelmed with the task in front of them and some are unsure how to or where to start. There are some suggested readings at the end of this document that may help you with this.

It is also worth looking at the [CASP website](#) which contains useful tools and checklists that help you evaluate the articles you find. The CASP website is just one example of online help, you may have come across others.

Reading your papers

When reading your research paper you are seeking to:

- **Identify** all relevant published and unpublished evidence
- **Select** studies or reports for inclusion
- **Assess** the quality of each study or report
- **Synthesise** [combine] the findings from individual studies or reports in an unbiased way
- **Interpret** the findings and present a balanced and impartial summary of the findings with due consideration of any flaws in the evidence.

(Taken from [What is a Systematic Review?](#) By Pippa Hemingway (2009) What Is? Series. Online resource)

- You can only achieve this if you are sure of the direction you are taking. Plan your route before you travel!

Some people use bibliographic software packages such as Mendeley or Endnote to organise their references. This is not compulsory, but they provide a useful method of collecting all your resources in one central place. They can also format your references in the appropriate bibliographic style required by your school or publisher, as well as automatically removing duplicated references from your reference library. Further information about bibliographical software packages can be found on the [Library referencing webpages](#).

SUGGESTED READINGS

- Aveyard, H. (2011). *A beginner's guide to critical thinking and writing in health and social care / Helen Aveyard, Pam Sharp and Mary Woolliams*. Maidenhead: Maidenhead : McGraw-Hill/Open University Press.
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