



The Purpose, Process, and Methods of Writing a Literature Review



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Perioperative nurses are bombarded with an overwhelming volume of nursing and health care publications; however, in-depth literature reviews provide a foundation for consolidating information from myriad publications with the potential to lead to improving clinical practice. Authors write literature reviews to examine previous studies, provide background regarding what is known on a topic, and establish the foundation for a change in practice.¹⁻³ Marshall defines a literature review as “a systematic method for identifying, evaluating, and interpreting work produced by researchers, scholars, and practitioners.”^{2(p20)} Using a culminating clinical literature review on a specific topic aids perioperative nurses and other health care practitioners by providing a way to identify best practices for clinical strategies and therefore maximize their time with patients.¹ Articulating what interventions are successful and unsuccessful is a targeted outcome of systematic literature reviews.⁴ This article focuses on four key elements of literature reviews: the purpose, preparation process, types, and methods.

PURPOSE

Literature reviews should “objectively report the current knowledge on a topic”^{1(p102)} and provide a summary of the best available research from previously published studies related to a specific topic.^{1,5} The synthesis of the literature reviewed provides an informed perspective or a comprehensive overview of the knowledge available on the topic. This detailed overview should be written in such a way as to provide clarity and promote understanding by the reader.¹ Clinicians and researchers use literature reviews in decision making as well as “to identify, justify, and refine hypotheses and to recognize

and avoid pitfalls in previous research.”^{1(p102)} Literature reviews afford a means for “validating assumptions” and opinions and “providing insight into the dynamics underlying the findings of other studies,” and they “may offer more conclusive results than a single primary research study.”^{1(p102)} Specific purposes of literature reviews are to

- provide a theoretical framework for the specific topic under study;
- define relevant or key terms and important variables used for a study or manuscript development;
- provide a synthesized overview of current evidence for practice to gain new perspectives and support assumptions and opinions presented in a manuscript using research studies, quality improvement projects, models, case studies, and so forth;
- identify the main methodology and research techniques previously used; and
- demonstrate the gap (distinguishing what has been done from what needs to be done) in the literature, pointing to the significance of the problem and need for the study or building a case for the quality improvement project to be conducted.^{1-3,5-7}

Building a case or defining a research gap assists an author in positioning his or her own work in the context of previous research findings.¹⁻³ The clinical implications developed from a research study must also relate to its preceding literature review.² The purpose of a review focused on clinical intervention is generally stated as follows:

To assess the effect of [intervention or comparison] for [health problem] in [types of people, disease, or problem], and health-care setting if appropriate. The parts of the review question

are often referred to as “PICO” (Participants, Interventions, Comparisons, and Outcomes). The included studies generally randomly assign participants to the intervention under investigation or control or comparative intervention.^{8(p1-2)}

PREPARATION PROCESS

The literature review process begins with a research question that clearly defines the topic and the intended audience.⁹ Authors can avoid searching and reading irrelevant papers by placing the specific research question(s) on which they are building the literature review in a prominent visible location as a reminder of the precise topic.² Marshall suggests using a three-stage process to develop an effective literature review: searching, critiquing, and synthesizing.² These three elements then lead to the culminating stage of writing the literature review for dissemination.

Searching

A complete review of the literature incorporates an appropriate breadth and depth of the topic.² Searching and re-searching the literature to gather and collect data for analysis are critical elements of the literature review development process. To search the literature effectively, reviewers must have clear inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure relevancy to the study or topic.² They must define the years of inclusion, such as literature from the past five years. It is important to be up-to-date, but older seminal studies may also have a role in the literature review article.⁹ The reviewer must provide rationale for the inclusion of older studies.

The search can yield three different results or a combination of the three. There could be:

- *A common consensus or near consensus about a topic. If this is so, this will represent the conventional wisdom on a topic.*
- *Areas of disagreement or debate, which give rise to various schools of thought.*
- *Gaps in the literature, eg, questions that have not been researched or perspectives that none has considered.*^{2(p21)}

Extremely large search results can make a review difficult to handle, particularly if there is a limited time frame and budget with which to conduct the search. In that case, reviewers should consider narrowing the focus of the search to “that produced by leading authorities, work that is the most recent (five years or less), and work that most closely aligns with your own.”^{2(p22)} Reviewers should always take detailed notes regarding search methods and while reading the articles,⁹ noting specifically the databases and key words used, and

clarify the resulting selection of articles.¹⁰ It is important for others to be able to follow or replicate the search processes used and understand how the literature was selected.¹⁰ Conducting the search by using multiple electronic databases is imperative. These databases may include but are not limited to the following:

- MEDLINE,
- the Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health (CINAHL),
- Google Scholar,
- ScienceDirect, and
- the Cochrane Collaboration.²

Critiquing

Critical evaluation is a process of applying rigorous and consistent literature review methods to provide an analysis or deconstruction of the content.² Reviewers should determine the strengths and weaknesses of the evidence presented in the literature, whether the results are small or provide a power sufficient for generalization, and whether the evidence provided can possibly change clinical practice.¹⁰

As a means to evaluate research studies and consider changes to practice, AORN perioperative practice specialists developed a new evidence rating model and new research appraisal tools. The AORN Research Evidence Appraisal Tool—Summary is designed for appraising systematic reviews of multiple quantitative and qualitative studies, and the AORN Research Evidence Appraisal Tool—Study is designed for appraising singular quantitative and qualitative studies.¹¹ Using a tool to analyze the articles under consideration for inclusion allows for consistency among team members when evaluating a large sample of articles divided among the team for initial evaluation. Exploring the value of an article in relation to the topic in question is critical to producing a solid, informative review.

Synthesizing and Writing

Synthesizing the available literature results from critical analysis of the varied sources and leads to a summary of knowledge on the topic.² It is important that an author of a literature review recognizes his or her own biases and seeks objectivity.^{1,2} This lends credibility to the work for publication. One’s own viewpoint is acceptable when it can be justified clearly for the reader. This includes using one’s own previously published works; however, objectivity becomes critical as the author writes the literature review.^{2,9} It is important to be critical for both positive and negative results and apply consistent methods. Remaining focused on

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