

TIPS FOR AUTHORS

Why the Literature Review is Important

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The careful reader will note that nearly every type of report in health sciences scholarly journals begins with a review of the relevant published literature. When preparing a manuscript for publication, the writer should recognize the specific function of such a review and the ways in which reviews will vary depending on the type of report. Understanding these differences will help the writer to shape the review appropriately.

One central principle holds true for any type of report, however, and that is that the literature review provides the *justification* or rationale for the research or technique to be described. Or to put it another way, the review characterizes the empty space in the relevant literature that the report of your results will fill.

So thinking about writing your literature review:

First of all, answer the question: how *comprehensive* should my literature review be? The answer depends in part on the type of report you are writing. Although the review for a **techniques report** can be relatively spare, for a **clinical** or **basic science research report**, the review section should be as comprehensive as necessary to identify and briefly describe previous studies on the same or similar topics. Relevant multi-center trials are particularly worthy of note and it will be important to identify any published meta-analysis or Cochrane Review related to your topic as well.

If your primary purpose is to write a report reviewing the literature rather than to report on an individual research project, the Materials and Methods section should fully describe the

search strategies you used in PubMed* and/or EMBASE* to identify relevant publications.

Second, whether you are writing a techniques report or a description of a research project and the project's findings, remember that the specific purpose of your review of the literature will be to characterize the knowledge gap that your work is designed to fill. That gap may be huge or it may be quite small. Your work may address a narrow issue or it may be only a step in the direction of solving a large problem but in either case, the problem will have not yet been addressed in quite the way that you will address it and it is important to make that clear in the literature review.

The requirements associated with the inclusion of literature reviews and precise descriptions of research methodology in today's health sciences research and technique reports actually date only from the last 150 years or so of the health sciences literature – longer than the life span of a single individual but still very much shorter than the hundreds of years of history of medical and dental care. These requirements have contributed to and continue to contribute to the enormous advances in the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge that inform the practice of the health professions today.

*PubMed is the health sciences literature online database published by the U.S. National Library of Medicine (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed) and Embase is the health sciences literature database published by Elsevier. PubMed is free to all online users while Embase requires a paid subscription.

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