

SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEWS

WHERE TO START?

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DEFINING A LITERATURE REVIEW

A piece of academic writing which involves the searching and evaluation of available literature on a given topic to demonstrate your understanding of existing knowledge with ‘a focus on scholarly work rather than popular materials’ (Healy and Mulholland, 2012, p. 168).

A comprehensive summary and critical synthesis (Kiteley and Stogdon, 2013)

Literature

Research, most likely based on evidence; usually published as journal articles, third sector reports, government studies.

Review

Survey of literature – or what has been written about a particular topic; key authors; theoretical underpinning; conceptual framework; intellectual context; locates your work within **existing body of knowledge**.

“FINDING THE GAP”

Finding, evaluating and synthesizing literature is a core component to all research projects.

Many approaches to conducting a literature review

- Narrative reviews
- Scoping reviews
- Systematic review
- Meta-analysis

A systematic literature review is a methodology in its own right, and adapts a rigorous, transparent process.

“a systematic review seeks to minimize bias by appraising and summarizing all available evidence in a rigorous and transparent way, in accordance with a predetermined set of inclusion/exclusion criteria” (Pascoe et al., 2021).

SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE AND NARRATIVE REVIEWS

Defining Characteristics

Narrative review

Focused on a specific research topic or practice issue

Does not seek to include all possible material, but should provide a balanced view that addresses contractions and trends in the literature to offer an overview

No strict inclusion or exclusion criteria. Not reproducible. Not limited to research only.

No standardised reporting structure, however, narrative review should draw upon multiple sources, referenced correctly and follow general academic writing principles

Systematic review

Clearly defined, and narrow focused research question with specific search terms.

Develop and adhere to a strict search strategy and protocol to appraise and summarise of all available evidence

Reproducible: Pre-set inclusion and exclusion criteria which may include date of publication, research methods employed (qualitative/quantitative/both), participant group, context and language of publication

Subject to specific reporting standards



CLEARLY DEFINED RESEARCH QUESTION

Frequently beginning with general engagement with the literature to explore what is known in your field.

Before deciding on whether or not to do a systematic literature review, it is important to have refined and cemented your research focus.

A systematic literature review should be responding to a clearly defined research question which will shape:
Search strategy, terminology, inclusion/exclusion criteria.

SOME EXAMPLE QUESTIONS

What are practicing frontline social workers' experiences of bureaucracy?

What teaching strategies are effective for building research confidence and competence in taught Masters social work qualifying degrees?

How do [insert profession or population of interest]
understand/define/perceive/experience [social problem or issue]

INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA

Include	Exclude
Type of literature ie Peer reviewed journal articles, empirical studies.	This may include grey literature like newspaper articles, commentaries, book reviews etc.
Year of publication: Is there a period you are confining this to?	Year of publication
Language: Do you need to include a language parameter?	Language
Is there a specific industry or profession? Eg Social workers not social care workers, teachers not teacher aids	➔ Studies outside of defined profession, intervention or industry ➔ Studies that combine findings across professions/populations
Method specific? ie qualitative, quantitative	

You should be able to justify your criteria and articulate why this has been applied for your study.



WHERE TO LOOK

Selecting bibliographic databases is a vital step in designing a systematic literature review.

- What databases are common in your field?
- Is your topic interdisciplinary?
- Have there been any assessments or evaluations of the precision and sensitivity of the data bases?
- Do you need to scope this yourself?

Often fragmented systems: Best practice should include more than one.

CREATING A SEARCH STRATEGY

AND: Narrows the search results by ensuring all terms are included in results A+B

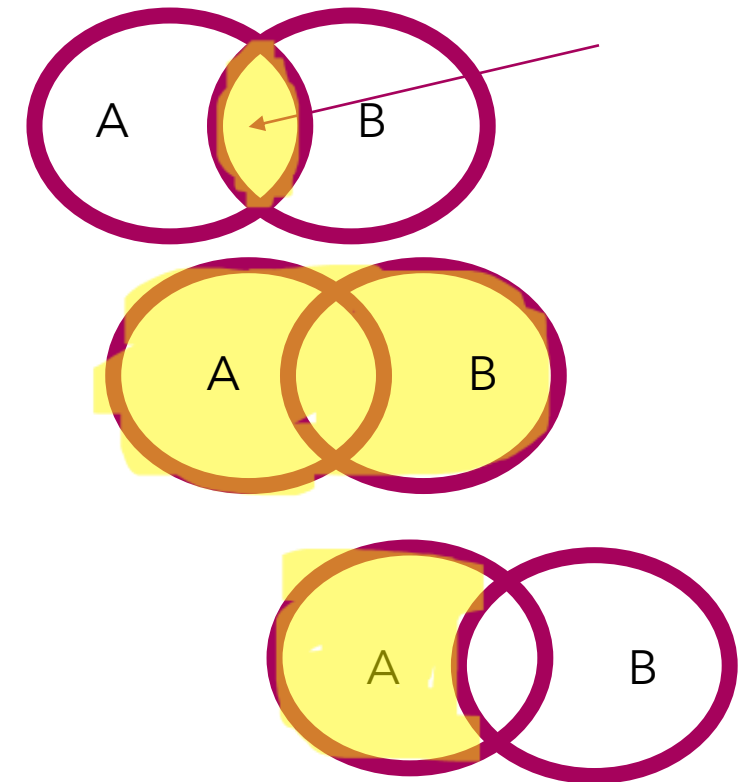
OR: Broadens the search results A or B

NOT: Limits the results by excluding terms A not B

Truncations * : reduce terms such as child* would include child, children and childcare

“use of inverted commas” to search for phrases such as “Community development” or “child protection”

(De Brun and Pearce-Smith, 2014)



CONCEPTS AND SYNONYMS

Concept 1 _____ *OR* _____ *OR* _____
AND
Concept 2 _____ *OR* _____ *OR* _____
AND
Concept 3 _____ *OR* _____ *OR* _____

Social Work	Experience	Bureaucra*
social service case management care management case work human services	perspective belie* response reaction perception opinion	managerial* “new public management” “performance management” audit paperwork “form-talk”



**ALWAYS TRIAL YOUR
STRATEGY FIRST**

KEEPING TRACK



Make a record of the specific search strategy and function for each database AND the date of the search

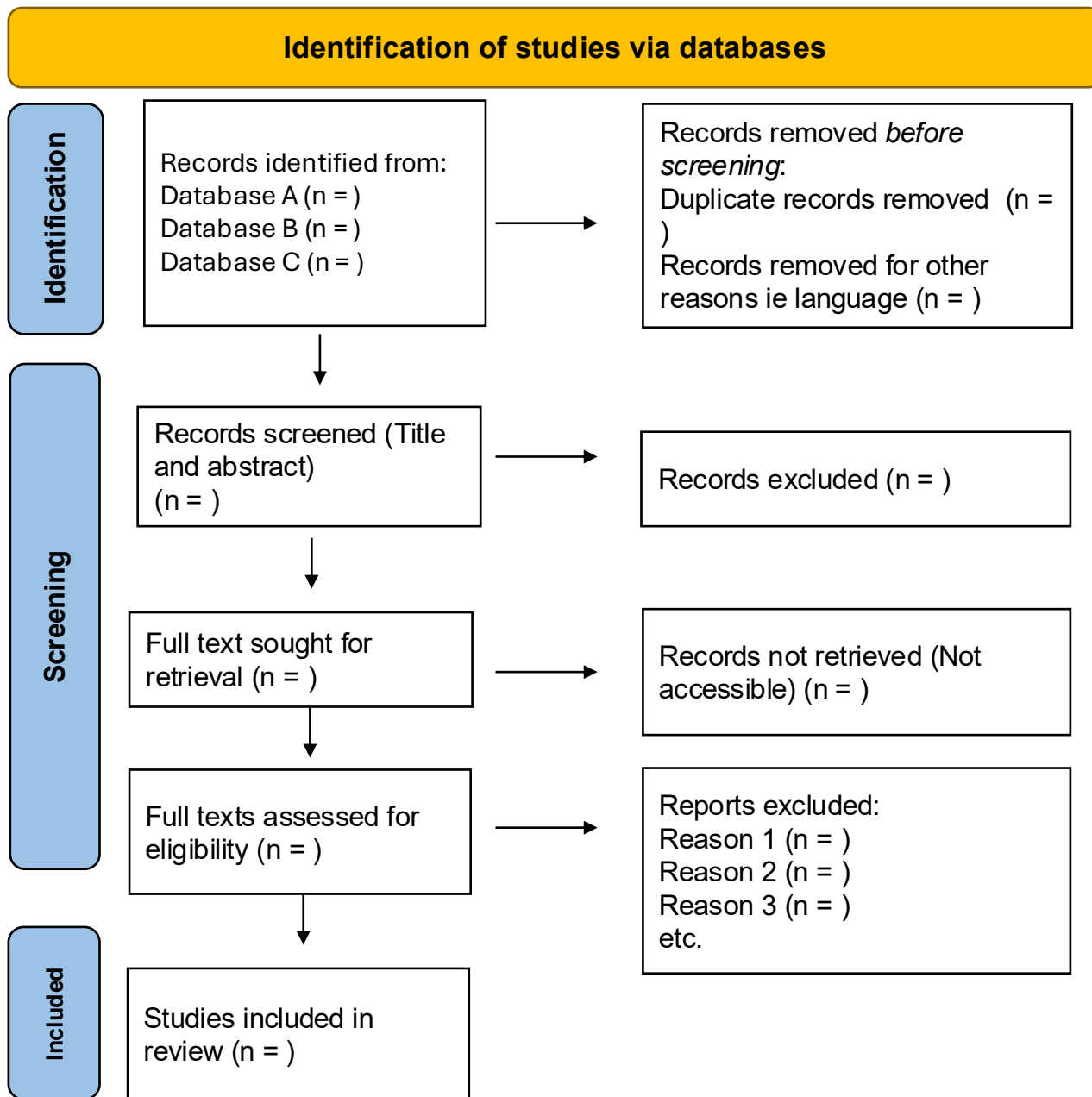


Keep a record of citations retrieved for each database and duplicates



Consider software that will be effective: Excel, referencing software, Nvivo, Covidence

Databas e	Title of article	Author(s)	Year published	Exclusion Or unsure	Justification
ASSIA, <u>pysch</u> , SCO, SSCI	The transformation of human services	Reinders	2008		Not empirical research. Literature review looking at the characteristics of neoliberalism and managerial changes in social work.
ASSIA, <u>Sco</u> , SSA	Making sense of experience: Death and old age	Machin	1998		Not empirical research, more a conceptual paper
ASSIA, SSA, <u>Sdata</u> , SSCI, IBSS	Constructing accountability: The development and delegation of outcome evaluation in American social work	Brown	2019		Theoretical and historical review of the development of evaluation practices in social work
ASSIA, SSA, IBSS	The vulnerable elderly's need for recognising relationships - a challenge to <u>danish</u> home- based care	Liveng	2011		It is the experiences of people in care, not of social workers, <u>however</u> may be relevant to other chapters as it talks about the concept of relationships.
ASSIA, SSCI, SSA	School social work in Australia	Lee	2012		Empirical research, recognising the large proportion of hours spent on paperwork. Need to read full article to confirm.



It is important to consider a team approach to screening, what to do if there is uncertainty in the screening?

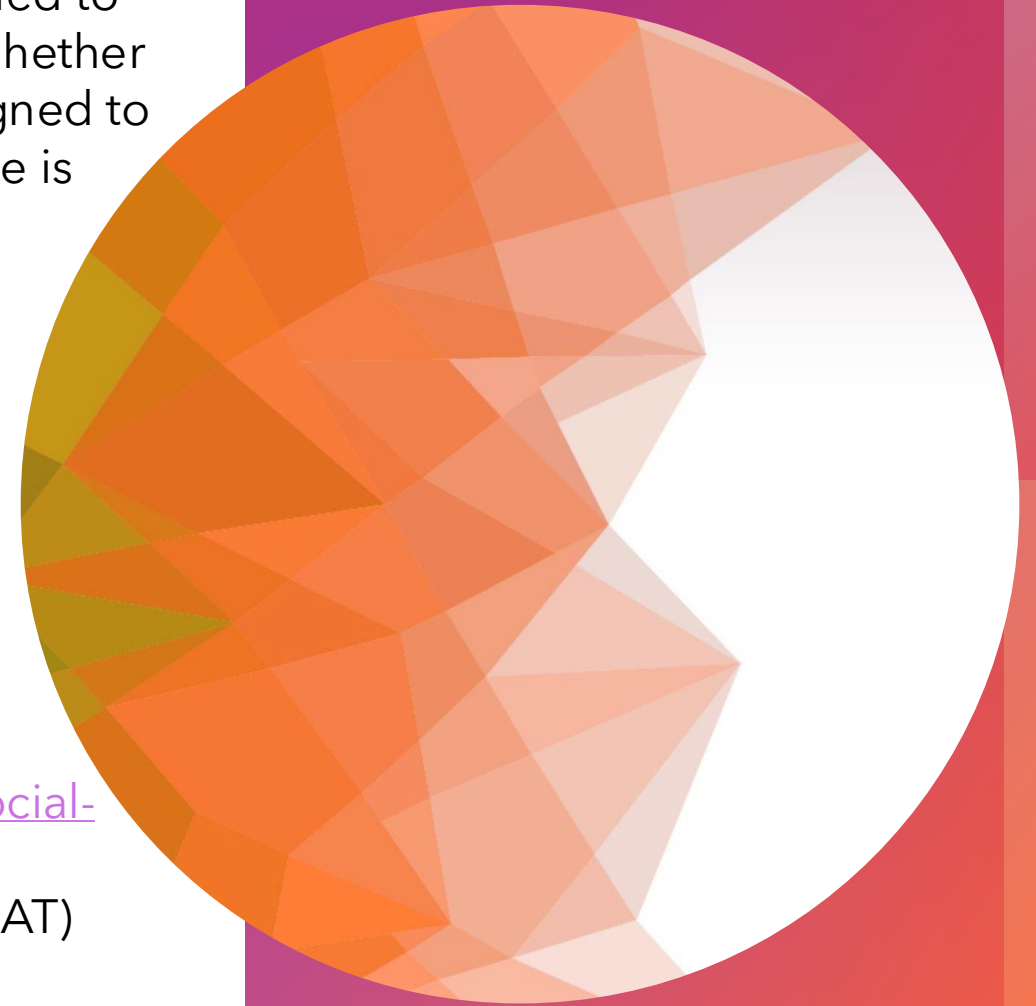
PRISMA FLOW DIAGRAM

<https://www.prisma-statement.org>

APPRAISE FULL ARTICLES

“There are multiple quality appraisal tools that have been designed to aid researchers in assessing the overall quality of research and whether a study is ethical, reliable, and relevant. These tools are not designed to replace critical thought and professional judgement, but their use is recommended to guide a systematic process of consideration” (Pascoe & Lynch, 2026).

- ✓ Critical Appraisal Skills Programme
<https://casp-uk.net/casp-tools-checklists/>
- ✓ Joanna Briggs Institute Critical appraisal tools
<https://jbi.global/critical-appraisal-tools>
- ✓ Spencer, L., Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., & Dillon, L. (2003).
Quality in qualitative evaluation: A framework for assessing research evidence:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-social-research-framework-for-assessing-research-evidence>
- ✓ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Quality Appraisal Tool (QAT)
can be used to determine the quality of research drawing on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldviews. Harfield, et al (2020). <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s12874-020-00959-3>



Use more than one bibliographic database: Selection and performance is often context specific

Don't underestimate the amount of reflection needed: More than technical expertise but require ongoing balancing

Trial your search strategy

Reach out to your subject librarian

It can be intimidating but take it one step at a time

Managing your information and continual decision making effectively



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Questions and conversation

Additional resources

De Brun, C., and Pearce-Smith, N. (2014). *Searching skills toolkit: Findings the evidence* (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.

Kiteley, R., & Stogdon, C. (2013). *Literature reviews in social work*. Sage Publications.

Pascoe, K. M., Waterhouse-Bradley, B., & McGinn, T. (2021). 'Systematic literature searching in social work: A practical guide with database appraisal.' *Research on Social Work Practice*, 31(5),
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731520986857>