Planning the Literature Review

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A literature review provides a synthetic summary and synthesis of what is known and unknown regarding a scholarly topic. A rigorous literature review may encourage the use of appropriate methods, enhances generalizability, places research within a broader context, accelerates progress in health professions education, and improves the likelihood of publication. This Last Page highlights the steps for planning and executing a literature review within health professions education.

Define scope

- Identify accepted standards for articles, and review model examples of the type you plan to write that have been published in target journals.
- Map out general topics of interest.
- Assess your existing knowledge and expertise. Novices may need to spend significant time searching and reading the literature.

Design search

- Select databases. Consider medical (PubMed, CINAHL), educational (ERIC), psychology (PsycINFO), and general databases (Scopus, Google Scholar).
- Review database indexing terms for a few relevant articles.
- Examine published reviews for potential search terms and strategies.
- Consult a medical librarian or another colleague for assistance.

Locate articles

- Dedicate time for iterative rounds of searching.
- Consult AM Last Page: How to perform an effective database search.
- Review reference lists of key articles for additional relevant references.

Organize & assess results

- Select a reference manager (e.g., Zotero, Endnote, Refworks, Mendeley), considering issues of access and cost.
- Develop a plan to systematically review titles, abstracts, and full text.
- Check search results for presence of key articles. If absent, revise your search.

Refine & repeat

- Carefully select references to cite and ensure reference accuracy, as citation problems contribute to rejection.
- Stop searching when the same citations appear repeatedly and new relevant citations are not seen.
- Repeat your search at critical time points, such as just before manuscript preparation, submission, and revision.

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References:

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