ABSTRACT

A review of the literature is a summary of the current understanding of a specific topic or condition that serves to educate and/or aid the reader by presenting and synthesizing previously published scholarly sources. This article discusses how to conduct a literature review using current databases to collect and evaluate a range of sources, such as peer-reviewed professional and academic journal articles and textbooks and organize findings into a manuscript.

KEYWORDS: literature, review, peer review, writing, physician assistant, Journal of Dermatology for Physician Assistants

Journal of Dermatology for Physician Assistants has two publishing categories that require literature review content. These categories are Literature Review and Systematic Review or Meta-Analysis. Conducting a literature review includes a comprehensive summary of previous research on a topic, giving the writer a point of departure for the nature of the research topic to be examined. Acknowledging the work of previously published material demonstrates that the author(s) have read and evaluated relevant prior publications while recognizing the work of previous researchers.

A literature review is based on the research question or topic to be explored and addressed. Identifying and reading previous and current relevant publications helps determine if your topic is timely, important, and is not a duplication of similarly published work. One caveat here is that replicating previous studies to determine if prior findings can be repeated and validated in similar conditions is a legitimate form of research.

Performing a thorough review of the literature often commences with a consultation with a biomedical librarian (if available) to acquire assistance and guidance with navigating current databases. At a minimum, these should include MEDLINE (PubMed), EMBASE (Scopus), and the Cochrane CENTRAL trials register. While these databases primarily cite published peer-reviewed manuscripts, it is important to examine and evaluate a range of sources, such as textbooks, web-based reports, peer-reviewed professional and academic journal articles, and published professional symposia proceedings or abstracts.

There are numerous supplemental databases available for conducting literature reviews, including the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, Google Scholar, and ClinicalTrials.gov. It should be noted that the literature review for a peer-reviewed biomedical publication does not necessarily consist of the breadth and depth of that required for academic doctoral dissertations. These reviews typically require an exhaustive summary of nearly everything ever published of relevance on the proposed topic.

Following the identification of relevant databases to query, the literature review is based on a keyword search. This is why indexed peer-reviewed journals require the inclusion of keywords with manuscript submissions. It enables the reader to either explore the topic in greater depth or to perform a literature review on a similar or complementary topic.

To begin the description of the review, one should narrow the issue or topic to provide the necessary framework for the review. This includes describing trends, conflicting findings, and methodology. A description of the criteria used in comparing and analyzing the review will inform the reader and provide a basis for why the publications selected were included. Conducting the review will also assist the researcher(s) in determining if their question should be modified or changed based on the information collected thus far.

The body of the review should categorize selected publications into themes, such as previous reviews of the literature, meta-analyses, dissertation work, or case studies in order to determine patterns or subtopics related to the research question. Another helpful indicator is describing if the work was performed with
quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods research tools. If the selected topic has frequently cited “gold standard” publications, these should be included in the review. This is often described as “chanting the names of the ancestors.”

The conclusion should support the focus of the research topic to be explored while summarizing the established body of knowledge on the topic. It should explain any identified inconsistencies found in published literature on the research topic and explain any gaps or omissions in existing research. Identifying potential areas for future research could be included here. If the review is performed only as a summary update of the recent and important literature on the topic described, then there is no need to tie it to a research question for an original study. However, if the review is conducted to support a research question with accompanying original data, the review should provide insight into the relationship between existing work and the study presented for consideration. Where possible, include content that reflects how dermatology PA practice may be influenced or affected by the contribution of the proposed topic.

Conducting a literature review can also serve as a method of self-study to enhance one’s breadth and depth of knowledge on a particular subject. For academic purposes, it can assist the researcher in enhancing the skills necessary to pursue advanced academic degrees. As the profession migrates toward a greater representation of doctoral prepared PAs, an ability to perform a topical in-depth review of the literature is a near-universal component of academic doctoral degree requirements.

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Funding: No funding was provided
Disclosures: The author reports no potential conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise, relating to the content of this article.

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