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Himmelfarb Library Liaison Letters

Himmelfarb Health Sciences Library

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Himmelfarb Library Liaison Letter - November 2023

George Washington University, Himmelfarb Health Sciences Library

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Writing a literature review is usually a complex process requiring a significant investment of time and effort. Before undertaking such a project, it's important to identify the type of review that will be most appropriate for your project. The review type you choose will likely be determined by what your ultimate goal is as well as the resources (both in terms of collaborators and work hours) that can be committed to the project. The Himmelfarb Library and its staff of talented librarians can also serve as a resource to help you accomplish your project.

Below is a discussion of the three most common kinds of literature reviews with which Himmelfarb librarians assist.

Narrative review

The goal of a narrative review is to give readers a snapshot of the current state of a particular field of study. These reviews are often the product of a single author and typically take weeks to months to complete. While there may be no formalized article selection process, the author(s) of such a review will attempt to identify the key articles within the field; it is not generally the intent to identify all of the articles covering that field. The literature searches done for such a review may seek to identify the impact of the included articles to ensure that the most important ones are included. When working on this kind of review, authors need to be especially mindful of their article selection and evaluation process to avoid introducing bias into their analysis.

Systematic review

Unlike a narrative review, which seeks to summarize what is known on a particular topic, a systematic review is meant to collect all relevant evidence to answer a discrete question or set of questions. The intent is not so much a summary of what is known but rather to provide guidance to practitioners and researchers by combining data from different sources to answer the initial, guiding question(s). These reviews require the effort of more than one person in order to minimize the likelihood of introducing bias into the process. Additionally, they usually take months to years to complete. The team performing a systematic review will attempt to locate all relevant evidence on a particular topic, not just 'key' articles. They will also carefully document the steps they've taken as those will be reported in the 'Methods' section of the manuscript that results from this work.

Scoping review

Like a systematic review, a scoping review is performed using a methodical, well-documented, and thorough search of the literature on a particular topic. Additionally, like a systematic review, it will be the product of a team and can take months to years, to complete. Overall, scoping reviews rely on much the same methodology as systematic reviews. The main difference is in the analysis of the articles identified from that search. As opposed to answering a pre-defined question(s), the purpose of a scoping review is to describe the current state of the literature around a particular topic. A key outcome of a scoping review is to guide future research by giving a better understanding of what has already been done in a particular field and therefore assisting in the identification of gaps in the literature which need to be addressed.

Regardless of the kind of review you want to write, librarians at the Himmelfarb Library are available to help. Email us at himmelfarb@gwu.edu and you'll be connected with one of our talented reference librarians! We offer different levels of service, from consultations meant to give general guidance on the process, all the way to being full co-researchers responsible for developing and implementing literature searches.

Himmelfarb will soon be implementing a charge-back process for reviews for which the librarian devotes a significant amount of time and acts as a full collaborator by developing and executing the literature searches and loading the data for analysis. This program will go into effect in January 2024 - however, librarian consultation for systematic reviews will remain a no-cost service to all Himmelfarb affiliates!

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Reference questions? Call 202-994-2850 or email us at himmelfarb@gwu.edu

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