

Fact sheet 3: How do I prepare a review of existing evidence on a topic?

This fact sheet aims to give you information to help you to understand:

- How to format an evidence review ;
- How to construct a web search for evidence; and
- How to consider and interpret evidence.

It will also provide links to other useful fact sheets, documents and resources that relate to evidence.

1. How to format an evidence review

A literature or evidence review presents published information in a particular subject area. It can be just a simple summary of the information, but it is usually organised around topic areas and combines both summary and synthesis. The summary is a recap of the relevant information available about the subject and the synthesis is a re-organisation and interpretation of that information. The review may provide a new interpretation of old material or involve debate or evaluation of the sources (where there is conflict in findings, for example).

Literature or evidence reviews provide you with a comprehensive overview of a particular topic and are useful reports that can keep you up to date with what is current in the field. They can also provide a solid background as a basis for decisions and emphasise the credibility of a decision. In choosing the information you want to include, consider:

- trying to focus your subject of interest into a particular topic (or topics) that you want to review, or a question that you want to answer. Remember, the broader your topic area, the more literature you will need to review;
- what sections/subheadings to use to help break down your chosen topic area(s) for the reader;
- including background information, such as definitions or history of a particular topic;
- whether the information is as current as possible. You may wish to consider how theory or evidence has advanced in your subject area over time, but ensure that any conclusions you make (and base decisions on) are based on the most currently available evidence; and
- whether the information is useful?
 - What does the evidence mean?
 - Can the evidence/results be trusted?
 - Does this answer my question?
 - Is it relevant to my work?

Once you have determined that the information you have found is useful, you will need to write it up! Try to:

- summarise and signpost the information for the reader rather than just repeat it. You can do this by discussing common themes or issues in the information;
- include some critique of the quality of the information you refer to or how representative it is. Just listing it gives the impression that each finding has equal weight, which may not be the case;
- consider whether there is a clear consensus? Or are there areas of debate? Are there gaps in what is accepted or known?
- discuss what you have drawn from reviewing the literature so far. What can you conclude or recommend? and
- give clear references for statements you make, making your review as objective as possible and allowing the reader to weigh up your conclusions.

2. How to construct a web search for evidence

Search terms

- Think about words and phrases that relate to your topic and synonyms. E.g. using the term '*obesity*' will return hundreds of thousands of web pages but '*weight management programme*' will return fewer more specific pages.
- If you want evidence only from this country narrow down your search by including 'UK' in your search terms or by limiting search to UK based websites.

Information sources

- Include evidence from a range of sources, such as local evaluations, peer-reviewed articles, and national policy and guidance. The more sources supporting your case, the stronger it is!
- Think about the websites you are using for information. Was it written by a reputable organisation, a blogger or a media source with a particular agenda? Do not assume everything written online is true. Check that facts and figures have been referenced by websites before using them in your review.
 - For example, Wikipedia should not be used as a source of evidence. It can be edited by any web user and so can contain inaccurate information.
- Where are you going to search? Useful search engines include the National Institute for Health & Clinical Excellence (NICE) <http://guidance.nice.org.uk/PHG/Published> and PubMed (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/>). Also see [Factsheet 2: What sort of evidence is available to me in Wirral Council?](#)

3. Tips & further advice

- Refine your search. When searching it can be useful to employ search techniques such as choosing keywords, or using truncation (for example using Boolean operators such as AND, OR or NOT to refine your search term, or using * at the end of a word to expand the search to include all forms of the word).
- Get someone else to read through your evidence. This is a good way of checking whether you have 'made the case' or not: are they convinced that your project is needed?
- Consider **referencing**:
 - It is important to acknowledge where you have drawn your conclusions from, and to show the breadth of the literature that you reviewed.
 - Harvard referencing is a commonly used style. There are numerous 'how to' guides available on the Internet.



More on this topic and further reading

For more information on the role of evidence in primary care delivery and the opportunities for evidence input and generation throughout the project cycle, see [Factsheet 1: How can I make sure my project is evidence based?](#)

For more information on the 3 domains of evidence - theoretical, empirical and experiential, different types and quality of evidence, national and local sources of evidence, see [Factsheet 2: What sort of evidence is available to me in NHS Wirral?](#)

For more information about evidence based practice visit: <http://www.ebnp.co.uk>

For more information about reviewing evidence:
[http://www.patient.co.uk/doctor/Different-Levels-of-Evidence-\(Critical-Reading\).htm](http://www.patient.co.uk/doctor/Different-Levels-of-Evidence-(Critical-Reading).htm)

Other useful documents:

<http://www.oxfordradcliffe.nhs.uk/research/researchers/news/documents/LiteratureSearchingGuidelinesChecklist.pdf>

Tricia Greenhalgh (2000). How to read a paper: the basics of evidence-based medicine BMJ Publishing Group, 2000.
http://www.hstathome.com/tjiziyuan/How%20to%20Read%20a%20Paper%20evadence_based%20medicine.pdf