Method 12
Non-systematic literature review

Summary of method

Literature review that describes (and may appraise) the state/nature of existing evidence, but does not follow a standardised, systematic method.

There are no formal reporting requirements.

Key references

No specific resource provides guidance on the method, as methods are so variable. The following paper suggests how to improve and standardise literature review methods.

Haddaway N et al (2015) Making literature reviews more reliable through application of lessons from systematic reviews. *Conservation Biology* 29, 1596-1605.

Examples of application

Most scientific assessment reports commissioned by Governments or international institutions follow this method. For example, none of the assessment reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA) or the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) published so far have followed standardised or peer-reviewed protocols or appraisal methods. They have not documented their detailed methods, or the fate of all articles screened. These steps are required for systematic reviews and systematic maps, and usually also for rapid evidence assessments and scoping reviews.

Non-systematic literature review	
Cost	Varies depending on rigour (a few days to months FTE)

Time required	Varies depending on rigour (a few days to months)
Repeatability	Low
Transparency	Low
Risk of bias	Very high
Scale (or level of detail)	Independent of scale (any)
Capacity for participation	Usually none
Data demand	Variable depending on rigour
Types of knowledge	Scientific/technical, opinion-based; explicit
Types of output	Narrative description and reference list
Specific expertise required	Usually requires a topic expert

Strengths	Weaknesses
Fast	No formal methodology
Requires little technical skill	Generally very low transparency precludes verification of methods used and reliability of synthesis
All academics are familiar with their conduct	No critical appraisal of included studies performed
Moderate length documents fairly easy to read and understand	No quantitative analysis of study findings
Can cover a broad subject area	High risk of vote-counting (see Vote-Counting)
	Typically do not include grey literature
	Low comprehensiveness