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A Step-by-Step Guide to Writing a Review Paper in Medical Education

Muhammad Zulfiqah Sadikan[1,2]

[1]Department of Pharmacology, Faculty of Medicine, Manipal University College Malaysia, Bukit Baru 75150 Melaka.

[2]Center of Transformative Learning, Manipal University College Malaysia, Bukit Baru 75150 Melaka.

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Corresponding Author: Muhammad Zulfiqah Sadikan

Email: mzsadikan@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

Review articles are foundation tasks in medical education since they synthesize current knowledge, establish best practice, and identify key research gaps. However, the majority of researchers and postgraduate students face immense challenges when they attempt to write their first review article. Common mistakes vary from selecting an appropriate topic, navigating through massive literature databases, synthesizing divergent sources, and presenting findings in an academic format. These step-by-step guides explain on how to write a review paper by providing a structured, easy-to-follow approach for medical education areas. The guide begins by explaining on how to choose a focused and relevant topic that is both within the author's scope of expertise and of urgent need in the field. It continues by outlining the key distinctions between different type of reviews such as narrative, systematic, and scoping reviews to help researchers determine the most suitable type to fulfil their objectives. Subsequent chapters discuss on approaches for conducting efficient literature searches, critically appraising sources, and synthesising information thematically. Special emphasis is placed on synthesizing findings into a coherent argument while maintaining academic integrity. This paper also addresses common errors such as managing the scope of the review, preventing plagiarism through proper citation conventions, and selecting appropriate journals to which to submit. Appropriate guidance is provided on how to structure the manuscript, refine academic writing style, and respond to peer reviewer criticisms. This manuscript aims to build confidence among researchers and finally empowers beginners to produce quality, publishable reviews that contribute impactfully to the medical education research and practice community.

Keywords:

Medical Education, Peer Review, Manuscript Submission, Reviewer Feedback, Academic Publishing

INTRODUCTION

The dynamic and interdisciplinarity of medical education necessitate ongoing investigation, reflection, and incorporation of new teaching methods, learning theory, technological innovations, and institutional reform (Kaufman 2018, Sadikan and Ariffin 2024). As published research remains in its rising trend, review articles have become a necessity for teachers, researchers, and policymakers to navigate the expanding base of evidence. In contrast to first-time original research articles reporting fresh results,

review articles synthesize recent evidence, draw thematic connections, and add critical perspectives shaping future practice and research agendas (Lim et al. 2022).

For the majority of postgraduate students, junior scholars, or healthcare professionals engaging in educational scholarship for the first time, composition of a review article is an ideal starting point. But the process is rather conceived as complicated and intimidating. Challenges include choosing a good and focused topic, the best form of review, developing a good plan for literature search, meaningfully synthesizing findings, and observing scholarly writing conventions (Chigbu et al. 2023). Without direction from experts, novice writers may not be in a position to develop clear and scholarly content publishable.

The current paper will cover this gap by giving a clear, step-by-step writing guide for writing a review article in medical education. Despite the abundance of resources on writing scientific papers, there are few that address the specific requirements of educational reviews, especially from the perspective of beginners. This manuscript breaks down the process into actionable steps from the topic development to submitting to a journal and offers useful advice to first-time writers to write clearly, confidently, and academically. Upon completion, readers will be well-equipped to initiate, conduct, and finalize a review paper that adds value to medical education discussion.

SELECTING A RELEVANT AND FOCUSED TOPIC

Choosing a suitable topic is one of the most significant tasks in organizing a review paper, particularly within a multidisciplinary field like medical education. A good choice of topic not only determines the direction of the paper but also influences the quality, relevance, and originality of the output. For beginners, the choice may be daunting, as the temptation is most often to work on broad or too ambitious themes (Lindsay 2020). But good review papers usually arise out of tightly constructed, focused questions that address specific gaps or issues in educational research or practice (Luft et al. 2022).

First, the author should reflect on his or her own knowledge, education, and interests in particular areas of medical education. Issues raised by personal classroom experience, curriculum design projects, or witnessed student learning difficulty have a good chance of providing powerful inquiry. For example, a clinical educator who has implemented team-based learning would be well advised to look back across the success of that pedagogy by medical discipline (Sterpu et al. 2024).

After a rough area is identified, the author should then conduct a brief initial search to determine how much literature exists (Cooper et al. 2018). If there are an excessive number of studies, the area might be too broad and needs to be narrowed. If minimal literature exists, the area might be too narrow or emerging and may need to be widened. The correct review topic will have a balance by which it must be specific enough to render synthesis purposeful but generic enough to cover sufficient studies to review.

In medical education, typical subjects are curriculum reform, assessment, e-learning, simulation, interprofessional learning, staff development, and student well-being. Authors should not reproduce topics of already highly discussed subjects unless they are providing a fresh perspective, new findings, new approaches, or highlighting underrepresented domains or populations.

One helpful approach to narrowing a topic is to rephrase it as a researchable question through the use of tools such as PICO (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome) or SPIDER (Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research type) even for non-systematic reviews. This allows for clarity of purpose from the start and facilitates the development of search strategies (Methley et al. 2014).

For instance, rather than examining "technology in medical education" as a whole, a more precise title would be: "The impact of gamified e-learning tools on anatomy knowledge retention by preclinical medical students." This specific subject at once defines the scope, relevant studies, and potential structure of the review.

Importantly, the topic must also align with current trends and interest among academia (Majumder et al. 2023). Scrolling through recent editorials, call for papers, or conference topics of medical education journals can help authors position their studies with ongoing academic discussions to improve the probability of acceptance and reading .

UNDERSTANDING THE TYPE OF REVIEW

Before beginning on creating a review paper in medical education, one has to first understand what kind of review best suits the audience. "Review" can be described in several different forms, every one with their method, purpose, and anticipation. Selecting the appropriate form of review not only constructs the paper's and integrity design but also guides the writer on what way evidence is obtained, deciphered, and documented.

Narrative Review

Narrative review, or traditional or literature review, is the most common type for novice authors. Typically, it offers an overview of a specific topic, incorporating information from multiple sources such as original studies, editorials, and commentaries. While narrative reviews are convenient and useful for presenting background information or conceptual trends summarization, they typically have no systematic approaches in article selection or quality evaluation (Sukhera 2022). This makes them susceptible to author bias unless handled carefully. However, a well-written narrative review can be useful when it is well-defined, logically structured, and critically analyzed.

Systematic Review

In contrast, a systematic review uses a defined methodology to locate, select, and critically appraise relevant studies on a particular research question. This type of review is best suited for evaluating the effect of educational interventions, comparing methods of assessment, or identifying predictors of educational outcomes. The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) approach is widely used in medical education systematic reviews to enhance transparency and reproducibility (Parums 2021). Although more resource-intensive, this type of review demands considerable time, access to multiple databases, and familiarity with methodological appraisal tools. It is normally done by a team rather than one author because of the complexity.

Scoping Review

Scoping reviews are best used if the aim is to map the breadth of literature on a new or broad topic. They enable key concepts, determination of research gaps, and assessment of the diversity of methodologies applied within a field (Peters et al. 2021). Scoping reviews differ from systematic reviews in that they do not focus on the quality of evidence but instead aim to explore the scope and nature of the topic. In medicine, they are increasingly used to explore issues like digital learning

environments, faculty development strategies, or interprofessional education. The PRISMA-ScR guidelines are used to report on scoping reviews consistently (Mattos et al. 2023, McGowan et al. 2020).

Other Types

Less often, authors can do realist reviews (Ajjawi and Kent 2022), meta-ethnographies (Luong et al. 2023), or integrative reviews (Cronin and George 2023) based on the type of inquiry they have. These types are more sophisticated and usually require expertise in both learning theory and qualitative synthesis. Therefore, a narrative or scoping review is recommendable for novice authors as a first step, gradually building skills to perform more complex types of reviews for subsequent studies.

CONDUCTING AN EFFECTIVE LITERATURE SEARCH

An effective literature search is the cornerstone of any fine review article. It ensures that the review is grounded on recent knowledge, reflects current trends, and complete enough to allow sound conclusions to be drawn. For medical education, the literature encompasses educational journals, clinical education databases, and at times grey literature, such that it necessitates a considered search strategy even more (Jha et al. 2022).

Define the Research Objective

The search process begins with the refinement of the topic into a specific, brief question. Using models such as PICO (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome) or SPIDER (Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research type) can help in structuring the search terms (Eriksen and Frandsen 2018). For instance, a PICO-structured question in medical education might be: "What is the impact of simulation-based training (Intervention) on clinical decision-making (Outcome) among medical students (Population)?"

Select Suitable Databases

Database choice has significant effects on the quality and amount of returned literature. Most widely used popular databases in medical education are in included in Table 1.

Table 1: Common databases used for retrieving literatures in medical education research.

Databases used in medical education	Context
PubMed/MEDLINE	• For peer-reviewed biomedical and health education literature.
ERIC (Education Resources Information Center)	• For educational research and pedagogy.
Scopus and Web of Science	• For broader interdisciplinary content.
PsycINFO	• When handling studies grounded in learning theory and cognitive psychology.
CINAHL	• Useful when conducting studies on interprofessional or nursing education.

Apart from, grey literature materials such as OpenGrey, Google Scholar, or ProQuest Dissertations may be used during the examination of new or previously under-explored fields (Hoffecker 2020).

Define Search Terms and Boolean Logic

Subject headings and keywords (for example, MeSH terms used in PubMed) of the subject need to be part of search terms. Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) might be used for combining or excluding terms and narrowing search results. For example: ("medical education" OR "clinical teaching") AND ("simulation" OR "mannequin-based training") AND ("decision-making" OR "clinical judgment"). Recording the search strings, date of search, and hits per database is essential for transparency and reproducibility.

Use Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Following the retrieval of a high volume of articles, using inclusion and exclusion criteria sharpens the focus. Some common criteria are included in Table 2.

Table 2: Common inclusion and exclusion criteria in medical education literature research.

Criteria	Common Examples
Inclusion	• Only peer-reviewed journal articles (no conference proceedings, editorials, or grey literature) • Articles published in English only • Published within the last 10 years (for example 2015–2025) • Must focus on biomedical or health education • Study participants must include medical students (undergraduate or graduate-entry) or medical educators (faculty, clinical preceptors) • Must involve a clear educational component for examples curriculum, teaching methods, learning outcomes, assessment, and faculty development. • Formal or informal medical education settings (for example, classrooms, hospitals, simulation labs, online modules)
Exclusion	• Studies not related to medical or health professions education • Exclude conference abstracts, editorials, opinion pieces, letters, and protocol-only papers • Articles not in English • Studies that do not involve medical students or teachers (for example, nursing, pharmacy, allied health unless medical students are also involved) • Studies published more than 10 years ago unless they are seminal works • Articles with no direct relevance or application to the research question (for example, those discussing general health care delivery without educational focus)

For systematic or scoping reviews, the selection process should typically be described in a flow diagram (for instance, PRISMA flowchart), and reasons for exclusion by each step should be documented.

Organize and Manage References

Using reference management software such as EndNote, Zotero, or Mendeley can help organize citations, remove duplicates, and insert in-text citations during manuscript writing. It can also format reference lists according to different journal requirements with ease (Kratochvíl 2017).

Ensure Comprehensive and Balanced Coverage

One of the pitfalls for novice writers is unconscious prejudice in selecting literature. Over-reliance on a limited number of sources or exclusion of non-Western studies can distort the results of the review (Liu 2024). A systematic search strategy guarantees that all possible perspectives are gathered and incorporated in the final review.

SCREENING AND SELECTING RELEVANT LITERATURE

After identifying a particular topic and initial broad literature search, the second essential step is the selection and screening of relevant literature. This process lays the foundation stones of the review and should be carried out with care so that the selected literature is sound, relevant, and representative of the available evidence (Booth et al. 2021).

The first step is title and abstract screening, where the author decides if the retrieved articles are generally related to the subject. The inclusion and exclusion criteria should already have been established at this point. For instance, if the review seeks to address feedback in clinical clerkships, then investigations in high school education or non-clinical undergraduate courses would be excluded. Likewise, articles that are not addressing feedback as the central theme would be aside. It is advised that one maintains evidence for the reason why certain studies were excluded to ensure openness, most significantly in systematic or scoping reviews (Munn et al. 2018).

The second is full-text screening. During this phase, the author reads the full content of the remaining articles to confirm their direct relevance to review objectives. It is common to find that some articles, though promising in title or abstract, do not achieve the inclusion criteria on full reading. Some do not have sufficient methodological rigor or cover tangential issues. It is helpful at this stage to extract and chart out basic information from each article, including 1) author(s) and year of publication, 2) location or region where the study was conducted, 3) educational context (e.g., preclinical, clinical, postgraduate), 4) study design and methodology, 5) key findings and conclusions and 6) implications for medical education.

A data extraction table is useful to make comparison of studies systematically, search for common themes, and ready the thematic synthesis (Mc Grath-Lone et al. 2022). For a narrative review, it assists with preparing the arrangement of the discussion. For scoping or systematic reviews, it is a compulsory methodology component. They also feature quality assessment of the studies involved. Though systematic reviews call for this, narrative reviews too can be assisted by referring to the strength or weakness of the large studies, especially if the review involves diversified methodologies or disputed results.

In the process of screening, authors must take care of publication bias and language bias (Jackson and Kuriyama 2019). Limiting a review to English-language articles or commonly known journals may inadvertently rule out valuable findings from low- and middle-income countries or non-English-speaking countries (Pilkington et al. 2005). Wherever possible, efforts should be made to incorporate diverse sources to enrich and diversify the review (Bahji et al. 2023).

Lastly, after determining the final group of studies, the writer can now synthesize and interpret the literature knowing that the evidence selected is relevant and reliable.

SYNTHESIZING THEMES AND STRUCTURING CONTENT

Once the literature has been filtered and selected, synthesizing the results into meaningful themes is the next essential step. A good synthesis is more than an overview of individual studies but interweaves them to find patterns, controversy, contradictions, and gaps in the literature (Moschis 2024). In medical education, where studies employ varied methodologies and present on varying learning settings, synthesis needs to be handled with care and caution .

Begin by thoroughly reading all selected articles and identifying dominant ideas, constructs, results, and theories. Thematic analysis is the most commonly used approach, whereby themes are inductively derived from the literature or clustered deductively based on previously determined categories such as teaching methods, assessment tools, or learner performance. Authors can use coding procedures or mind mapping software to group similar findings and identify superordinate themes (Kushnir 2025). For example, a critique of simulation-based education might reveal some universal themes such as learner engagement, simulation realism, debriefing techniques, and faculty training. Each theme can be developed into a paper subsection. Authors are required to describe divergent findings when studies present conflicting results and to explain methodological differences, sample demographics, or contextual considerations that may explain the differences (Dawadi et al. 2021).

A clear structure is required to guide the reader through the synthesis. Common structuring approaches are described in Table 3.

• Chronological, in line with the development of a subject over time.

• Thematic, arranging literature by emergent or preconceived themes.

• Methodological grouping, separating studies by study design (qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods).

• Geographical or level of education clustering, for example, studies from different continents or between preclinical and clinical phases.

Table 3: Common inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Common Structuring Approaches	Description
Chronological	• In line with the development of a subject over time.
Thematic	• Arranging literature by emergent or preconceived themes.
Methodological grouping	• Separating studies by study design (qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods).
Geographical or level of education clustering	• For example, studies from different continents or between preclinical and clinical phases.

Whatever structure is used, consistency should be maintained throughout the manuscript. Each section should begin with a brief overview of the topic, followed by critical analysis with evidence. Specifically, the synthesis should conclude with a narrative that not only outlines what is known but also identifies what is unknown or not adequately addressed in the literature (Ferrari 2015).

Tables and conceptual figures can enhance the reader's understanding by summarizing significant results, comparing methodologies, or illustrating conceptual relationships. They must be clear, readable, and integrated into the narrative flow of the manuscript. Pre-writing steps in reviewing medical education manuscripts are presented in Figure 1.

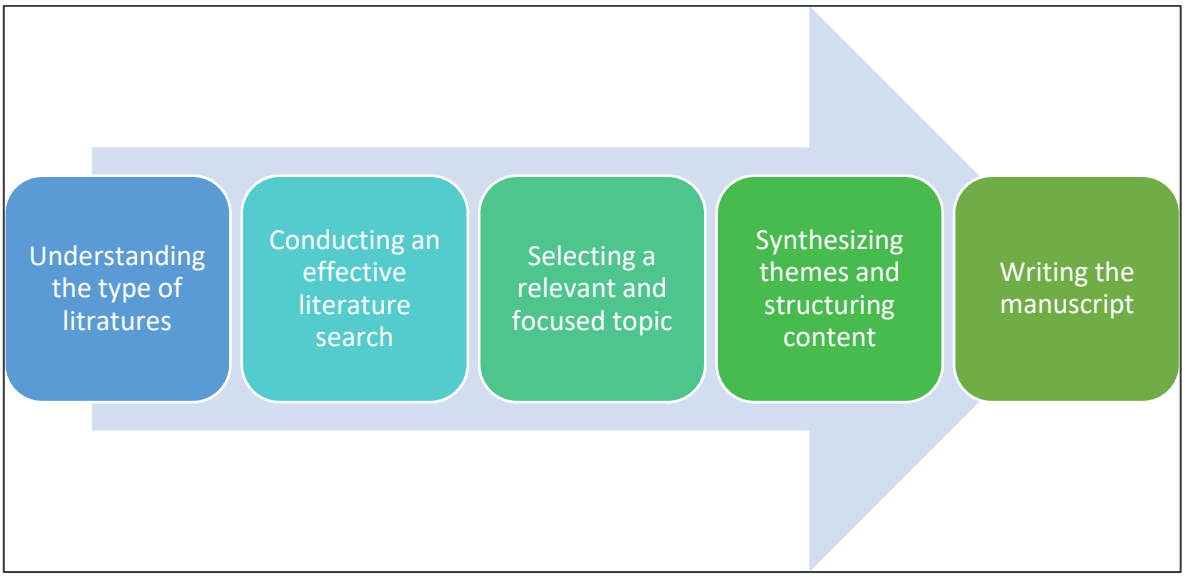

Figure 1: Pre-writing steps in reviewing medical education manuscript.

WRITING THE MANUSCRIPT

The writing process transforms synthesized content into scholarly and coherent scholarship. It is more than stringing summaries together where it involves taking more of logical structure, argument clarity, and scholarly tone. Every section of the paper should serve a purpose and function in accordance with the ultimate goal of the review (Morris et al. 2024).

Begin with a strong introduction, which establishes the context, reason, and purpose of the review. The introduction should engage the reader by explaining why the topic matters within medical education and what the review aims to address. It typically concludes with a clear statement of the objectives or main questions of the review (Tavakol and O'Brien 2023).

Next, a methodology section (specifically for systematic or scoping reviews) must outline the search strategy, inclusion/exclusion criteria, databases searched, number of articles screened and included, and any data extraction or quality appraisal tools used (Shaheen et al. 2023). Even in narrative reviews, a brief outline of how the literature was retrieved adds transparency.

The manuscript body synthesizes the themes. Descriptive titles must be used by all the subsections, and each of them must begin with a brief introduction to the theme. Discussion must incorporate ideas from multiple studies and not leave each paper separate. The text must reflect critical analysis by highlighting agreements, contradictions, and loopholes, and not merely reporting results (Chan and Lee 2021).

A strong discussion section situates the findings in broader educational and theoretical contexts. Authors may offer comment on the implications of the findings for teaching and learning, curriculum planning, policy, or faculty professional development. Naturally, the discussion should also acknowledge the limitations of the review itself, such as methodological limitations or gaps in literature (Snyder 2019).

Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the key messages of the review and often suggests practice, further research, or policy. The conclusion must be concise, powerful, and forward-looking. A few revisions must be made on the manuscript prior to submission (Rosenfeld 2010). Authors are welcome to receive feedback from peers, mentors, or colleagues, preferably those with experience in medical education. Grammarly, EndNote, or reference software may be used to polish the writing and citations.

ACADEMIC AND SCHOLARLY COMMUNICATION

Writing to a medical education audience requires accuracy, clarity, and adherence to scholarly conventions (Ravinetto and Singh 2023). Academic writing is different from creative writing in that it maintains structure, coherence, and evidence. However, it also needs to be readable and engaging, especially when writing to multidisciplinary audiences such as clinicians, educators, researchers, and policymakers.

Authors should be formal yet reader-friendly in their tone, avoiding jargon, prolixity, or heavy sentences. Their paragraphs should also be clear and start with topic sentences and without interruption move from point to point. Active voice will generally work well for clarity of expression but might be used strategically.

Effective scholarly communication also involves proper citation of sources, which lends credibility and allows readers to verify and pursue further study of cited sources. Consistency in style of referencing (APA, Vancouver, etc.) is required, and writers are required to comply with the target journal's specific requirements. Citation of pioneering articles as well as contemporary literature provides an informed and authoritative foundation (Pant et al. 2023).

Equally important is the ethical aspect of scholarly writing. Writers should never plagiarize, this requires paraphrasing, quoting when necessary, and acknowledging all inputs and resources. Programs like Turnitin or iThenticate are also useful to scan for accidental overlap (Rahman et al. 2024).

When presenting a review paper, it should be accompanied by a well-written cover letter to the manuscript. It should give a brief introduction of the title of the paper, its significance to the field of medical education, and its suitability for the target journal. Authors are sometimes also requested to state conflicts of interest, funding source, or ethical clearance (if applicable).

Once submitted, the peer review process is initiated. Authors must be ready to accept constructive criticism and reform their manuscript in light of this. A respectful and detailed response to the reviewers maximizes the prospects of acceptance and publication (Hidouri et al. 2024).

Finally, after publication, publication dissemination is crucial to ensuring that the review paper has its greatest effect. Authors may share their work on scholarly social networks (ResearchGate, Academia.edu), institutional repositories, social media, at conferences, and in teaching. A good review can therefore serve as a valuable source for informing curriculum, informing research, and informing educational policy among the medical education community (Ross-Hellauer et al. 2020).

SELECTING A JOURNAL AND PREPARING FOR SUBMISSION

Choosing an appropriate journal is a strategic decision. Writers need to look at a journal's scope, readership, and previous publications to match. Medical education journals such as BMC Medical Education, Medical Education, Advances in Health Sciences Education, or Teaching and Learning in Medicine are likely to receive review submissions.

Authors must adhere to the journal's word length, format, abstract structure, and reference style requirements prior to submission. The submission must include a concise, engaging cover letter that describes the article, its importance, and its originality (Bahadoran et al. 2021).

Online submission platforms typically require uploading of manuscript, abstract, keywords, figures where relevant, and author statements. Having all elements in place assists in reducing the likelihood of immediate desk rejection.

RESPONDING TO REVIEWER FEEDBACK

Peer review is part of the norm in the publishing process (Drozdz and Ladomery 2024). The process of getting comments from the reviewers may be intimidating, yet authors need to treat them as opportunities to be better. They must respond with respect, thoroughly, and fully (Zimba and Gasparyan 2021).

Responses must be given point-by-point, with clear indications of where changes have been made in the manuscript. If the author disagrees with a comment, a respectful explanation with evidence must be given. Maintaining a cooperative and professional tone throughout the revision process can improve the chances of acceptance.

AVOIDING COMMON ERRORS

Some mistakes are common among beginning writers. Some of these are selecting topics that are too broad or too common, failing to synthesize the literature properly, using outdated references, and failing to comply with journal instructions. Some may forget to follow proper citation protocols, leading to accidental plagiarism. Staying original, clear, and critical throughout the manuscript can avoid such mistakes (Shreffler and Huecker 2022).

CONCLUSION

A review in medical education is so much more than a literature synthesis, it is an initiation to publishing research itself, most importantly to early-career scholars eager to make their contribution to the field. From selecting a meritorious and targeted subject, diligently progressing through consolidating from multiple sources, to creating a logical and interesting manuscript, the process promotes a rich set of scholarly competencies. These include critical analysis of evidence, synthesis of complex information, scholarly writing, and awareness of the publication process, which are core to professional growth in academic medicine.

Although the concept of publishing a review article may seem daunting at first, especially to new researchers, structuring the process into a clear and deliberate plan may make it more manageable. It comprises topic selection, literature search, data extraction, theming, and manuscript preparation, is an opportunity to build confidence, increase research literacy, and contribute meaningfully to the ongoing conversation in medical education. Additionally, passing peer review helps new authors develop resilience, openness to criticism, and respect for scholarly practices.

Alongside personal development, writing a review article provides early-career educators and clinicians an opportunity to leave their mark on the broader educational community. A well-organized review can clarify areas for further knowledge, spotlight current trends, shape forthcoming research agendas, and

guide the development of curricula and pedagogic practice. Thus, review writing is simultaneously a scholarship exercise and a service to the learner and medical education community.

Starting with following the guidelines and procedure outlined here, researchers are not only ready to write their initial review with certainty and concision but are also inspired to imagine themselves as important individuals in a changing, evidence-driven, and interactive profession. Finally, the experience of writing a review article is a mark of maturation a to ongoing scholarly investigation, influencing the next generation of medical practitioners.

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