Overview

Systematic literature reviews (SLRs) are a structured, reproducible method for identifying and synthesizing existing research to answer a focused research question. This page will guide you through the concept and process step by step.

What Is a Systematic Literature Review?

An SLR is a scholarly synthesis of evidence on a clearly defined topic, using explicit, pre-specified methods to identify, select, critically appraise, and summarise relevant studies. Unlike ad hoc reading of literature, every decision is documented so the review can be replicated.

- Minimizes selection bias through predefined inclusion/exclusion criteria
- Provides the highest level of secondary evidence for a research question
- Common in business research (e.g., management, HRM, strategy, marketing) theses

SLR vs. Traditional Literature Review

Feature	Traditional Literature Review	Systematic Literature Review
Research question	Broad or flexible	Narrow and pre-specified

Feature	Traditional Literature Review	Systematic Literature Review
Search strategy	Informal, author-led	Documented, reproducible

Feature	Traditional Literature Review	Systematic Literature Review
Study selection	Subjective	Governed by explicit criteria

Feature	Traditional Literature Review	Systematic Literature Review
Quality appraisal	Often absent	Mandatory

Feature	Traditional Literature Review	Systematic Literature Review
Reporting	Variable	Follows standards (e.g., PRISMA)

Feature	Traditional Literature Review	Systematic Literature Review
Replicability	Low	High

When Should You Use an SLR?

- Your thesis research question asks *what does the existing evidence show about X?*
- Your supervisor or faculty expects evidence-based synthesis (common in management, HRM, sustainability, entrepreneurship)
- You have sufficient time; a rigorous SLR takes weeks to months
- Note: Not every thesis requires an SLR; confirm with your supervisor first

The SLR Process: Step by Step

Step 1: Define Your Research Question / Select Framework

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A well-defined research question is the foundation of a systematic literature review. Every subsequent decision (which databases to search, what terms to use, which studies to include) flows directly from it. A question that is too broad produces an unmanageable volume of results; one that is too narrow may yield almost nothing. Structured question frameworks give you a reliable method for making your question precise and searchable before you open a single database.

Review Define Your Research Question & Select Framework for more information on this topic.

Step 2: Write a Protocol

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A protocol is a written plan that specifies, **in advance**, exactly how you intend to conduct your systematic literature review. It is not complete until all 11/12 sub-sections below have been worked through and recorded. Writing the protocol is not a bureaucratic hurdle; it is the mechanism that makes your review transparent, reproducible, and defensible to examiners, supervisors, and future readers.

Review Writing a Protocol for more information on **why it matters** and **what it contains**.

Step 3: Conduct Your Search

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This step translates the search strategy you documented in your protocol into actual database queries, records the results systematically, and prepares a clean, deduplicated set of references for screening. Precision and documentation at this stage are critical: every decision you make must be recorded so that your search can be reported transparently in your final thesis.

Review Conducting Your Search for more information on this topic.

> Before you search, use our Search Quality Self-Assessment Checklist (adapted from vom Brocke et al., 2015) to verify your search strategy meets the standards expected in a systematic review.

Step 4: Screen Results

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Screening is the process of applying your pre-specified inclusion and exclusion criteria to the deduplicated set of references produced earlier, in order to identify the studies that will form the basis of your review. It proceeds in two sequential phases: first by title and abstract, then by full text. Each phase reduces the total set further; only studies that pass both phases are included in your final review.

Review Screening the Results for more information on this topic.

Step 5: Appraise Study Quality

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Quality appraisal is the systematic assessment of the methodological rigor of each study included after screening. It answers the question: how much confidence can we place in the findings of this study? Appraisal does not judge whether a study is interesting or relevant (screening already established relevance); it judges whether the study was conducted in a way

that makes its findings trustworthy.

Review Appraise Study Quality for more information on this topic.

Step 6: Extract Data

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Data extraction is the process of systematically pulling the information you need from each included study and recording it in a standardised form. It bridges the gap between your screened, appraised set of studies and the synthesis you will conduct later. Consistent, thorough extraction is what makes synthesis possible: if you extract different information from different papers, you cannot meaningfully compare or combine them.

Review Extract Data for more information on this topic.

Step 7: Synthesize and Report

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Synthesis is where the work of the review becomes an argument. Having identified, screened, appraised, and extracted data from your included studies, you now interpret what they collectively say in response to your research question. Reporting then translates that interpretation into a structured written account that meets the standards of academic transparency required for a thesis.

Review Synthesize and Report for more information on this topic.

Before Submission: Evaluating Your Own SLR Process

A Note on Process Models

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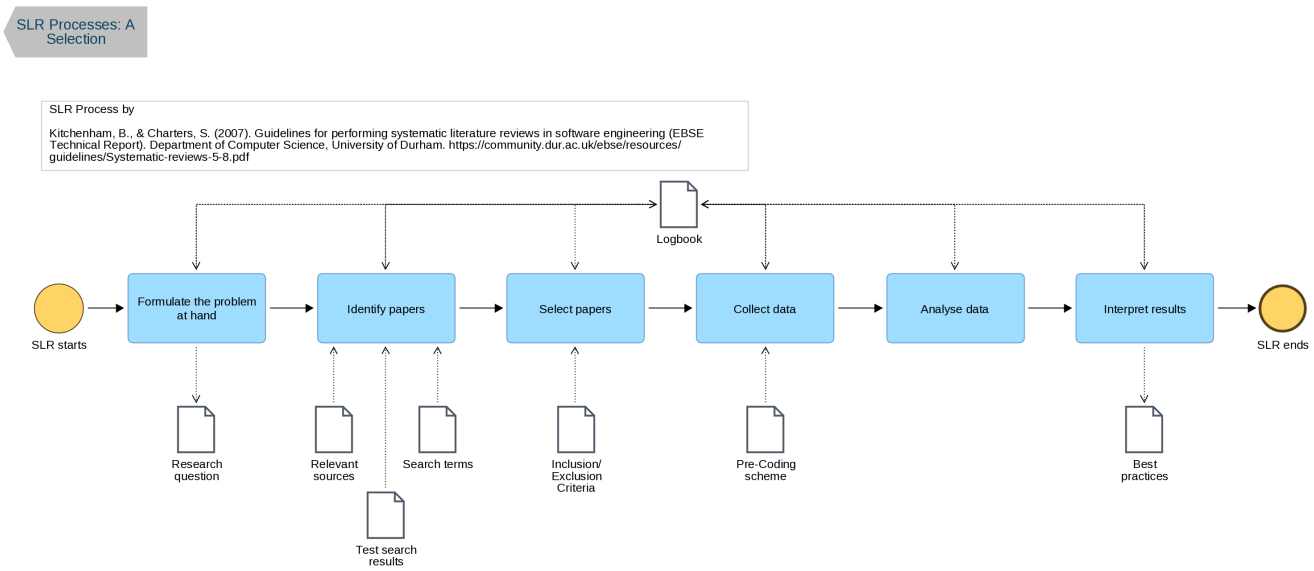
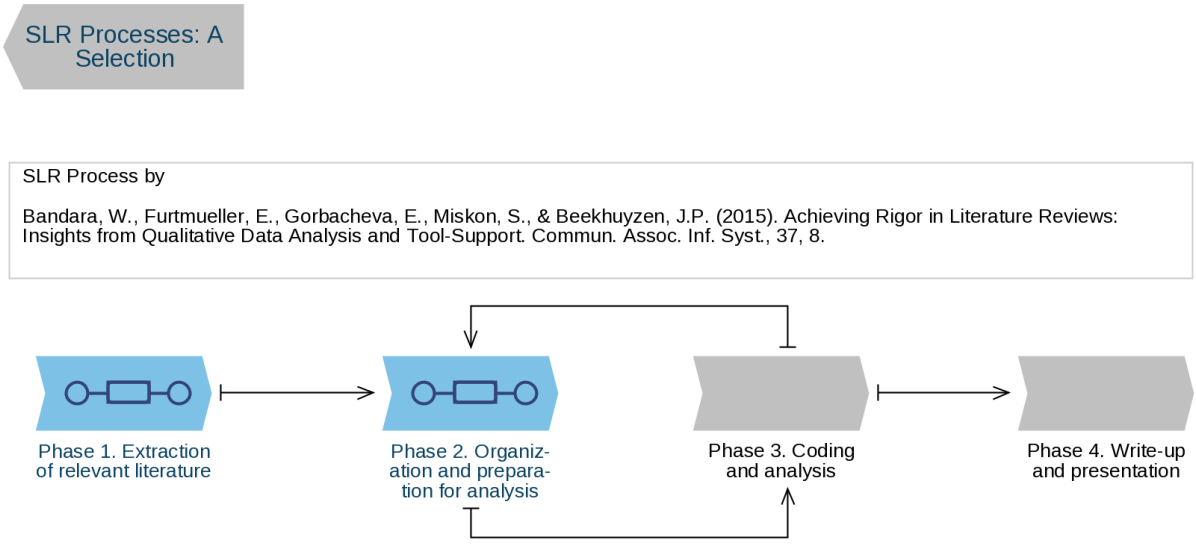
Different disciplines and authors present SLR processes with slightly different stage names and orders. The seven-step structure presented here synthesises best practices from management research (Tranfield et al., 2003), software engineering (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007), and information systems (vom Brocke et al., 2015; Bandara et al., 2015). The core sequence (question → protocol → search → screen → appraise → extract → synthesise) is common across all models; differences are primarily in emphasis rather than substance.





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