

How to do a literature search

**Good Practice in Action 015
Research Fact Sheet**

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Contents

Context	4
Using Fact Sheet resources	4
Introduction	5
1 What is a literature search and why is it important?	5
2 How to conduct a literature search	6
2.1 Background reading – choosing the research question	6
2.2 Identifying search terms – creating a search plan	7
2.3 Identifying resources – planning your search	8
3 Conducting the search	11
3.1 Word endings	11
3.2 Linking terms	12
3.3 Phrase searching	12
3.4 Limitations	12
4. Reviewing and collating your results	13
4.1 What if you have too much information?	13
4.2 What if you cannot find enough information?	14
4.3 How do you determine the quality of the literature?	14
Conclusion	15
About the author	16
References and further reading	16

Context

This resource is one of a suite prepared by BACP to enable members to engage with BACP's *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* (2018) in respect of how to do a literature search.

Using Fact Sheet resources

BACP members have a contractual commitment to work in accordance with the current *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions*. The Fact Sheet resources are not contractually binding on members, but are intended to support practitioners by providing general information on principles and policy applicable at the time of publication, in the context of the core ethical principles, values and personal moral qualities of BACP.

Specific issues in practice will vary depending on clients, particular models of working, the context of the work and the kind of therapeutic intervention provided. As specific issues arising from work with clients are often complex, BACP always recommends discussion of practice dilemmas with a supervisor and/or consulting a suitably qualified and experienced legal or other relevant practitioner.

In this resource, the word 'therapist' is used to mean specifically counsellors and psychotherapists and 'therapy' to mean specifically counselling and psychotherapy.

The terms 'practitioner' and 'counselling related services' are used generically in a wider sense, to include the practice of counselling, psychotherapy, coaching and pastoral care.

Introduction

Conducting a search of the literature can sometimes feel daunting, but it is hoped that this resource will help to guide you through the process, from choosing a research question and identifying the best search terms, to finding resources, together with some top tips for you to consider when conducting your search.

More detailed descriptions of the different kind of literature searches, you may need for specific tasks can be found online, including a helpful overview of different methods which can be downloaded at: www.literaturereviewof.com/types-of-literature-review.html.

1 What is a literature search and why is it important?

A literature search is a detailed and comprehensive search of all types of research and academic writing (this could include both published research, and what is described as 'grey' literature – that has been produced by individuals or organisations outside the normal academic and commercial publishing systems – on your topic choice). The importance of a literature search can often be overlooked, or underestimated, but the success of a research study can be dependent on completing a thorough review of the literature at the outset. Effective literature searching is a critical skill in its own right and will prove valuable for any future information gathering activity whether in the academic field or not. Conducting a search of the literature is a fundamental element of any research project, which involves finding out what research has already been conducted in a particular field to help shape your own research project/research knowledge by:

- outlining the current progress of the research in your field
- establishing the originality of your research (i.e. has it been explored before?)
- identifying a narrow and defined scope for your research (i.e. a specific research question)
- enabling you to position your research in the wider context (i.e. what your research will add to the field, what implications it will have for practitioners).

2 How to conduct a literature search

This section includes a step-by-step guide to take you through the process of conducting a literature search.

2.1 Background reading – choosing the research question

The first step to start your literature search is to think carefully about your research question – what are you aiming to find out?

The intention here is to define a specific research question by reviewing the literature to establish what has already been published to shape your knowledge and own research aims. This can be done by identifying the general research topic area, for example private practice counsellors, and searching for a small amount of reading material to give you an overview of the topic. The general text can be from a variety of sources such as books, journals, and policy documents (more on this later), as the main aim is to get an overall flavour of the field. Not only will this identify what research has already been published, but it will also help you to identify gaps in the research literature – what research needs to be conducted to add to, and build on, existing knowledge.

By reading on your chosen topic area, you should get an idea of what exactly your research could focus on, for example counsellors' views of burnout in private practice.

TOP TIP: The key to choosing your research question is to be as specific as possible.

Being specific with your research question will make your literature search more manageable and help ensure your search returns relevant literature. Focusing at this stage is a good idea as it helps you to get an idea of how much information is out there. If you remain vague, as in searching private practice counsellors over counsellors' views of burnout in private practice, you could miss vital research in this field. This is why using the correct search terms is helpful.

2.2 Identifying search terms – creating a search plan

Now you have your specific research question, it is important to use the right search terms and also identify as much of the key terminology associated with the topic as possible. Within any research question it will be possible to identify several key terms – the simplest starting point here is to spend some time thinking about the wording of your question – are there other terms you could use? What are the terms used within this field; are there any alternatives?

- for example, with the research question 'what are counsellors' views of burnout in private practice?', you could use: *counsellor, burnout, private practice*
- but there are also many alternatives used in this field, for example for counsellors (depending on your target group and how inclusive you wish to be here) you could also use: *psychotherapist, psychoanalyst, therapist, coach, pastoral care, practitioner*
- burnout is a key term used in the mental health professions' literature but it is also worthwhile considering: *emotional exhaustion, exhaustion, worn out, fatigue, stress, breakdown, weariness*
- for private practice you could also use: *private practitioner, independent practitioner, independent practice, private counsellor, private psychotherapist, private therapist, independent therapist.*

Conducting your search using a variety of search terms means you can capture all research relating to this area – for example some American studies may use the term 'therapist' whereas European studies may use 'practitioner', and the UK may use modality-specific terms (person-centred counsellor, psychodynamic psychotherapist, cognitive behavioural therapist). It is also worthwhile considering spelling differences: in American English, *counselor* is the preferred spelling; therefore using 'counsellor' may not capture any American studies.

Selecting search terms is only the first part of the process, using specific search techniques (outlined in detail below) helps to further ensure all the relevant references are generated from your search.

2.3 Identifying resources – planning your search

A critical part of planning your search is knowing where to search. There are a range of sources of information which can be used to conduct your search, some are outlined below.

Books

Although books can become outdated very quickly, they can be a good starting point, especially at the beginning of your literature search, as they tend to provide a clear and concise overview of a topic or theory. Books can often be found online as well as in hard copy; search engines such as google books: <https://books.google.co.uk>. This can be a good source as it provides a partial view of the book – so you can determine if the book has chapters relevant to your search and whether it is worthwhile ordering/borrowing a copy. Other sources are your local academic library (if you are affiliated to an academic institution) or local council libraries, both of which are always extremely helpful in sourcing a book. Books that are described as 'handbooks' are considered sound academic resources, as they aim to provide an overview of a broad or complex subject area and may even include a review of academic literature.

Journals

In the counselling and psychotherapy field (along with other subject areas), journals are key resources for a literature search.

Some journals will have been peer reviewed or refereed (i.e. reviewed by experts in the field before publication) and are therefore deemed to be of higher quality and the best source to seek relevant and up-to-date research. You can determine whether or not a journal has been peer reviewed or refereed in a number of ways:

- check the journal – journals which are peer reviewed will generally make this information clear, either on their website or in the hard copy of the journal. Other things to look out for are whether or not they have an editorial board and/or a review policy; these are good indications that a journal is peer reviewed
- when searching for literature on databases, it is often possible to limit the search to peer-reviewed articles only (usually this will be in the advanced search option, or you can apply a 'filter' on a search which has already been conducted). This method is not always guaranteed so it is still a good idea to check out the journal.

If a journal has not been peer reviewed this does not necessarily mean that the literature contained in it should not be used, rather it is something to be mindful of when considering the quality of the information you have sourced.

Databases

Databases, which are records of published materials (most often journal articles or books), are a good way to go about searching numerous publications simultaneously. Databases may seem complex but once you are aware of which databases are most appropriate to your topic area and how to use them (see section 4: Conducting the search) they will cut down your literature search time.

There are different types of databases, such as those outlined below:

Multi-disciplinary journal databases:

These databases contain journals from multiple subject areas, for example **JSTOR (Journal Storage)** searches from humanities, social sciences and sciences, **Academic Search Complete** (EBSCO) spans a broad range of academic fields and Social Science Research Network (SSRN) covers health sciences, social sciences and humanities. Although these databases contain a variety of journals from a range of subjects you will always be able to restrict your search to relevant journals.

To gain access to the text of articles, or abstracts from these databases, you may need 'log in' details either from an academic institution (or you may be able to subscribe for a fee). BACP membership entitles you to free access to the EBSCO research journal database and discovery service.

Subject specific databases:

These databases are defined by their subject or group of related subjects and are therefore great to use to limit the scope of your search. Examples of such databases relevant to the counselling and psychotherapy literature are provided below. As these databases vary you will need to search more than one to ensure you don't miss any relevant references. Again, you may have to subscribe, or have an academic login to gain full access to the articles listed.

Database name: CINAHL
Subject area: Nursing and allied health

Database name: Cochrane library
Subject area: Systematic reviews, randomised controlled trials of a wide range of health interventions

Database name: International bibliography of social sciences
Subject area: Social science research

Database name: Medline and PubMed
Subject area: Biomedical literature

Database name: PsycINFO
Subject area: Psychological literature

Database name: Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing
Subject area: Psychoanalytic psychotherapy

Database name: Social Care online
Subject area: Social care issues.

Publishers' databases:

Databases, such as **Science Direct**, **Sage Journals**, **Taylor & Francis** and **Wiley Online Library**, contain journal content published by a particular publishing company. These databases may also have a subject focus or may be multidisciplinary. For example, Wiley Online Library publishes BACP's international, peer-reviewed journal *Counselling & Psychotherapy Research* (CPR) and BACP members can access the full text of the articles as part of their membership. Full copies of articles from other journals can usually be accessed with an academic (or purchased) login, but many of them offer a free search facility and download of abstracts, which can then be purchased individually if relevant.

Other sources:

As well as books, journals, and databases, professional organisations often provide specific information and research reports relevant to that organisation's topic area. For example, professional bodies, such as BACP, British Psychoanalytic Council (BPC) and the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) provide information relating to counselling and psychotherapy. Additionally, consumer or patient organisations can be useful providers of information about specific health-related concerns, such as BEAT for eating disorders or The National Autistic Society – these are usually great resources in providing accurate and up-to-date statistics. Some organisations, including some NHS trusts, will provide staff members with institutional access to research via 'OpenAthens' accounts. This has the advantage of having a library as a search repository.

TOP TIP: Use Google Scholar to search for resources.

Google is not recommended as you cannot always guarantee the quality and reliability of information found. Instead, try Google Scholar, <https://scholar.google.co.uk> which can be used to search academic publishers, university repositories and preprint depositories, and will often offer abstracts so that you can get a better idea as to whether a particular study is relevant to your research.

Google Scholar also sources articles from freely accessed platforms, such as LinkedIn and Research Gate, which can be accessed (if you have an account) and full-text articles can be downloaded free of charge by the general public and do not require an academic institution login.

3 Conducting the search

Having now identified your search question, search terms, and which databases to search, you are ready to go. However, the quality of your results will be improved by employing some of the techniques outlined below:

TOP TIP: Always opt for the advanced search (or multi-search box) over the simple or basic search as it will allow you to adopt the following techniques.

3.1 Word endings

TOP TIP: Using an asterisk to replace individual letters within a word will capture alternative spellings.

Unless directed, search engines will not automatically search for derivatives of the same word. For example, the search term 'counsellor' will miss other variants of the word such as 'counselling' or 'counsellors'. To overcome this, an asterisk is inserted at the end of the word so the search engine automatically searches for all the different endings of that word stem.

For example, `counsel*` will retrieve `counsel`, `counselling`, `counsellor`, `counselor`, `counsellors`, and so on.

Similarly, an asterisk can be inserted in the middle of a word to retrieve alternative spellings, for example `ag*ing` would retrieve `aging` and `ageing`.

3.2 Linking terms

If using more than one search term it is best to link them with either the connecting word **AND** or the connecting word **OR**.

Using the search AND will *narrow* your search to find only results that contain both terms. Using the search OR will broaden your search to find any results that contain *either* terms.

For example, 'counsellor' AND 'burnout' AND 'private practice' will only find results which include all of these terms. Using ('counsel*' OR 'psychotherap*') AND 'burnout' AND 'private practice' will find results that just mention counsellors, just mention psychotherapists AND any results that mention both in relation to burnout and private practice (note the use of brackets to limit the 'OR' to the words 'counsel*' and 'psychotherap*').

3.3 Phrase searching

On occasions, especially when using the linking term AND, a search will generate too many records, of which some may be irrelevant. If your search terms are expressed as a phrase, that is more than one word appearing next to another, quotation marks around your phrase are encouraged. Phrase searching, such as 'counsellor' AND 'burnout' AND 'private practice' will generate research papers where the words appear immediately next to each other. Here private will always appear next to practice.

If you don't do this the search will find results containing both words but there may be no contextual relevance i.e. 'private' may be in one paragraph and 'practice' in another.

3.4 Limitations

Before you click 'search', think of the limits that you can apply to your search to make it more specific – you can further restrict your search on a range of factors:

- a. **Time span:** It is typically advised you limit your search to the past five or 10 years to get a good overview of recently published literature.
- b. **Country:** Are you looking for research published in the UK, or internationally – remember this may also include research undertaken in the UK?
- c. **Where should you search?** Always start with searching for your search terms in the title. If your term(s) appear in the title, it is likely that these articles will be relevant to your topic. If this does not return enough relevant material try searching in the *abstract/keywords*.

- d. **Discipline:** Not always relevant but if you are using a multi-disciplinary database make sure you specify your discipline, as you may have results which use one of your search terms but have no relevance to your topic.
- e. **Type of material:** Here you can specify what publication you prefer to search, such as journals, books or book chapters.
- f. **Gender/age:** If relevant you can further refine your search by specifying particular age groups or genders – this is especially useful for a specific search, for example, autism in boys aged between five and 10 years of age.

TOP TIP: Always keep your literature search up to date.

New books and journal articles are being published all the time. This is especially relevant if your project is researched and written over a long period of time. Although this sounds time-consuming it can be done by setting up email alerts on databases with your search terms and browsing tables of contents of new issues of journals in your subject.

The reference lists of relevant articles, or suggestions of 'related articles' (when accessing material online) can also be a useful way of accessing relevant literature.

4. Reviewing and collating your results

As you find research material from your search, it is vital to record each reference, this will save you time and effort when you re-run searches. Additionally, referencing throughout ensures good academic practice and avoids plagiarism. You can either save your searches in separate Word documents for each database/search platform or in one Word document as a bibliography – this is down to personal preference and depends on how you prefer to organise and best present your literature.

4.1 What if you have too much information?

The next step is to review all your references to ensure the relevance of the literature for your topic. At this stage you may find you have **too much information**, this may be due to:

- a lot of material having been published on this topic
- your topic having links with other subject areas.

This is easily resolved by re-focusing on your search question – do these references cover what you are looking to find out? Do they add to your search? You can refine your search by having more specific terms and/or adding in limits (in particular by publication year).

4.2 What if you cannot find enough information?

At this stage you may find you have **a limited number of references** and may need to broaden your search by:

- reviewing your search question – make it a little less specific. For example, if your search on 'counsellors' views of burnout in private practice' does not return many results, consider removing 'private practice' from your question
- increasing the time period for published materials. For example, if you have limited your search to literature published in the last five years, consider extending this to literature published in the last 10 years.

Remember this is not always a bad thing, it could mean you have identified a gap in the research literature which needs exploring. If you are undertaking a piece of research at an academic institution your tutor or supervisor will be able to advise if your topic area is well researched or suggest related areas for you to research.

4.3 How do you determine the quality of the literature?

The final stage in the review process is determining the **quality of the literature**.

Quality and how you measure it will, of course, be dependent on what you are trying to find out, if you are undertaking your own study, and the methodology you are using. If you are looking for overall trends within healthcare, or findings about, for example, 'what kinds of therapy have been shown to be effective in the UK for the treatment of depression?' A free resource entitled 'Understanding health research' www.understandinghealthresearch.org/notice/1 could be helpful in guiding you through making sense of your health research.

Additionally, the number of times a journal paper has been cited will give you an idea of its impact in that particular field.

It is also worth considering that within some settings, for example, healthcare, some kinds of research methods are deemed stronger than others. Large-scale, quantitative, scientific research methods, such as randomised controlled trials, systematic reviews and meta-analyses are deemed stronger designs. Further information about the NHS hierarchy of evidence for research can be found at: <https://nhsevidencetoolkit.net/dev/what-is-evidence>.

Bear in mind, however, that studies of this sort will come from a specific scientific/medical understanding of the world; searching for trends, and patterns of truth/findings within a wide field of participants.

If, however, your study and research question are more of an in-depth exploration of a particular moment, or situation, for example, 'the experience of therapists working with clients who are depressed in private practice', you may get some useful data from large studies about depression, and overviews of therapist experience, but you may also need to search for studies that are qualitative; i.e. looking at the detail of this particular aspect of work. Qualitative studies cannot give general views, or show trends, but they can illuminate particular aspects of living or practice, and they can also bring to life qualitative research and inform your own methodology. Examples of qualitative research frequently used within the counselling professions are case studies, narrative inquiry, ethnography and phenomenological studies. For more information about qualitative research you may find peer-reviewed journals, such as

Qualitative Research <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/qrij> and *Qualitative Inquiry* <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/qix> helpful.

The research underpinning the counselling professions comes from both quantitative and qualitative methodologies – you can see examples of each within *CPR* see: www.bacp.co.uk/publications/journals/cpr.php.

Conclusion

From reading this resource you should have a better idea of how to choose a research question, identify search terms, where to seek relevant sources of information, as well as key techniques when searching the literature. This step-by-step guide should help keep you on track and ensure you retrieve manageable amounts of relevant information.

About the author

Leah Drewitt is currently a Senior Assistant Psychologist at St Andrews Healthcare, Northampton. Prior to this role Leah was a Research Intern and Research Officer at BACP. In this role Leah undertook a mixed-methods piece of research exploring practitioners' experiences of learning and implementing Counselling for Depression in routine practice settings. More recently, Leah has completed and presented research on the use of outcomes to tackle complex cases in psychiatric intensive care units. Leah has extensive clinical experience in adult mental health, including but not limited to, borderline personality disorder, psychosis and working in psychiatric intensive care units.

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