



RESEARCH METHODS SERIES

What Journal Reviewers Look For

A practical reference guide to what reviewers check, why it matters, and how to pre-empt it before you submit.

- Protocol fidelity & reporting compliance
- Statistical framework consistency
- Calibrated language & positioning

Written from practitioner experience across published systematic reviews and meta-analyses, including network meta-analyses registered on INPLASY.

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01 Before You Start

How reviewers actually read your manuscript

Peer reviewers of systematic reviews and meta-analyses increasingly work with the registered protocol open in one window and the manuscript open in another, checking one against the other line by line. They are also typically familiar with PRISMA, GRADE, and SWiM, and will assess compliance against each item by item rather than taking a general impression.

This guide compiles the recurring patterns in what reviewers actually check, organised by theme, with what each comment means and what a correct response looks like. It draws on real, generalised patterns from peer review of published systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and network meta-analyses – not fabricated examples.

★ How to use this guide

Each section below covers one recurring theme. Within each, comment cards pair a generalised version of what a reviewer said with the resolution that addressed it. Use this as a pre-submission audit: work through each theme against your own manuscript before it goes anywhere near a reviewer.

Protocol fidelity checked

Search & eligibility criteria justified

Sections 3–4

Screening & quality assessment reproducible

Sections 5–6

Statistical & certainty framework consistent throughout

Sections 7–8

Language calibrated to what the evidence supports

Section 11

Internal consistency verified end to end

Section 10

02 Protocol Fidelity

What reviewers check against your registration

Reviewers with access to a registered protocol (INPLASY, PROSPERO) will compare it directly against the submitted manuscript – one of the most consistent and consequential checks in peer review of evidence synthesis.

What gets checked

- Whether all pre-specified primary outcomes were reported, or explained if not
- Whether the statistical model and analysis plan match what was pre-specified
- Whether subgroup analyses reported were pre-specified, or added post-hoc
- Whether eligibility criteria in the manuscript match those in the registration
- Whether the registration date precedes the search date (i.e. was genuinely prospective)

Outcome switching

" Reviewer comment

The primary outcome reported in the manuscript differs from the primary outcome in the registered protocol.

✓ Resolution

Post-hoc outcome reclassification is a serious form of reporting bias. If the change was disclosed with justification, report it transparently and file a formal amendment with the registry; if swapped in error, correct it.

Undisclosed protocol deviation

" Reviewer comment

The manuscript does not report any deviations from the registered protocol, despite visible differences between the two documents.

✓ Resolution

Some deviation from protocol is almost universal and not disqualifying by itself – what damages credibility is an undisclosed deviation. Add an explicit "deviations from the registered protocol" subsection listing each change and its justification.

Post-hoc subgroup or moderator analysis

" Reviewer comment

A subgroup analysis, or a meta-regression, appears in the results with no corresponding mention in the registered protocol or the methods section.

✓ Resolution

Either confirm the pre-specification and cite it explicitly, or relabel the analysis clearly as post-hoc and exploratory throughout the manuscript, including the abstract and conclusions.

Further Reading

- Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C., Mulrow, C. D., ... & Moher, D. (2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *bmj*, 372. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71>

03 Search Strategy

Replicability, grey literature, and justified restrictions

A reproducible search strategy is one of the defining features that separates a systematic review from a narrative one. Reviewers check this specifically and early.

Insufficient search detail

"Reviewer comment"

The search strategy described in the methods is not detailed enough to allow replication; full search strings should be provided.

✓ Resolution

Add a supplementary appendix with the complete, verbatim search string for every database searched, including all field tags, Boolean operators, and controlled vocabulary terms used.

Narrow database selection

"Reviewer comment"

Only a small number of databases were searched, and the selection appears narrow or unjustified for the topic area.

✓ Resolution

Either add further databases at revision if feasible, or provide explicit justification for the databases chosen and any excluded, referencing coverage relevant to the specific field.

Grey literature omitted

"Reviewer comment"

The search was restricted to published journal articles; grey literature (conference abstracts, theses, trial registries) was not searched, which may introduce publication bias.

✓ Resolution

Add a grey literature search covering trial registries, relevant institutional repositories, and conference abstracts from the leading society in the field, and document exactly what was searched and when.

Unjustified date restriction

"Reviewer comment"

The search was restricted to a specific starting year without justification in the methods.

✓ Resolution

Provide an explicit, evidence-based reason for any date restriction – for example, a documented shift in methodological standards around that year, supported by a citation – or extend the range if no such reason exists. Pre-specify the justification in the protocol, not retrospectively.

Unjustified language restriction

"Reviewer comment"

A restriction to English-language publications was applied without discussion of the potential for language bias.

✓ Resolution

Where feasible, empirically test the impact of the restriction – checking whether non-English studies meeting eligibility criteria exist – before finalising it, and report that test. Otherwise, acknowledge it explicitly as a limitation.