

What do journals' author instructions state on search methods for systematic reviews: from evidence to implementation

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Abstract

Systematic reviews are essential in clinical decision-making, policy development, and evidence-based practice. Our previous research identified significant gaps in author instructions of biomedical and health journals regarding search methods for systematic reviews. To address this, we engaged with key stakeholders to disseminate our research findings and provide recommendations to implement and improve the quality of journals' author instructions, ultimately contributing to enhancing the quality of published systematic reviews. This brief note outlines the strategy and outcomes of this implementation project. Despite our efforts, limited adoption of our recommendations appears to be primarily due to misconceptions about relevance to different journal scopes, competing editorial priorities, resource constraints related to time and expertise needed for implementation, and a lack of clear responsibility or accountability. Further outreach is needed to raise awareness and improve the quality of journals' author instructions.

Key words: editorial policies; librarians; periodicals as topic; publishing; systematic reviews as topic.

Introduction and objectives

Ensuring the quality of published systematic reviews is essential, given their increasing number and critical role in shaping clinical practice and policies (1). Despite the availability of methodological standards, reporting guidelines, quality assessment checklists and expert information specialists to aid in the search process, the persistent publication of systematic reviews with low quality search methods raises concerns (2-8). There appears to be a gap between existing guidelines, the availability of expert support and authors' awareness or ability to apply these standards and resources effectively (9). Journal author instructions serve as an important tool to potentially bridge this gap by guiding authors in implementing rigorous search methods, which is the central focus of this project.

Our previous research identified significant shortcomings in the author instructions of biomedical and health journals regarding search methods for systematic re-

views (10). We concluded that key issues such as the lack of tailored instructions for systematic reviewers, the under-recognition of the role of information specialists, and outdated guidance on search methodology need to be addressed. Therefore, we provided recommendations for editors and editorial teams in our publication. Additionally, we contacted relevant stakeholders to translate these recommendations into practice. Information specialists were approached to help disseminate our findings through their professional networks and to provide feedback on a draft template of improved author instructions. Our template was designed to be a sustainable resource by referencing established organisations for conducting and reporting systematic reviews. At the same time, we contacted other stakeholders, including editors, editorial teams, and editorial organisations, to adjust and enhance the journals' author instructions.

This brief note outlines the strategy and findings of this

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implementation project, highlighting our progress and barriers encountered in improving journal instructions for systematic review search methods.

From evidence to implementation: strategy

After publishing our research on the shortcomings in author instructions and recommendations (10), we launched the implementation of our project in April 2024. The strategy for this implementation project is focused on targeted communication, setting clear milestones, and assessing the impact of our efforts, all aimed at achieving meaningful improvements in journals' author instructions. The implementation material and process are described below and visualised in *Figure 1*. First, we developed a template (<https://osf.io/x6nvm>) that contained author instructions for systematic reviews, stating different recommendations and the reasoning behind each item based on our research findings (10). This also included additional information for editorial teams with further context and implementation advice. This template was refined and finalised based on feedback from other information specialists recruited via mailing lists. Contributors are listed and

acknowledged below accordingly. Second, an author instruction section (<https://osf.io/fh8qw>) was subsequently created to facilitate implementation of the template for editorial teams. This section serves as a ready-to-use section that can be added to or replace the current section on systematic reviews in the journals' author instructions. Over the summer, the template and author instruction section were distributed to the journals and publishers that were included in our originally published analysis (9), and a reminder email was sent to all non-responders in October. Additionally, the editorial organisations International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) and The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) were approached via email since they offer recommendations and educational resources for editors and others involved in medical research and publication. Finally, a more concise version of the author instruction section (<https://osf.io/x5bpt>) was developed based on suggestions from responders about its length to enhance usability. This brief version was sent to all listed stakeholders at the beginning of February 2025, officially concluding the active outreach to stakeholders via mailings.

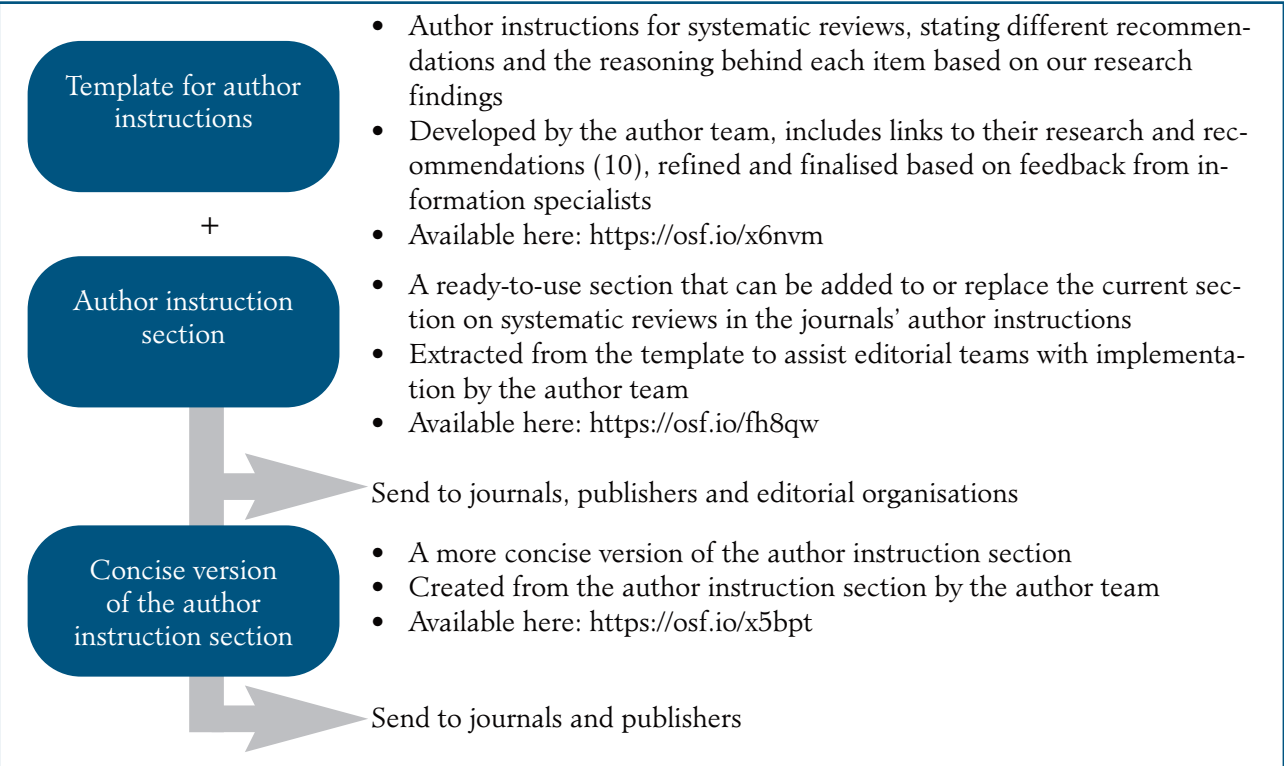


Fig. 1. *Implementation process and material.*

From evidence to implementation: outcomes and discussion

Throughout the project, 3 rounds of emails were sent to editors, editorial team members and editorial organisations. When no specific contact person was identified, emails were sent to a general contact point. As of the project's conclusion in January 2025, 10 of the 168 selected journals were not contacted due to missing contact details on their website. In 146 cases, the emails to journals remained unanswered. Five messages were redirected to the appropriate contact, while six respondents indicated they had no interest, deemed the issue a low priority, or lacked the time to engage. One of the editorial organisations replied but could not take further action, as we are not a member of their organisation. To our knowledge and as of now, two author instructions have been modified using our template, effectively implementing (partly) our recommendations. One of these is European Review for Medical and Pharmacological Sciences (Online ISSN: 2284-0729 | Print ISSN: 1128-3602). Additionally, the publisher MDPI has incorporated elements of our template into its systematic review guidelines.

Several factors may explain the limited interest in putting our recommendations into practice. First, the method of contact being via email may not have been sufficiently effective or clear in engaging stakeholders and prompting action. To encourage responses, we did implement several strategies. We carefully crafted a concise, structured email with direct links to our templates on the Open Science Framework, which was reviewed by the authors and tested for clarity by using ChatGPT. Additionally, instead of sending a mass email, we prioritised personalised outreach by addressing individual contacts by name in the initial round of emails and reminders. We also offered meetings to clarify our project, leading to two respondents participating in discussing our project further. The follow-up meetings revealed this is an unusual offer and challenging to accept due to concerns about author rights related to the templates. We as authors of the template emphasise the importance of its implementation and do not expect attribution, as this is uncommon in author instructions.

Second, editors and editorial teams may not perceive a direct benefit or urgent need to revise their guidelines, especially if they believe their current instructions already fulfil their requirements. To address this, we ex-

plicitly informed them they were selected based on their relevance to systematic reviews. The selection criteria focused on the number of systematic reviews they publish and/or the impact of their published reviews. We clearly stated our rationale for selecting them and contacted them because we identified opportunities for improvement based on our analysis.

Third, journals and publishers often manage competing editorial priorities and may lack the time or resources to evaluate and integrate new recommendations. Because many did not respond and others forwarded our inquiry without clear follow-up, it became difficult to determine who was responsible for updating the author instructions. The authors got the impression that few felt responsible or actually were responsible or accountable for maintaining or improving these guidelines. If improving author instructions is not seen as an urgent or high-impact change compared to other pressing matters, they may deprioritise, delay engagement or be less inclined to respond. To overcome this barrier, we provided a ready-to-use template, assuming it would be low-hanging fruit for them, making it easy to implement. With this approach, we hoped it could trigger their engagement.

In conclusion, misconceptions about relevance, competing editorial priorities, resource constraints, and a lack of clear responsibility or accountability appear to be the main reasons for the limited adoption of our recommendations. As a result, author instructions may remain static and unchanged due to a lack of time and (human) resources to prioritise updates, rather than a deliberate editorial decision.

The authors hope that this work will serve as a catalyst, encouraging further implementation in the future. We are grateful to the journal of EAHIL for publishing this project, as broader outreach will be key to its success.

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Supplementary material

All supplementary material for this project is available at Open Science Framework, <https://osf.io/6ax4p/>

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