If you haven’t seen a systematic review already or if you’ve never read one thinking “this is what I’m going to have to produce”, it might be useful to see one just so you know what you will have to present because that can help you know what you need to keep hold of as you go through the search process, for example. What you need to document. Because, there are things you need to report in a systematic review that you would never retain or report normally for other kinds of literature reviews…the total number of records found. That kind of thing.

One of the places you can see systematic review are on the previously done DClins which are on the Edinburgh Research Archive (ERA) which is an online repository and the theses and DClins have to have an electronic copy which is deposited in there and the DClins have sys rev chapters which you could then have a look at.

The link to ERA is there on the screen.

Another way is just to find a systematic review and you can do that through the abstracting and indexing (A&I) databases (and lots of other ways too) but using the A&I databases you can see if there’s a review within your topic, for example. So you can come up with a topic search and then look to see if any of that set have a review article in them.

It can be helpful, not just not to see the layout but perhaps there are ways that they [the authors] have searched for a particular topic that also interests you which you can adapt and learn from.

When you know what kind of product you’re going to be producing, when you know what your review should include and report on, you will probably already have an idea of the research question or the topic you would like the review to answer. Or you may have an idea of an area but not quite an exact topic or question yet. So there is a scoping review or a scoping search which goes on before you maybe finalise on your exact research question that your review is going to be on.

The scoping review can help you decide on your topic because it may tell you that there are not enough papers on the topic you were hoping to do, to support a review. So there might not be enough out there for you to be able to do the review question you were hoping

There may be too many papers on the topic so you may need to focus in on one particular problem rather than a range of problems or think about different population or something else that still lets you do a review on the topic you were after but the papers already found by doing your scoping searches may also suggest what area within that is worth maybe thinking about for a more specific type of review question.

If you have not enough papers, I should have said before, it helps to think about what concept or aspect you could drop, that you’re least interested in or what you can broaden out on. The thinking being that you would get more papers that way.
So if you have an idea of what’s most important but also what you are happy to loosen up on or drop that can help if your scoping search results suggest there are not enough papers on the topic you’d first thought of.

And, as we’ve said, if there too many papers on first look, what concepts can you add to narrow down your results.

Also a scoping search may throw up that there is a systematic review already on the topic you were hoping to do yourself and that may be worth having a discussion with your supervisor about as there may be a strand within the review that’s been published, that you can pick out and do your own review on. Or, it may be that the review you’ve found has been published long enough ago, or the search done long enough ago, that since then there’s been enough papers that you could then update that review yourself.

When you have a topic and you have a question that’s when you would put together a search. Decide on your search terms that are going to work for the topic you want to review and you would then run that on the A&I databases, and other resources perhaps, that you have decided are best suited to the search, or the topic, you are interested in.

So you would have your topic.

You would have your research question.

You would have your search terms and you would know the databases you are going to run those searches on and then you would do that.

You would run your searches on the databases you have chosen and the records that you find then are the ones that follow you through the whole rest of the process. So the best idea, probably, is when you’ve done those final searches to take those records out of the databases where you’ve found them and put them all into something else which is yours and which you keep hold of. That’s when reference management software like EndNote or Mendeley or Zotero is useful. It becomes a place where you can put your search results into and you can deduplicate in there and can do your screening process in there.

But as I say these are records which follow you through the rest of the process and from which you include and exclude to get to your final set of papers which you get to do your review on.