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Crafting Impactful Systematic Literature Reviews: Thumb Rules and Suggestions

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ABSTRACT

As research matures across various disciplines, the importance of systematic literature reviews (SLRs) grows significantly. These reviews help establish research contexts, identify knowledge gaps, and justify scholarly inquiry. In this context, the present article outlines key thumb rules for crafting a classic systematic literature review and offers practical suggestions to enhance its likelihood of acceptance.

1 | Systematic Literature Review: Synthesizing Prior Research

To advance knowledge in any field, a thorough understanding of prior literature is essential. Without it, identifying research gaps or defining new contributions becomes nearly impossible. Literature review articles serve to synthesize what is known and highlight what remains unexplored. They reconcile conflicting findings, expose gaps, and suggest future research directions, often through methodological, theoretical, and contextual analyses (Canabal and White 2008; Paul and Rosado-Serrano 2019; Hao et al. 2019).

Systematic literature reviews, when executed rigorously, are not only useful but also highly impactful. They guide future researchers and set the agenda for further inquiry. As such, employing robust and appropriate methodologies is vital (Paul and Criado 2020; Paul et al. 2023). Effective SLRs aim to identify underexplored areas and suggest novel avenues of investigation, avoiding redundant or recycled research. Ultimately, they provide a state-of-the-art understanding of a field and play a critical role in advancing scholarly knowledge.

Numerous publications have guided crafting of impactful SLRs. For example, Paul and Criado (2020) outline comprehensive standards in their article *The Art of Writing Literature Reviews*. There are several types of literature reviews, each with distinct objectives and methodologies (Paul et al. 2023). The most prevalent form is the *domain-based thematic review* (Paul and Barari 2022; Paul and Criado 2020), which can take various formats (Paul and Menzies 2023):

- Narrative reviews (plain vanilla)
- Framework-based reviews (structured review using an organizing framework)
- Conceptual reviews (focused on theory/model development)
- Bibliometric reviews
- Hybrid reviews

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- Meta-analytic reviews (Paul and Barari 2022)

Each approach serves a different purpose, but evidence suggests that *framework-based reviews* are particularly impactful. According to Paul et al. (2023), these tend to receive more citations and are more likely to become classic contributions.

2 | Thumb Rules for Writing Impactful Review Articles

With over two decades of experience reading, writing, and publishing widely cited and downloaded review articles, I have contributed extensively to the evolution of SLRs. My editorial roles with leading journals—including *Journal of Business Research* (*Managing Editor of Literature reviews for 2years*), *International Business Review*, *European Management Journal*, and *International Journal of Consumer Studies* (*IJCS*)—have provided deep insights into what makes a review paper impactful. I have served as Editor of over 600 review articles in different journals. Reading all of them has taken all my time; however, it was an enriching experience for knowledge advancement.

However, it is concerning that some recent guidance on review writing comes from junior scholars with limited experience, sometimes resulting in misleading advice. This motivated me to offer a new, experience-based perspective.

Generally, literature reviews can be more influential than empirical articles. The high impact factors of journals like the *Academy of Management Review* and the *International Journal of Management Reviews* (*IJMR*) attest to the value of review articles. Similarly, the growth of *IJCS* can be partly attributed to the publication of some impactful SLRs on important topics between 2020 and 2025.

Based on these insights, I propose the following *thumb rules* for crafting a high-impact review article.

2.1 | Thumb Rule 1 to develop a Conceptual Review

Think about developing a Conceptual Review, aiming for Theory development, which is a classic review. Journals such as the *Academy of Management Review* and the *Academy of Marketing Science Review* (*AMS Review*) publish mainly this type of review article. This type of review can be considered as your brainchild because you are developing a new, unique, novel conceptual model or theoretical framework in this type of review, based on the pooled findings of prior reviews. One classic example is the review article titled-Toward a 7P Framework for International Marketing (Paul and Mas, 2020), developed based on the literature on the internationalization of Latin American firms.

2.2 | Thumb Rule 2: Craft a Review Using an Organizing Framework

To come out with an impactful framework-based review, authors can choose different organizing frameworks such as the theory-Context-Characteristics-Methodology (TCCM) framework (Paul and Rosado-Serrano 2019; Basu et al. 2022; Hassan et al. 2022), the Antecedents, Decisions, and Outcome (ADO) framework (Paul and Benito 2018; Södergren 2021) 5W + 1 H framework (Callahan 2014).

2.3 | Thumb Rule 3: Develop a Hybrid Review

A mere bibliometric review is not useful to provide ideas for future research and set a future research agenda. Bibliometric review is primarily based on citation-derived metrics. Such a review has limited scope for retrospective evaluation and rationalization of a field (Hulland 2024). However, doing cluster analysis using a bibliometric software and integrating that with a framework-based review would be a better way of crafting an impactful review. Other aspects of bibliometric review, such as co-occurrence and co-citation, are not useful to identify research gaps.

2.4 | Thumb Rule 4: Future Research Agenda—A Crucial Section

A high-quality SLR must go beyond summarizing existing literature to actively identifying *research gaps* and proposing *a robust future research agenda*. According to Gilal et al. (2021), Kumar et al. (2020), and Lotfi Dehkharghani et al. (2022), a subject advances when review articles delineate underexplored areas and guide subsequent research. We recommend that *at least 30% of the content* in a review article be dedicated to future research directions.

This section should evaluate:

- Which *theories*, *constructs*, *variables*, *and methods* have been frequently used—and which have not ?
- The *contexts* (e.g., countries, industries) commonly studied versus those that are underrepresented.
- Empirical patterns including *antecedents*, *mediators*, *moderators*, *and outcomes* (Hassan et al. 2022).

A review article becomes a *platform for ideas* when it encourages the scholarly community to shift from redundant theory or method recycling toward more *novel theories*, *fresh constructs*, *new methods*, and unexplored contexts. In doing so, it provides a valuable lens or typology for both researchers and practitioners (Paul, Merchant, et al. 2021).

2.5 | Thumb Rule 5: Explore AI Tools for Review Synthesis

Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools can significantly assist in automating the *initial stages of SLRs*, such as literature search, screening, and data extraction. AI enables *procedural consistency*, enhances *logical coherence*, and supports *rapid iteration*. However, final interpretation, argumentation, and theoretical development must be *overseen by domain experts* to ensure academic rigor and conceptual relevance (Ngwenyama and Rowe 2024).

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2.6 | Thumb Rule 6: Adopt a Scientific Journal Selection Criterion

A well-defined journal selection protocol is essential. Following the *SPAR-4-SLR Protocol* (Paul, Lim, et al. 2021), researchers should:

- Use *Web of Science or Scopus Q1 journals* for popular topics.
- For niche topics, consider including *Q2 journals* to ensure sufficient data for analysis.

Lack of transparency in journal selection criteria is a *major reason for review paper rejections*, as emphasized by a former editor-in-chief of a top-tier journal.

2.7 | Thumb Rule 7: Ensure Rigorous Article Selection (Objectivity and Subjectivity)

Use a *two-step article selection process*:

1. *Objectivity-based coding*: Co-authors assign Code 1 (include) or Code 0 (exclude) to each article.
2. *Subjective validation*: Confirm thematic alignment and conceptual relevance.

Inclusion of irrelevant articles can introduce *biases*, including the misidentification of the most cited authors or seminal works in bibliometric studies.

2.8 | Thumb Rule 8: Select a Relatively Broad Topic

Choose a topic with a *broad academic scope*. Reviews on overly narrow topics are often rejected due to limited readership. A broad topic increases *citation potential* and contributes more significantly to the field. As noted by a co-editor of the *Journal of Business Research Special issue on Literature reviews* (*when I was Managing Editor of the special issue*), breadth increases the *impact and acceptance* of a review article.

2.9 | Thumb Rule 9: Develop Theoretical and Testable Propositions (If Applicable)

If crafting a *conceptual review*, derive *theoretical propositions* to guide future empirical testing and support theory development. These are not necessary for *bibliometric*, *framework-based*, *or domain-mapping reviews*.

2.10 | Thumb Rule 10: Include 6 to 10 Insightful Tables

Generate between *6 and 10 comprehensive tables* that:

- Summarize frequently used *theories*, *constructs*, *and methods*.
- Identify rarely used variables or methodologies.
- Highlight geographic or sectoral research gaps

Such tables are essential in *non-conceptual reviews* to systematically synthesize patterns in the literature.

2.11 | Thumb Rule 11: Develop a Conceptual Framework or Theoretical Model

For *theory-proposing conceptual reviews*, develop a *new conceptual framework* or *theoretical model*. This model can serve as a foundation for future empirical work and enrich scholarly understanding. For other review types, this is not necessary.

2.12 | Thumb Rule 12: Follow a Protocol (e.g., SPAR-4-SLR)

Authors are encouraged to follow established protocols such as SPAR-4-SLR, introduced by Paul, Lim, et al. (2021), which provides a structured approach to developing high-quality literature reviews. SPAR-4-SLR includes 3 steps: assembling, arranging, and assessing.

2.13 | Thumb Rule 13: Co-Author With a Subject Expert

Engage a *senior scholar or field expert* as a co-author. Their experience can significantly enhance the *depth and direction* of the future research agenda and increase the likelihood of *acceptance in high-tier journals*.

2.14 | Thumb Rule 14: Use a Standardized Title Format

Adopt a clear and conventional title format for thematic reviews (for all reviews other than Conceptual reviews): "[Topic]: A Review and Research Agenda"

Examples:

- Brand Equity: A Review and Research Agenda
- Sustainable Supply Chain Management: A Review and Research Agenda

This signals the article's scope and value proposition to both editors and readers.

2.15 | Thumb Rule 15: Avoid a Separate Literature Review Section

Do not include a standalone "Literature Review" section because the entire article is Literature review. Instead, *integrate prior literature within thematic discussions* or in the "Findings and Discussion" section. This avoids redundancy and enhances coherence.

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2.16 | Thumb Rule 16: Suggested Section Structure

Structure the review into five distinct sections if you are writing a review not aiming for proposing and developing a theory or theoretical model. You may follow the proposed section structure for Review using an organizing framework such as TCCM, ADO, 5 W; for bbliometric reviews, for hybrid reviews, narrative reviews etc.

1. Introduction
2. Methodology
3. Findings and Discussion
4. Future Research Agenda
5. Conclusion

This format aligns with expectations in top-tier journals and provides logical progression for the reader.

2.17 | Thumb Rule 17: Innovate by Diversifying Review Types

If multiple existing reviews already cover a specific topic using the same review approach (e.g., bibliometric or SLR), consider crafting a *different type of review* such as:

- A framework-based review
- A conceptual review
- A hybrid review

Diversifying your review methodology increases its *originality* and scholarly value.

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Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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