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How to Do a Flash Review

A Flash Review

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The UPHN is a national organization established in 2004 which today includes the Medical Officers of Health in 24 of Canada's large urban centres. Working collaboratively and with a collective voice, the network addresses public health issues that are common to urban populations. Research operations of the UPHN are conducted in partnership with the University of Saskatchewan.

UPHN flash reviews are for discussion and comment purposes. They have not been peer reviewed nor been subject to review by the UPHN members or executive.

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How to Do a Flash Review: A Flash Review¹²³

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Key words

review, review literature as topic, research design

Question

The Urban Public Health Network (UPHN) Research Team has identified the flash review reporting format as providing an ideal template for making the results of our internal and oftentimes preliminary work available and accessible to ourselves and other researchers and knowledge users. During the course of a research project, teams draw on past work to inform any number of ad hoc decisions. The flash review provides an opportunity to document this work in a systematic way and a way that can more easily be referenced and shared with others. Note that flash reviews are not systematic reviews,¹ or even rapid reviews;² they are not intended to comprehensively review and summarize a published body of literature on a given topic.³

In this flash review, I answer the question: how should we do a flash review? Based on prior flash reviews that have been shared, it details the key elements of the reporting format and explains what content should be included in these kinds of reviews.

Review/search strategy

The flash review reporting format was first invented and developed by the INTERACT research team which is headed by Meghan Winters, Yan Kestens, and Daniel Fuller. In order to inform this flash review, we accessed all the flash reviews that had been produced by this group on topics ranging from measuring well-being with ecological momentary assessment to transit access measures (INTERACT had published five reviews⁴⁻⁸ at the time of this writing (late 2020)). These reviews were analyzed and their common structural elements were identified. In places, the author of this flash review has taken liberties and introduced additional elements to the format to suit the purposes of the UPHN. I have noted these divergences in footnotes.

Findings

A flash review should consist of roughly four major sections and, if needed, an appendix. Table 1 presents these five sections and describes what should be contained in each (a detailed breakdown of the sections found in the INTERACT flash reviews is provided in Appendix A). The entire flash review should be no more than 6-10 pages (not counting appendices, if they are included). The critical aim of the review is to present and answer the question raised in the review in an easily readable and accessible way. Subsections and subheadings should be used to improve readability. Presenting information in point or tabular form helps to make content more accessible and is encouraged.

The flash review is not meant to present an exhaustive review of the literature but rather present the basis for and how a given research decision was made in a transparent way. The flash review should present enough information so that a person external to the project can understand why the group was interested in the question addressed and how they came to answer it. More extended and detailed information can be provided in appendices following the document. If a more exhaustive or systematic approach is taken to answering the question, then the research group should consider using other established approaches to reviewing and synthesizing literature such as a rapid review.²

There is some fluidity and repetition between the Findings section and the Recommendations and conclusion sections. The amount of fluidity depends on the nature of the question being addressed in the flash review. Ideally, the Conclusions and recommendations section is very brief (no more than 2 paragraphs or so), only emphasizes key takeaways from the review, and can easily be skimmed. When the answer to the question addressed by the flash review is more complex, there is a greater need to present and discuss this conclusion and how it was arrived at in greater depth in the Findings section. The Conclusions and recommendations section may also comment on limitations and directions for future investigation.

Anyone on the research team can prepare a flash review. Rather than pursue an external review process, the flash review should be reviewed by at least two principal investigators and/or co-investigators associated with the project (in our case the UPHN). When principal investigators or co-investigators are authors, they can review their own work. This review process is consistent with the review process usually involved in internal decision making by research teams.

Each flash review should be titled, dated, and clearly state its authorship. The senior investigators who review the flash review should also be named.

Conclusions and recommendations

The flash review provides a relatively straightforward way to document and share research decisions made by a research team. In addition, it provides a relatively accessible first professional writing assignment for an entry-level student or research assistant. The medium is analogous to an internal memo explaining an organizational decision but it is also meant to be shareable with individuals outside the group. The generic structure of the flash review helps to ensure that the document is accessible and readable to a wide audience.

References

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Table 1. Summary of major sections in flash review and what should be contained in each.

Flash Review Major Sections	Summary of content
Question	Introduces the background and/or motivation for the current flash review. Identifies the key question that the flash review aims to answer.
Review/search strategy*	Explains the process that was used and the material drawn upon to form the basis of the answer to the question addressed by the flash review. The strategy may be informal but should still be described.
Findings	Presents the key findings of the flash review, oftentimes in point or tabular form. Presents answer to the question that frames the flash review and how it was arrived at in modest depth.
Recommendations and conclusion	Restates key takeaways arising from the flash review. May summarize limitations of the review and/or propose directions for future study. Should be short.
Appendices*	Contains any technical detail that has been collated to support the flash review. E.g. a glossary or detailed list of supporting materials.

* This does not emerge as a consistent element in the original INTERACT version of the flash review reporting format although this information is regularly contained in the opening “Question” section. The addition of appendices as a recognized element is also new.

Appendix A. Overview of past INTERACT flash review sections

Flash review	Question	Review/search strategy	Findings	Recommendations	Other
Rancourt and Wasfi (2019)	Present	Present in “Findings”	Present but called “Well-being”	Present	Also includes “Summary Table” at end
Theirry (2019)	Present	Absent	Present but called “Review of measures / methods”	Present	Also includes “Summary Table” at end
Pugh (2018)	Present	Present in “Question”	Present but called “Review of measures / methods”	Present	
Fuller (2018)	Present	References systematic review in “Question”	Present but called “Review of measures / methods”	Present	Includes appendix with detailed calculations
Morrison and Fuller (2018)	Present	Absent	Present but called “Review of measures / methods”	Present	Includes “Areas for Future study” and “Limitations”