HOW TO REVIEW THE GREY LITERATURE

by Simon Moss

Introduction

When you conduct a systematic review—or even a conventional literature review—you are often encouraged to explore the grey literature. So, what is the grey literature? Although no universal definition has been established, the grey literature tends to include research material that is not published in refereed journals or scholarly books. This literature includes theses, reports, conference papers, working papers, government documents, newsletters, clinical trials, and informal communication such as podcasts.

**Benefits and drawbacks of reviewing the grey literature**

In contrast to refereed journals and scholarly books, the grey literature can offer some unique insights. For example

* The grey literature can sometimes be more recent than refereed journals or scholarly books.
* The grey literature is not cited as often as refereed journals or scholarly books—and, therefore, may include discoveries or insights that few academics have cited or explored
* The grey literature is not as restricted and, therefore, can include features that reviewers tend to dismiss, such as non-significant results. Consequently, the grey literature may not be as biased as refereed journals.

Nevertheless, the grey literature is usually not scrutinized as closely as refereed journals or scholarly books. Consequently, the grey literature might often be inaccurate or flawed. To evaluate the grey literature, researchers often apply an acronym called AACODS. To illustrate, in systematic reviews, they might rate, on a five-point scale, the extent to which

* The author of each article is credible—and, for example, has published refereed journal articles, called **Authority**
* The article cites scholarly references and applies the accepted methods in a discipline, called **Accuracy**
* The article concedes the limitations of their work, called **Coverage**
* The article is unbiased—and, for example, considers alternative perspectives, called **Objective**
* The article was published on a specific, explicit date, called **Date**
* The article is relevant and informative to your research, called **Significant**

**How to search the grey literature**

Obviously, no single database can be used to search all grey literature. Nevertheless, researchers and institutions have developed some helpful resources to search the grey literature. This table outlines some of these resources.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Resource | Discipline | Details |
| General resourcesGen |  |  |
| Trove | All | * trove.nla.gov.au * Aggregates resources from Australian libraries, museums, and other research institutions * Includes newspapers, books, theses, photos, maps, diaries, and letters |
| OpenGrey | Many | * www.opengrey.eu * Extensive grey literature from Europe, including theses, research reports, and conference papers |
| OpenDOAR or Directory of Open Access Repositories | All | * www.opendoar.org * A database of all open access repositories |
| NZresearch.org.nz |  | * nzresearch.org.nz//?locale=en * Includes an extensive array of NZ research * Can search for specific types, such as theses, conference posters, patents, and reports |
| General resources in specific disciplines |  |  |
| Mednar | Medicine | * mednar.com/mednar/desktop/en/search.html * Search engine that uncovers medical articles that are both accessible and inaccessible |
| Western Pacific Region Index Medicus | Medicine | * [www.wprim.org](http://www.wprim.org) * Published by the WHO |
| Clinical Trials Search Portal | Clinical trials | * apps.who.int/trialsearch/ * A database of both ongoing and completed clinical trials around the globe |
| Theses |  |  |
| ProQuest Dissertations & Theses. | All | * Includes a huge array of American and European theses * Available from libguides.cdu.edu.au/az.php?a=p |
| CINAHL Plus with Full Text | Nursing | * Can limit “Publication type” to “Doctoral dissertations” * Available from libguides.cdu.edu.au/az.php?a=c |
| PsycINFO | Psychology | * Can limit “Document type” to “Dissertations” * Available from libguides.cdu.edu.au/az.php?a=p |
| Theses Canada | All | * www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/services/theses/Pages/theses-canada.aspx * Includes many Canadian theses |
| Specific needs |  |  |
| Relevant statistics for specific topics |  | * libguides.library.curtin.edu.au/c.php?g=202345&p=1333237 * Presents links to databases that present relevant statistics * See also unstats.un.org/home/nso\_sites/ for a list of all national statistical agencies |

You can also use Google or Google Scholar to search the grey literature. Here are some guidelines on how to use Google effectively

* When searching in Google, if you add the *filetype:pdf*, only pdfs will appear. This guideline is useful because most grey literature that is available on the web is submitted as a pdf.
* Use the hyphen sign to exclude sites that utilize specific words, such as “-adults”. Do not include a space between the minus sign and the relevant term.
* Include “site: “ to search specific sites only, such as “site: en.wikipedia.org”.
* To uncover statistics on some topic, add the term statistics to a search, such as “depression statistics”

Perhaps the most comprehensive site to help you identify grey literature is **greynet.org/home.html**.