To prepare for writing a literature review, I searched for and piled together a host of educational materials on how to write research articles correctly, effectively, and professionally. Though I have participated in a research lab prior to grad school, I was involved solely in assisting with formulation of the abstract. Following self-reflection and self-assessment of my personal writing strengths and weaknesses, I determined that informational materials on specific criteria of literature reviews as well as material on voice and tense would be most beneficial to my success on this project.

An informational article by Sharma1 titled “How to become a competent medical writer” was a great starting point and source of inspiration for my journey into unmarked territory. This article emphasized the importance of having a full understanding of the research material and question at hand prior to first pen-stroke. Additionally, this article included many skills necessary to write research papers, which was the basis of my self-reflection. I read over the four general knowledge/skills criteria (“Literature & grammar, Literature/reference searching, Interpretation and presentation of research data, Ethical & legal issues)1 and determined that grammar and presentation of research data were my two weakest areas. The seven steps provided for writing scientific literature allowed me to have a “game-plan” for the project as well as track my progress. Though I will not be going through the review process to submit for an academic journal, I will still have a “review” of sorts in terms of my project committee reviewing and critiquing the material. All other components of the process specified apply at least vaguely and have allowed me to create a more detailed outline of my schedule.

After coming up with a game-plan and identifying weaknesses, resources were gathered to address my personal weaknesses and the weaknesses of the draft I have completed thus far. A resource by the University of Ontario by Dena Taylor2 outlined when it is appropriate to use present tense, simple past tense, perfect tense, future tense, progressive tense and active and passive voice. After reviewing the rules outlined in this document, I noted mistakes in EVERY paragraph of my draft literature review. The majority of issues noted in the review paper were regarding use of use of past instead of present tense to describe published research that is currently valid. For example, prior to my assessment a sentence read “Recent research has pointed out”, and was changed to “Current research indicates” - which not only corrects improper tense, but also changes the sentence to be of active voice as opposed to passive. Following use of these guidelines, my literature review sounds much more professional and seems to “flow” better.

While grammar is a very important aspect of writing a literature review, I also wanted to be sure all important aspects of the literature review were included in my document. Though this is a rough draft and is not yet completed – knowing exactly what is needed from each article and from the synthesis of information speeds up the process ten-fold! I found the check-list provided by Taylor3 extremely helpful in assisting me with pulling necessary information from articles and including all relevant information in my results and discussion. Her document titled “A Brief Guide to Writing a Literature Review” provides a list of 8 components of your review of literature you should meet as well as a list of 13 items your review should include for each reviewed article within the literature review. Though the majority of items were relevant to my research, there were a few that were catered to studies outside of the medical sciences. After review of the relevant items, I realized I was missing the following components in my review: studies contrary to my perspective, strengths of the studies reviewed, and objectivity on the part of authors in the studies that I reviewed (i.e. were they being objective or just setting out to prove what they thought was right). With the addition of these components to my literature review, I believe it will be a strong, informative document.

Lastly, the abstract is a crucial component for any research article. Though I have assisted in the construction of an abstract, I wanted to ensure I can catch reader’s attention and encourage them to continue reading the entire article. According to guidelines by the Handbook for Academic Medicine Writing4, the abstract should refrain from providing too much background information at the expense of limiting the amount of key information that fits into the word limit. Additionally, the handbook states that the abstract should include all key facts and ideas, not include any information not already in the article, and is allowed to contain lists in order to further condense key points and information if necessary (along with many, MANY other tips/pointers included in the guidelines)4. One pointer that hit a little too close to home was “if someone saw only the abstract, would they at least have a fair, if not good, understanding of what my article is about and what the main message or finding is?” (p.8)4. For this literature review I based whether or not articles were included based solely on their titles and abstracts – so I want to be sure readers get an understanding of my research without having to read the entire article! Though I did not write my abstract prior to reading these guidelines, they have guided the beginnings of, and will continue to effect the way my abstract is formulated. My overall goal of this literature review is to get as many school-based therapists as possible to read it, become inspired, and complete their own research on the matter in order for the profession to have a better understanding of the effect of assistive devices in the school setting. All of this starts with a great abstract! I look forward to using the guidelines to ensure I reach my goal.

In conclusion, the educational materials related to academic writing resulted in self-reflection, self-assessment, changes in grammatical structure of the document, a more in-depth analysis of studies for my literature review, and a great start to my abstract. Making the changes indicated by this process will result in a more professional, informational, and holistic representation of review findings.

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