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Manuscript Selection in a Literature Review: “Free-Full-Text-or-Next” as a New Criterion

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Abstract

Literature inclusion and exclusion (E/I) criteria are a fundamental selection methodology in different applications. Mainly, the E/I criteria are identified and chosen with respect to the question for which the manuscript itself is produced, thus allowing the selection of the literature. This procedure is not always related to the economic availability of independent subjects (e.g., researchers, authors, students) or even institutions in low-income areas or with little willingness to cover the use of paid materials. The proposed criterion (free-full-text-or-next) aims to support independent subjects (without affiliations) or subjects belonging to economically disadvantaged areas.

Keywords: medical education, faculty development, peer support, literature review, research

Free-Full-Text-or-Next: A Proposed Literature Review Criterion

Literature reviews are tools for collecting, observing, and analysing literature relating to a specific and focused topic. The literature review, particularly if using systematic methods, involves a manuscript search protocol and involves the use of inclusion and exclusion criteria (E/I criteria; Snyder, 2019; van Wee & Banister, 2023). The free-full-text-or-next (FFTN) is proposed as a criterion applicable in the literature search phase or in the selection phase using E/I. FFTN aims to represent a support criterion for researchers of every discipline unable to use access to databases through an institutional profile, unable to purchase manuscripts, and free from the request to third parties for access to the manuscripts of interest.

The characteristics of FFTN include the exclusive use of literature granted completely free of charge, without the need for institutional profiles or the obligation to request a free copy from the authors. The FFTN criterion is proposed as inclusive and fair, accessible by every researcher anywhere in the world, regardless of personal or institutional economic possibilities, regardless of rankings, and regardless of institutional affiliations. FFTN is proposed as a useful criterion for independent researchers and authors, and/or those with a lack of funds. The lack of personal or institutional funds, or the location in low-income areas, can limit the use of paid manuscript types, limiting or impeding the development of activities of researchers, students, institutions. The FFTN criterion thus allows us to make the choice or need to use exclusively free material visible, and to make this choice a criterion like others already in use.

The proposal contained in the FFTN criterion is to be considered an additional opportunity compared to the criteria already present, as well as being an incentive to offer more and more literature that is not only open access but without formal mandatory requirements. The proposal of the FFTN criterion does not have the objective of excluding or boycotting paid material, but rather of being a choice criterion to be declared within the literature review development process, which is also an incentive and visibility for the works proposed by subjects (e.g., individual authors/researchers, universities, institutes) with low spending capacity or opportunities. Even if there is the indisputable possibility of generating selection bias, the use of the FFTN criterion declared in the procedure would have the same loss as any other E/I criteria used (e.g., period/range, publication date, publication language) already used in literature reviews. The advantages of applying the FFTN criterion can be aimed mainly at stakeholders without funding, stakeholders with reduced spending, and students. The product of using the criterion will not be of lower quality compared to the use of the other criteria; furthermore, the publication cost, in the form of article processing costs (APC), does not influence the impact of the proposed article (Maddi & Sapinho, 2022).

To conclude, the free-full-text-or-next (FFTN) can be considered an advantageous criterion from a financial point of view, which allows the use of quality literature, and which allows the generation of a quality product. FFTN allows a methodology for which literature is also selected due to the absence of payments, absence of institutional/academic profiles, thus generating a factor of inclusiveness and equity, with the strict need to declare its use within the procedures and paying attention to possible bias.

Conflict of Interest: There is no conflict of interest.

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