<u>Reports & Reviews</u>

Sharpening Search Skills:
Reflections on a Peer-Review Search Strategies Course

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This past June I took part in an online course that turned out to be one of the most practical and inspiring bits of training I've done in a while: How to Peer Review Search Strategies. As someone working in the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (INMO) Library, where requests from INMO members for complex literature searches are increasingly common, I'm always looking for ways to make sure my searching skills and the support I give to members stay sharp. When I spotted this course advertised through the Health Sciences Libraries Group (HSLG) list, I thought it would be ideal and signed up straight away.

WHY IT MATTERED
Systematic reviews, scoping reviews, and evidence syntheses all stand or fall on the quality of their search strategies. A well-built search means the difference between finding the studies that matter and missing them completely. But what I hadn't appreciated fully before the course was just how important peer reviewing those strategies can be. Having a second pair of eyes helps to catch mistakes, tighten design, and make sure the work stands up to scrutiny.

WHO LED THE COURSE
The course was led by two well-known names in our field: Carol Lefebvre, an Independent Information Consultant and Lead Convenor of the Cochrane Information Retrieval Methods Group, and Julie Glanville, an Independent Consultant in Information Retrieval. Between them, they bring decades of experience, not just in crafting search strategies but also in teaching others to do the same. They have a very approachable, clear manner in explaining any issues.

THE PRESS FRAMEWORK IN ACTION
One of the highlights for me was how thoroughly the course unpacked the **PRESS (Peer Review of Electronic Search Strategies) guideline**. I had come across PRESS before, but this was the first time I had seen it walked through in such detail. Rather than just being mentioned as a checklist in passing, the PRESS guideline was really the backbone of the course.

We were shown how each element of PRESS maps onto real-life searches, including things like assessing the appropriateness of search terms, spotting common syntax errors, and considering how limits and filters are applied. The trainers didn't just describe the checklist; they used it step by step as a working template for evaluating sample strategies with us. This process made it click for me in a way that reading the guideline alone never had. By the end, I felt confident I could not only apply PRESS to my own searches but also use it to give structured, constructive feedback to others.

HOW IT WAS RUN

The course was spread across two afternoons on Zoom, which made it manageable without being overwhelming. Recordings and slides were made available for a month afterwards, which was brilliant for going back over trickier sections. The interactive element really stood out, with Carol and Julie actively encouraging questions and steering discussions in ways that made sure everyone online got involved. There was also a discussion forum for follow-up questions, which gave the training a community feel.

WHAT I TOOK AWAY

A few key messages have stuck with me since completing the course:

- Peer review of search strategies isn't optional—it's increasingly required by organisations like Cochrane, JBI, PRISMA 2020, and NICE.
- Timing is crucial: peer review needs to happen before the search is run.
- Searches should be peer reviewed exactly as they were executed, not as tidied up versions.
- Only trained information specialists should conduct peer reviews.
- Most importantly, the peer reviewer's role is to advise, not to rewrite.

That last point really struck a chord with me. In my own library practice, I sometimes felt a pull to "fix" members' searches. This course reframed my thinking: the goal is to provide structured feedback and suggestions, not to take over.

LOOKING AHEAD

Since completing the course, I've already changed how I approach both my own searching and the support I give to members. Having PRESS as a structured framework to lean on has given me more confidence in both roles. I've also been reminded of the value of making space for peer review—it's easy to think you don't have time, but the risks of skipping it are much greater.

For anyone working in health sciences libraries or supporting researchers undertaking evidence syntheses, I would wholeheartedly recommend this training. It offers not just technical know-how but also a chance to reflect on our professional practice. I attended the live version, but the course is now available for purchase on demand through Instats (https://instats.org/seminar/how-to-peer-review-search-strategies-1) so is available now to everyone to access in their own timeframe.