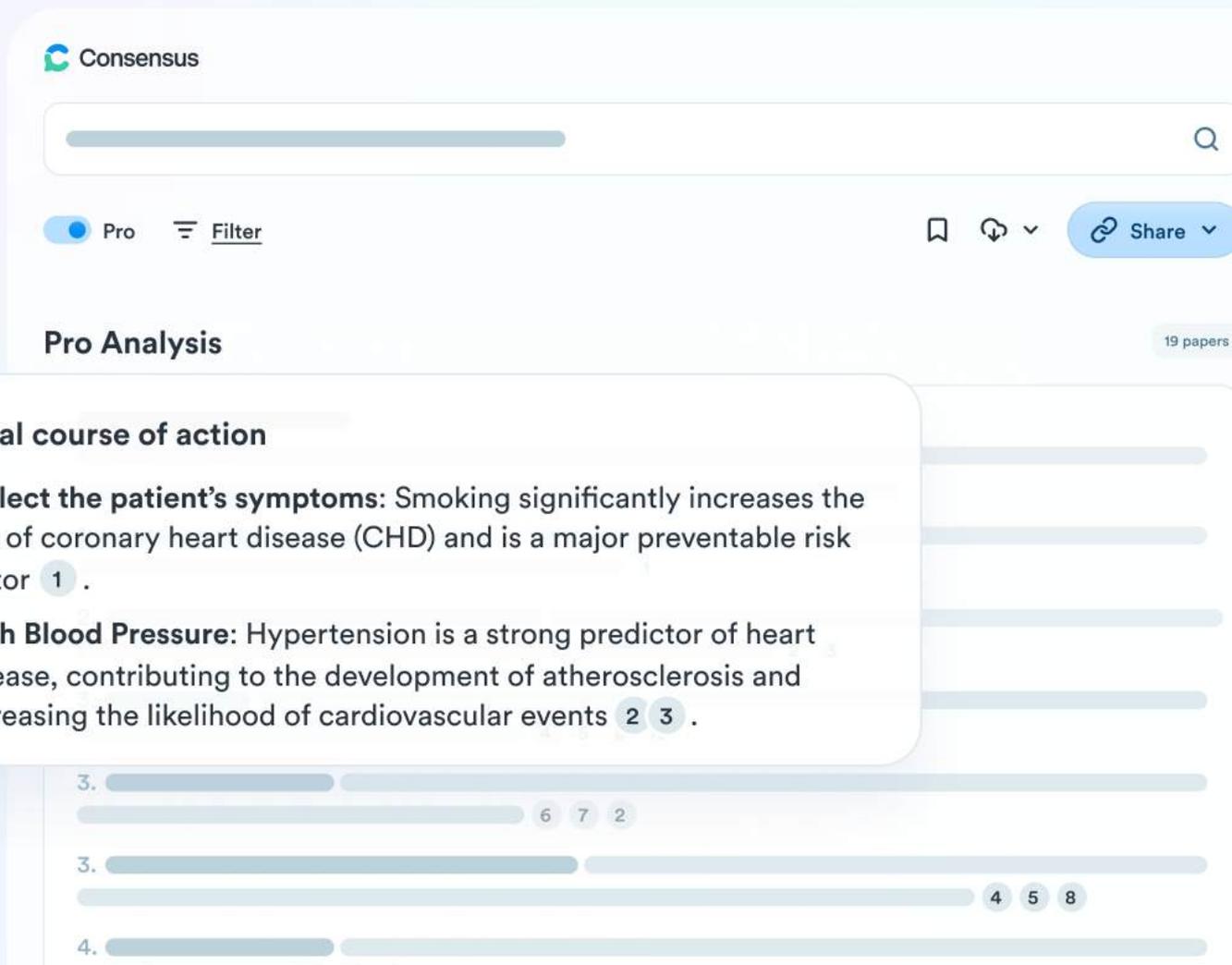


A Comprehensive Guide to Crafting Literature Reviews & Dissertations

Step-by-step strategies, proven techniques, and expert insights to simplify academic writing and elevate your research to new heights.



Consensus

Pro [Filter](#) [Share](#)

19 papers

Medical course of action

- 1. Collect the patient's symptoms:** Smoking significantly increases the risk of coronary heart disease (CHD) and is a major preventable risk factor ¹.
- 2. High Blood Pressure:** Hypertension is a strong predictor of heart disease, contributing to the development of atherosclerosis and increasing the likelihood of cardiovascular events ^{2 3}.
- ^{3 6 7 2}
- ^{4 5 8}

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Consensus Guide: How to Write a Literature Review or Dissertation

Written by Samuel Dicken, PhD

Introduction

Writing a well-balanced, academically sound, and correctly referenced piece of work is essential for any student or academic. The ability to navigate and synthesize vast amounts of literature, while ensuring accuracy and relevance, is a critical skill. However, current tools like PubMed and Google Scholar, though useful, often fall short in maximizing the potential of the available research. Moreover, traditional AI tools such as ChatGPT may fabricate references, which undermines their value for serious academic work.

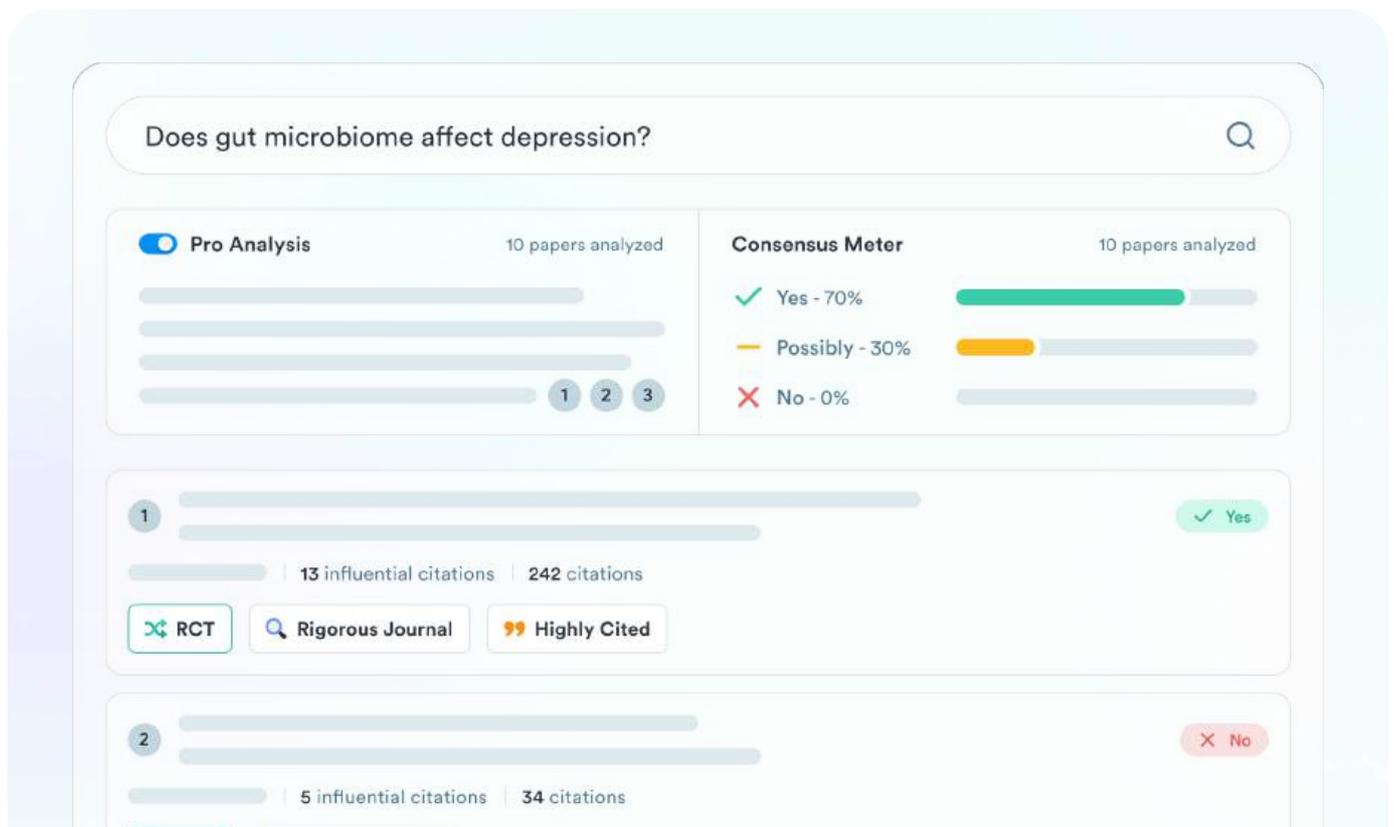
This is where Consensus steps in. By offering an academic-focused database and a multifunctional search bar, Consensus streamlines the research and writing process. Unlike other tools, Consensus is specifically designed to support rigorous academic work without compromising on the quality or integrity of references.

At Consensus, we are committed to upholding the highest academic standards. While the platform won't write your Literature Review or Dissertation for you, it acts as a powerful assistant—much like a good teacher who guides you through the process. Consensus won't take over the writing, but it will make the task significantly easier. By asking the right questions, you can extract valuable insights, break down complex topics, and advance your work effectively.

Key points in this guide

Think of Consensus as the ultimate academic assistant - but it won't write the entire review or dissertation for you.

- Do not use Consensus to write the review or dissertation for you: Instead, use it as an academic assistant.
- Use Consensus for assistance across all sections: It helps with the overall structure and each part of the Literature Review or Dissertation.
- Consensus helps build a reading foundation: Use it to break large topics into smaller, manageable sections.
- Utilize prompts for Consensus Pro: Maximize your searches with specific prompts for different purposes (e.g., research questions, outlines).
- Ask Consensus about limitations in the evidence: This ensures balanced and nuanced insights.
- Save key searches and papers: Create lists for quick reference during your writing process.



The screenshot displays the Consensus search interface for the query "Does gut microbiome affect depression?".

Search Query: Does gut microbiome affect depression?

Pro Analysis: 10 papers analyzed. The interface shows three horizontal bars representing analysis progress, with a "1 2 3" indicator at the bottom.

Consensus Meter: 10 papers analyzed. The meter shows the following distribution:

- ✓ Yes - 70% (represented by a green bar)
- Possibly - 30% (represented by a yellow bar)
- ✗ No - 0% (represented by a red bar)

Search Results:

- Result 1:** Labeled "1" in a blue circle. It has a green "Yes" status. Below the title, it shows "13 influential citations" and "242 citations". It includes tags for "RCT", "Rigorous Journal", and "Highly Cited".
- Result 2:** Labeled "2" in a blue circle. It has a red "No" status. Below the title, it shows "5 influential citations" and "34 citations".

Quick start prompts

By leveraging these targeted prompts, you can more efficiently navigate the complexities of academic writing.

This section provides a collection of practical prompts designed to help you make the most of Consensus during your research and writing process. These prompts can guide you through various stages, from generating research questions to outlining your literature review and finding key references.

Whether you're seeking to clarify your topic, organize your ideas, or identify gaps in the literature, these prompts will serve as a starting point to streamline your research.

Generate potential review questions about your topic

 **Ask Consensus**

Provide some research questions for a literature review around obesity that currently do not exist

 **Ask Consensus**

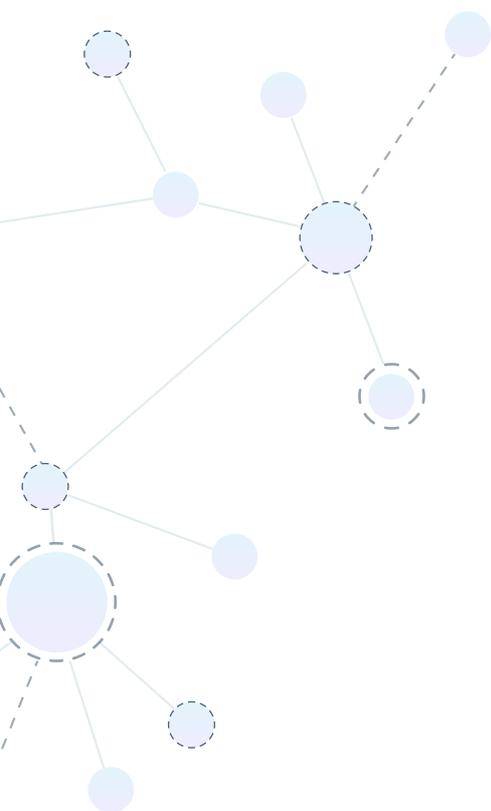
Provide some research questions that require compare and contrast around obesity

 **Ask Consensus**

Provide research questions that require pro and cons around obesity

Gauging for interest, scope, and difficulty

To create a successful review, it's essential to carefully assess the question's content for its relevance, depth, and complexity. This ensures that the review addresses topics that are engaging and manageable within the intended scope.



Gauging the review question content for interest, scope, and difficulty

Ask Consensus

What should be discussed when writing about obesity

Ask Consensus

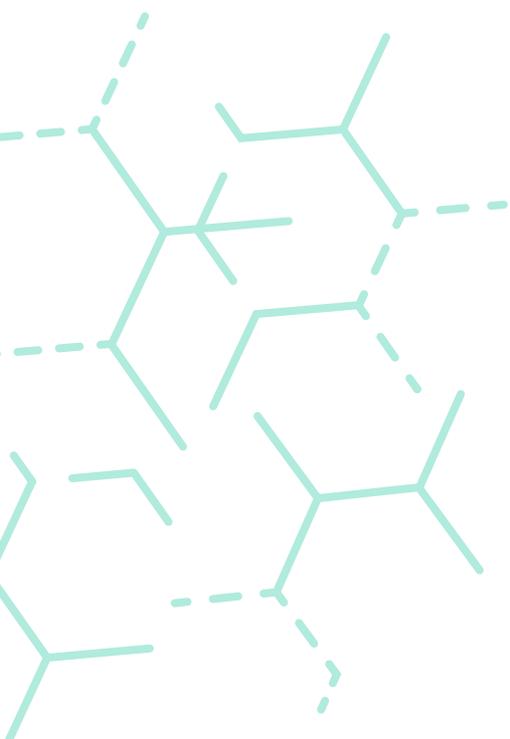
Provide an outline for a literature review about obesity

Ask Consensus

Provide an outline for a literature review about the quality of evidence on obesity

Assessing your review question

Building an effective review begins with assessing the review question's content for its relevance, scope, and complexity. This step ensures the question is engaging, aligns with the intended objectives, and is manageable within the constraints of the review.



Construct the review outline based on format

Ask Consensus

Provide an outline for a literature review about the benefits and risks of obesity

Ask Consensus

Provide an outline for a literature review about the mechanisms of obesity

Ask Consensus

Provide an outline for a literature review about the leading solutions to obesity

More prompt ideas

Click on these search examples to view in Consensus...

Construct the content for each subheading of the review

🔍 Provide an outline for a literature review about genetic factors contributing to obesity

Find concepts

🔍 What key concepts do I need to know about around obesity?

Find definitions

🔍 Give me definitions for key terms relating to obesity

Prompt for formatting

🔍 Provide bullet points on obesity

Critical appraisal:
Nuance and variation

🔍 How does obesity vary by country?

Strengths and limitations

🔍 What are the limitations and strengths of case-control studies?

Find whether a theory or idea is supported

🔍 Is there any evidence to support the following statement: withdrawing tirzepatide leads to substantial regain of lost weight?

Find references to support a specific claim

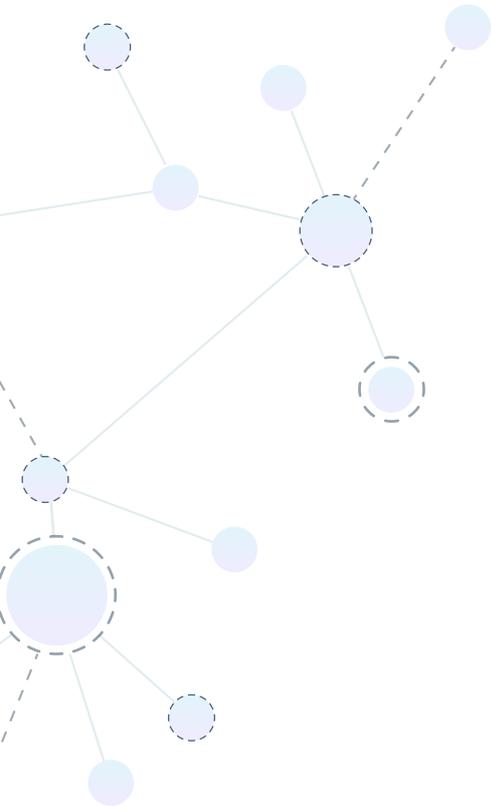
🔍 Find me references which support the following statement: “observational cohort studies show that obesity is associated with lower income in high income countries

Future research needs

🔍 What are the unanswered questions regarding obesity?

Developing your question

Deciding on an interesting and valuable question can be challenging, but Consensus Pro can help. You can use Consensus to generate relevant research questions based on the latest literature. This ensures your question is both informed and aligned with current academic discussions.



Ask Consensus

Provide some research questions for a literature review around obesity that currently do not exist

Ask Consensus

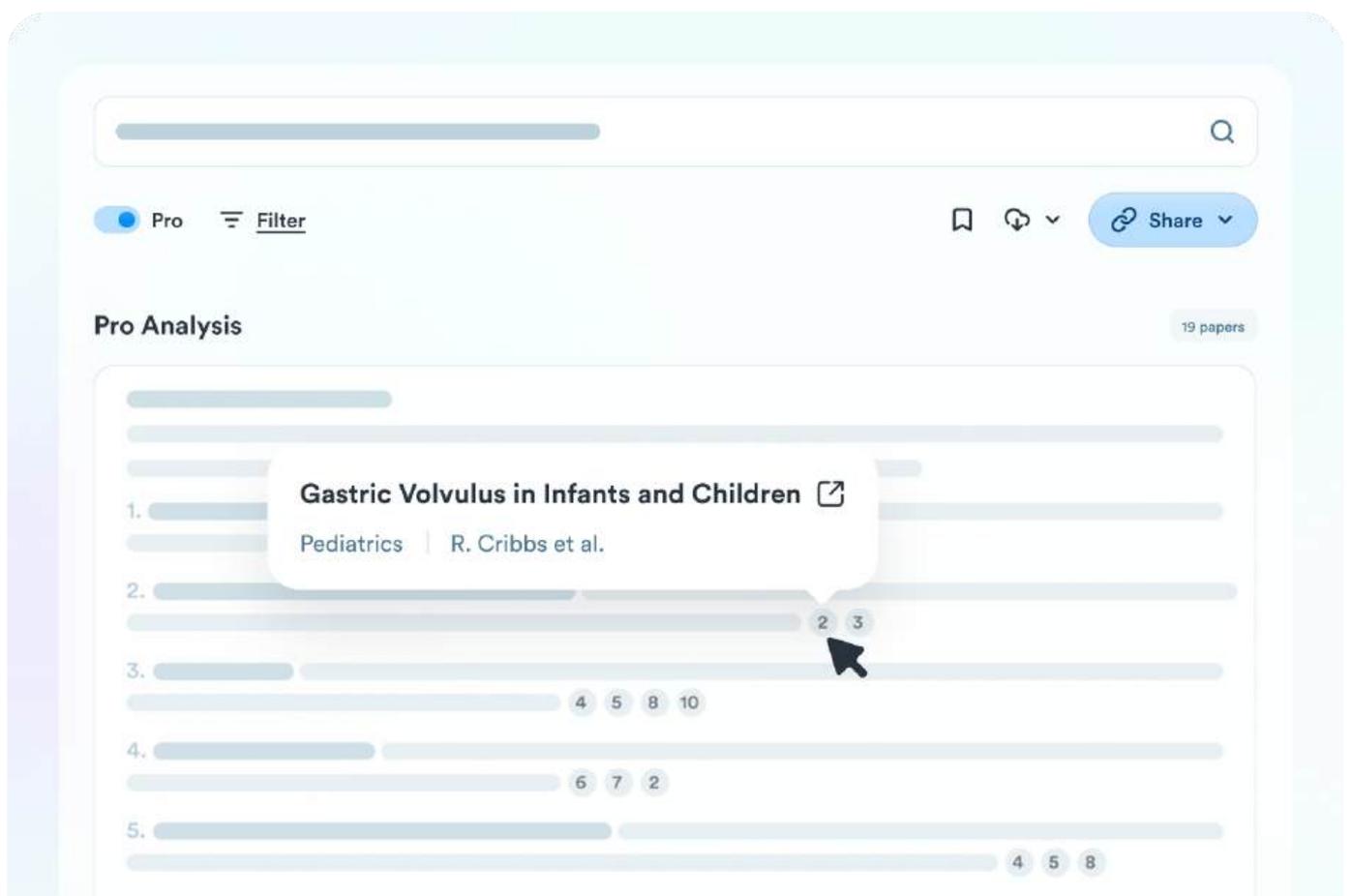
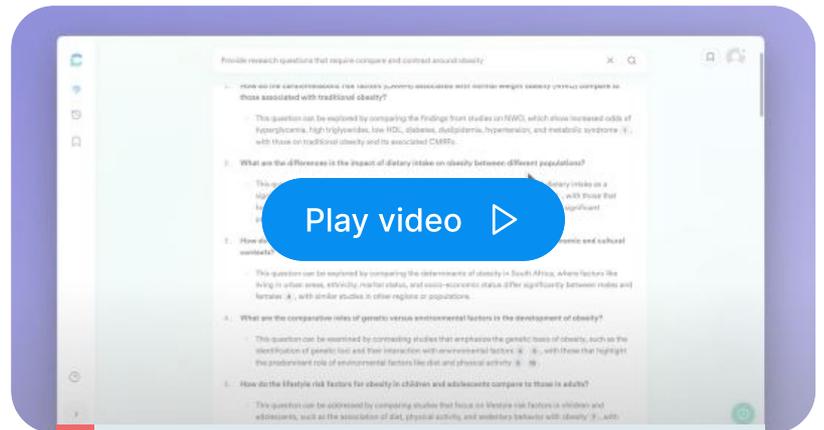
Provide research questions that require compare and contrast around obesity

Ask Consensus

Provide research questions that require pro and cons around obesity

Developing your question

Check out this video to see examples of stepping through different Consensus prompts.



Understanding your question topic

If you've been handed a question, you may be needing some help in understanding your topic and getting to grips with the literature. Your teacher/lecturer may also have given you a lengthy reading list of books, of which only 5% will be relevant.

Let Consensus get you up to speed on the topic by understanding key concepts by finding the most important/references to get you started on reading:

 [What key concepts do I need to know about around obesity](#)

Without having to apply any filters, Consensus provided a Nature Reviews Primer, European and Canadian Guidelines, and two papers providing definitions, prevalence rates, causes and treatments, perfect to get you up to speed.

You can also use the find concepts prompt below for a simpler breakdown:

 [Provide a discussion of 10 important concepts about obesity](#)

Or, you may be given a list of questions to choose from. You want to make sure that the question you choose and the content involved will be interesting or within your scope/ability. Again, type in each question to get a flavour for what you may need to research.

 [What should be discussed when writing about the benefits and drawbacks of weight reduction interventions in older adults with obesity?](#)

Saving your reference list & key searches

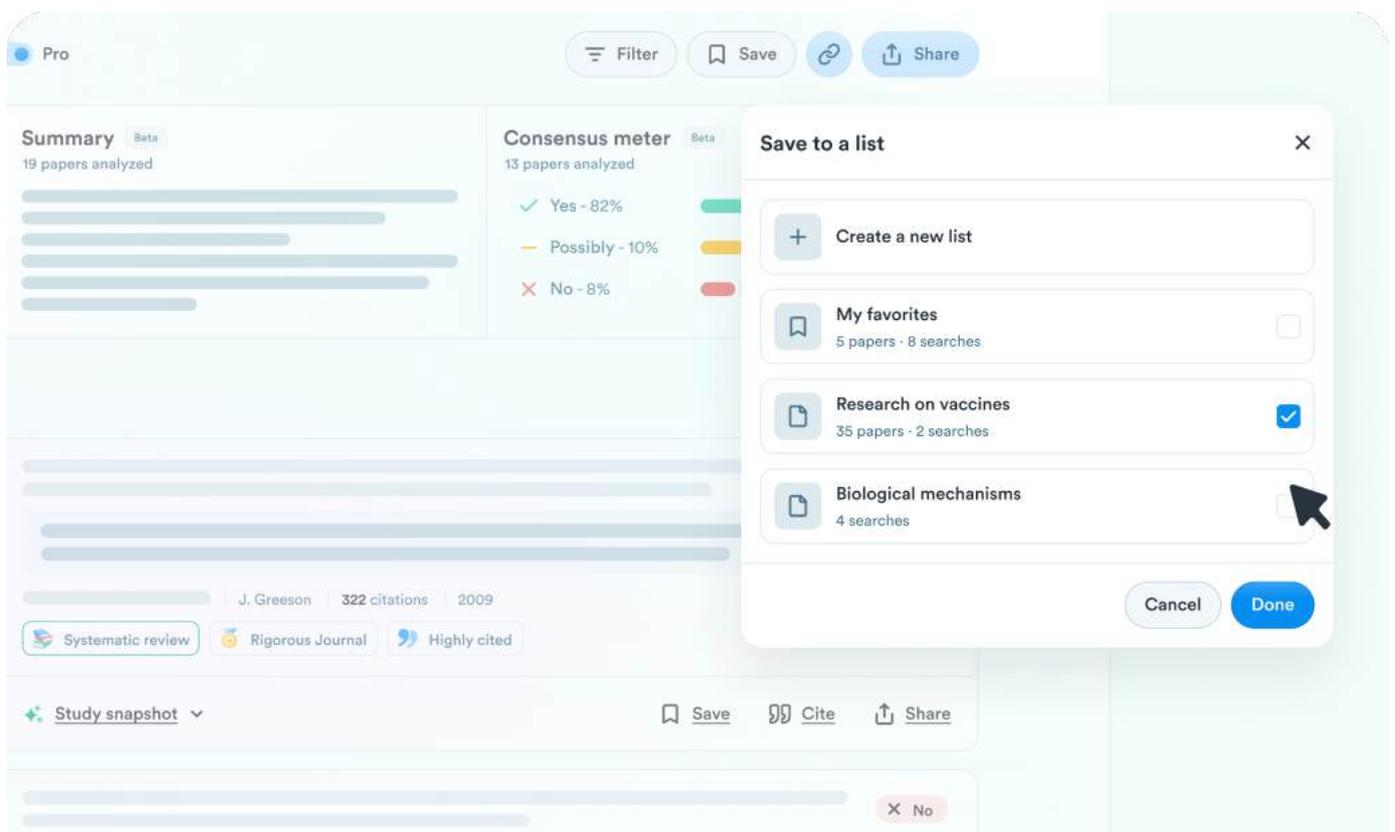
At this stage, it's a good idea to set up your list of useful papers and searches.

You can quickly refer to key papers, and use Ask paper to ask questions. You can quickly export all the references you need to your reference software.

You can quickly re-enter the search at a later date without having to re-type or remember the exact words, and easily apply filters or tweaks to the search

[How to lists of search and paper results in Consensus.](#)

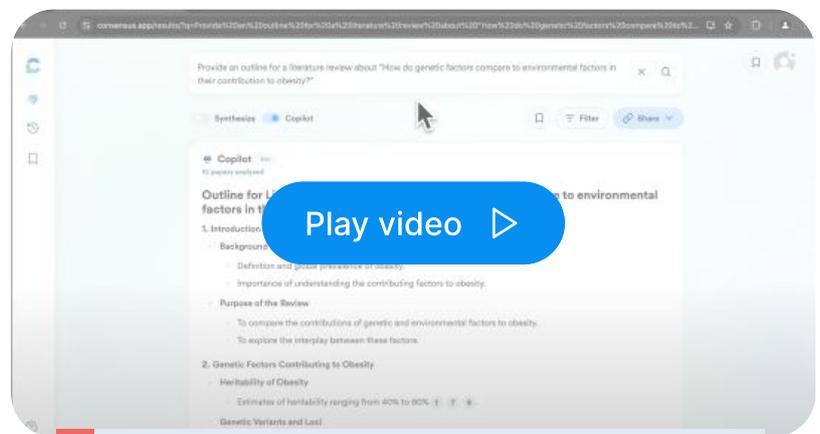
[How to quickly export your references into your reference software.](#)



The screenshot displays the Consensus web interface. At the top, there are navigation buttons for 'Filter', 'Save', and 'Share'. The main content area is divided into two panels: 'Summary' (Beta) and 'Consensus meter' (Beta). The 'Summary' panel shows '19 papers analyzed' with a bar chart. The 'Consensus meter' panel shows '13 papers analyzed' with a breakdown: 'Yes - 82%' (green), 'Possibly - 10%' (yellow), and 'No - 8%' (red). A 'Save to a list' dialog box is open in the foreground, listing existing lists: 'My favorites' (5 papers, 8 searches), 'Research on vaccines' (35 papers, 2 searches, checked), and 'Biological mechanisms' (4 searches). The dialog box includes a 'Cancel' button and a 'Done' button.

Creating the outline structure and topics to research

Now we have our question to begin writing. Next, we can use Consensus to assist our outline of the literature review too.



You now have a clear structure to answer the question, with subheadings and brief outlines of the key sections you need to consider in your writing. You can also see that in each section/subheading in the outline will also include key references. You can use these as a starting point for your reading. Make sure to save these references to your list for later.

You can also export the Consensus Pro output into your word processor, ready to begin research and writing. Make sure to consider the type of essay you are writing when performing your search, as this will alter the response provided and the outline of the review.

 [Provide an outline for a literature review about "How do genetic factors compare to environmental factors in their contribution to obesity?"](#)

Getting deeper into the sections, prompt ideas

Click on these search examples to view in Consensus...

Compare and contrast



Provide an outline for a literature review about “How are genetic factors similar or different to environmental factors in their contribution to obesity?”

Mechanisms



Provide an outline for a literature review about the mechanisms of genetic factors and environmental factors contributing to obesity

Knowledge-based / discussion



Provide an outline for a literature review about what is known about genetic factors and environmental factors contributing to obesity

Argumentative



Provide an outline for a literature review about determining which is more important in contributing to obesity: genetic factors or environmental factors?

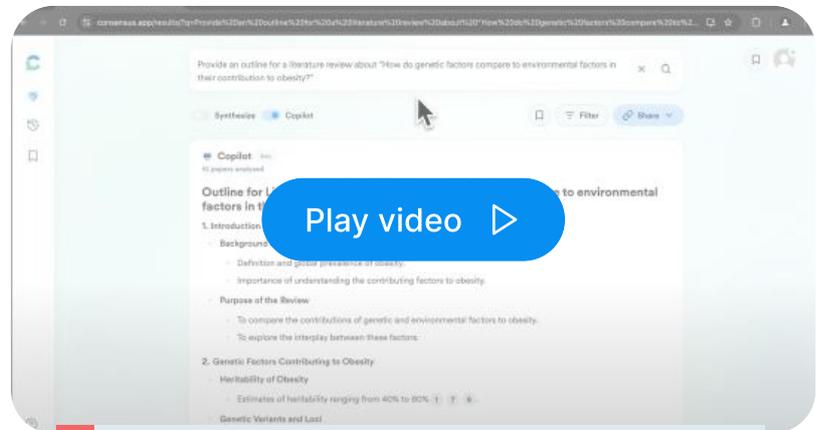
Pros and cons



Provide an outline for a literature review about the pros and cons of studying genetic factors and environmental factors contributing to obesity

Building your review

Consensus allows you to break down complex topics into manageable parts, ensuring you cover all critical areas comprehensively. This approach will help you create a well-organized, thoroughly researched, and academically sound review.



Click on these search examples to view in Consensus...

Start with your review topic/title

🔍 Provide an outline for a literature review about "How do genetic factors compare to environmental factors in their contribution to obesity?"

We can ask about the second subheading from the Consensus Pro

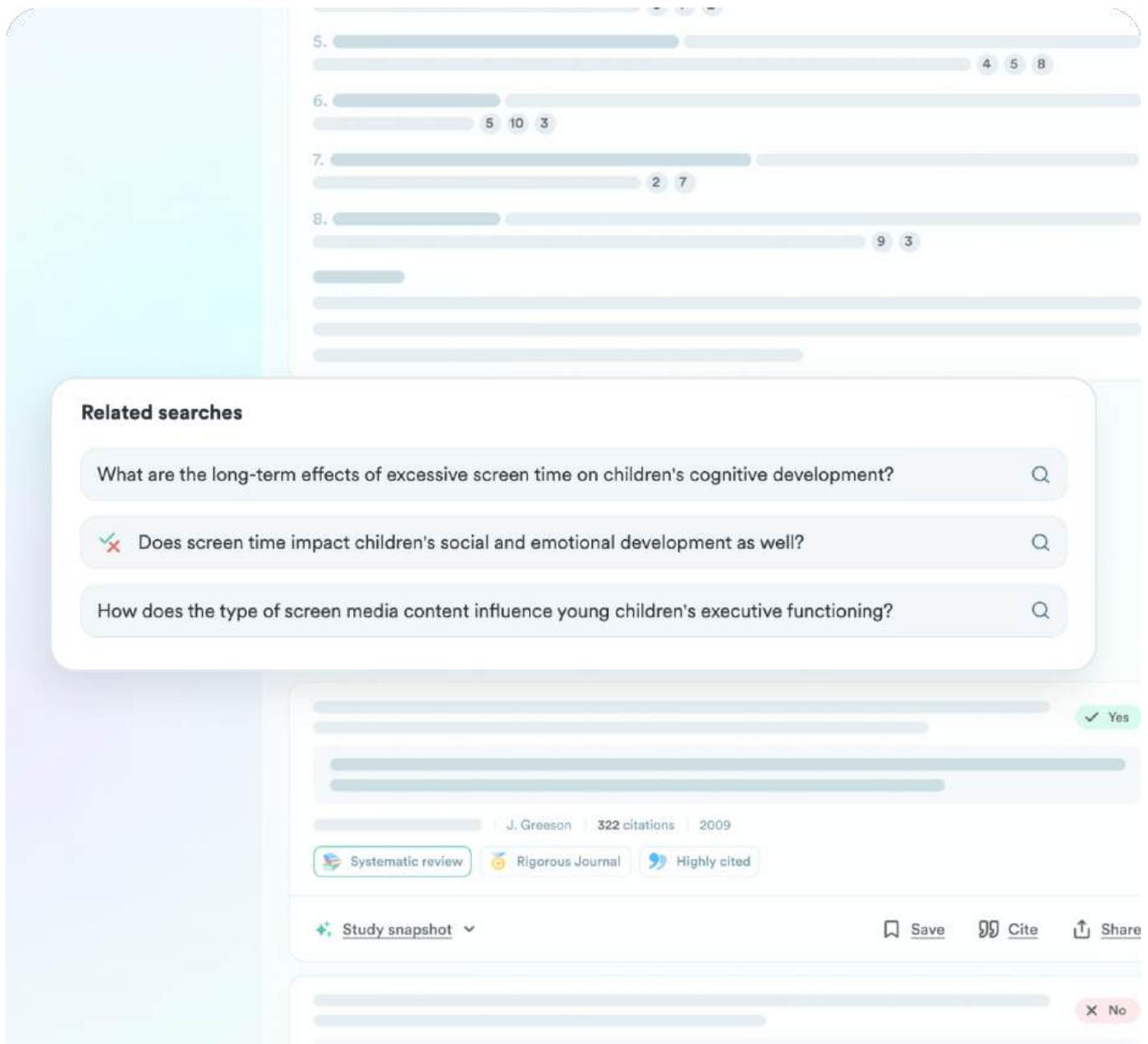
🔍 Provide an outline for a literature review about Monogenic Obesity

You can continually do this to hone in on specific topics

🔍 Provide an outline for a literature review about Syndromic vs. Non-Syndromic Monogenic Obesity

Leverage Consensus related searches

Make sure to also use the related searches beneath the references to expand your thinking and generate more insightful results, building out each of your topics.



The screenshot displays a list of search results, numbered 5 through 8, with various metrics and a 'Related searches' section below. The 'Related searches' section contains three search queries, each with a search icon.

Related searches

- What are the long-term effects of excessive screen time on children's cognitive development?
- Does screen time impact children's social and emotional development as well?
- How does the type of screen media content influence young children's executive functioning?

The search results shown include:

- 5. [Redacted] 4 5 8
- 6. [Redacted] 5 10 3
- 7. [Redacted] 2 7
- 8. [Redacted] 9 3

Below the 'Related searches' section, a search result is visible with the following details:

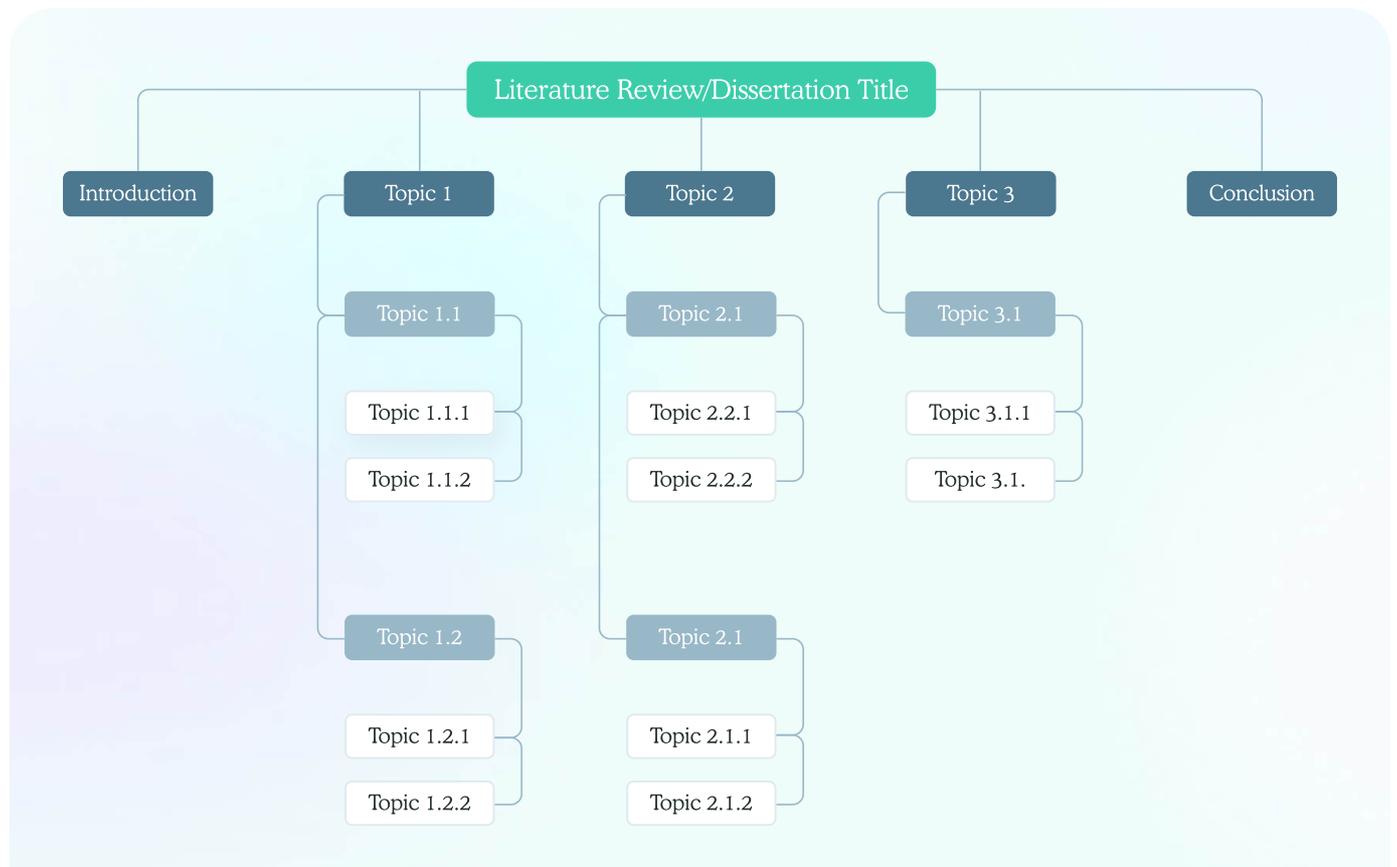
- Author: J. Greeson | Citations: 322 | Year: 2009
- Tags: Systematic review, Rigorous Journal, Highly cited
- Actions: Study snapshot, Save, Cite, Share

At the bottom of the visible result, there is a 'No' button.

How to think about topic discovery & ideation

This quick, yet incredibly powerful tip allows you to explore and find topics within your essay that you may not have even been aware of. From just a single word (in this case, “obesity”), we can map out the underlying structure of the topic. This will also allow you to better conceptually understand your question and ultimately, write a much more comprehensive review.

Next, we will cover some useful tips when constructing each section of the review.

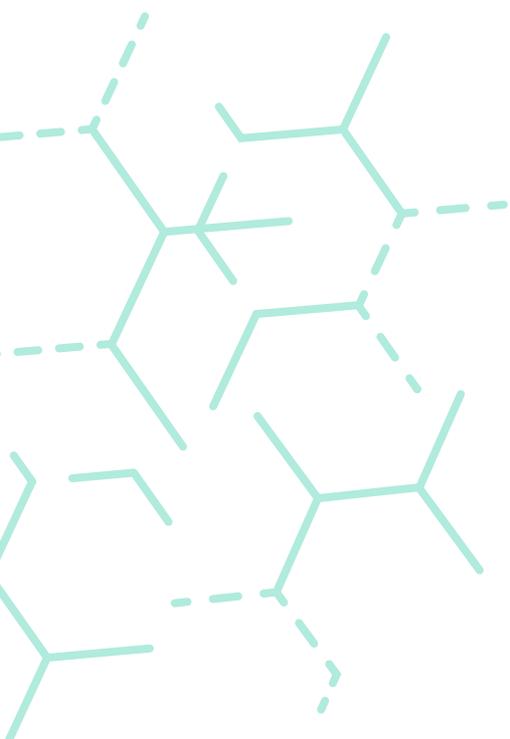


Definitions and meanings

For most written pieces, the introduction will include definitions of key terms.

You will now be given a set of key terms and definitions relating to your topic, along with the reference for it, so you can correctly cite in your review. Make sure to save these references to your list. If you're unsure about a definition, you can put it back into the Search to learn a bit more.

You can use this prompt for extra definitions relating to your later sections, for example:



 **Ask Consensus**

Tell me about Gene-Environment Interaction, what does it mean

 **Ask Consensus**

Give me definitions for key terms relating to genetics and environment in their contribution to obesity

 **Ask Consensus**

Give me definitions for key terms relating to global prevalence and health impacts of obesity

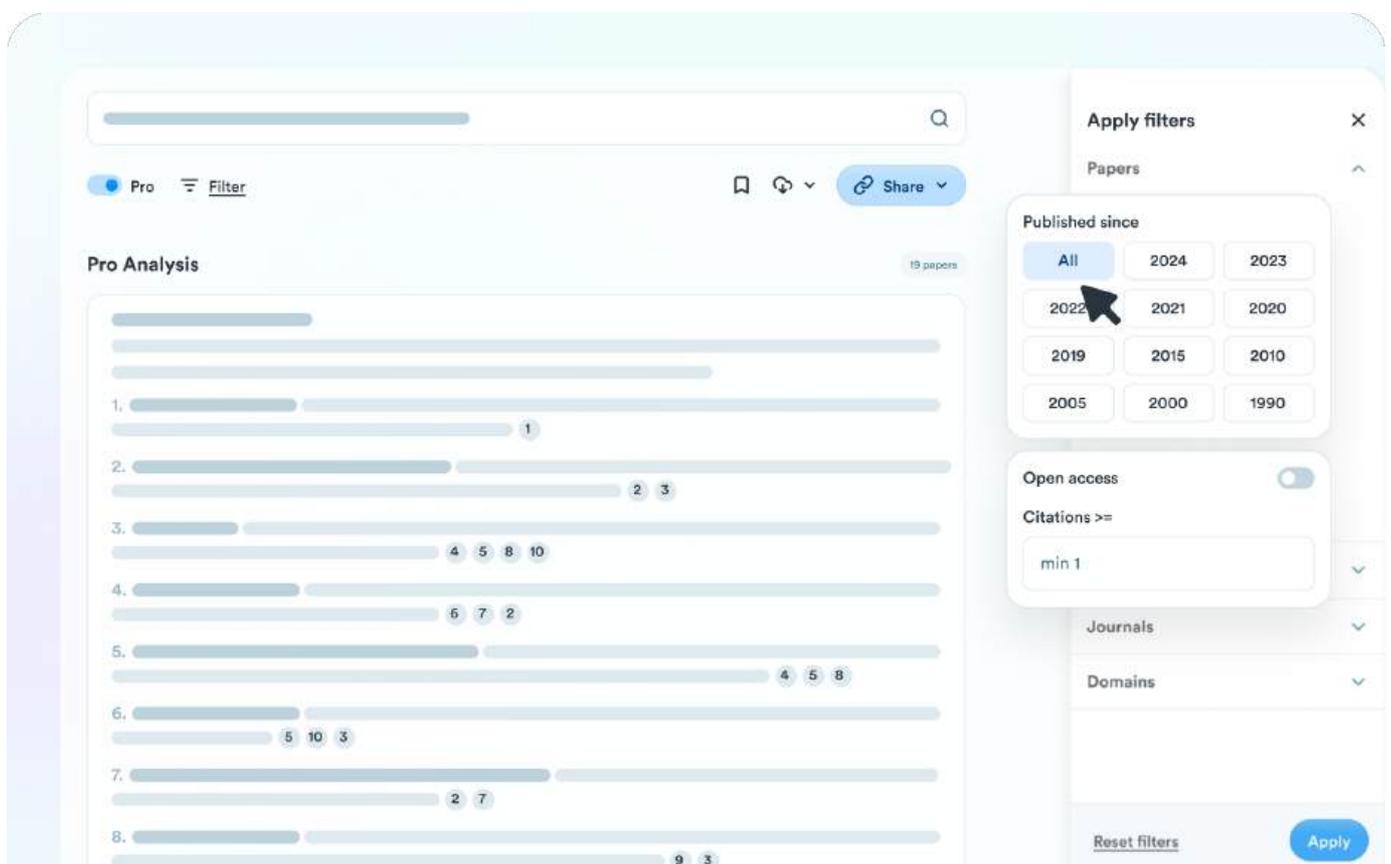
Obtaining sufficient key summary data

Depending on the review and suggestions for your review outline created earlier, your introduction may also need some strong summary data or key facts. In our obesity review, we should include data on disease prevalence:

What is the prevalence of obesity?

Make sure to apply the Published since date filter to get recent estimates for prevalence

Repeat this for other key data points, such as the social impact or cost of obesity.

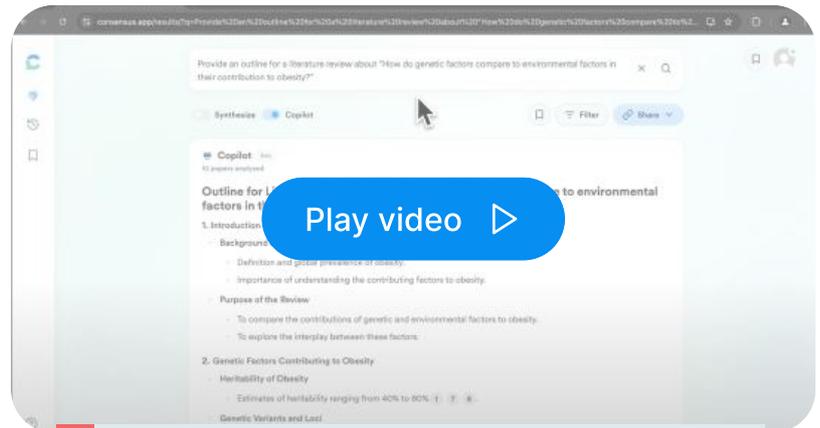


The screenshot displays the Consensus Pro interface. On the left, a search bar is visible above a 'Pro Analysis' section. The analysis section shows a list of 8 items, each with a horizontal bar chart and a small table of numbers. The right side of the interface features a 'Filter' panel with the following options:

- Published since:** A grid of buttons for years: All (selected), 2024, 2023, 2022, 2021, 2020, 2019, 2015, 2010, 2005, 2000, 1990. A mouse cursor is pointing at the 2022 button.
- Open access:** A toggle switch that is currently turned on.
- Citations >=:** A text input field containing 'min 1'.
- Journals:** A dropdown menu.
- Domains:** A dropdown menu.
- Reset filters:** A button.
- Apply:** A blue button.

Writing out the review

The advantage of Consensus is that you can obtain this information in the format that most suits your learning style, try prompts for formatting.



We are now using the subheading sections identified in the Consensus Pro outputs from the 'building your review' section as new searches in Consensus to start adding in detail. We can repeat this for each of our subheadings, ensuring that we have a framework of insights and references for each of our sections. With this, we can begin to write our review in our word processing document.

- 🔍 Provide notes on the contributing factors to obesity
- 🔍 Provide bullet points on the contributing factors to obesity
- 🔍 Provide a summary of the contributing factors to obesity
- 🔍 Provide information on the contributing factors to obesity in simple words

Critical appraisal and discussion

Now, the difficult part. Regardless of your essay topic or type, at some point you'll need to gather all of the points and thoughts you have laid out so far into a discussion.

For example, whether we need to critically appraise, compare or contrast ideas, weigh up pros and cons, or argue for a given conclusion, critical thinking sets apart the top thinkers from the rest.

Utilize consensus to help you with your thinking, to help you analyze papers, clarify support for a claim, identify multiple academic viewpoints on a topic, identify strengths and weaknesses in the evidence, and suggest further research or policy/practical implications of the review findings.



Discovering nuance and context

You'll need to discuss important research and studies in your review. You can use the new 'Ask paper' feature to help understand each key paper.

Now we have structure to our review, we can start to search and consider nuance and context. For example, whether prevalence, outcomes or treatments differ based on demographics, country, or study design:

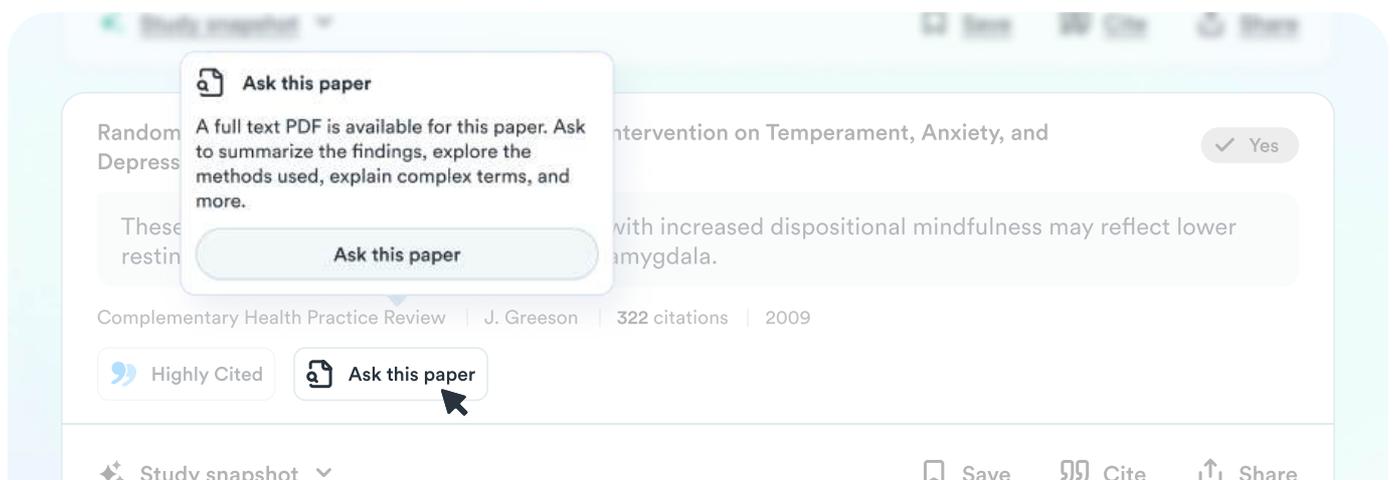
For example: "How does [variable] vary by [variable]?" or, "How does [variable] vary between [variable 1] and [variable 2]?"

🔍 [How does obesity treatment availability vary by country](#)

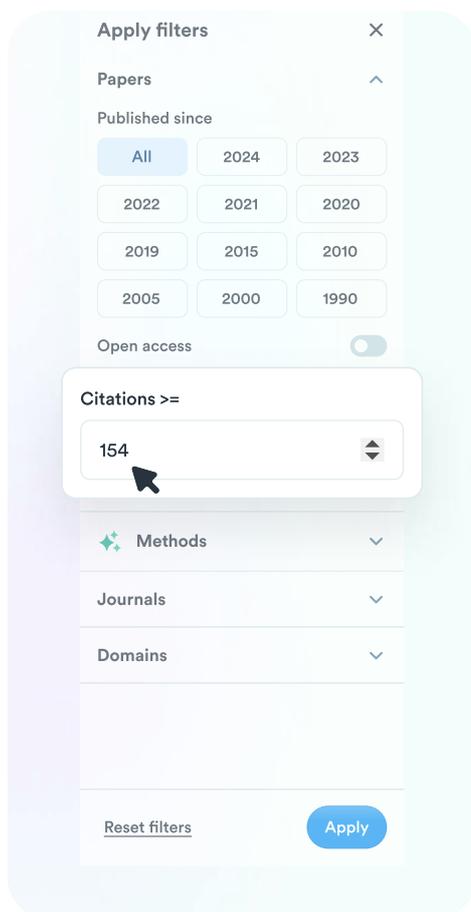
🔍 [How does obesity treatment vary between males and females](#)

You'll need to discuss important research and studies in your review. You can use the new Ask paper feature to help you understand each key paper. Ask to summarize the findings, explore the methods used, explain complex terms, and more.

Turn on Ask Paper available to only be provided with references where you can use it.



Finding references to support a claim or idea



Perhaps you've read in a paper about a theory or idea by another academic, but they did not provide a citation, or, your reading has led you to a thought or a new idea. But is it backed by any evidence? We can use Consensus to get an answer in seconds:

🔍 **Is there any evidence to support the following statement: withdrawing tirzepatide leads to substantial regain of lost weight**

If we put in the opposite statement, we can see that Consensus informs us that the statement is not supported, with strong evidence against this:

🔍 **Is there any evidence to support the following statement: withdrawing tirzepatide leads to weight loss**

It can therefore be a good idea to enter both prompts, which can allow you to build up a picture of the for and against arguments for a statement. You can also use this prompt to find a specific reference, such as if you find that you have made some statements that are not supported by a reference, and you cannot remember where the statement originated from:

🔍 **Find me references which support the following statement: "observational cohort studies show that obesity is associated with lower income in high income countries"**

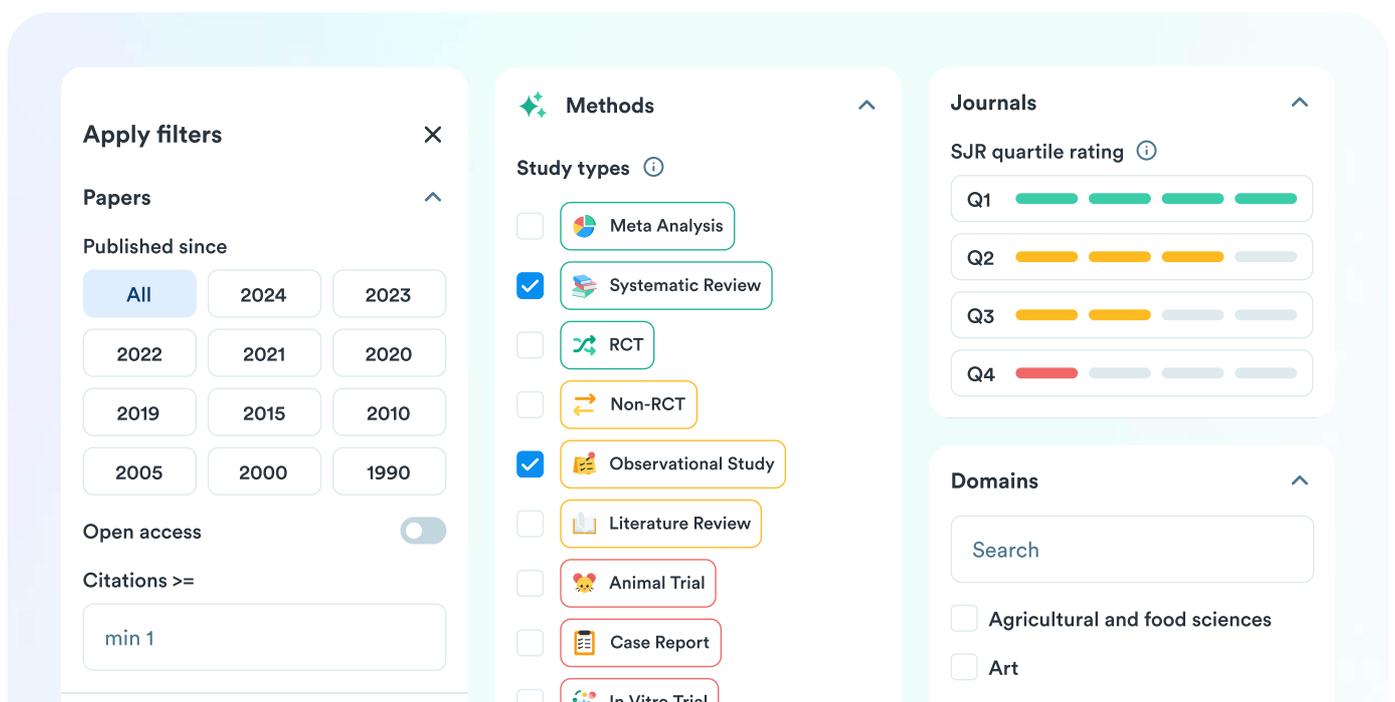
Obtain multiple viewpoints for the discussion

In academia, some topics have an overarching general consensus and agreement, whereas others may be more inconclusive. At the boundaries of existing knowledge, there can be a number of ideas or theories.

A key aspect of any review is ensuring that the range of views in the literature are considered in proportion to the amount of supporting evidence.

Of course, there may be other academic views that you've not considered or are unaware of. Again, Consensus can help with identifying these:

 [What are the different viewpoints regarding personalized medicine as the best option to treat obesity?](#)



The screenshot displays the Consensus search interface with several filter panels:

- Apply filters:** Includes options for 'Papers', 'Published since' (with buttons for years from 1990 to 2024), 'Open access' (toggle), and 'Citations >=' (with a 'min 1' input field).
- Methods:** A list of study types with checkboxes:
 - Meta Analysis
 - Systematic Review
 - RCT
 - Non-RCT
 - Observational Study
 - Literature Review
 - Animal Trial
 - Case Report
 - In Vitro Trial
- Journals:** Shows 'SJR quartile rating' with four categories:
 - Q1: 4 green bars
 - Q2: 3 yellow bars
 - Q3: 2 yellow bars
 - Q4: 1 red bar
- Domains:** Includes a search bar and checkboxes for 'Agricultural and food sciences' and 'Art'.

Dealing with our own confirmation bias

Good scientists are willing to change their stance or opinion on a topic, given new evidence that contradicts it.

Of course, as we become more familiar and more knowledgeable on a topic, we may well form strong beliefs, that, perhaps, we should be less confident, following further publications.

We can use Consensus to help us to identify and consider conflicting viewpoints to our own, with limitations in and contrasting evidence against our belief:

- Q Provide the existing opposing viewpoints that do not support the statement that personalized medicine is the best option to treat obesity
- Q Provide the existing viewpoints that do not support the statement that exercise helps with weight loss

As we start to draw our own conclusions, this approach to writing a review can help us to be good academics and researchers, and build a more critical review.



Identifying strengths and limitations in the evidence

An important aspect of academic work is acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of a piece of work. We could do this for the quality of evidence on a topic, a type of measurement tool (e.g. ELISA, a questionnaire), a trial or cohort. We can use Consensus to help us identify what these may be.

- 🔍 Summarize the limitations and strengths of the evidence regarding genetics and obesity
- 🔍 Summarize the limitations and strengths of the evidence regarding the environment and obesity

We can now discuss these insights in the review, and as above, further investigate the points of most interest. We can use this prompt in other ways, such as to assess specific research methods, study designs, or cohorts.

- 🔍 What are the limitations and strengths of mendelian randomisation studies to assess genetic factors in obesity?
- 🔍 What are the limitations and strengths of cohort studies to assess the environmental factors in obesity?
- 🔍 What are the limitations and strengths of the UK BioBank to assess the environmental factors in obesity?

Unanswered questions and further research

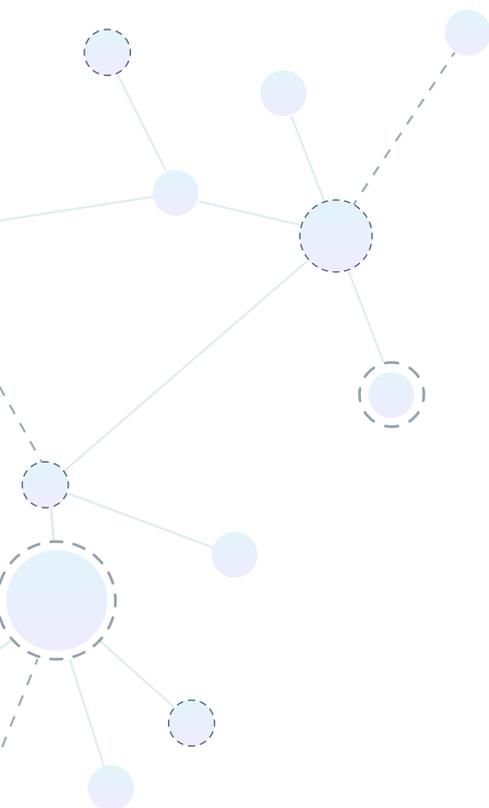
**What are practical implications of the review findings?
How might it change policy?**

Few fields are closed books. Even as a new study comes in with conclusive results, it often opens up more questions than it answers. Therefore any good review will include research recommendations to address the unanswered questions.

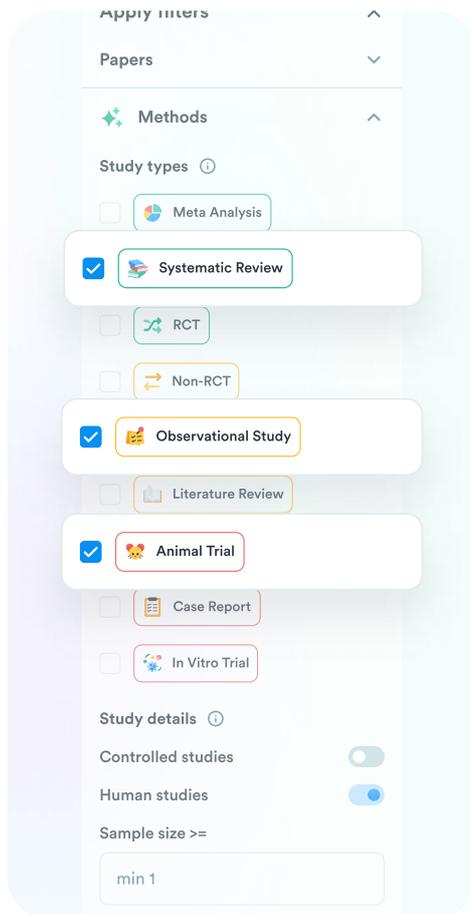
- Q What are the unanswered questions regarding the environmental factors contributing to obesity?
- Q What research is needed to better understand the environmental factors contributing to obesity?

Any good review also provides a summary of what the literature and its findings mean for policy or practice.

- Q What are the policy implications of the environmental factors contributing to obesity
- Q What are the practical implications of the genetic factors contributing to obesity
- Q What are the practical implications of the environmental factors contributing to obesity



References: Finding key, extra, or specific papers



Depending on your essay, you may need to find some primary research papers (e.g. a clinical trial or an observational study, rather than a review). Use these helpful tips to find relevant papers for your review.

A key outline of a study is PICO: population, intervention/exposure, comparator/control, and outcome. We can use this structure in our search to find studies meeting this design. For example:

🔍 Reference the studies closest matching this study design: population = adults with obesity, intervention = semaglutide, comparison = placebo, outcome = weight

Make sure to use the Study types filter for an observational study or experimental study for more specific insights.

Find high-impact papers

You can find prominent papers in your topic in two ways. One, apply a minimum citation number in the Citations filter.

The number of citations of a high-impact paper will vary by subject and age of the publication, but generally, papers with at least 50-100 citations are pretty important, and anything over 500-1000 are very important.

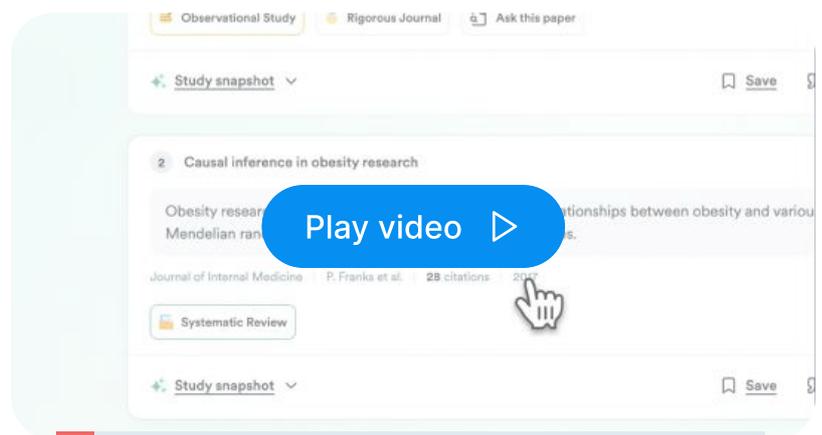
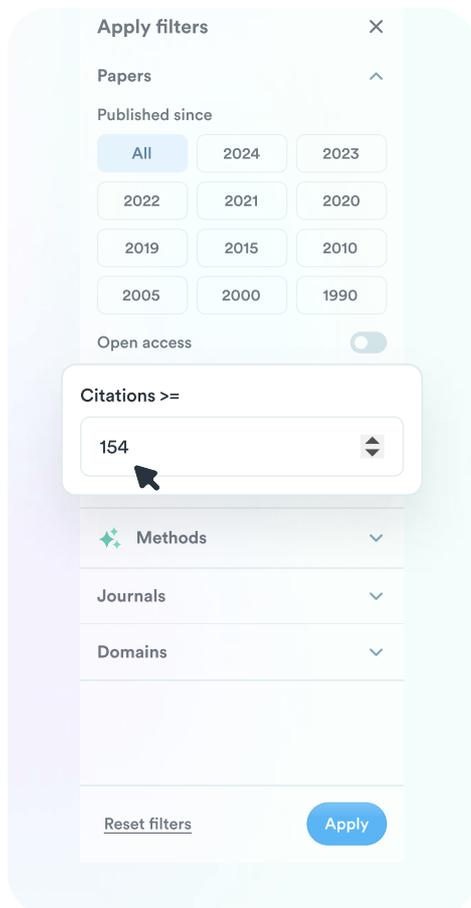
Two, select from high-quality journals only using the Journals SJR quartile rating filter

The screenshot displays the Consensus search results page. At the top, there is a search bar and navigation icons. A 'Filter' menu is open, showing options for 'Papers', 'Methods', and 'Journals'. The 'Journals' filter is selected, and a modal window titled 'SJR quartile rating' is overlaid on the page. This modal shows four quartile options: Q1 (green), Q2 (yellow), Q3 (orange), and Q4 (red), each with a corresponding progress bar. The background shows a list of papers with horizontal bars representing citation counts and journal SJR ratings. A 'Share' button is visible in the top right, and 'Reset filters' and 'Apply' buttons are at the bottom right.

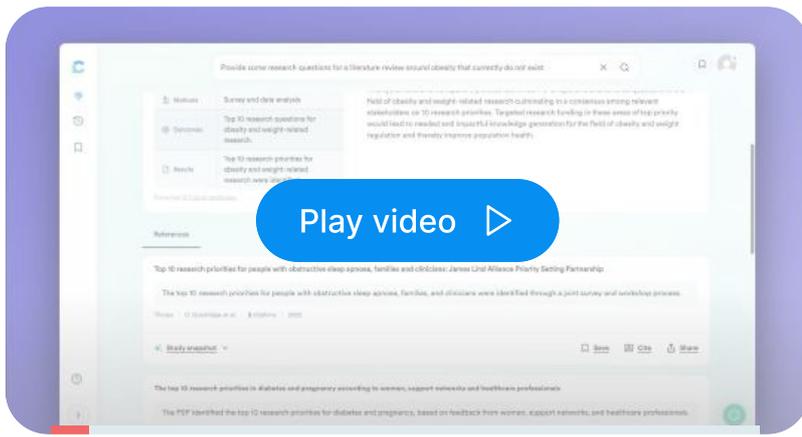
Snowballing: check citations of older/high-impact papers

Filter by the number of citations to find high impact and influential papers.

Look through the citations of one of the key papers from your searches to find recent relevant studies. This works particularly well for papers at least a few years old, or highly influential papers



Check references of key or recent papers



Look at the references of one of the key papers from your searches to find older relevant studies. This often works well for more recent papers, such as those with specific study designs that you wish to find more of, as they will often cite any similar previous studies, as well as any important papers.

intervention	
Sample size	283
Methods	Mixed methods (diary study and randomized field experiment)
Outcomes	Emotional exhaustion, job satisfaction, surface acting
Journal	The Journal of applied psychology
SJR rating: Q1	

across different age groups and are maintained even after the cessation of supplementation. Creatine does not appear to enhance endurance performance or oxidative capacity, but it does contribute to muscle hypertrophy and strength gains, which can improve functional performance and potentially contribute to better health and quality of life.

Citations **References**

mindfulness Intervention on Temperament, Anxiety, and Depression: A Randomized Controlled Trial

These patterns of improved affect regulation with increased dispositional mindfulness may reflect lower resting activity in key brain areas such as the amygdala.

Complementary Health Practice Review | J. Greeson | 322 citations | 2009

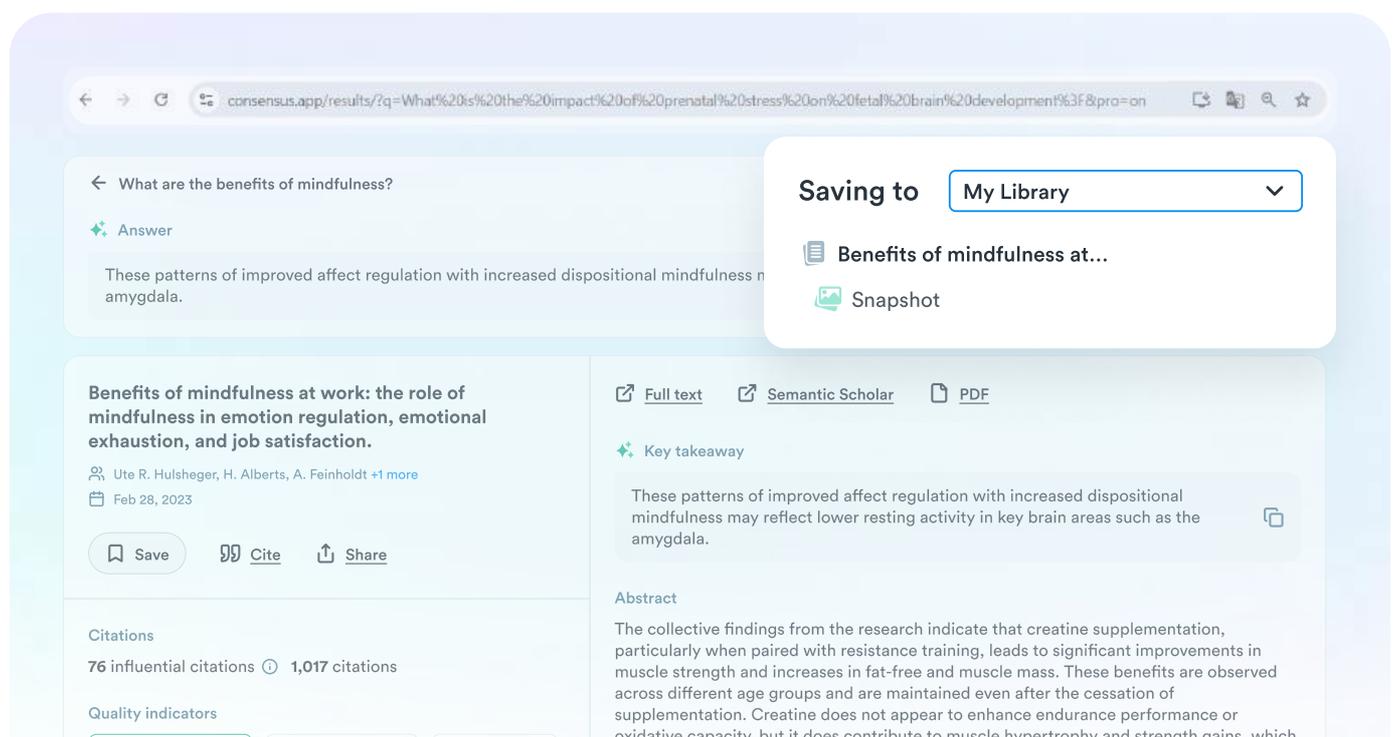
Exporting references from Consensus to your reference software

Save searches & papers using the Consensus ‘Saved Lists’ feature.

References – make use of lists. Along the way, make sure to save the useful references from your searches to a list, and also save useful searches. If you want to be really organised, you can even create a list for each section of your review.

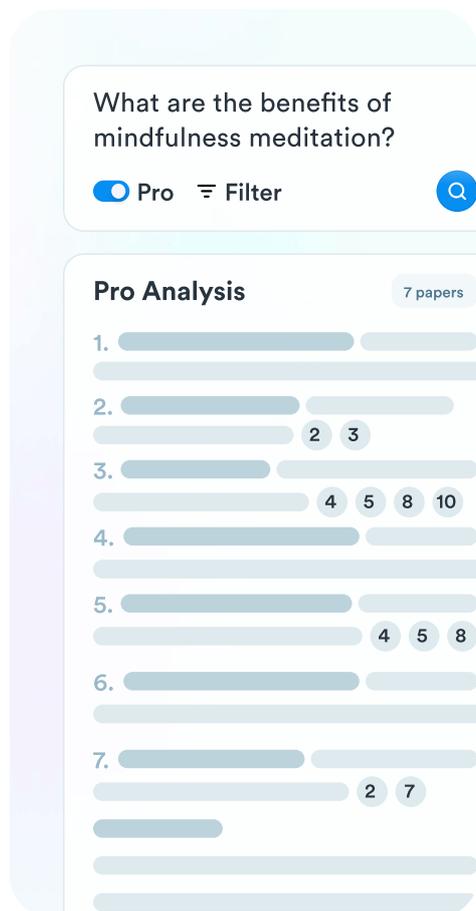
On the page of a paper, you can also click on the Zotero plugin to automatically save that paper. Or, if you see a useful reference during your searches, just click on the Zotero button or export to quickly add it to your reference software.

 [How to quickly export your references into your reference software.](#)



The screenshot displays the Consensus app interface. At the top, a search bar contains the query: "What are the benefits of mindfulness?". Below the search bar, a dropdown menu shows "Saving to My Library". A list of search results is visible, with the top result being "Benefits of mindfulness at work: the role of mindfulness in emotion regulation, emotional exhaustion, and job satisfaction." by Ute R. Hulsheger, H. Alberts, A. Feinholdt, and others. The paper's abstract is partially visible, discussing the collective findings from research on creatine supplementation and its effects on muscle strength and mass. The interface includes navigation icons, a search bar, and a list of search results.

Summary



In summary, Consensus is a powerful tool for assisting with writing a literature review or dissertation by providing structured support across the entire process.

Consensus can help with generating potential review questions, constructing the review outline, finding key definitions and references, and constructing the content for each section of the review, including key aspects such as critical appraisal, future research needs and implications, all while upholding academic standards.

By using the prompts in this guide, Consensus enables users to build a comprehensive understanding of their topic, identifying gaps in research, and critically assessing evidence.

Consensus can help to explore alternative viewpoints, obtain nuanced insights, and recognize strengths and limitations in studies. Additionally, users can save searches and key references for easier citation management and organization.

While Consensus won't write the review for you, it acts as a valuable support throughout the writing process, making complex academic research more accessible and manageable.

With careful application of its features, Consensus can support the development of well-informed and academically sound writing.