

View of published reviews by program directors
(Compiled and edited by HNM 3/14/2026 with the aid of ChatGPT)

Narrative reviews

A narrative review summarizes and synthesizes existing literature on a topic.

Examples appear in journals such as:

- The American Journal of Medicine
- BMJ Open
- Cureus

Positive views by program directors

- shows ability to read and synthesize medical literature
- demonstrates writing ability
- indicates academic curiosity

Limitations that may be held by program directors

- does not generate new data
- sometimes largely written by a mentor or senior author.

Overall interpretation

- solid scholarly activity, but not as strong as original research.

Systematic reviews

A systematic review uses structured search methods and predefined criteria to analyze existing studies, following PRISMA guidelines.

Usually viewed more favorably than narrative reviews because they involve:

- formal search strategies
- predefined inclusion/exclusion criteria
- structured analysis.

But usually ranked below original studies.

Meta-analyses

A meta-analysis statistically combines results from multiple studies.

These appear in journals such as:

- JAMA
- The Lancet
- PLOS ONE

Program directors likely view these as being impressive since they require

- advanced literature search skills
- statistical analysis
- careful methodology.

What program directors focus on when evaluating review papers

- Authorship: First author review → strong signal of real involvement
- Journal quality: Well-known journals carry more weight
- Depth of understanding: during interviews, they may ask questions such as:

“What gaps in the literature did your review identify?”

“What controversies did you find?”

They try to determine if the applicant actually engaged intellectually with the literature.

Simplified ranking of the hierarchy of published papers in descending order

- Original clinical or laboratory research
- Meta-analysis
- Systematic review
- Narrative review
- Case report

But all of these still count as legitimate scholarly work.

General overview comments

Many program directors consider review papers to be good scholarly activity, especially if the student is the first author and demonstrates a strong understanding of the literature.

They are typically less impressive than original research but stronger than case reports.

Some faculty actually believe that writing a high-quality review teaches students more about a field than a short case report does.