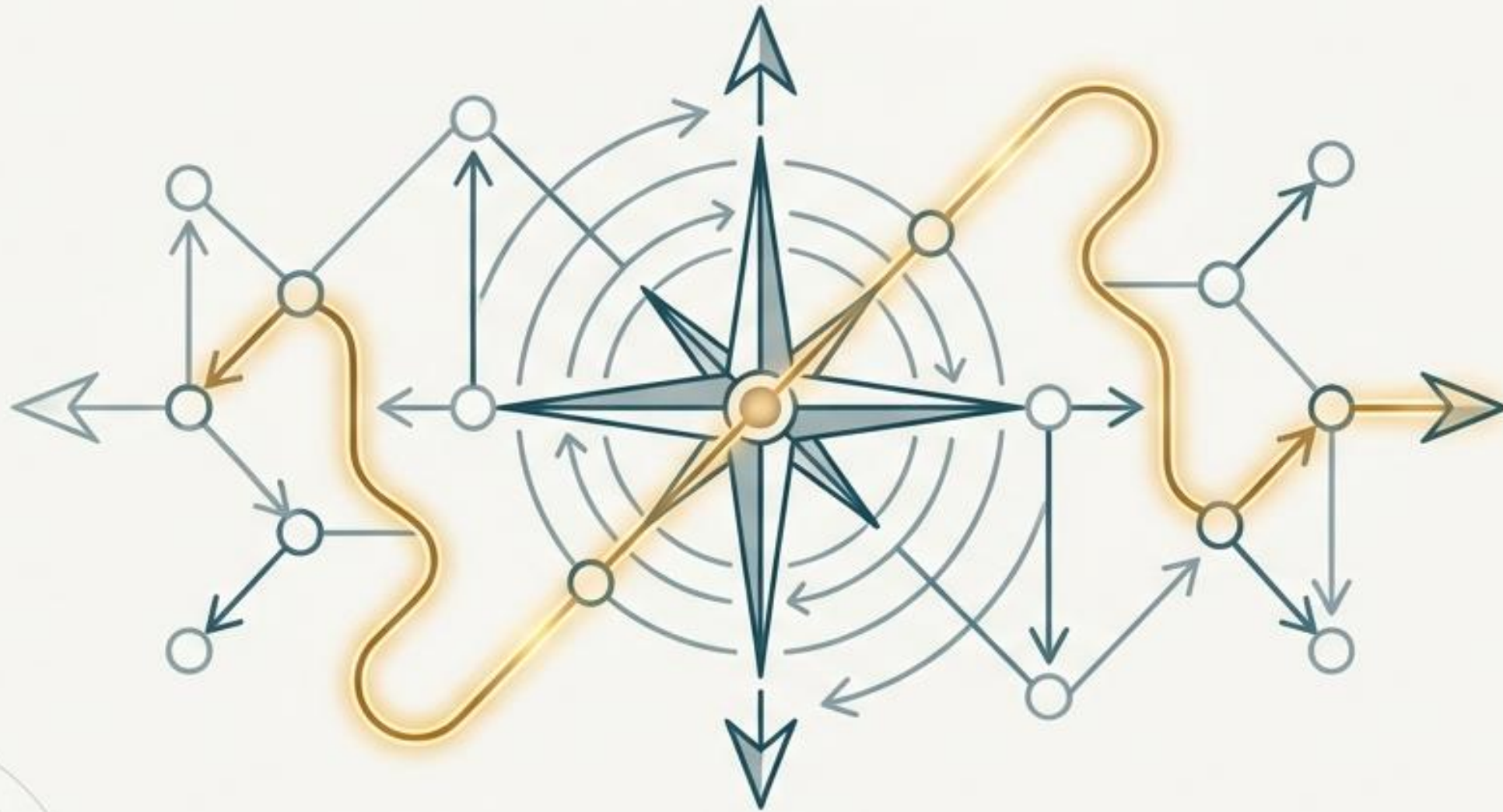


Navigating the Systematic Review

A High-Level Blueprint for Postgraduate Students



Synthesizing current methodological guidelines for a stress-free review process.

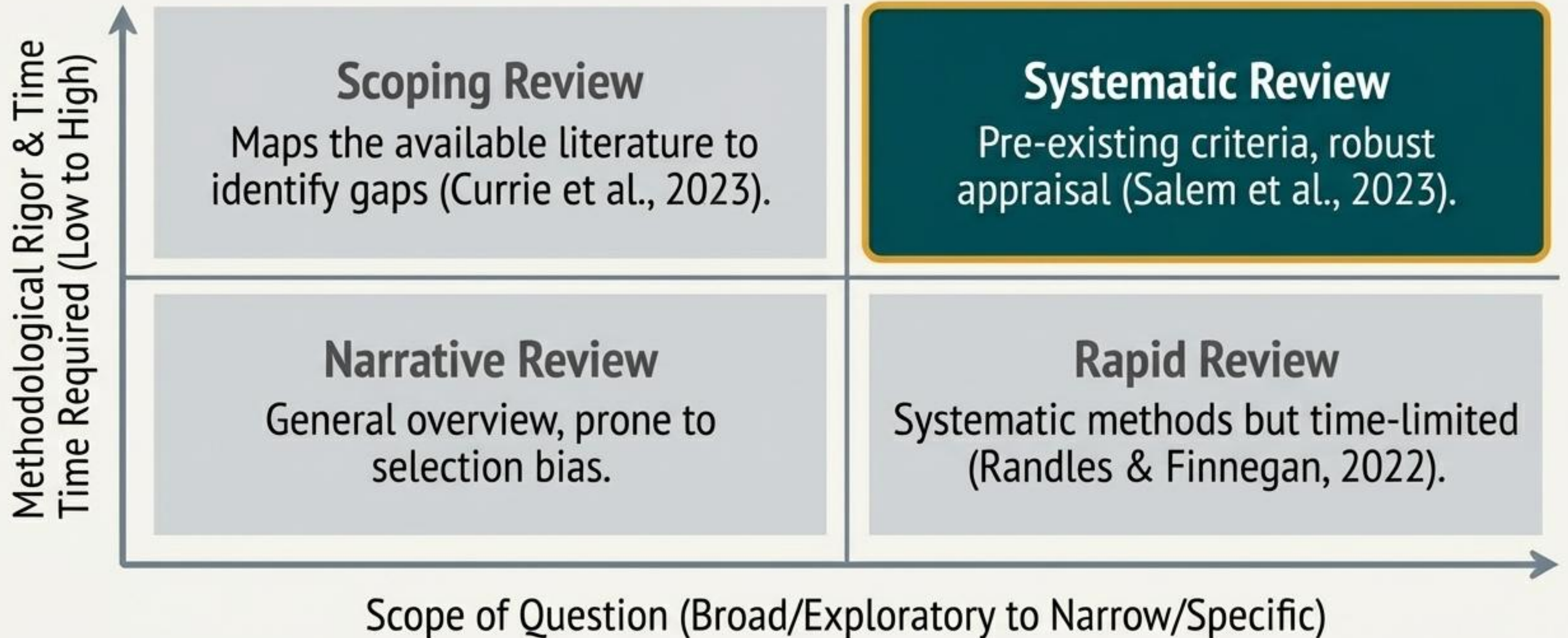
The Gold Standard of Evidence

A **Systematic Review** is a reproducible, transparent synthesis of evidence designed to eliminate bias and answer a specific clinical or research question (Aromataris & Pearson, 2014; Cochrane, 2022).

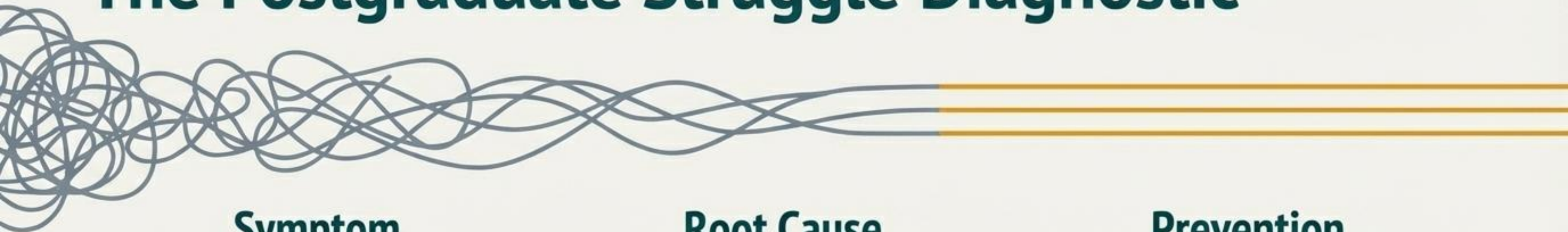
Unlike standard literature reviews, SRs follow a strict methodical process to ensure no relevant data is missed and selection bias is minimized (Khan et al., 2003).



The Review Landscape Matrix

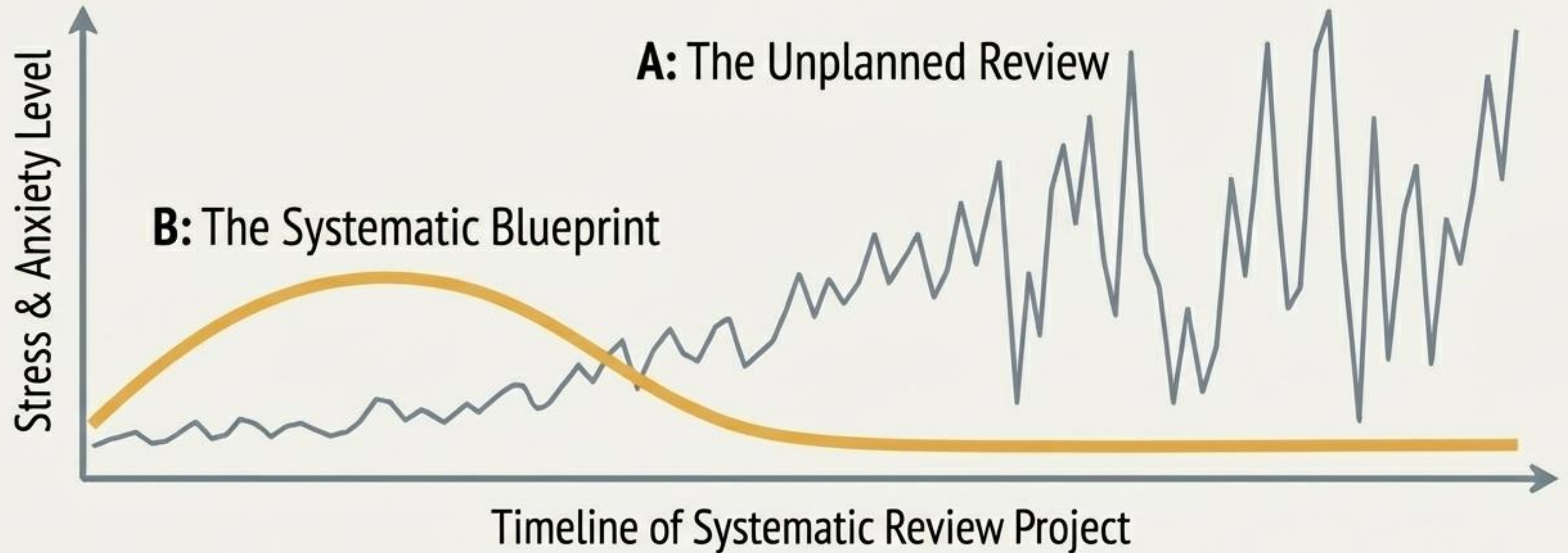


The Postgraduate Struggle Diagnostic



Symptom (What you feel)	Root Cause (Where it broke)	Prevention (How to fix it)
Drowning in thousands of irrelevant papers.	Unfocused search strategy and vague criteria.	Strict PICO framework & Librarian consultation.
Endless scope creep; the project never ends.	Changing rules midway through the process.	Pre-registering a rigid protocol (e.g., PROSPERO).
Paralyzed during the writing phase.	Messy, unstructured data extraction.	Standardized extraction forms & the IMRaD structure.

The Antidote to Overwhelm

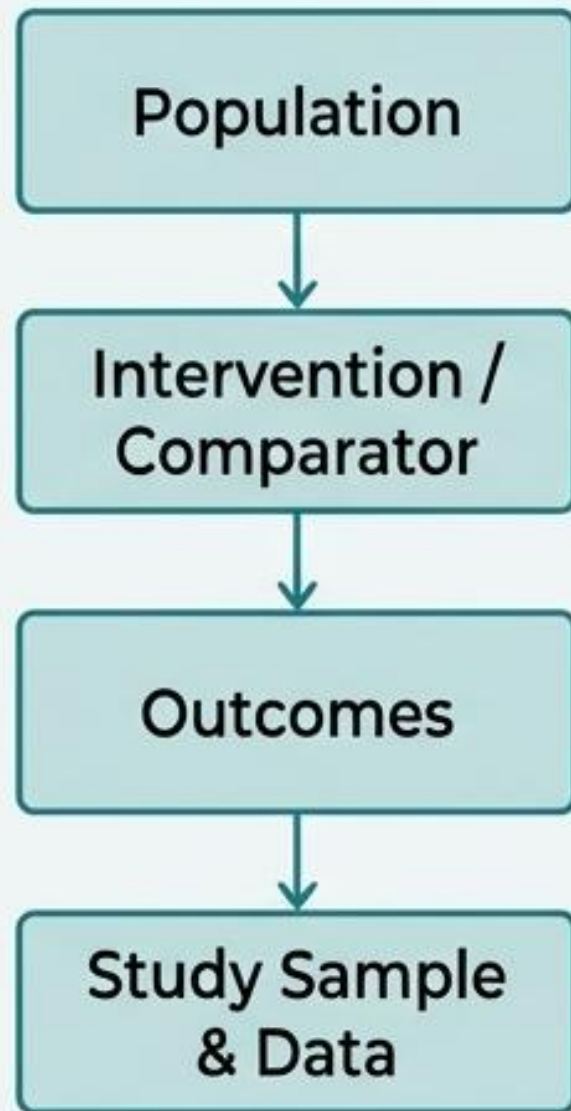


The secret to a stress-free SR is front-loading the effort. The strict rules aren't there to punish you; they are guardrails to keep you safe and moving forward (Chien & Khan, 2023).

The 5-Step Wayfinding Blueprint



Step 1: The Question & The Protocol



P.I.C.O.: Population, Intervention, Comparator, Outcomes.
This creates an unambiguous, answerable boundary for your research (Nishikawa-Pacher, 2022).

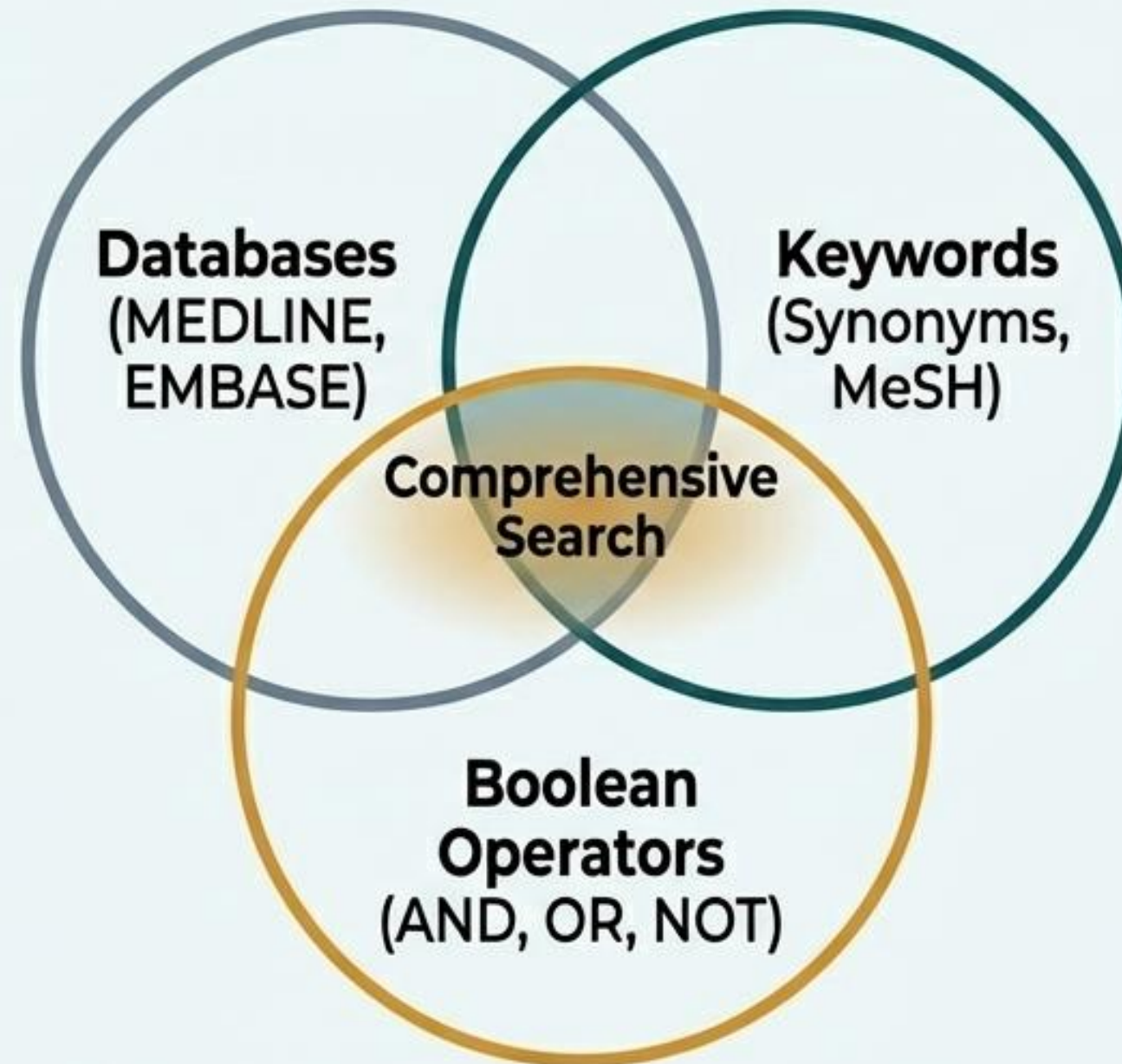


The Protocol: Registering on PROSPERO prevents duplication and enforces transparency (Harris et al., 2013).

Stress-Relief Tip: A pre-registered protocol makes the hard decisions for you later. When in doubt during screening, you simply ask: *"What does the protocol say?"*

Step 2: The Search Strategy

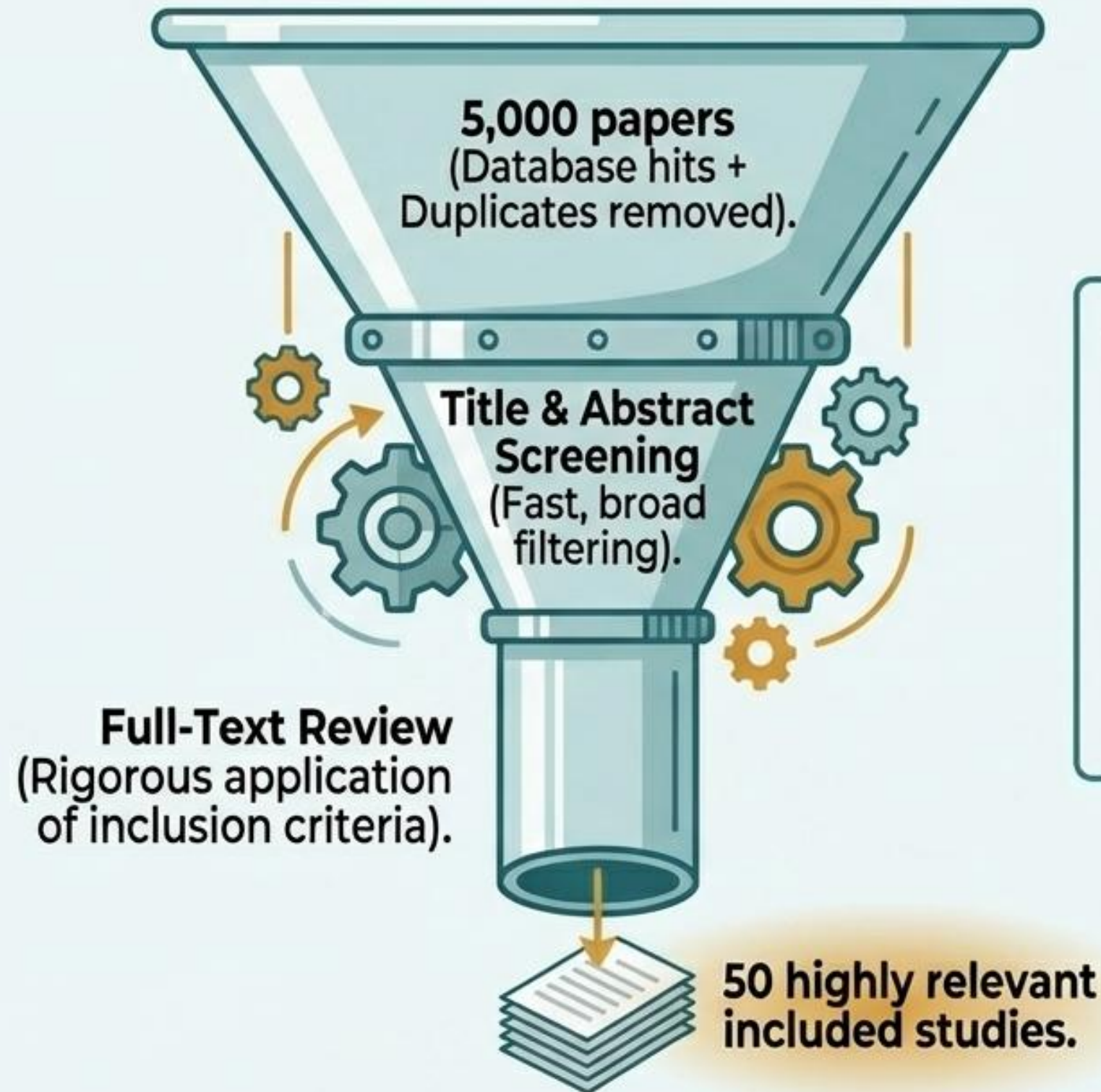
A **transparent, reproducible search** is the paramount aspect of the SR (Aromataris & Pearson, 2014).



Ensure sensitivity (finding all relevant papers) doesn't completely destroy specificity (excluding irrelevant ones) (Phillips & Barker, 2021).

Stress-Relief Tip: You do not have to be a database expert. Institutional research librarians are your secret weapon—consult them early to build your syntax.

Step 3: The Funnel of Clarity (Screening)



**Parallel independent
screening by two
reviewers minimizes
selection bias.
Track every
exclusion reason
meticulously.**

Step 4: Extraction & Quality Appraisal



Data Extraction

Pulling out study design, demographics, and outcomes using standardized forms to ensure consistency (Brignardello-Petersen et al., 2024).

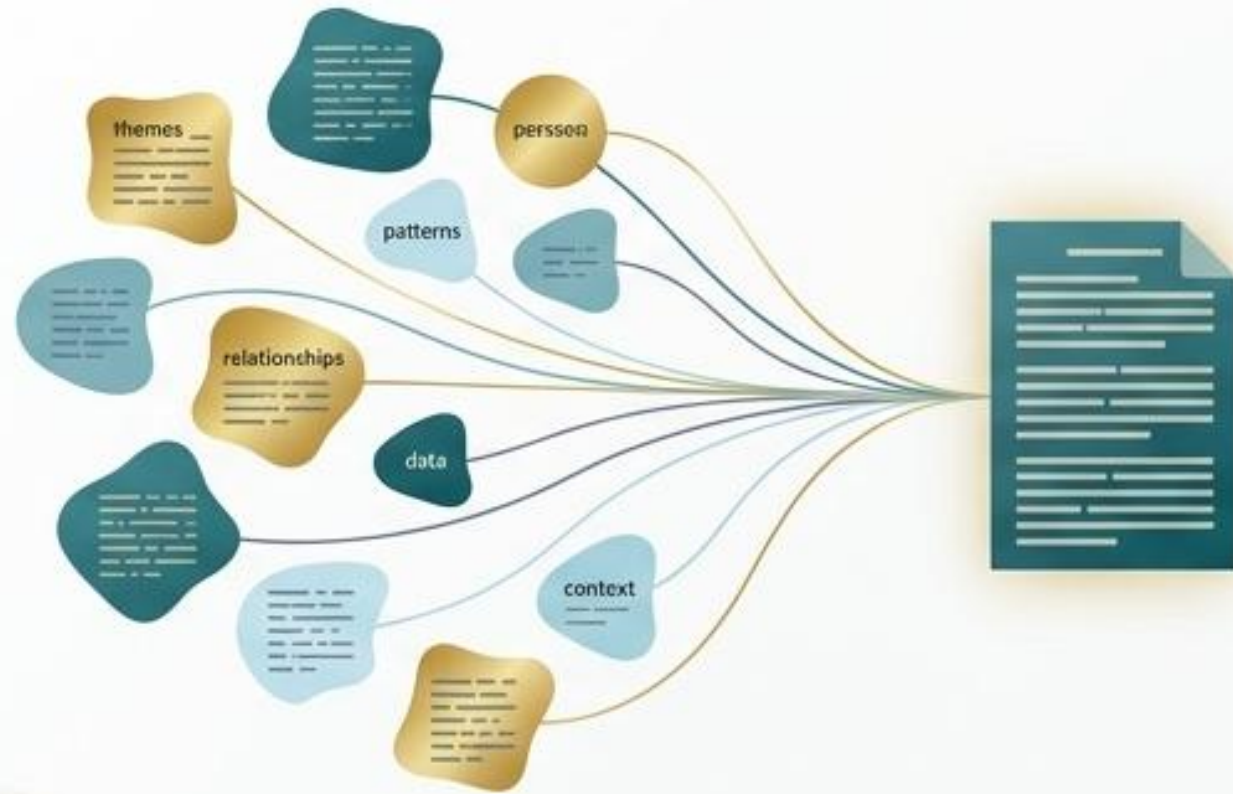
Quality Appraisal

Not all studies are equal. Use validated tools like CASP (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme), ROBIS, or AMSTAR 2 to assess risk of bias (Whiting et al., 2016).

Stress-Relief Tip: Read like a machine, not a novelist. Extract only the specific data points your protocol dictates—nothing more. Resist the urge to read for leisure.

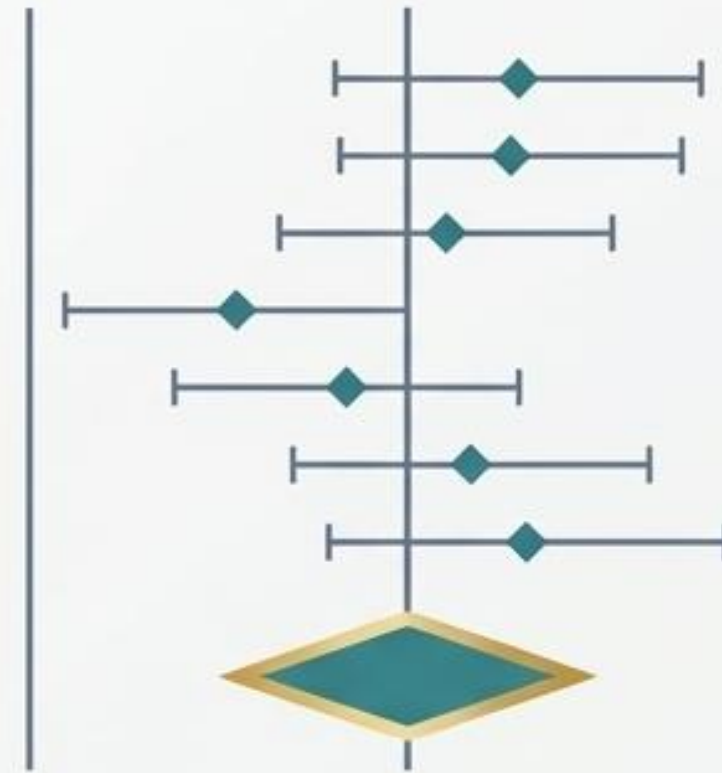
Step 5: Synthesis & Making Sense of It All

Narrative Synthesis



Identifying common themes, relationships, and patterns across literature when statistical pooling isn't appropriate (Centre for Reviews and Dissemination, 2009)

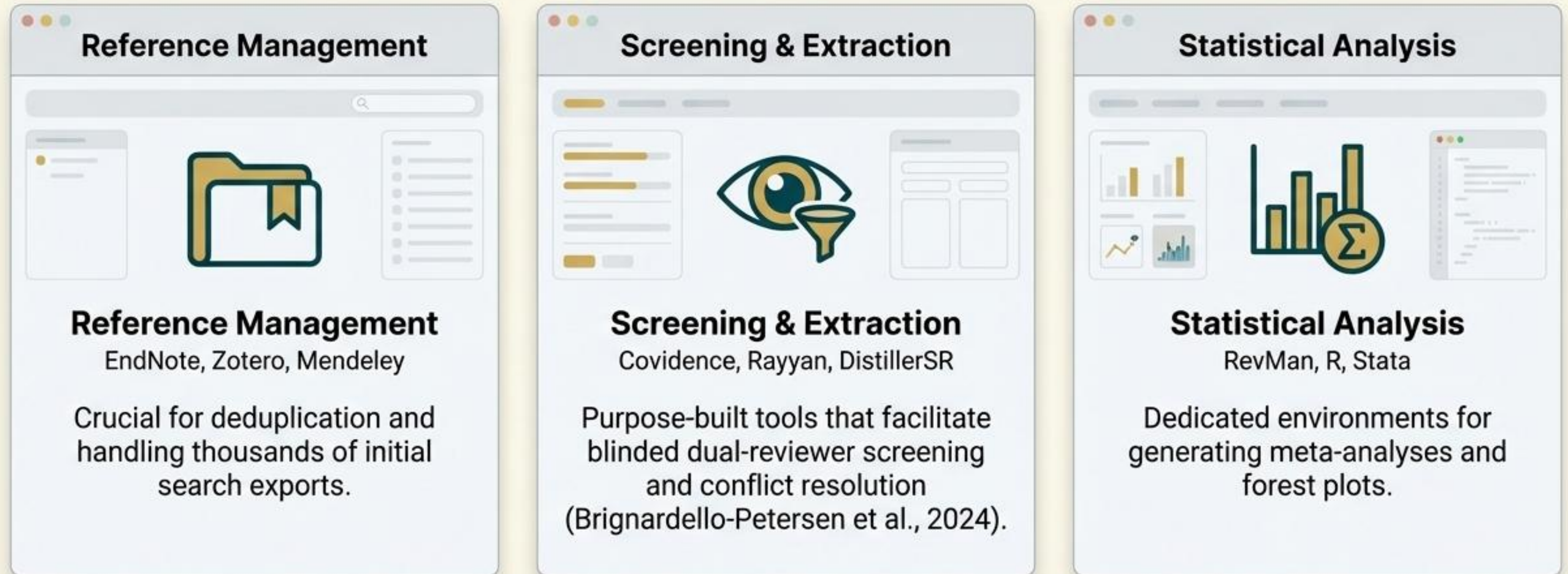
Meta-Analysis



Statistical combination of results from two or more studies to produce a summary effect (Chien & Khan, 2023)

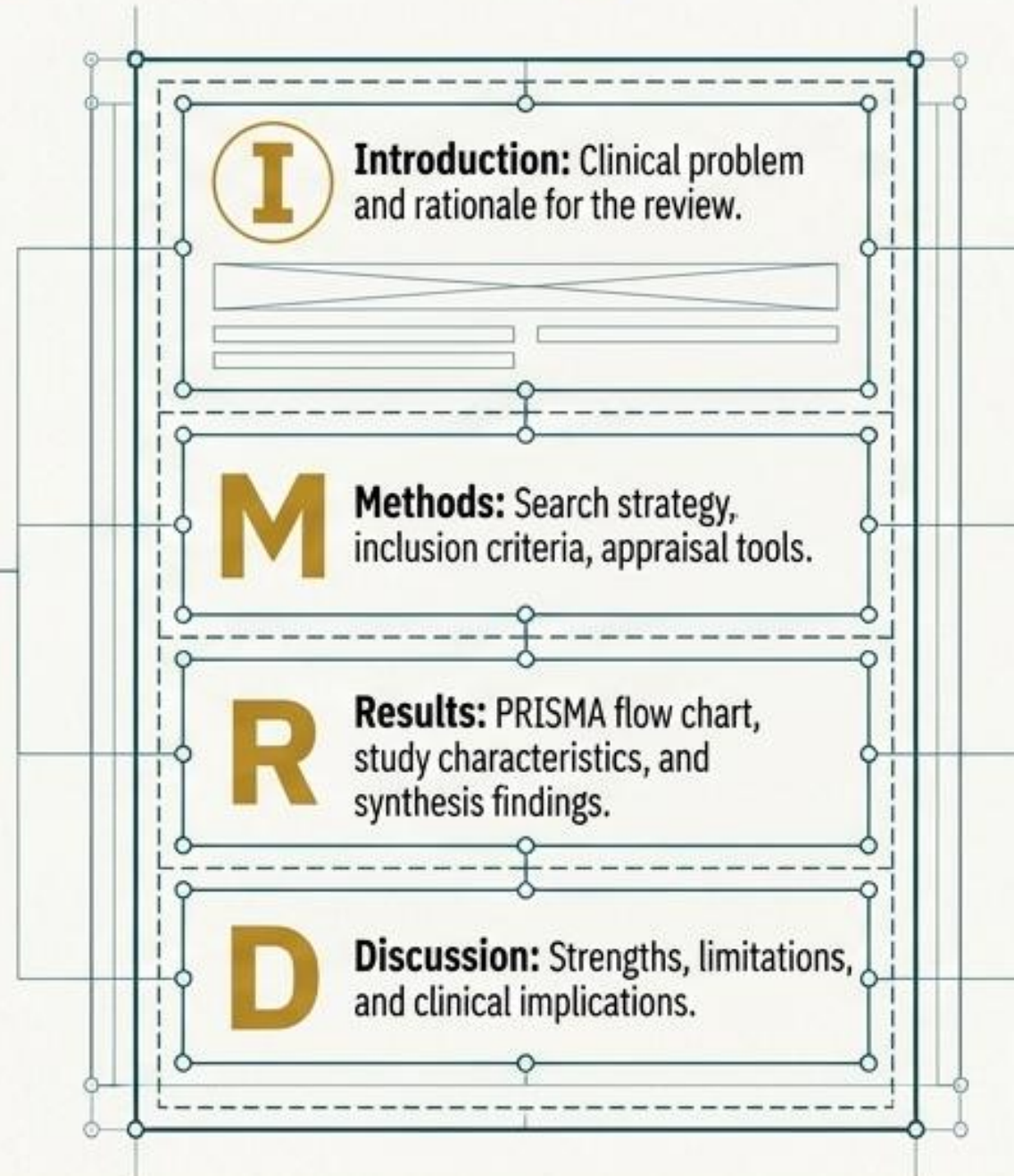
Synthesis is about finding the overarching story in the data and explaining the heterogeneity (why studies differ).

The Modern Tech Toolkit



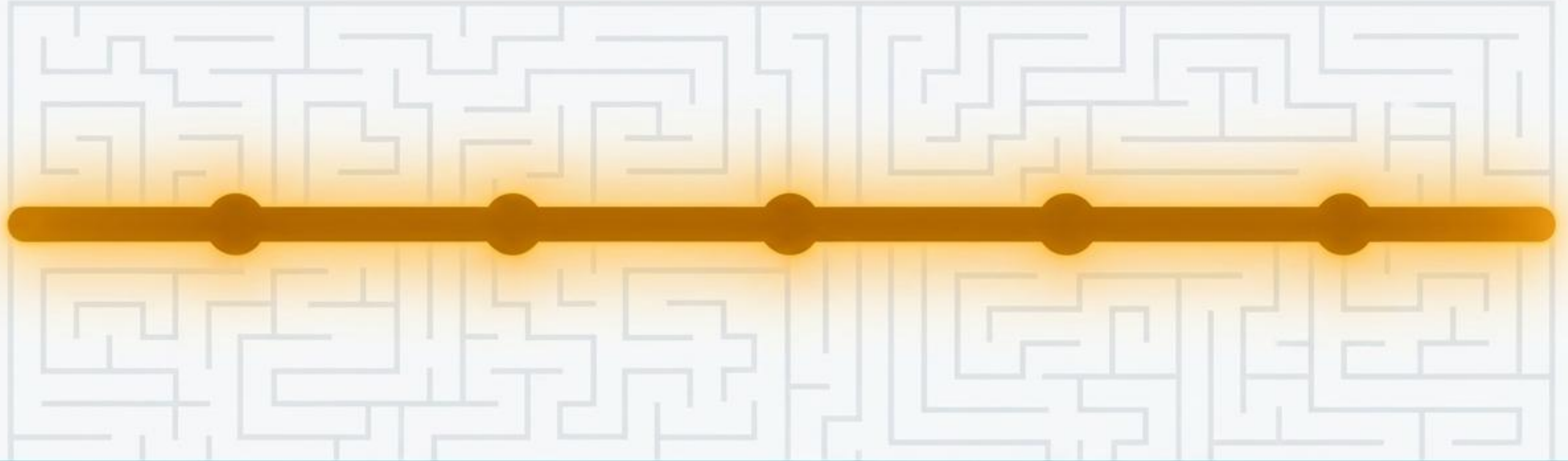
Takeaway: Do not attempt to manage an SR entirely in Excel and Word. Leverage software to save hundreds of hours.

Writing Concisely and Precisely



Stress-Relief Tip: Let the PRISMA checklist write your Methods section. Follow it item-by-item, and the structure of your paper will build itself (Chien & Khan, 2023).

The Blueprint Revealed



The rigid rules of a Systematic Review—PICO, PROSPERO, PRISMA, CASP—are not there to punish you or create busywork. They are carefully engineered guardrails.

By adhering to the map, you eliminate decision fatigue, prevent scope creep, and ensure that your final synthesis is a trustworthy, valuable contribution to science.

You Have the Map.

The systematic review is a test of organization, not just intellect.
Trust the process, lean on your toolkit, and take it one stop at a time.



Key References for the Journey:

- Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions (Higgins et al.)
- PRISMA 2020 Explanation and Elaboration (Page et al., 2021)
- JBI Manual for Evidence Synthesis (Aromataris & Munn, 2020)
- CRD's Guidance for Undertaking Reviews in Health Care (Centre for Reviews and Dissemination, 2009)