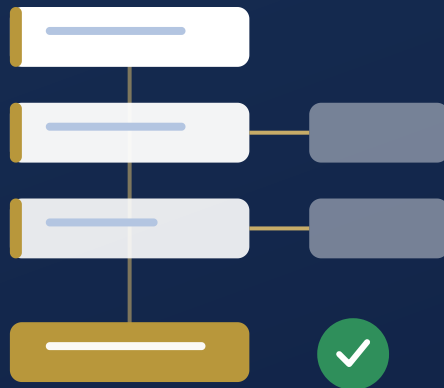


Make Your PRISMA Numbers Add Up

A worksheet that reconciles every count in your PRISMA 2020 flow diagram, from records identified to studies included, so the arithmetic holds and a reviewer cannot fault it.



The free PRISMA flow diagram tool prismaflowdiagramgenerator.com

The diagram is easy. The bookkeeping is where reviews stumble

Drawing the boxes takes minutes. The hard part is making the numbers flow correctly from one box to the next, so that what goes in, minus what you removed, equals what comes out at every stage. Reviewers add these up, and when they do not reconcile, they ask why.

PRINCIPLE

Every stage of the PRISMA 2020 flow obeys one rule: the number entering a stage, minus everything removed at that stage, must equal the number leaving it. If you can account for every excluded record with a reason, your diagram is internally consistent and defensible.

The four stages your counts move through

1 Identification

Records found through database searching, plus records found through other methods such as citation searching and registers. Count the raw total before any cleaning.

2 Duplicates removed

Records removed before screening, including duplicates and any removed by automation tools. This is a separate, explicit number, not something folded silently into screening.

3 Screening

Records screened by title and abstract, the number excluded, then reports sought for retrieval, those not retrieved, and reports assessed for eligibility at full text.

4 Inclusion

Reports excluded at full text, each with a reason and a count, and finally the studies, and the reports of those studies, included in the review.

The equation behind every box

Each transition is a subtraction. Work down this table and confirm that each line balances before you trust the diagram.

EACH STAGE MUST BALANCE

Stage transition	The equation that must hold
Before screening	Records identified, minus duplicates and records removed, equals records screened
Title and abstract screening	Records screened, minus records excluded, equals reports sought for retrieval
Retrieval	Reports sought, minus reports not retrieved, equals reports assessed for eligibility
Full text eligibility	Reports assessed, minus reports excluded with reasons, equals studies included

WATCH OUT FOR

The exclusions at full text must each carry a reason and a number, and those reason counts must sum to the total excluded at that stage. A single unexplained exclusion is the most common reason a reviewer asks the diagram to be redone.

PRINCIPLE

PRISMA 2020 separates three units that students routinely merge, and the final boxes will not reconcile until you keep them distinct. A *record* is a single database hit (a title and abstract). A *report* is a full document (an article, preprint, or thesis). A *study* is the actual piece of research, which may be described across several reports, and is the unit you include. So one included study can map to three reports, and a single report can describe two studies. Count records through identification and screening, switch to reports at full-text retrieval, and report the final tally as studies (with their associated reports). Mislabelling these is why a diagram that arithmetically balances can still be marked wrong.

Fill in your counts, then check the totals

Copy this worksheet and enter your own numbers. If every subtraction below resolves to the next line, your flow diagram will reconcile.

PRISMA 2020 reconciliation worksheet

IDENTIFICATION

Records from databases [a]
 Records from other sources (citations, registers) [b]
 Total identified [a + b]

BEFORE SCREENING

Duplicate records removed [c]
 Records removed by automation or as ineligible [d]
 Records screened [a + b - c - d]

SCREENING

Records excluded at title and abstract [e]
 Reports sought for retrieval [screened - e]
 Reports not retrieved [f]
 Reports assessed for eligibility [sought - f]

ELIGIBILITY (each reason needs a count)

Excluded: wrong population [g1]
 Excluded: wrong intervention or exposure [g2]
 Excluded: wrong outcome [g3]
 Excluded: wrong study design [g4]
 Total excluded at full text [g1 + g2 + g3 + g4]

INCLUDED

Studies included in review [assessed - total excluded]
 Reports of included studies [count]

PRINCIPLE

Keep this worksheet beside your screening records, not in your head. When you can point to the source of every number, writing the methods paragraph and answering a reviewer both become a copy-and-paste exercise rather than a panic.

The flow diagram reconciliation checklist

Run your diagram through this list. If every box is ticked, the numbers will hold up under scrutiny.

- ☒ The total identified separates database records from records found by other methods.
- ☒ Duplicates removed before screening are shown as their own explicit number.
- ☒ Records screened equals records identified minus everything removed before screening.
- ☒ Reports sought for retrieval equals records screened minus records excluded.
- ☒ Reports not retrieved are counted and subtracted before the eligibility stage.
- ☒ Every full-text exclusion has both a reason and a count.
- ☒ The exclusion reason counts sum exactly to the total excluded at full text.
- ☒ Studies included equals reports assessed minus total excluded at full text.

**WHEN THE REVIEW BEHIND THE DIAGRAM NEEDS A
HAND**

Get the systematic review behind your diagram done right

The flow diagram is the easy part. If you want help with the searching, screening, data extraction, risk of bias assessment, and synthesis that sit behind it, our PhD methodologists can run the review with you to a standard that holds up in peer review. You stay the author and make every judgement call.

Get help with your review

prismaflowdiagramgenerator.com . Free PRISMA flow diagram tool . We work in writing, on your schedule.