

YourDNP

PICOT Question & Literature Search Toolkit

COMPLETED EXAMPLE: Develop a focused clinical question, translate it into database concepts, and document a reproducible search.

Student: Your DNP Course: Evidence-Based Practice / Evidence Translation	Faculty/Preceptor: Dr. Jane Smith, DNP Date started: June 2026
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How to Use This Toolkit

1. Define the practice problem before writing the PICOT question.
2. Draft each PICOT component and confirm that the outcome is measurable.
3. Convert the question into searchable concepts, keywords, and database-specific subject headings.
4. Document each database search exactly as performed, including filters, dates, and result counts.
5. Revise the strategy when it is too broad, too narrow, or misses key literature.
6. Insert screenshots when required by your assignment and retain the final search history.

1. Practice Problem and Clinical Significance

Practice problem: What clinical, workflow, population-health, or systems problem are you trying to address?	
High-risk adults discharged from the emergency department (ED) frequently experience fragmented transitions to outpatient care because of medical complexity, transportation barriers, unstable housing or contact information, medication-access challenges, limited primary-care access, and difficulty navigating health and community services.	
Who is affected?	High-risk adults discharged from the ED, particularly patients with chronic disease, complex psychosocial needs, frequent acute-care use, housing or contact instability, transportation barriers, or medication-access problems.
What evidence, data, or observations suggest a problem exists?	Clinical observations and published evidence indicate that many patients leave acute care with unresolved follow-up needs. Missed appointments, fragmented communication, and limited access to services can interrupt continuity after discharge.
What are the potential consequences if the problem persists?	Potential consequences include missed follow-up, unresolved symptoms or medication problems, repeated ED use, avoidable readmission, patient dissatisfaction, and continued inequity in access to outpatient care.
What setting or context should be considered?	The intended context is adult ED discharge with linkage to community-based follow-up, including care navigation, care coordination, transitional care, or community paramedicine.

2. Build the PICOT Question

Element	Guiding question	Your project component	Notes / refinements
P	Who is the patient, population, or problem?	High-risk adults discharged from the emergency department	Broad enough to retrieve evidence, but focused on a population at risk for fragmented follow-up.
I	What intervention or practice change will be evaluated?	Community care navigation or structured care-coordination referral	May include patient navigation, transitional care, community paramedicine, or related post-discharge coordination.
C	What is the comparison: usual care, another intervention, or none?	Usual discharge planning	Represents existing discharge processes without a standardized navigation intervention.
O	What measurable outcome should change?	Completion of outpatient follow-up	Primary measurable outcome; related secondary outcomes may include ED revisits, readmission, service connection, cost, or satisfaction.
T	Over what timeframe will the outcome be evaluated? (Optional)	Within 30 days	A clinically meaningful and feasible post-discharge follow-up period.

Draft PICOT Question

In high-risk adults discharged from the emergency department, does community care navigation, compared with usual discharge planning, improve outpatient follow-up completion within 30 days?

PICOT Quality Check

- ☒ Population is specific enough to guide the search.
- ☒ Intervention is clearly defined and feasible.
- ☒ Comparison is appropriate or intentionally omitted.
- ☒ Primary outcome is measurable.
- ☒ Timeframe is realistic when included.
- ☒ Question addresses one primary intervention and one primary outcome.
- ☒ Question can be answered using existing evidence.

3. Search Concept and Subject-Heading Table

Do not search the entire PICOT question as one sentence. Group synonyms with OR, then combine concept groups with AND. Comparison and timeframe terms are often omitted from the initial search when they make retrieval too narrow.

Element	Primary concept	Keywords / synonyms / abbreviations	PubMed MeSH terms	CINAHL Subject Headings / other vocabulary
P	Emergency department discharge	emergency department; emergency room; ED; hospital discharge; acute care discharge	Emergency Service, Hospital; Patient Discharge	Emergency Service; Patient Discharge
I	Community care navigation	patient navigation; care navigation; care coordination; transitional care; community paramedicine; mobile integrated health	Patient Navigation; Continuity of Patient Care; Transitional Care	Patient Navigation; Care Coordination; Transitional Care; Community Health Services
C	Usual discharge planning	usual care; standard care; routine discharge planning	No required MeSH term for initial search	Often omitted from initial search
O	Outpatient follow-up	follow-up; primary care; appointment completion; continuity of care; readmission; ED revisit; service connection	Aftercare; Continuity of Patient Care; Patient Readmission	Follow-Up Care; Continuity of Patient Care; Patient Readmission
T	30 days	30-day; post-discharge; short-term	Usually omitted from initial search	Usually omitted from initial search

Concept Groups

Population concept group (OR):

("Emergency Service, Hospital"[MeSH] OR "emergency department" OR "emergency room" OR "hospital discharge" OR "acute care discharge")

Intervention concept group (OR):

("patient navigation" OR "care navigation" OR "care coordination" OR "community paramedicine" OR "mobile integrated health" OR "transitional care")

Outcome concept group (OR):

("follow-up" OR "primary care" OR "appointment completion" OR "Patient Readmission"[MeSH] OR readmission OR "emergency department revisit")

Combined search (AND):

("Emergency Service, Hospital"[MeSH] OR "emergency department" OR "emergency room" OR "hospital discharge" OR "acute care discharge") AND ("patient navigation" OR "care navigation" OR "care coordination" OR "community paramedicine" OR "mobile integrated health" OR "transitional care") AND ("follow-up" OR "primary care" OR "appointment completion" OR "Patient Readmission"[MeSH] OR readmission OR "emergency department revisit")

4. Database Search Documentation

Complete one record for every database searched. Copy the exact final search string from the database search history whenever possible.

Database Search Record 1

Database / platform	PubMed
Date searched	June 2026
Exact search string	("Emergency Service, Hospital"[MeSH] OR "emergency department" OR "emergency room" OR "hospital discharge" OR "acute care discharge") AND ("patient navigation" OR "care navigation" OR "care coordination" OR "community paramedicine" OR "mobile integrated health" OR "transitional care") AND ("follow-up" OR "primary care" OR "appointment completion" OR "Patient Readmission"[MeSH] OR readmission OR "emergency department revisit")
Subject headings used	Emergency Service, Hospital [MeSH]; Patient Readmission [MeSH]
Filters / limits applied	English; adults; publication date June 2021-June 2026
Results before filters	Not documented in retained assignment materials
Results after filters	64
Records retained for initial screening	64 records exported for combined screening and duplicate review

Database Search Record 2

Database / platform	CINAHL
Date searched	June 2026
Exact search string	("emergency department" OR "emergency service" OR "hospital discharge") AND ("patient navigation" OR "care navigation" OR "care coordination" OR "community paramedicine" OR "transitional care") AND (follow-up OR "primary care" OR readmission OR "emergency department revisit")
Subject headings used	CINAHL Headings and database keywords appropriate to Emergency Service, Patient Discharge, Care Coordination, and Follow-Up Care
Filters / limits applied	English; peer reviewed; adults; publication date June 2021-June 2026
Results before filters	Not documented in retained assignment materials
Results after filters	17
Records retained for initial screening	17 records exported for combined screening and duplicate review

5. Search Revision Log

Record how and why the strategy changed. This creates an audit trail and helps explain the final search methodology.

Attempt / date	Problem identified	Revision made	Result count	Decision / rationale
1 / June 2026	Initial search was broad and retrieved general discharge-planning literature.	Added navigation, coordination, transitional-care, and community-paramedicine terms.	Broad; exact count not retained	Retained broader intervention synonyms because terminology varies across studies.
2 / June 2026	Some relevant articles used different terms for the ED population and transition period.	Added emergency-room, hospital-discharge, acute-care-discharge, and post-discharge language.	Improved relevance	Kept population language broad enough to capture studies spanning ED and acute-care discharge.
3 / June 2026	Outcome terms risked making the search too narrow.	Used follow-up, readmission, revisit, continuity, and service-connection concepts; did not require every outcome term.	PubMed 64; CINAHL 17 after filters	Selected as the final reproducible strategy.
4 / screening	Some records were disease-specific, pediatric, inpatient-only, protocols, or weakly related to navigation.	Applied explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria during title/abstract review.	81 identified before duplicate removal	Moved relevant studies forward for full-text review and evidence-table development.
5 / full-text review	Some potentially useful papers did not directly test the intervention or meet all criteria.	Separated primary evidence from supplemental background or rationale sources.	19 articles screened; 3-4 key studies plus a systematic review prioritized	Maintained a focused evidence set while preserving useful contextual sources.

6. Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Peer-reviewed English-language evidence published from June 2021 through June 2026; adult patients discharged from an ED, hospital, or acute-care setting; interventions involving patient or care navigation, care coordination, transitional care, community paramedicine, or structured post-discharge follow-up; outcomes addressing follow-up, ED revisits, readmission, service connection, utilization, cost, patient needs, or satisfaction; systematic reviews, randomized trials, quasi-experimental studies, observational studies, and relevant implementation/model articles.	Pediatric-only studies; inpatient-only interventions without a post-discharge transition component; disease-management interventions without navigation or coordination relevance; protocol-only papers; expert opinion without outcome or implementation data; duplicates; and articles with weak relevance to ED or acute-care discharge.

Consider: publication dates, language, population, setting, intervention, outcomes, study designs, peer-review status, and relevance to the practice problem.

7. Search Evidence and Screenshots

When required, insert screenshots showing the database name, complete search strategy, filters, and number of results. Use the caption fields to identify what each image demonstrates.

Screenshot 1: Database and final search

The screenshot displays the 'History and Search Details' section of a PubMed interface. It features a table with columns for Search ID, Actions, Details, Query, Results, and Time. Two search entries are visible: #8 and #7. Search #8 shows a complex query with filters for the last 5 years, full text, clinical studies, evidence synthesis, meta-analysis, randomized controlled trials, scoping reviews, systematic reviews, English, and humans, resulting in 64 hits. Search #7 shows a similar query with 100 hits.

Search	Actions	Details	Query	Results	Time
#8	...	>	Search: ("Emergency Service, Hospital"[MeSH] OR "emergency department" OR "hospital discharge") AND ("patient navigation" OR "care navigation" OR "community paramedicine" OR "care coordination" OR "transitional care") AND ("follow-up" OR "readmission" OR "patient readmission"[MeSH] OR "emergency department revisit") Filters: in the last 5 years, Full text, Clinical Study, Comparative Study, Evidence Synthesis, Meta-Analysis, Randomized Controlled Trial, Scoping Review, Systematic Review, English, Humans, Adult: 19+ years	64	21:33:26
#7	...	>	Search: ("Emergency Service, Hospital"[MeSH] OR "emergency department" OR "hospital discharge") AND ("patient navigation" OR "care navigation" OR "community paramedicine" OR "care coordination" OR "transitional care") AND ("follow-up" OR "readmission" OR "patient readmission"[MeSH] OR "emergency department revisit")	100	21:33:20

Database: PubMed Date: June 2026 Results: 64

Caption / notes: Final filtered PubMed search; original screenshot not reproduced in this public demonstration.

Screenshot 2: Database and final search

The screenshot shows the EBSCOhost search interface. The search bar contains the query: ("Emergency Service, Hospital"[MeSH] OR "emergency department" OR "hospital discharge") AND ("patient navigation" OR "care navigation" OR "community paramedicine" OR "care coordination" OR "transitional care") AND ("follow-up" OR "readmission" OR "patient readmission"[MeSH] OR "emergency department revisit"). Filters applied include Full Text, Peer Reviewed, and Past 5 years. The results section shows 17 total results, with a 'Show: 10' dropdown and a 'Relevance' sort option. The interface also includes a sidebar with navigation links like My dashboard, Projects, Saved, Recent activity, and Holds & checkouts.

Database: CINAHL Date: June 2026 Results: 17

Caption / notes: Final filtered CINAHL search; original screenshot not reproduced in this public demonstration.

8. Final Question and Search Summary

Final PICOT Question

In high-risk adults discharged from the emergency department, does community care navigation, compared with usual discharge planning, improve outpatient follow-up completion within 30 days?

Search Summary

Databases searched	PubMed and CINAHL
Date range of searches	June 2026; evidence publication range June 2021-June 2026
Total records identified	81 records identified after database filters and before duplicate removal
Duplicates removed	Not documented in the retained assignment summary
Records screened	19 articles screened during evidence selection
Articles retained for evidence review	3-4 key studies plus a systematic review prioritized; supplemental sources retained separately

Faculty / Preceptor Feedback

Example feedback: The question is clinically relevant and sufficiently focused. Continue distinguishing the primary outcome from secondary utilization and satisfaction outcomes.

Example feedback: Preserve database-specific controlled vocabulary and document all final search histories and screenshots.

Final Submission Check

- ☒ Problem statement is concise and supported.
- ☒ Final PICOT question matches the practice problem.
- ☒ Alternative terms are listed for each applicable concept.
- ☒ Database-specific subject headings are documented.
- ☒ At least two database searches are documented when required.
- ☒ Exact search strings and filters are recorded.
- ☒ Result counts are included.

- ☒ Required screenshots show the search strategy and result count.
- ☒ Inclusion and exclusion criteria are explicit.
- ☒ Search revisions and rationale are documented.
- ☒ All course-specific instructions and rubric requirements were rechecked.

Educational Use Disclaimer

This worksheet is an educational planning and documentation tool. Course, institutional, faculty, database, and DNP project requirements vary. Students should follow their current assignment instructions, rubric, librarian guidance, faculty feedback, organizational policies, and applicable ethical or regulatory requirements.