Writing up a lit review. In two parts.

Part One. Finding all the right stuff.

Before, during or after you have started finding references and looking into your topic, try and structure your thinking like this…

1. What is published about my exact topic? (remind yourself what it is)
    a. Lots/little?
    b. Are there RCT's? systematic reviews? Meta-analyses?
    c. If nothing exact, if there something close?

2. Does what I found apply to my exact target audience/population/geography?
    a. How, explain to yourself specifically for whom or for where/what you are looking for data
    b. What does apply?
    c. What doesn't…?

3. Is the answer to what I want to know definitely known?
    a. If yes, great, there is no research gap, and I have my answer (**no research project** needed, unless repeating a process would be valuable to confirm findings, check with an experienced researcher in the field as to whether this is really true or not, maybe 2 or 3 established researchers)
    b. If no, write out what the gap is, be detailed about the entire context, location (country, setting, hospital/community, etc.), population (gender, age, socioeconomic, etc.)

4. Why is this topic important at all? Consider all aspects and see what the published literature can tell you.
    a. You? Why do you need to know about it? (good reminder, but your own personal perspective unlikely to be included in most lit reviews)
    b. The patients/populations – what would they gain if we knew the answer? Are things changing, in a specific way that makes this topic more relevant, e.g. budgets tightening, population aging, what are the facts that support this?
    c. Providers, all sorts (family doctors, specialists, nurses, etc.)
    d. Health care administrators
    e. Policy makers
    f. Governments/businesses

NOW, DESCRIBE WHAT THE GAP IS IN EXISTING KNOWLEDGE IN PUBLISHED LITERATURE

And, then consider…
5. What about Grey literature?
    a. Are there government reports about this?
    b. Did anyone write a thesis on this topic and not publish it (theses can be found on 'UBC Circle')?
    c. Popular media? Are books written on this topic? Big news stories?
    d. Wikipedia? Other online sources?

6. What do experts say on the topic?
    a. Who could you ask about this?
        i. Local experts
        ii. Experts with social media presence and contacts?
        iii. Authors of papers in a similar field?

7. How does this additional, non-peer reviewed, material change what you know about the question? (It might not change it at all, but you may have identified stakeholders, informants, possible content reviewers, etc.).

8. Has your question evolved?
    • What is your (new?) question?

9. What research method would best answer this question?
    a. Don't know?
        i. Look it up on the world wide web
        ii. Ask someone who knows; a research expert.
    b. What do you know about this method?

10. Is there a particular paper from #1 (using the best method) that would be a great model for me?
    a. Could you borrow the format? The tools? The analysis plan?
    b. Email the author and let her/him know what you are thinking.

11. What does the literature say about using this method?
    a. What kind of data analysis should I do? (applies to both qualitative and quantitative)
        i. What is a reference-able source about how to effectively use this kind of analysis?

Part Two. Writing it up.

A lit review could be a whole paper in itself, or a 2-3 page section of a research proposal or just three paragraphs for the introduction. Regardless, it should tell a story when you write it up… a story that hangs together and clarifies:
A. Why this topic is important (most general)
B. What is already known (narrowing)
C. What remains to be answered and your proposed question (most specific)

Consider using this guide to get yourself going. The topic is … (one sentence about what you are looking at, might turn into the title)

Each point below is a paragraph (some may be lumped into a single paragraph).

IMPORTANCE OF TOPIC *(from #4 in Part 1)*
1. The topic is important to the following group… (your target population) in the following ways… (max three ways)

WHAT IS ALREADY KNOWN *(from #1-3, 5, maybe 11 in Part 1)*
2. What is already known about this topic is…
    a. Describe the quantity of papers found and what kind of results (clump these, preferably into <=3 categories) they have shown…
        i. The quality of this evidence is (e.g. comprehensive and complete, robust in certain geographies or types of patients, but not specific to my needs, almost non-existent, or something like this….)…

3. Grey literature or expert opinion or current policy says this about the topic….
    a. Note: If you did not consider grey literature or opinions, say why (e.g. looked and couldn't find any, seemed inappropriate, etc.).

WHAT GAPS REMAIN and WHY RESEARCH IS NEEDED *(from #7-10 in Part 1)*
4. The specific gap in the research is this….
    a. My research question to address this gap (or a portion of it) is… (Use PICO or other specific format)

5. The method that has been chosen is… because… I will use the following guides or references to apply this method.

6. The specific aims/objectives of this project in addressing this research question with this research method are…

Making it readable.
- *Now that you have all the content in order, go back and make it flow.*
    - *Get a non-medical friend to read it for clarity, grammar, spelling.*
    - *Reduce word count where needed.*
- *Make sure all of your references are in your reference manager software (e.g. Zotero)*
    - *Use Vancouver superscript citation/bibliography style.*
        - *Is same thing as National Library of Medicine Style (NLM)*
        - *Helpful style guide from an unusual place: http://library.vcc.ca/downloads/VCC_VancouverStyleGuide.pdf*