Consensus

Rapid Evidence Review

This is a recurring classroom routine you can run at the start of a lecture that takes around 10 minutes. It's not intended to be a graded assessment.

INSPIRED BY

Inspired by a professor at Ohio University who runs quick live exercises where students spend five minutes querying a controversial topic on Consensus to learn why studies often seemingly conflict with each other.

WHO THIS ASSIGNMENT IS FOR

The "Rapid Evidence Review" is designed to be a recurring classroom routine rather than a traditional, graded assignment. The primary goal is to foster critical thinking by moving students beyond surface-level answers. It teaches them to:

- **Evaluate study components:** Students learn to actively look at critical details within a study, such as the **population**, **sample size**, and **methodology**.
- **Understand disagreement:** It teaches students that research results often conflict, and helps them identify why those differences exist (e.g., differences in study design, population, dose/intensity, or outcomes measured).
- **Think critically about results:** By performing their own searches and analyzing the literature, students learn to avoid taking the first result they find as definitive fact.
- **Build independent habits:** With consistent weekly practice, students learn to intuitively check the validity and context of studies without being told to do so.

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Assignment Overview

You read one question out loud, students search it with a few follow up searches, three of them report on what they found. One gives details on a study that supports, another on one that disagreed, then one more provides an opinion on why the outcomes appear to differ. Then you confirm or provide a different answer and move on with your class.

The goal of this is to get students used to checking parts of a study like population, sample size, and methods when evaluating a study and thinking critically about the results.

It is not graded, it does not require a syllabus change, and it does not need preparation beyond picking a prompt and testing it out. Run it every week and students start getting used to checking the population and methods instead of just looking at the outcome.

This document has three parts: how to run one, how to write your own prompts, and eighteen example prompts you can try out.

TIME	Around 10 minutes.
COURSE FIT	Any course in any discipline where students hold priors about contested empirical questions, which is all of them.
LEVEL	Introductory through graduate.
TOOL	Consensus (consensus.app). Free accounts have limited searches, so if you run this weekly, check institutional access.
PREP	Two minutes. Run the prompt yourself the morning you use it. Results may shift as the corpus grows.
GRADING	None.

01 How to run one

Read the prompt out loud. Most of these are phrased the way a student would actually type them.

Time	What you do	Why it is there
0:00 to 0:30	Read the prompt. Ask for a show of hands: who thinks yes, who thinks no.	Get students engaged in the outcome of a research question, show disagreement in the literature.

Time	What you do	Why it is there
0:30 to 3:00	Students search, alone or in pairs.	Students actually run a search themselves + any additional follow ups.
3:00 to 5:30	Three students report what they found. One supporting, one refuting, and a third opinion on why the results differ.	Students should include the population, sample size, and actual outcomes in their answer. (ie. A survey based study 186 participants showed an improvement in dry-eyes when they wore blue light glasses for 90 minutes).
5:30 to 7:00	Confirm or name one other factor that explains the disagreement then move on.	Almost always one of four: population, dose or intensity, the outcome measured, or the study type. Re-affirm that science is not black and white, but the differences often lie in the details.

02 How to write your own

- **The literature must actually disagree, or the filters must change the answer.** Either is fine and the second is often better. A question where applying the human studies filter cuts the result set by three quarters teaches more than a question where the papers merely conflict.
- **It has to be answerable in principle.** “Is the food industry hiding the truth” is a claim about motives and there is no study that speaks to it. Every prompt needs a measurable outcome even if nobody has measured it well.
- **One search must not settle it.** Test this yourself. If your first query produces a clean answer in thirty seconds, it’s not worth a discussion.
- **The disagreement must have a nameable cause.** You have to be able to finish the sprint in ninety seconds. If the reason the literature conflicts is a statistical dispute you cannot explain quickly, save it for a seminar.

A shortcut that works: take the claim your field is most tired of arguing about, phrase it the way an undergraduate would, and run it yourself once. If you get an uncomfortable spread of results, you have a good starting prompt.

03 Example prompts

Here are a set of example prompts that have a range of results. When asked in Consensus they will generate a yes/no meter which categorizes studies into a section if they state a clear outcome.

#	Example Prompt	What to watch for
1	`Do seed oils cause inflammation?`	Most of what surfaces first is cell and animal work.
2	`Does eating breakfast help with weight loss?`	Observational studies and trials point different directions. Ask which of the two designs can support a causal claim.
3	`Do learning styles improve learning outcomes?`	Most students arrive believing this. Ask them to notice the gap between how confident the belief is and what the literature shows.
4	`Do blue light glasses reduce eye strain?`	Watch the outcome measure. Eye strain, sleep, and screen comfort are three different things and get treated as one.
5	`Does stretching before exercise prevent injury?`	Population does the work here. Military recruits, runners, and team sport athletes give different answers.
6	`Do standing desks improve health?`	Outcome again. Sitting time, back pain, and cardiovascular markers separate quickly once students look.
7	`Does cold water immersion after training improve recovery?`	Reverse the question and ask whether it impairs training adaptation. The two searches disagree and both are right.
8	`Does creatine improve strength in women?`	Good counterweight card. Students expect nothing and there is more here than they think.
9	`Do growth mindset interventions improve academic achievement?`	Watch effect sizes and the gap between small trials and large replications. Also watch who funded which.
10	`Does social media use cause depression in adolescents?`	Correlational versus experimental, and the word cause. Ask what design would be needed and whether it would be ethical.
11	`Do brain training games improve general cognitive ability?`	Transfer is the issue. Improvement on the trained task is not the claim being made in the advertising.
12	`Does mindfulness reduce workplace stress?`	Control conditions. Ask what the comparison group did, and how many studies had one at all.

#	Example Prompt	What to watch for
13	`Does raising the minimum wage reduce employment?`	Economics card. Filter by country and watch the answer move. Good for showing that context is not a detail.
14	`Does open plan office design reduce collaboration?`	Measurement. Self reported collaboration and observed interaction do not agree, and the studies that measured behaviour are the interesting ones.
15	`Does microfinance reduce poverty?`	Six major randomized trials exist and the popular narrative predates them. Good card for the gap between advocacy and evidence.
16	`Do body worn cameras reduce police use of force?`	Site variation. Ask why the same intervention produces different results in different departments, which is the whole finding.
17	`Does class size reduction improve student achievement?`	Cost never appears in the literature and always appears in the decision. Useful for policy and education leadership courses.
18	`Does nudging produce durable behaviour change?`	Duration. Filter by study length and watch short term effects separate from anything lasting.