Definitions of some common types of review articles. (Note: these definitions were developed in collaboration with, and are used by, the Brown University School of Public Health to advise MPH students on thesis requirements.)

A Literature Review (non-specified) should fulfill these criteria:
• Generic term, sometimes referred to as a narrative review. Often performed as background to a research study.
• This is a review with a wide scope and non-standardized methodology. Synthesis is typically narrative.
• Literature search does not need to be comprehensive or systematic.
• A good choice for reviewing and describing a range of literature without rigidly defined parameters.

A Structured Literature Review should fulfill these criteria:
• Includes one or more elements of systematic review process (below) while stopping short of systematic review (e.g., may not have two reviewers).
• Should include some comprehensive, but not necessarily exhaustive, searching in 2-3 databases.
• This review type can help to identify what is known, gaps in research, and limitations of methodology.
• Flexibility in timeframe for completion. Will not take as long as a systematic review.
• Sometimes referred to as a systematized review.

A Systematic Review should fulfill these criteria:
• A team of 3 or more people with various expertise related to the review question, and a process that ensures blind review of the retrieved references with at least 2 reviewers.
• A clearly defined research question formulated using a PICO (Population/Problem/Patient, Intervention, Control, Outcome) framework, including explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria.
• A written protocol, registered with PROSPERO (https://www.crd.york.ac.uk/prospero/)
• A systematic and replicable search strategy using multiple databases (typically PubMed and EMBASE, plus a subject-specific database such as ERIC, Global Health, PsycInfo, CINAHL, etc., where appropriate). Usually includes a search of grey literature such as dissertations and reports/white papers from NGOs or governmental agencies.
• Generally follows reporting guidelines such as PRISMA.
• These reviews take 10-18 months to complete.
• If you are missing any of the above elements, a traditional or a structured literature review will be more appropriate for your project.

A Meta-Analysis should fulfill these criteria:
• Will fulfill all the components of a systematic review plus
• Includes a statistical technique for combining the findings from disparate quantitative studies.
• Uses statistical methods to objectively evaluate, synthesize, and summarize results.
• Follows reporting guidelines such as PRISMA or MOOSE.

Additionally, for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses it is necessary for searches to be designed and performed by a librarian trained in SR systemology.