How to Write a Literature Review

Presented by the VCU Writing Center and Library Services

What is a Literature Review?
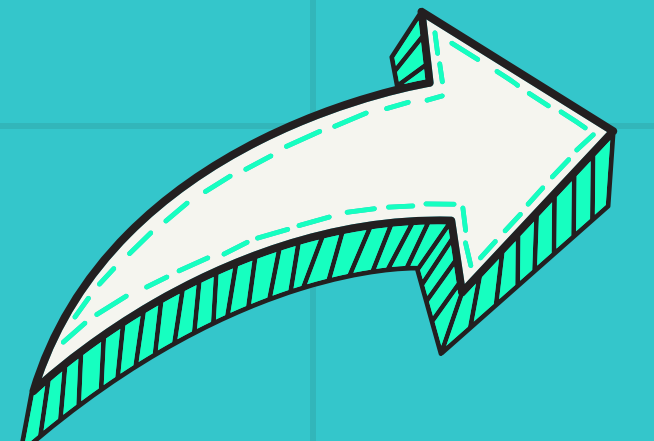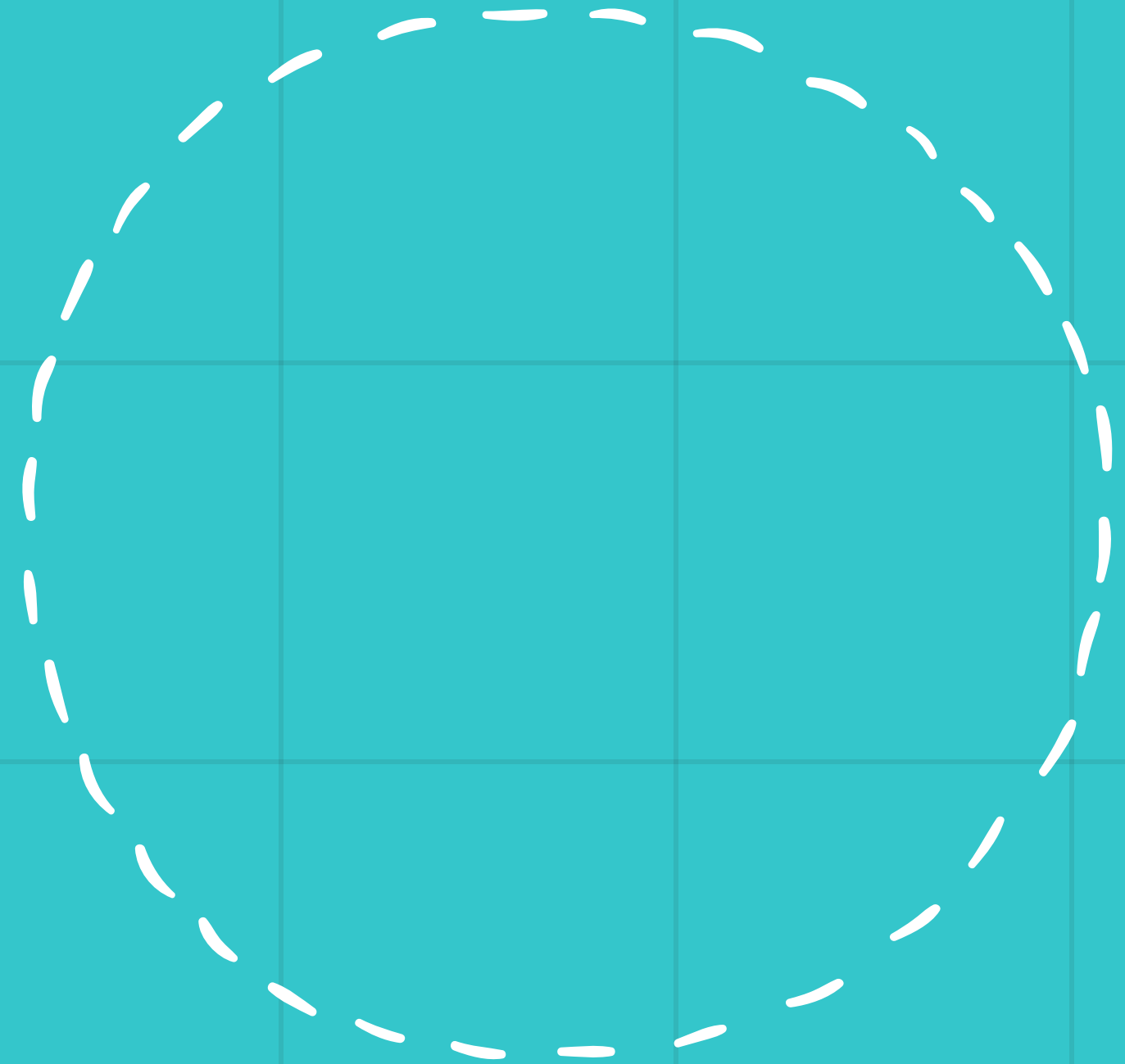
We know that's a hard question.

>>> From the VCU Library page:

"A literature review provides an overview of what's been written about a specific topic. There are many different types of literature reviews. They vary in terms of comprehensiveness, types of study included, and purpose."
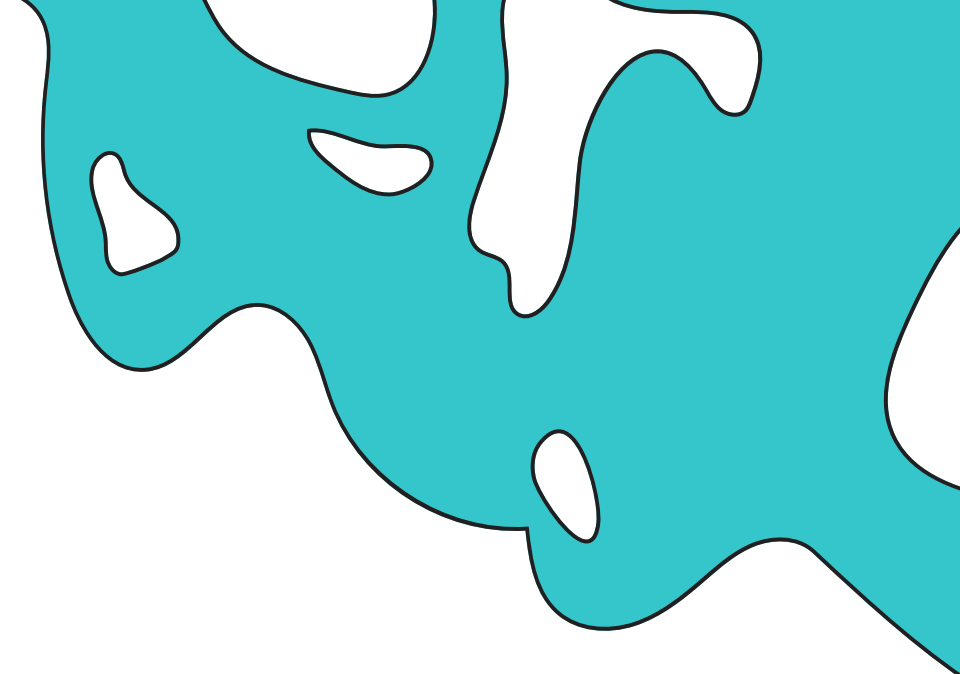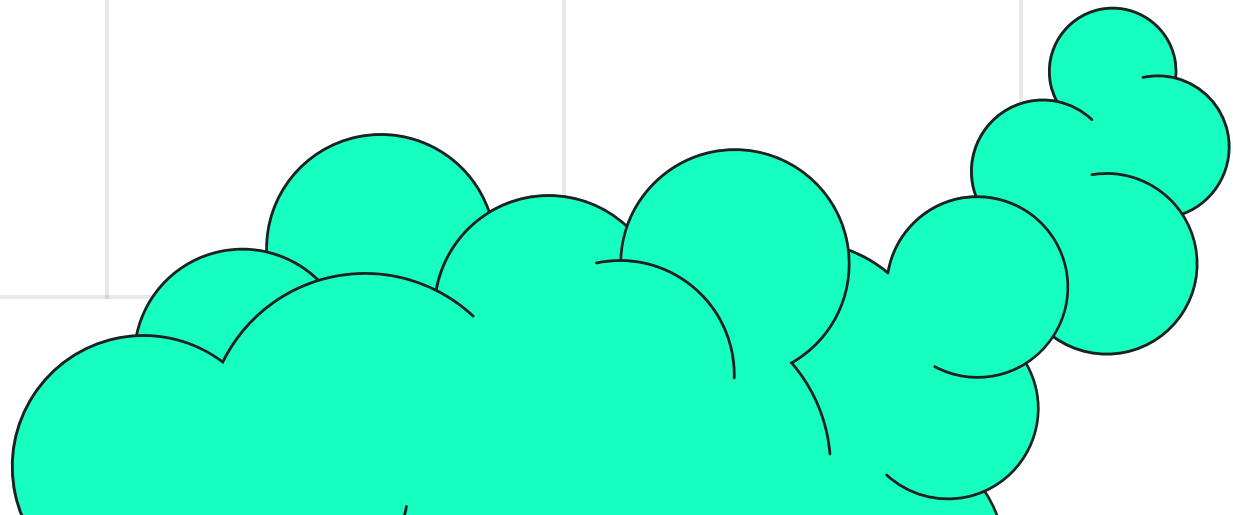
This guide is here to break this down for you.

"Literature" can be misleading...

>>> "Literature" is not referring to fiction, poetry, or other forms of "literature" that you might've studied in high school. **Literature in a research paper refers to THE RESEARCH that exists on a given topic.** We refer to this body of knowledge and these studies collectively as "the literature"

What is synthesis?
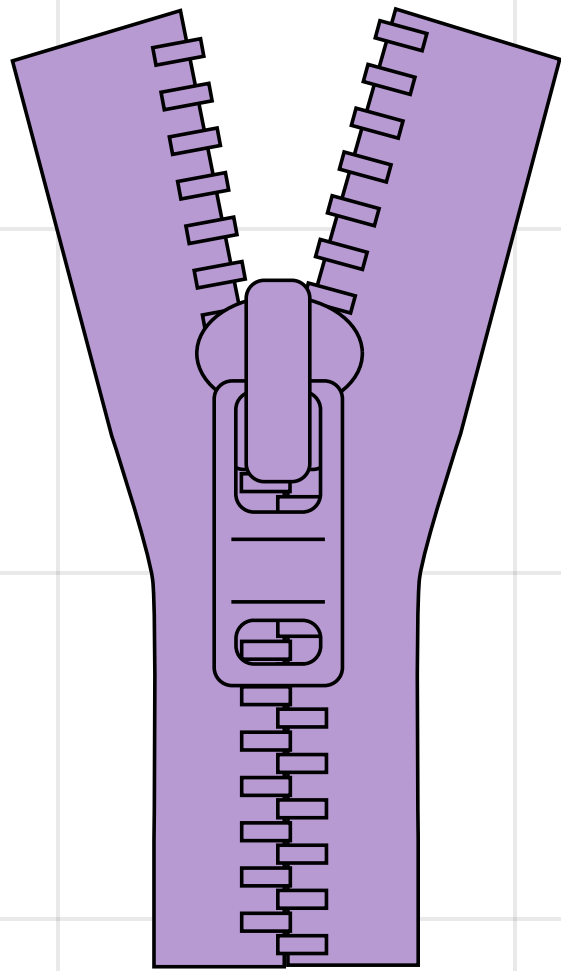
>>> *We'll show you how to do this later*, but an important part of a literature review is SYNTHESIZING the information together.

Synthesis: The combination of ideas to form a theory or system.

Think of synthesis as a zipper. You are zipping multiple sources together in your discussion to create themes!
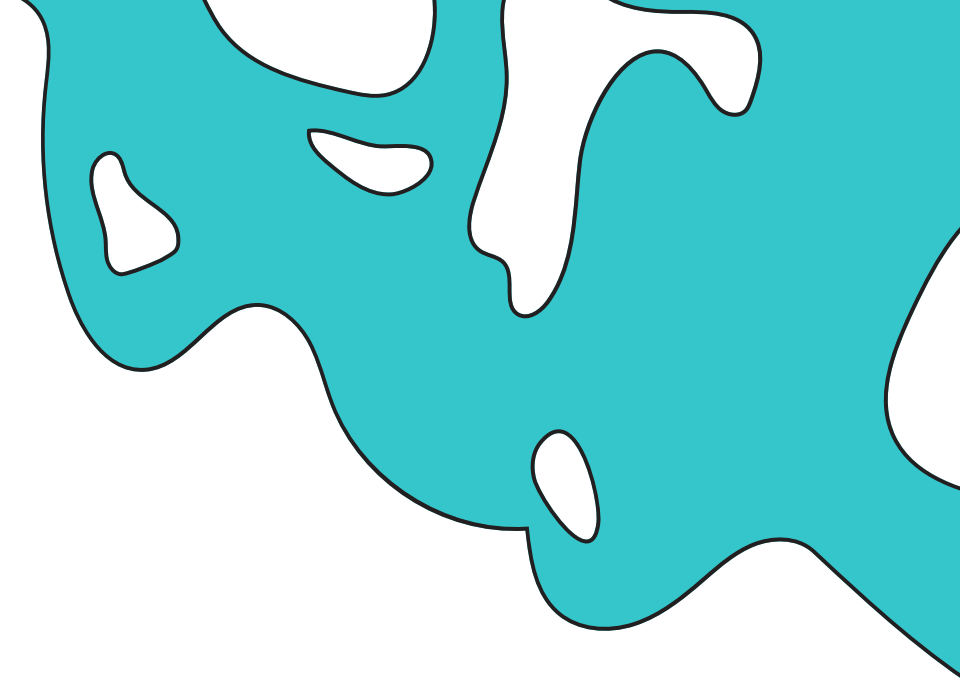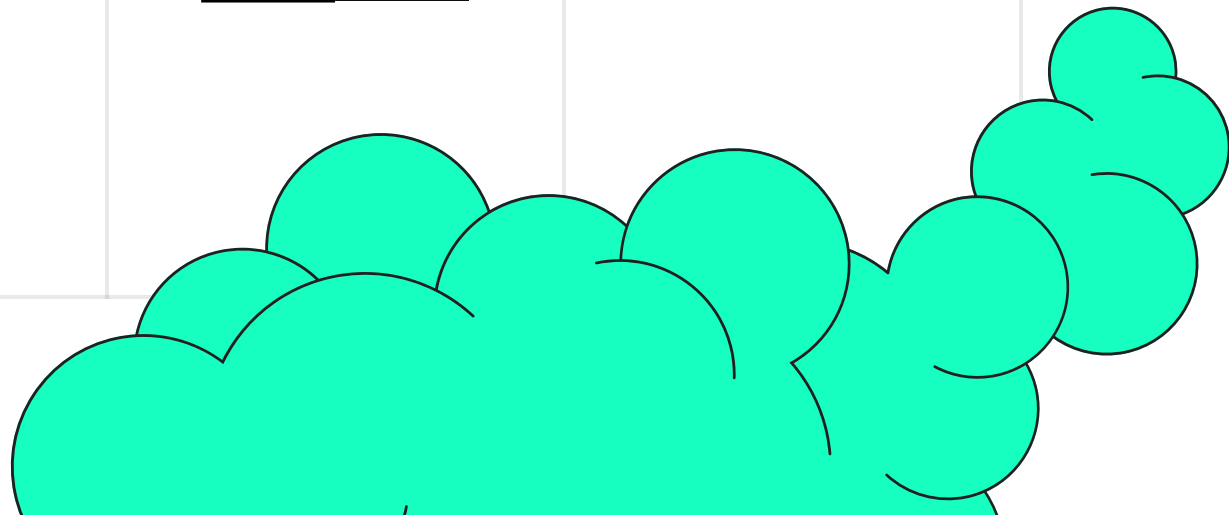
What's the difference between an annotated bibliography and a literature review?

>>> Annotated bibliographies and a literature reviews seem like very similar writing formats. **Here's the difference:**
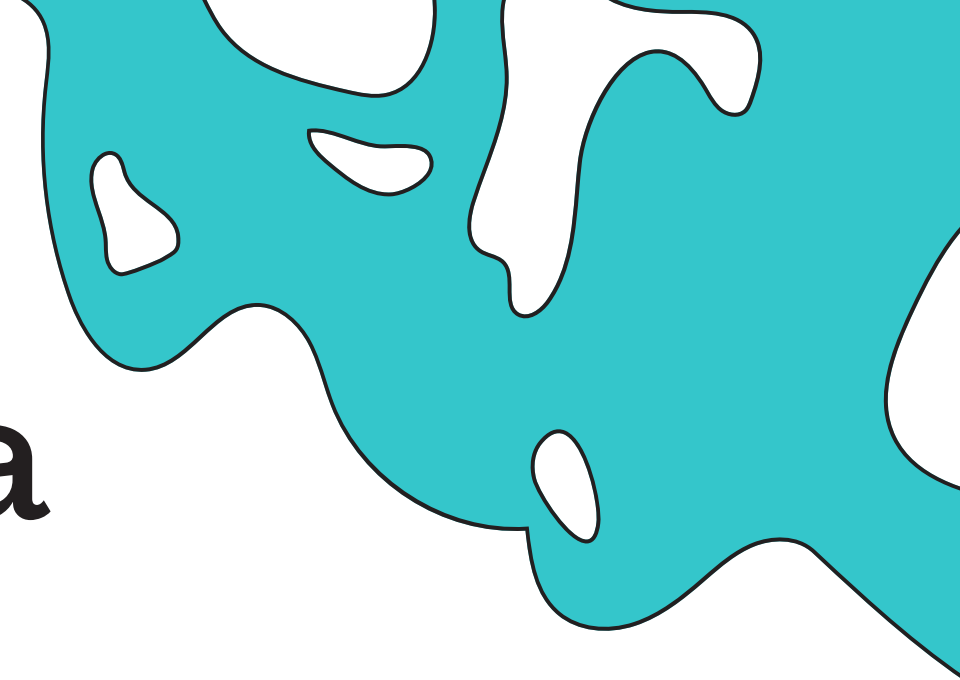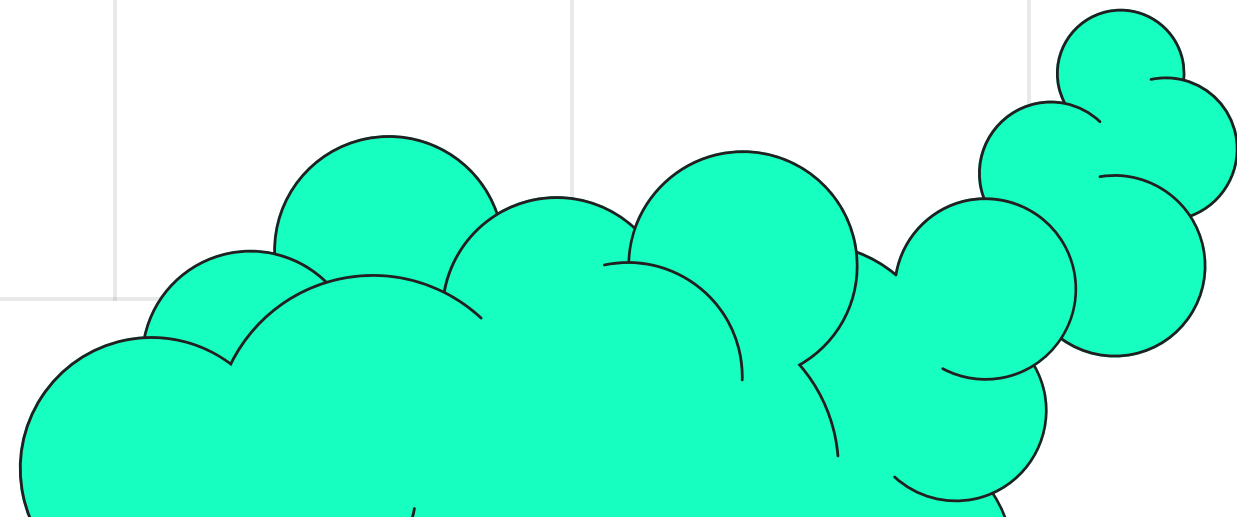
Let's clarify the difference...

Annotated Bibliographies

BOTH

Literature Reviews

Annotated Bibliography

Check out this sample annotated bibliography

Subject: Humanities - Psychology
Sample Topic: Psychology behind pet ownership during the Covid-19 lockdown
Sample Research Question: *What are the psychological benefits to pet-ownership during the Covid-19 pandemic?*

Template:
- Summary of the source's main ideas
- Evaluation of strengths/weaknesses of the source
- Reflection on the source's potential importance or usefulness for your research

Banerjee, D., & Rai, M. (2020). Social isolation in Covid-19: The impact of loneliness. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry, 66*(6), 525–527. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020764020922269
"The Impact of loneliness" discusses how isolation during the COVID-19 lockdown could increase the detrimental impact of a person's mental and physical health. The authors claim that loneliness during isolation can negatively affect a person's life and could create "vicious cycle which makes the lonely individual more segregated into his own 'constricted' space," (526). For example, if isolation continued, it could enhance risk factors such as, "sensory loss, connective tissue and auto-immune disorders, ardio-vascular disorders and obesity" (526). Loneliness and isolation can contribute to pre-existing anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorders. The source's strengths are that it addresses how loneliness and isolation can negatively impact a person's mental and physical health. However, no case study was administered. The source's potential importance is that it aims to show how people should look at isolation as a form of solitude which embodies "peace and tranquility" (526). This could be a valuable source as a treatment for loneliness is by having a companion (a pet), especially if someone has a pre-existing mental or physical risk factor.

Campbell, Smith, C. M., Tumilty, S., Cameron, C., & Treharne, G. J. (2016). How Does Dog-Walking Influence Perceptions of Health and Wellbeing in Healthy Adults? A Qualitative Dog-Walk-Along Study. *Anthrozoös, 29*(2), 181–192. https://doi.org/10.1080/08927936.2015.1082770
This qualitative study explored the perceptions of health and wellbeing associated with dog-walking. This study took a holistic approach so as to examine the emotional and psychological benefits to dog walking, in addition to the physical health benefits. Three themes were identified: participants had an "Emotional Connection" with their dog(s); dog-walking led to "Healthy Interactions" (social and environmental interactions); and participants had come to value dog-walking for its aggregate benefits for Psychological Wellbeing. This study utilized a mobile method approach, which involved interviews conducted during "walk-alongs" and Follow-up participatory analysis sessions were conducted to allow participants to reflect on insights and experiences.This study had a variety of findings related to the three themes of emotional connection, healthy interactions, and psychological well-being. One salient finding was that the dog owners felt as if their dog was owed this care, and by feeling obligated, they were more likely to follow through on the routine of movement. As a result of the gratification from their dog, they felt more inclined to continue with the routine to keep the dog happy. This study will contribute to the literature in this field in that other studies focus mostly on the physical health benefits of dog walking for specific populations, such as those with diabetes, but this study offers a holistic approach to studying the participants' health.

Oliva, & Johnston, K. L. (2021). Puppy love in the time of Corona: Dog ownership protects against loneliness for those living alone during the COVID-19 lockdown. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry, 67*(3), 232–242. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020764020944195
"Puppy love" is a qualitative study conducted in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic (May 5th - 13th, 2020). The study consisted of 384 participants who were asked their measures of loneliness during lockdown and if their pet ownership helped with their state of mind. The online survey consisted of 328 women and 54

- Includes a description or annotation of each source.
  - Approximately 150-200 words.
- Identifies the main ideas/findings for each source and any other identifying information that will help you sort your sources.
- **Suggested format for annotation:**
  - Summary
  - Strengths/Weaknesses
  - Potential importance or usefulness in your larger paper/ research project
- **Important Links:**
  - What's an annotated bibliography? [YouTube]
  - The Purdue OWL, 2019 Annotated Bibliography Guide
  - Writing Commons Overview of Annotated Bibliography

Literature Review

- A review of the different sources related to the research question or central topic of the paper.
- This review describes HOW the chosen sources relate to the central topic of the paper.
- The discussion of the ideas from the research are organized by THEMES so that you can combine multiple sources together. This is called SYNTHESIS.
  - Instead of discussing each source individually, you *synthesize* the information from the various sources together to illustrate your themes.
- **Important Links:**
- How to Write a Literature Review in 3 Simple Steps [YouTube]

The literature review lives WITHIN your larger research paper.

It could be one paragraph or multiple pages long- it depends on YOUR paper!
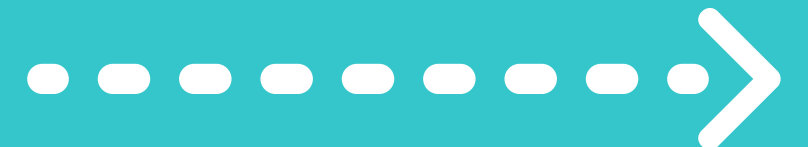
- You must identify a subject, topic, and research question that is guiding the research.
- It is grounded in the work of <u>others.</u>

Important Considerations:

- What are the authors hypotheses or arguments and what do they ask?
- What exists on the topic and what can we learn from it?
- Pay attention to common themes, methods, key words, or references as they reoccur in the literature.

Both

Important Links:
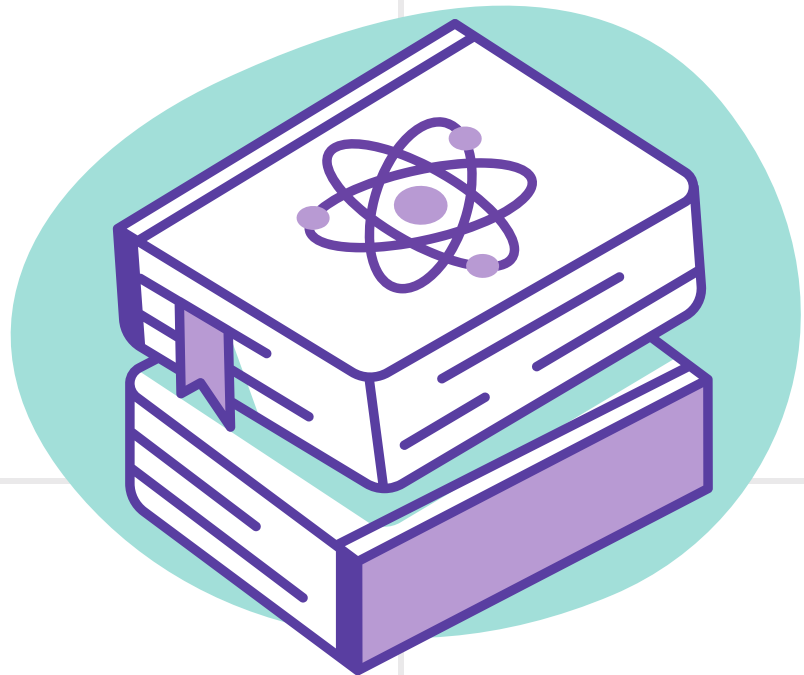
- **Focused Inquiry and VCU's Environment**
- **Rasmussen University: Literature Review vs. Annotated Bibliography.**
- **Video: Annotated Bibliography vs. Literature Review: Are they different?**
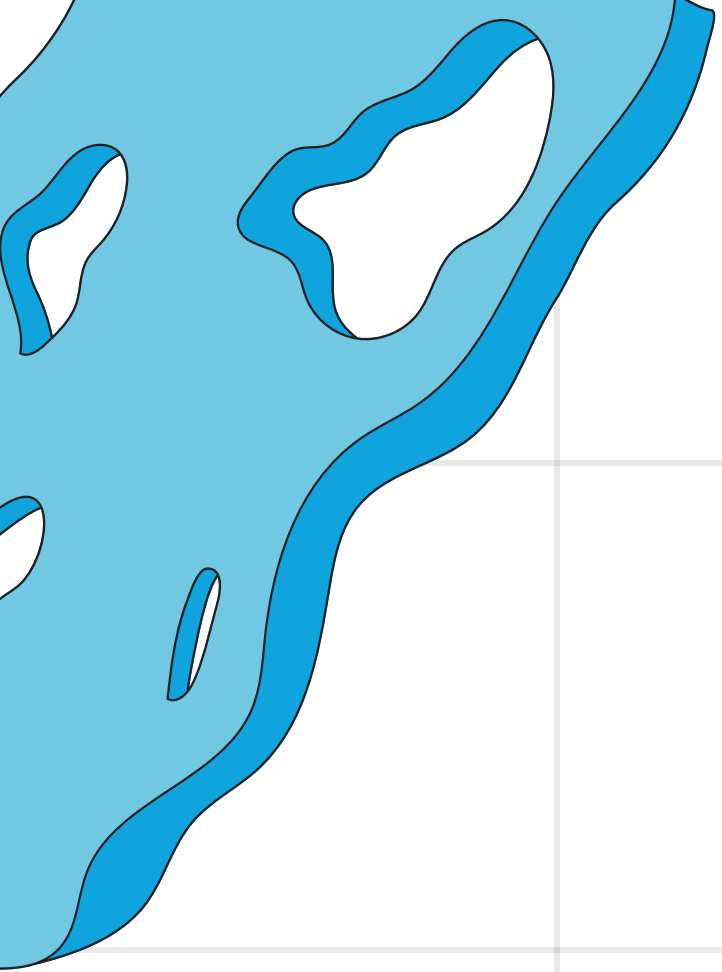
Steps to creating a successful Literature Review

Here we provide you with the steps needed to create a literature review. You'll be building a literature review with us, step by step.

Step one:

- Identify your subject- think about how this would be catalogued in a library...or your Netflix queue!
- Identify a focused topic within your subject. The more specific, the better!
- Create a research question. This needs to be very specific. Work with your professor or a consultant from the writing center to focus your ideas!
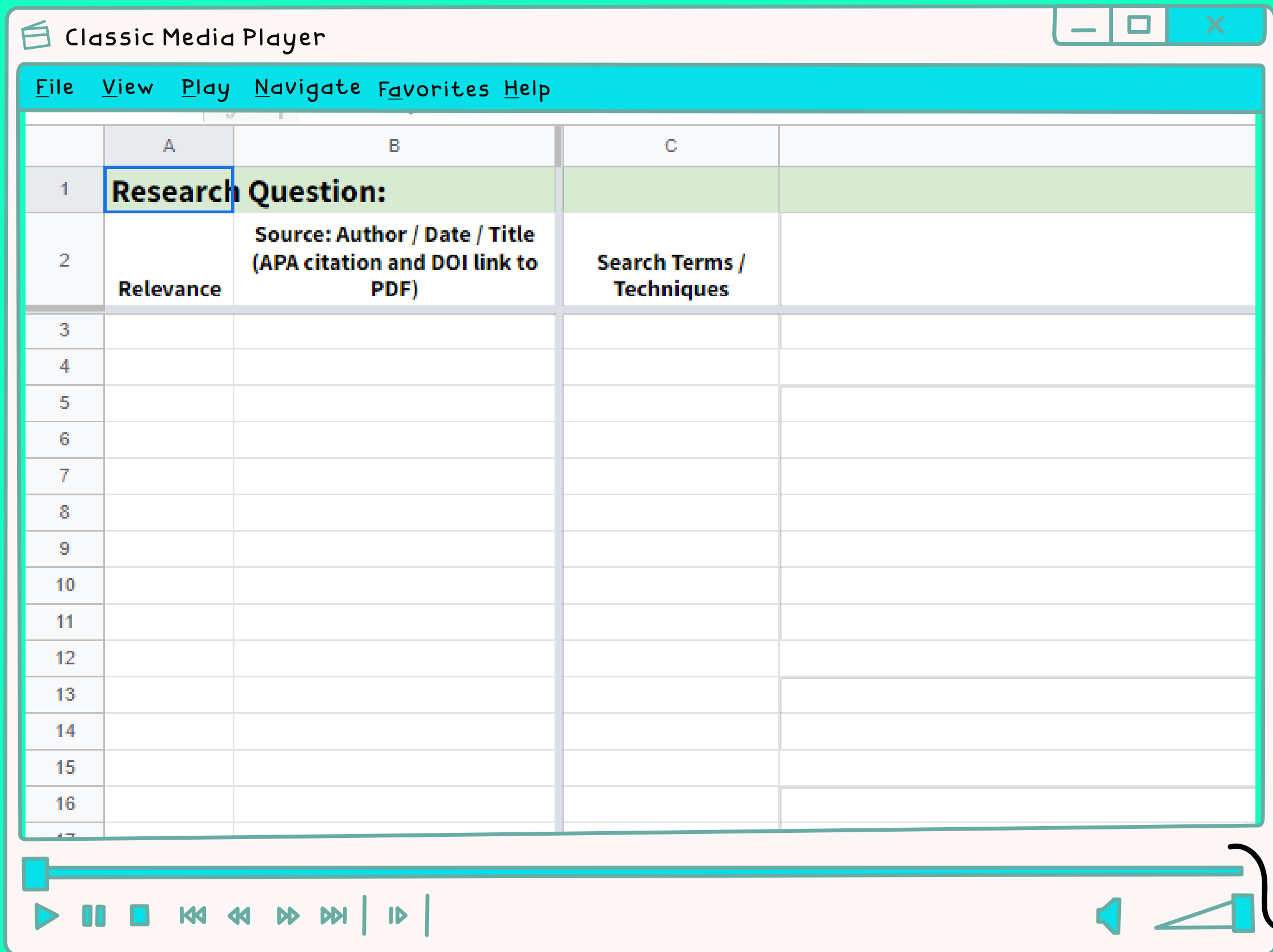
Subject: Humanities – Psychology

Topic: Psychology behind pet ownership during the Covid–19 lockdown

Research Question: Are there psychological benefits of pet ownership during the Covid–19 pandemic?

Classic Media Player

	A	B	C	
1	**Research Question:**			
2	Relevance	**Source: Author / Date / Title (APA citation and DOI link to PDF)**	**Search Terms / Techniques**	
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Step Two:

- Go find your research!
- Use a matrix like the one we've linked here to keep track of your search terms and your sources.
- As you read through your sources, make note of what you will need to discuss in your paper **and annotate your sources as you go.**

*This is a glimpse of the matrix template we provide for you to use!*

Step Three:

- Remember how you would create a theme statement in middle and high school after reading a fiction book? It's the same idea here!
- Look for what your sources have in common and what is different about each one.
- **Create 1-4 theme statements that captures some ideas from MULTIPLE sources. Your number of theme statements depends on how extensive your research is!**
  - **NOTE:** If you find that one source doesn't "fit" or you made a theme that only applies to one source, then address in your paper **WHY** that is.
  - *Did they use a different method? Do they have a variable that none of your other sources cover? Do they take a point of view that is absent from the rest of the literature?*
- There is no perfect way to do this. You can read and annotate all of your sources first OR you can do this at the end– do what works best for you!

Step Four:

- Synthesize the information that you have collected.
- You will organize your synthesis around your theme(s).
- With this, you are connecting all of the information in your research and how it coincides with the overall research question.
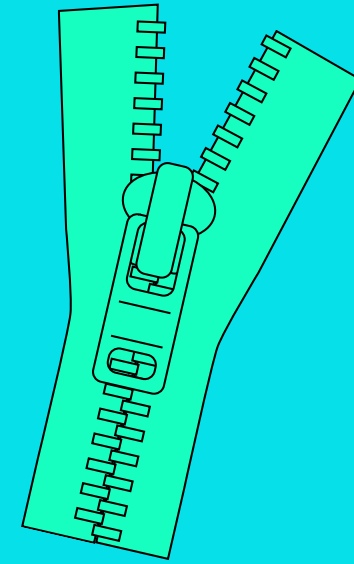
Check out our example theme statements and synthesis paragraph!

Look to see how each theme is woven together in the paragraph below. By discussing all of the sources as themes, you're able to identify the overlaps and the gaps in the literature and how the different pieces of research work together to form a comprehensive picture of your field.

Themes:
- Loneliness and isolation can contribute to pre-existing anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorders (Banerjee & Rai, 2020, Xin et al., 2021).
- Pet ownership decreased feelings of depression, anxiety, and loneliness during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic (Xin et al., 2021, Oliva, & Johnston, 2021).
    - This used the two sources that specifically spoke to pets as an intervention method/coping mechanism during the pandemic.
- Pet ownership is associated with positive benefits to include emotional connection, healthy interactions, and positive psychological well being (Xin et al., 2021, Oliva, & Johnston, 2021., Campbell et al., 2016).

Synthesis:
The literature discusses three central themes to address the research question: *What are the psychological benefits to pet-ownership during the COVID-19 pandemic?* The keywords used in our search were *loneliness, isolation, pet ownership*, and *COVID-19*. In studies by Banerjee & Rai (2020) and Xin et al. (2021) loneliness and isolation were identified as contributing to pre-existing anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorders. These findings were compounded due to the isolation individuals experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study by Xin et al. (2021) sought to provide support for encouraging pet ownership. Their data discusses how pet ownership decreased feelings of depression, anxiety, and loneliness during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their participants were located in Wuhan, China, the epicenter of the pandemic. This study, along with Oliva & Johnston's (2021) findings present pet ownership as an intervention method/coping mechanism during the pandemic to combat these negative feelings. In the studies by Xin et al. (2021), Oliva, & Johnston (2021), and Campbell et al. (2016) pet ownership is associated with positive benefits that improve mental and physical health; such as emotional connection, health interactions, and positive psychological well being. In Oliva & Johnston's (2021) study, the overall results surveyed that pet ownership (more with dogs than cats) made the lockdown during isolation easier and eased loneliness, as some people reported that they could cuddle their dogs and talk with their cats or dogs.

Step Five:

- You're almost done! The final step is to make sure you're correctly formatting your in-text citations.
- You'll create a references page for at the end of your paper, but these citations are IN ADDITION to that, and they live inside of your paper.
- The format that you use will depend on if you're writing in APA, MLA, Chicago, IEEE, CSE, ACS, ACM, or NLM.
- Refer back to the information you wrote on your matrix to help streamline this process!

Purdue OWL has a comprehensive overview for APA, MLA, and Chicago Style Citations

You're ready to launch!

- You've got all of the tools and examples necessary to tackling the literature review.
- ALWAYS check in with your professor and review the rubric for the assignment to clarify the expectations.
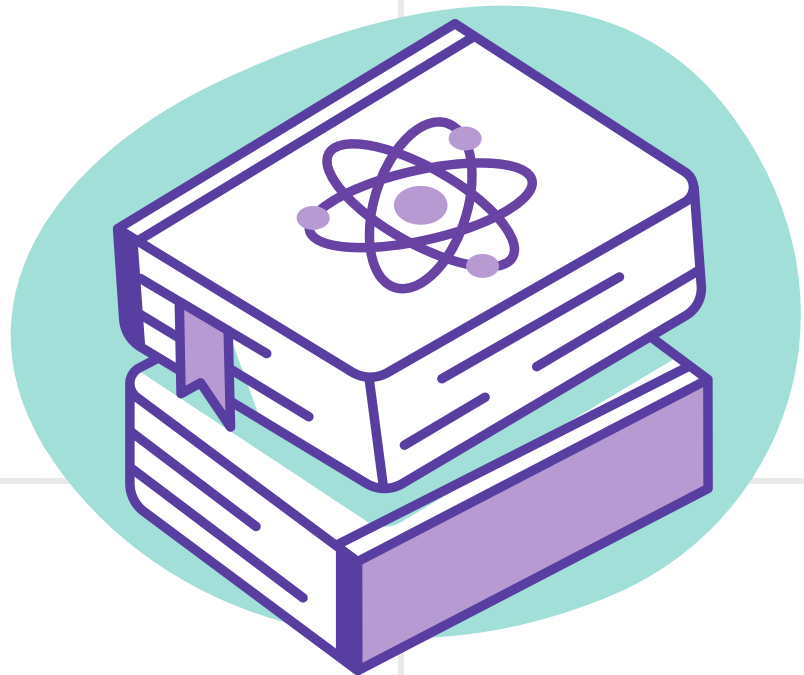
Don't be surprised...

- If you realize that your research question needs to change from when you started- that's normal!
- If you're feeling stuck about what to write, return to the research. **You have to read** the research BEFORE you can decide what you want to say!
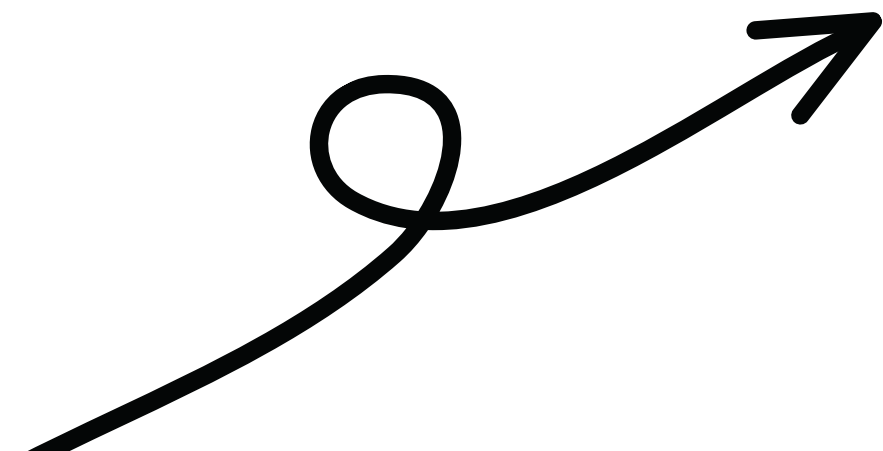
Links? We have them!

- For help with citations:
  - **Purdue OWL**
  - **Introduction to Citations – VCU Writes! (rampages.us)**
- For help with annotated bibliographies:
  - **What's an annotated bibliography? [YouTube]**
  - **The Purdue OWL, 2019 Annotated Bibliography Guide**
  - **Writing Commons Overview of Annotated Bibliography**

- For help with differentiating between an annotated bibliography and a literature review:
  - **Focused Inquiry and VCU's Environment**
  - **Rasmussen University: Literature Review vs. Annotated Bibliography.**
  - **Video: Annotated Bibliography vs. Literature Review: Are they different?**
- Two great organizing softwares that help keep track of reference sources:
  - **Zotero | Your personal research assistant**
  - **Mendeley | Reference Management Software**
- For help with annotating research:
  - **My Method for Digitally Annotating Articles**
- Direct link to our **Research Matrix** to organize your sources!
- Direct link to our **annotated bibliography sample**
- Direct link to our **theme and synthesis sample**
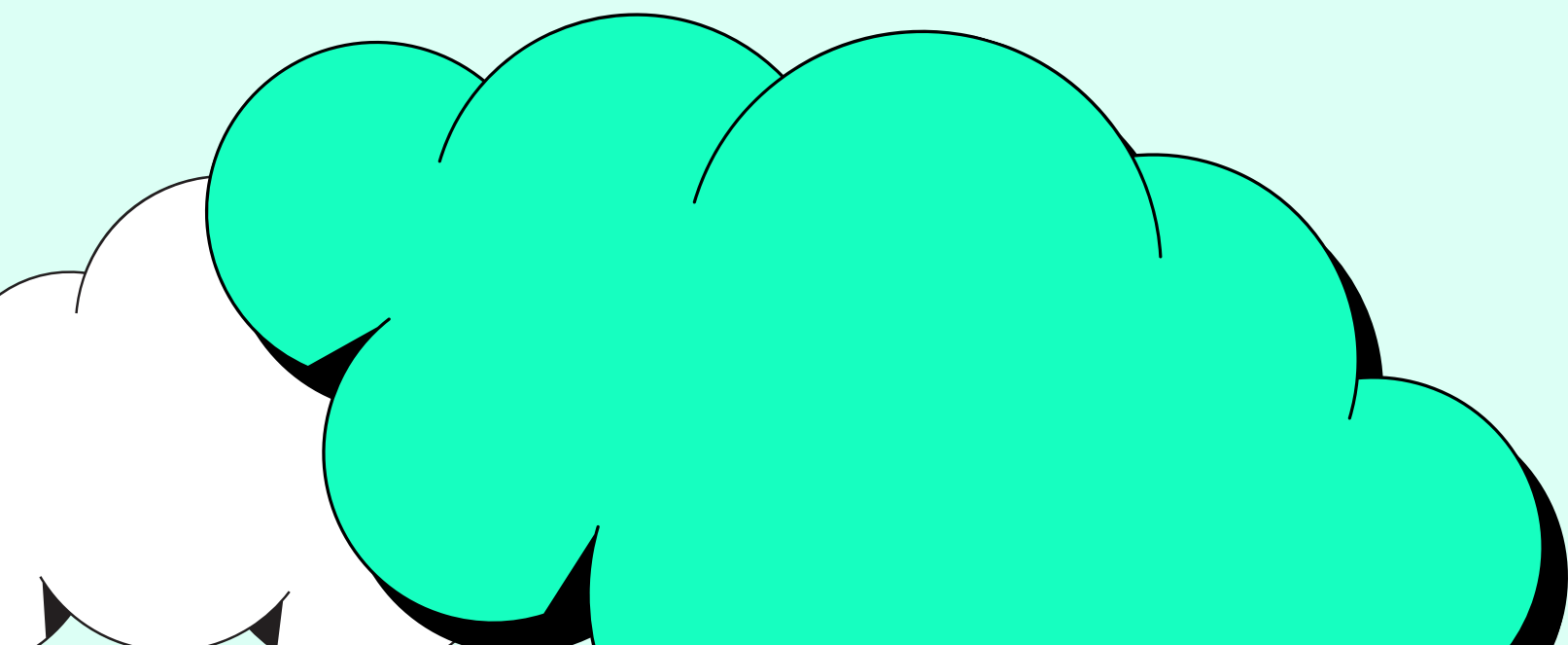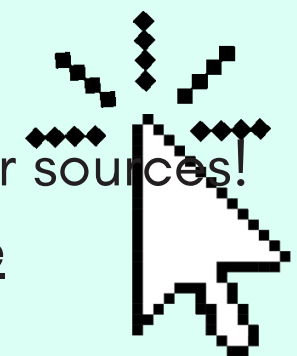
Additional Support!

- If you have any questions or concerns, or you would like help, please contact your major's librarian for help.
- They can be reached at Ask Us | VCU Libraries.
- Writing Center Consultations can be scheduled through Navigate or by calling (804) 828-4851
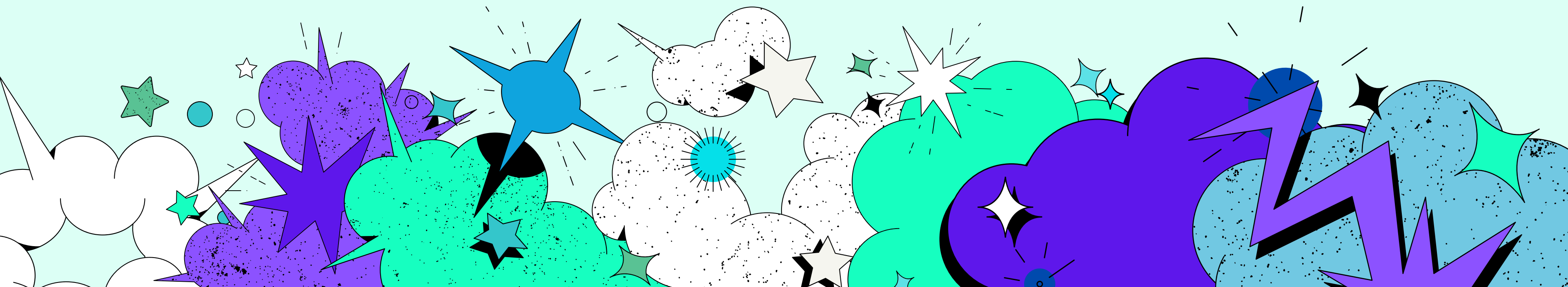
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