

# HOW TO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Let's learn to write one together!

**BROUGHT TO YOU BY:**

The Brenau University Writing Center

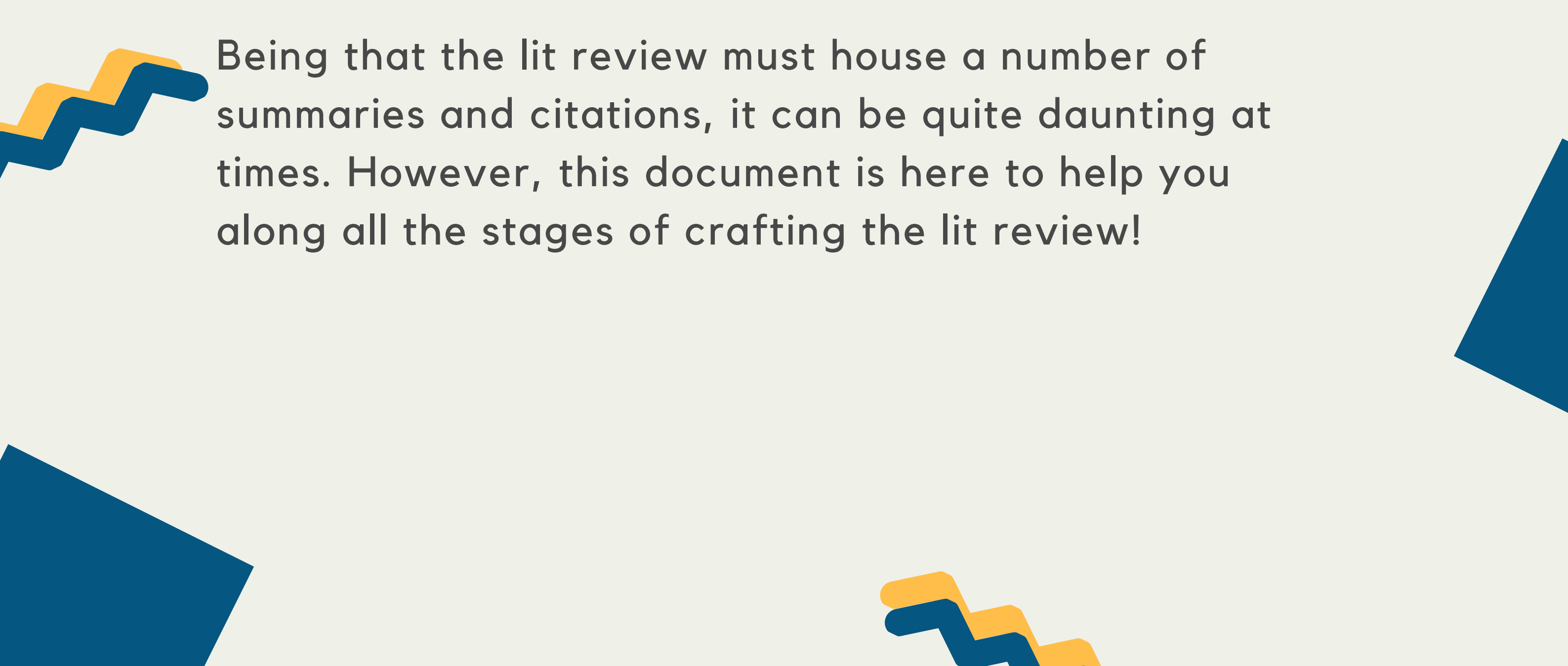




## WHAT IS A LITERATURE REVIEW/WHY DO I NEED ONE?

A literature review, or lit review, is something used in research writing to provide an overview of scholarly material related to the topic of interest. These can sometimes serve as a standalone study or as a chapter in a larger thesis paper.

The intent in writing a lit review is to summarize anything that has been published on the actual topic as well as various pieces of your research question, thereby helping make you an expert, inform the reader on what is already known, and aid in shaping your study. Further though, the lit review helps funnel your paper down to the gap in research. In turn, this helps to provide justification for your study and paper as well as carve out the logical place for understanding your research in context.



Being that the lit review must house a number of summaries and citations, it can be quite daunting at times. However, this document is here to help you along all the stages of crafting the lit review!

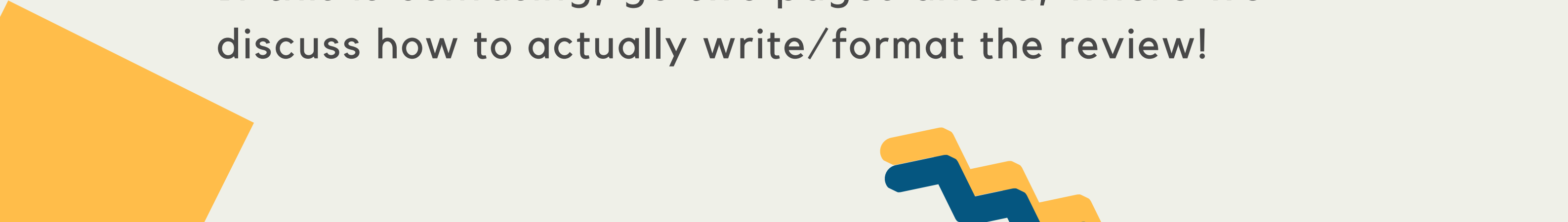


## HOW DO I START THE LIT REVIEW PROCESS?

Research is the first step in writing your lit review. If you don't know what your topic is, what was found in prior studies, or recent research about the topic - then you certainly can't start summarizing all relevant literature. In your course, you will be filling out article matrices, which are discussed on the next page, and these, when thoroughly filled out, are invaluable to organizing research and writing your lit review.

Further, Zotero can be a great place to slowly begin crafting your review. Some ways you can do this are to tag studies that are related in some way as they might be easily grouped and cited in a section of the lit review. For example, if you find that studies A, B, and C all have findings that support one another, you could tag them as whatever the finding is so that you can easily plug them into the same section of your lit review. Also, having short synopses of the studies, which can be kept within Zotero or on a running document, to organize the most important/relevant can be helpful. Further, you will know you have "enough" studies when there is regular repetition in what the studies find/do, that the studies you have included are all the most cited (most credible) on the subject, and that what you have included is what shows up in the references of new studies you look at.

If this is confusing, go two pages ahead, where we discuss how to actually write/format the review!






## HOW DO I COMPLETE AND USE MY ARTICLE MATRIX?

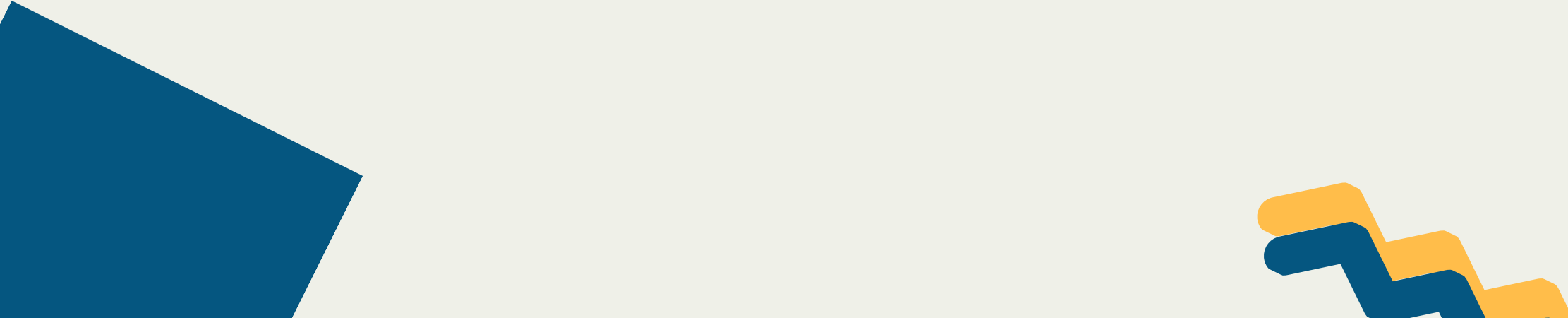
When first looking at the matrix, things can be highly confusing. However, they truly are a very simple thing to fill in. To break it down: every row will contain information about ONE study and each column pertains to different pieces of information about a study.

Essentially, the matrix is a way to pull out the essential pieces of information about publications, so that when you are writing your lit review, you have the summaries in an easy to access format. The matrix also helps you to weed out those that maybe aren't applicable or aren't credible/quality sources, which might be based on the type of study done, limitations of the study, etc.

To fill it out, you first need an article or scholarly publication. Then, just go column by column and paraphrase the needed information; you are legitimately just pulling out things piece by piece to make an abbreviated skeleton of the article. Some professors will prefer full sentences or bulleted lists, so be sure you check with yours before beginning your matrix.





A handy trick similar to organizing things in Zotero, is that you can use ctrl + f to find keywords mentioned across multiple articles and/or you can colorcode (for your personal use) studies which are related to one another and should be grouped in your lit review.





## NOW THAT I HAVE MY INFORMATION, HOW DO I ORGANIZE A LIT REVIEW?

When beginning to write your lit review, you need to first decide how you want to organize it. The main ways of organizing are:

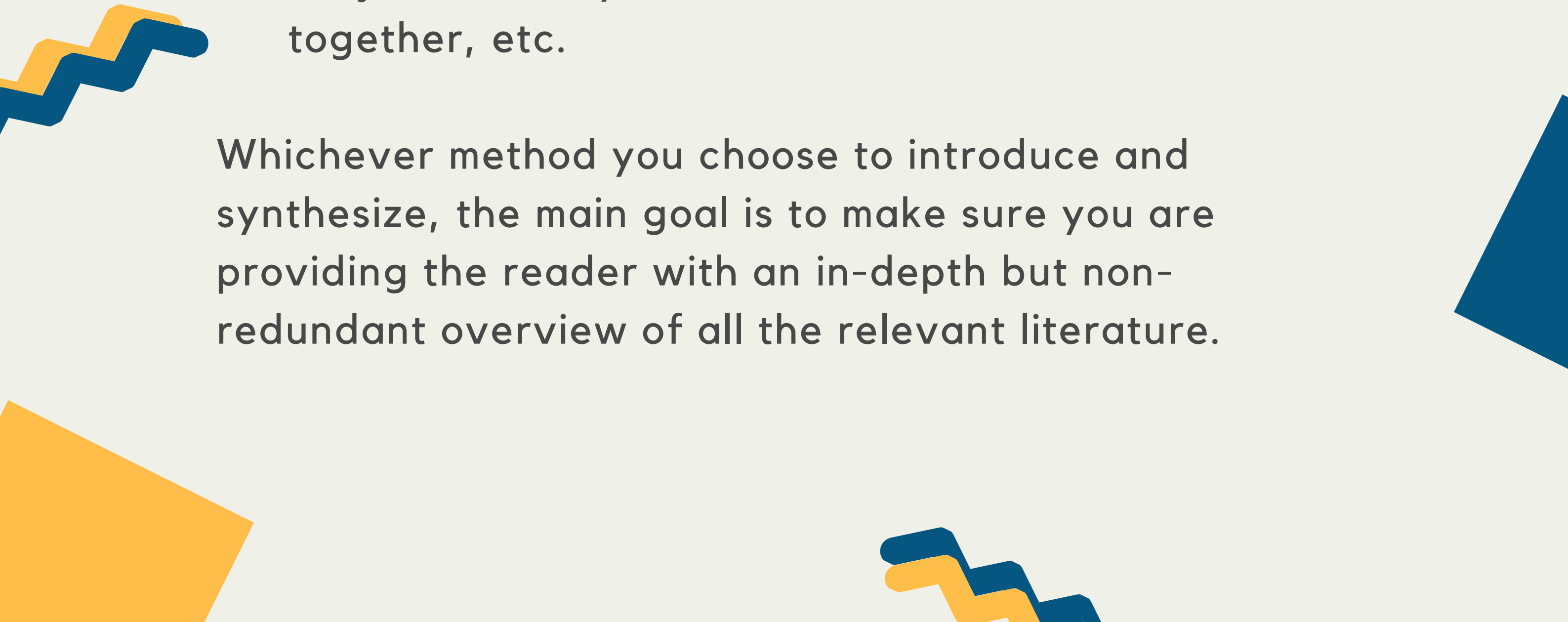
1. **Methodological:** This method is centered on grouping by the methods used in the writing. In a scientific lit review, this might be grouping by type of study (quasi vs single subject vs multifactorial).
  2. **Chronological:** As it sounds, this organization style is based on the date of publication going from oldest to newest or vice versa. This can be especially helpful if your topic has to do with progression of something, whether it be attitudes over time, symptoms over time, or other longitudinal type questions.
  3. **Thematic:** A thematic angle of organization is centered on different themes. In completing your matrices, some of the things you might find are that different themes arise from the literature and what previous researchers have found related to your topic. These major themes can be specified and used to organize all the publications you have reviewed.
  4. **Major Theories/Models:** This strategy is similar to thematic in that there are major categories that have been proven/found in prior literature and it is through those lenses that all the information is organized. This can be helpful if your research question is related in some way to a theory
- 
- 



## NOW, HOW DO I SYNTHESIZE MY INFORMATION?

Initially, looking at the amount of information you have to work with can be quite terrifying, the strategies you use to weave it all together are the exact same as what would be used when writing a standard research paper. The golden rule, of course, is to always paraphrase your material and never direct quote, but your organization method can also help you decide what goes where. From this point, you can choose the way you introduce your information. Underneath the sections you have delineated you can:

- Go study by study and link it back to your heading, but this can become choppy and not as seamless.
- Introduce the groups of studies by bookending your paragraph with citations for all the discussed studies - ensuring you use information from each in all your sentences.
- A few studies at a time. For example, maybe you have 10 studies under one heading but 3 are single subject and so you choose to discuss those together, etc.

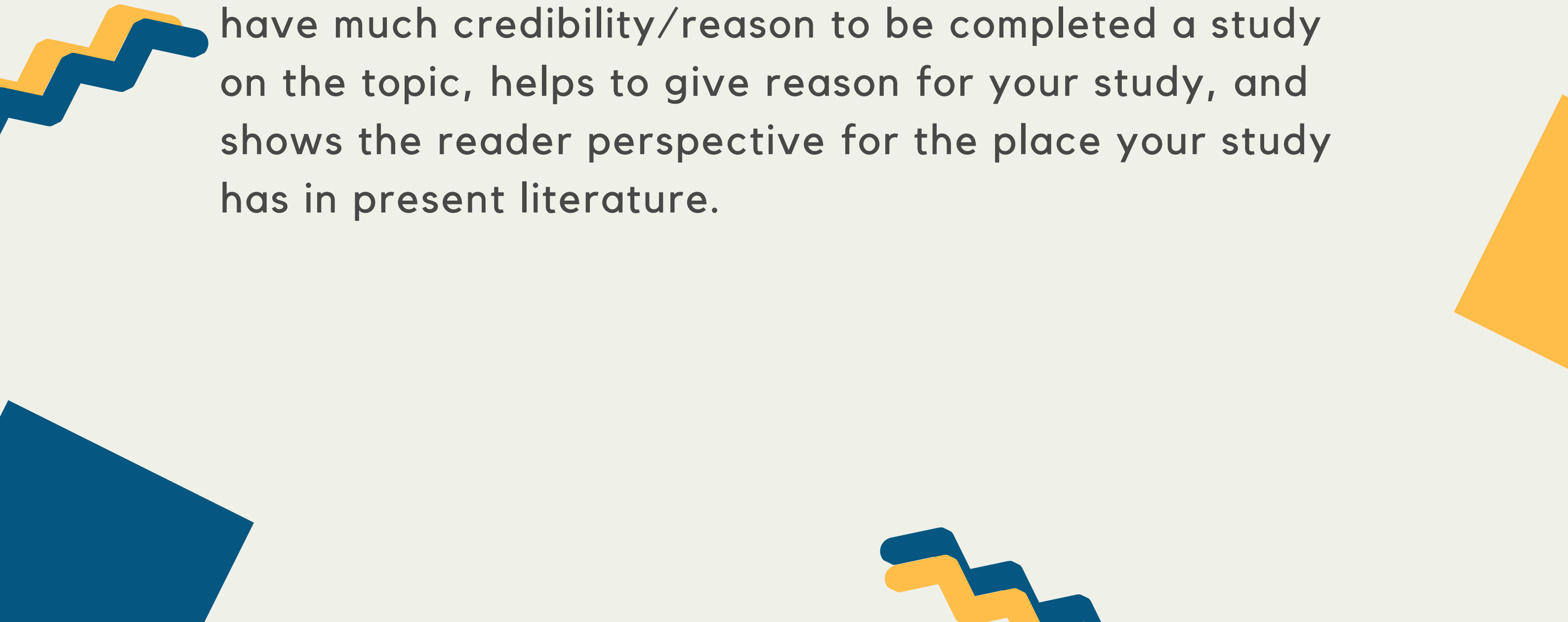


Whichever method you choose to introduce and synthesize, the main goal is to make sure you are providing the reader with an in-depth but non-redundant overview of all the relevant literature.



## HOW DO I END MY LITERATURE REVIEW?

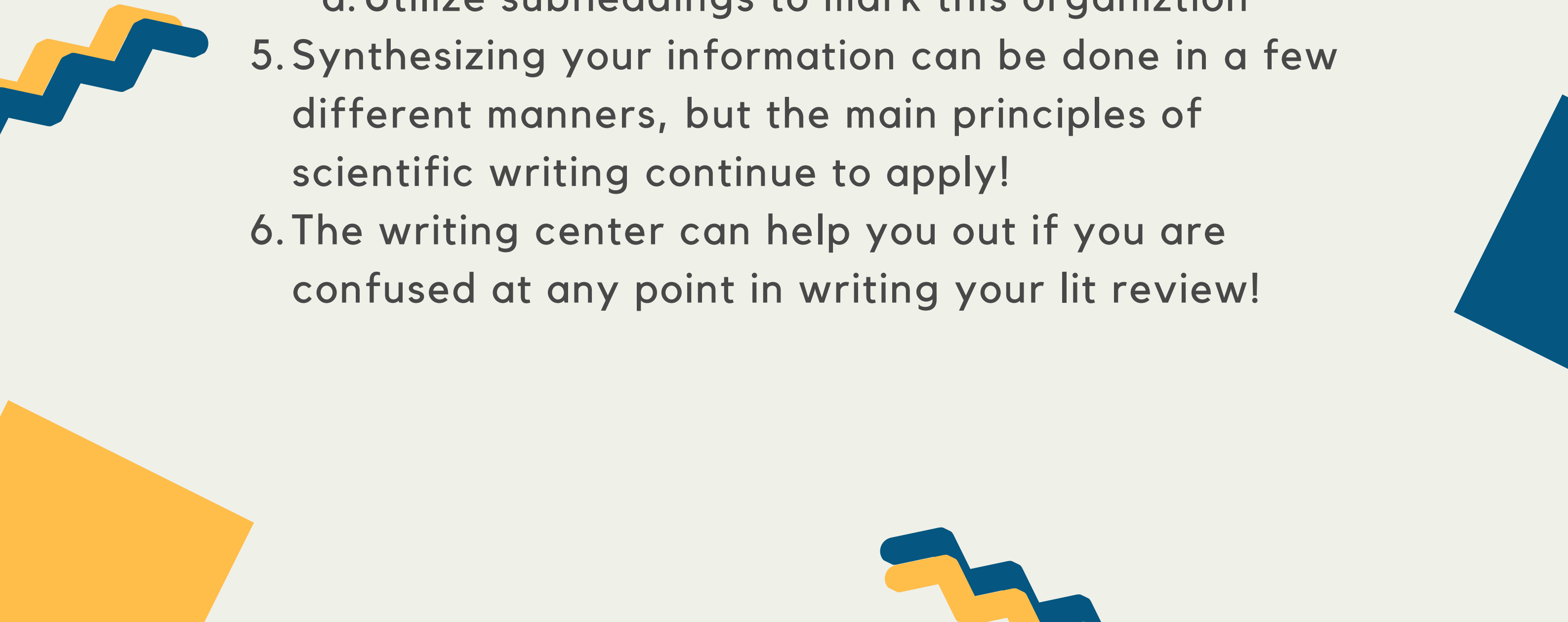
Ending the lit review depends on the context in which it is being used. If it is a standalone study, then you end it by bringing it all back to the research question and what the relevant literature says. Similarly, if it is a chapter in a thesis, then you will funnel it all back down to highlight the gap in the literature, which should be closely related to what your research question is. Bringing all the information down to this pinpoint of your research question helps to justify why your study needs to happen and sets you up to continue with your further chapters, wherein you then discuss methods, data, findings, and then bring it all together in your discussion and conclusion.



Overall, the literature review is an important piece of scientific writing as it helps to make sure you are highly informed on the subject, otherwise you don't have much credibility/reason to be completed a study on the topic, helps to give reason for your study, and shows the reader perspective for the place your study has in present literature.



## QUICK REFERENCE TIPS AND TRICKS FOR THE LIT REVIEW

1. It is going to be long, which is a good thing. This is supposed to be a comprehensive piece of writing that covers all existing and relevant literature.
    - a. This in turn means it should be grounded in literature and heavily cited.
  2. Utilizing your article matrices will be invaluable to organization and construction of your lit review. While they might not be the most exciting thing to complete, doing it thoroughly will save you from scrambling through articles and abstracts during the writing process.
  3. While this is meant to be comprehensive, you do not have to include every single article under the sun, you still want to be selective. If you originally think an article will fit but it ends up not being a credible source, then you don't have to include it.
  4. There are 4 different methods to organize the information, and these are: methodological, thematic, chronological, and major theories/models.
    - a. Utilize subheadings to mark this organization
  5. Synthesizing your information can be done in a few different manners, but the main principles of scientific writing continue to apply!
  6. The writing center can help you out if you are confused at any point in writing your lit review!
- 



## REFERENCES


Ashford University. (n.d.). *Writing a literature review*.  
<https://writingcenter.ashford.edu/writing-literature-review>

Boston College Libraries. (2020, Sug 5). *Writing a literature review: Phase 5: Organizing the review*.  
<https://libguides.bc.edu/litreview/phase5>

NC State University Libraries. (Director). (n.d.).  
*Literature reviews: An overview for graduate students*.  
[Video]. NC State.

Sacred Heart University Library (n.d.). Organizing academic research papers: 5. the literature reveiw.  
<https://library.sacredheart.edu/c.php?g=29803&p=185920>

The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. (n.d.). *Literature reviews*.  
<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/literature-reviews/>



UC Santa Cruz. (n.d.). *Write a literature review*.  
<https://guides.library.ucsc.edu/write-a-literature-review>

USC Libraries. (2020, Aug 6). *Organizing your social sciences research paper: 5. the literature review*.  
<https://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/literaturereview>  
w

