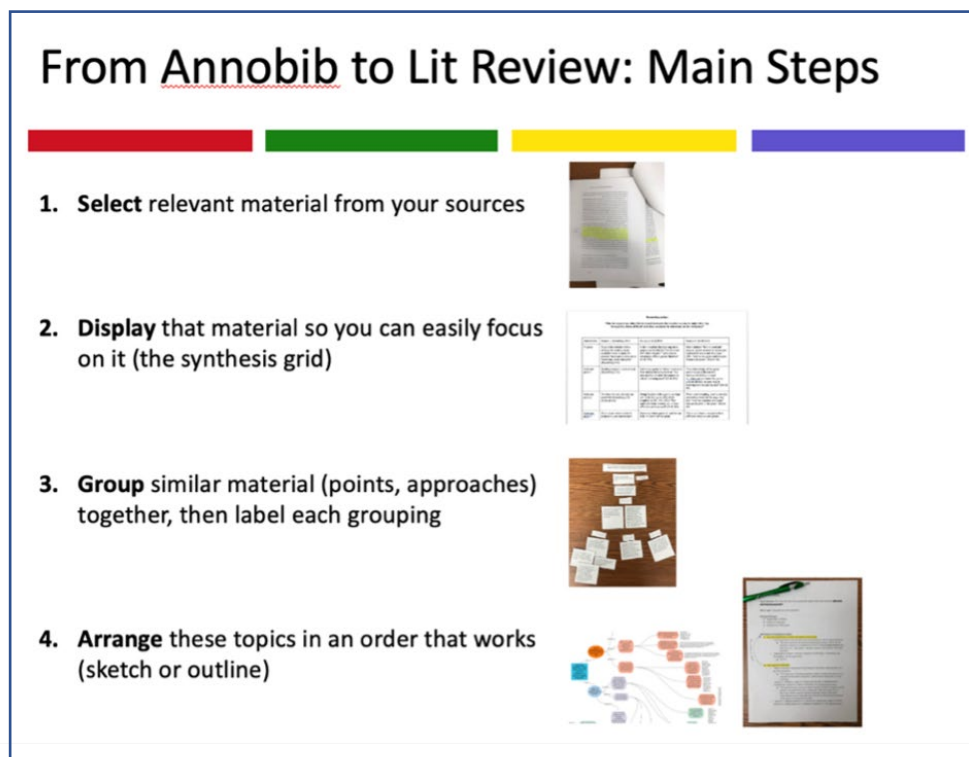*Scaffolding the Review of the Literature*

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Students can struggle with writing reviews of the literature. The task can seem overwhelming, so I scaffold my lit review assignment in English 302 with four goals in mind:

- to break the task into manageable chunks
- to help students reduce the amount of text they work with
- to provide a strategy for generating a structure for the paper
- to externalize the complex thought processes that go into synthesizing sources

The stepped-out process described below comes after students have completed their research (and an annotated bibliography) and before they begin drafting the lit review.

From Annobib to Lit Review: Main Steps

1. **Select** relevant material from your sources

2. **Display** that material so you can easily focus on it (the synthesis grid)

3. **Group** similar material (points, approaches) together, then label each grouping

4. **Arrange** these topics in an order that works (sketch or outline)

Select – Students identify the material from each source that is relevant to their research question. They can extract quotations or paraphrase key passages. This step reduces the amount of material they work with with as they go forward—but it's the right material.

Display – Students place the selected material in a grid, allowing them to see all of their relevant source material in a single array, all oriented to the research question. Students look at each others' grids and ask questions when they cannot see how a given cell in the grid addresses its research question.

Group – To launch this step, I bring a sample grid and many pairs of scissors to class, give each student a copy of the grid, and invite them to cut it up into its cells. I then ask them to group cells together that make similar kind of points. Students move the cells around on the tabletop, trying different

configurations. This concrete process does a lot to illuminate what it means to "show how your sources are conversing with one another," and it helps them generate the topics that will form the backbone of their lit review's structure. Students also see that their colleagues rarely group the sources identically, and I underscore the point that their own unique perspectives help shape their synthesis.

Label and order – As students group the source material in the cut-up grid, they tend to label each group with a noun phrase. Their next step is to rework the noun-phrase label into an assertion that makes the point each grouping lets them make. Finally, they look at their assertions and arrange the groupings in an order that makes sense to them, either because it tells a good story, makes a good argument, or just feels intuitively like the right order. At this point they can create a sketch or outline, or move to drafting the lit review.

In class I acknowledge that this stepped-out process is not the "right" way to make your way to a lit review, and that people have a variety of strategies for synthesizing sources. Some writers do many of these steps "in their heads," without externalizing their thought processes. But first-time writers of lit reviews often say they appreciate the scaffolding, and more intuitive writers say the process gives them some language for talking about their tacit procedureal knowledge.