Two years ago, I embarked in one of the most challenging and yet rewarding academic experiences thus far: writing my first research manuscript for the Ronald E. McNair Research Program. The goal of this program is to prepare students for graduate school by introducing us to scientific writing. In light of this, I was required to 1) conduct a literature review, 2) develop a research study, and 3) complete a research manuscript about the findings. The first phase of this project was to research the background about our topic of interest in order to develop our project. This was the beginning of my research journey.

My topic of interest was domestic violence and mental health. While there are innumerable sources of information on the Internet about this topic, I had to focus on scientific sources, particularly peer-reviewed journals. In academia, it is imperative to support each claim that the writer makes in order to maintain and enhance the credibility and validity of the research being conducted. While other sources may be used such as websites or books, their utilization in science is primarily to provide background information, and less so to serve as evidence. Again, the essence of scientific research is to provide a trustworthy overview of the topic through evidence-based articles, which are typically found in published journals.

As a novice researcher, I did not know how to start my literature review. Hence, I took advantage of the writing resources offered by Raynor Memorial Libraries and made an appointment with a research consultant. During my appointment, a research librarian guided me through the process of where and what to search for in order to find the information I needed. This was when I was introduced to online databases, inter-library loan, and MU’s catalogs. Since I was interested in domestic violence and mental health, I focused on psychological databases such as PsycINFO, Psychology in ProQuest, and Web of Science. Another useful source that I utilized was
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Google Scholar, which also has scholarly articles, and the inter-library loan to access sources that I could not find at Marquette.

As explained by the research librarian, the key to finding what you look for is to develop a list of potential keywords. In my case, I was able to create a list of words/phrases that related to my topic of domestic violence including “intimate partner violence,” “dating violence,” “dating aggression,” “interpersonal violence,” among others. Similarly, for mental health I also searched for “mental well-being,” “depression,” “anxiety,” and “posttraumatic stress disorder.” In the process, I also learned that the use of AND, OR, and NOT in search engines would connect my concepts and with that obtain more specific search findings. These research techniques helped me obtain a wide range of research articles related to my topic, which became a challenge in the selection of my bibliography.

In order reduce the amount of search findings, I had to become more selective. Based on the purposes of my study, I decided to focus on recent articles (e.g. 2000-present) and with that exclude outdated sources. Nevertheless, I still included a few articles that were either the original theoretical frameworks or major studies that were commonly cited. Other exclusions were dissertations since they were not peer-reviewed, and studies conducted outside of the United States because my study focus was on American emerging adults.

Although writing a literature review can become the most time-consuming and tedious phase of scientific research, I was able to develop some useful techniques. For instance, the creation of an annotated bibliography allowed me to keep my information organized and easily accessible thanks to the magic of the “find” tap. Overall, this project has helped me learn that if a project—such as a research paper—seems extremely difficult, it is because you are not taking advantage of the resources and techniques that exist both in the Internet and at your institution.