Seeking More Rigorous Author Guidelines at *C&RL*

Amy Riegelman and Megan Kocher

In August 2025, we submitted a letter to the editor calling on *College & Research Libraries* (*C&RL*) to adopt more rigorous policies for the articles it publishes, particularly literature review articles and theoretical/critical articles; we were then asked to submit it as a guest editorial. The letter was prompted by conversations with our colleagues concerning *C&RL*'s lack of policies on the types of reviews it will publish and requirements for conducting or reporting guideline use. As evidence synthesis librarians and leaders of the Evidence Synthesis Institute, we have some expertise in standards for rigorous and transparent conducting and reporting methods (Evidence Synthesis Institute, 2025). Rigorous reviews should be comprehensive and assess the totality of what is known within research questions so that reviews can be used to inform evidence-based practices and policies. A lack of guidelines enables authors to cherry pick citations and skew the evidence to meet claims. As one of the most respected journals in academic librarianship, *C&RL* has a responsibility to publish high quality research and reviews, and it is currently falling behind in this regard. Academic librarians work with research teams in a broad array of disciplines to produce rigorous evidence syntheses (e.g., scoping reviews, systematic reviews, meta-analyses), and we should apply the same standards to our own field. We call on *C&RL* to be a part of that.

We acknowledge that outgoing *C&RL* Editor, Kristen Totleben (2025), wrote in a recent letter that the editor and editorial board are working on changes to make "editorial processes such as peer review more transparent, equitable, and efficient." While this is a step in the right direction, we are concerned that this does not do enough to address the quality and rigor of research published in the journal. The ACRL Plan for Excellence (2022) envisioned "academic and research libraries and librarians as catalysts in exceptional research and learning." We argue that "exceptional" research requires rigorous methods and that the leading journal in our discipline should be an exemplar in this area.

Status Quo

We believe that guideline ambiguity regarding methods, results, and discussion has potential to cause harm. Not having policies about secondary research methods gives authors carte blanche

Amy Riegelman is Social Sciences & Evidence Synthesis Librarian at the University of Minnesota, email: aspringe@umn.edu; Megan Kocher is Science & Evidence Synthesis Librarian at the University of Minnesota, email: mkocher@umn.edu

to cherry pick included studies and callously cite problematic literature without context or consequence. The current *C&RL* author guidelines contain no such requirements for literature selection, evaluation, or addressing manuscript limitations and/or weaknesses. The current guidelines do not contain the word *rigor* (nor any synonyms) whereas many other journal guidelines do. The guidelines also do not indicate any reference to transparency regarding research design and analysis (Sayre & Riegelman, 2018; Sayre & Riegelman, 2019).

Regarding selection of included literature in manuscripts, authors could be expected to include a rationale for inclusion criteria or methods used to identify such literature. For the most rigorous types of reviews (e.g., systematic reviews, meta-analyses), there are established conducting and reporting guidelines (Aloe et al., 2024; Higgins et al., 2023; Page et al., 2021).We are not suggesting that *C&RL* only publish these types of reviews as they are not appropriate for all types of reviews in this field, but that they provide an example of how transparency and rigor can be achieved. Presently at *C&RL*, authors are not required to transparently report how they acquired included studies, nor the methods used to select their final citations. Providing information on how sources were selected, and why, is not a practice that is limited to a specific discipline or review type. Failure to transparently report makes it impossible to reproduce or replicate others' work (Sayre & Riegelman, 2018; Sayre & Riegelman, 2019).

C&RL articles have the potential to influence (ideally) evidence-based policy and practice, and therefore, it is crucial that our peer reviewed literature contains rigorous methods. As the flagship journal of ACRL, this should be an expectation. At the very least, *C&RL* should be following ACRL's *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (2015). The author guidelines as currently written do not require or even inspire authors to be in accordance with the organization's own information literacy standards. As an example, we believe that a recently published article (Antelman, 2025) fell short on many of the information literacy concepts, thus leading to allegations of biased cherry-picking of sources and failure to evaluate sources (Academic librarians of #CripLib, 2025). In the Authority is Constructed and Contextual threshold concept, even novice learners are expected to "critically examine all evidence … and to ask relevant questions about origins, context, and suitability for the current information need" *(Framework,* 2015). Moreover, in the Information Creation as a Process threshold concept, one knowledge practice is to synthesize multiple sources and "monitor gathered information and assess for gaps or weaknesses" (*Framework*, 2015).

Regarding the potential for cherry-picking and skewing evidence to meet claims, the only mention of bias in *C&RL's* current guidelines is the following: "Clear, simple prose enhances the presentation of ideas and opinions. The editor encourages writing in the active voice and adhering to APA's guide for Bias-Free Language." The American Psychological Association's (APA) (2020) text on Bias-Free Language is featured in chapter 5 of the APA Manual, and *C&RL* links to APA's Bias-Free Language web page (American Psychological Association, 2025). On that web page, APA states that the Bias-Free Language guidelines and recommendations "should be used in conjunction with APA's Inclusive Language Guide and the Journal Article Reporting Standards for Race, Ethnicity, and Culture (JARS-REC)." JARS-REC's purpose was "to design a comprehensive set of standards to promote research transparency and methodological rigor in how we analyze race, ethnicity, and culture in behavioral science research." Authors are asked to "[c]onsider whether the research findings could be misinterpreted or misused to cause harm to members of historically excluded groups. Address how the authors can mitigate these risks." Further, JARS-REC has a section on *Citation*

Bias and Equitable Citation Praxis. For *C&RL* to say that they require adherence to APA's guide to Bias-Free Language (which leans on JARS-REC) feels disingenuous, or at least out of step with their current requirements.

Currently *C&RL* does not require authors to include a limitations section, which is a common expectation of many journals. The ACRL threshold concept Research as Inquiry has a disposition that we think is aligned with the value of requiring a limitations section in future *C&RL* manuscripts. The relevant Research as Inquiry disposition states that, "[l]earners who are developing their information literate abilities" should "demonstrate intellectual humility (i.e., recognize their own intellectual or experiential limitations)." We feel strongly that future published articles should include a limitations section wherein authors are asked to confront their own intellectual and experimental limitations. As to how this relates to review and theoretical/critical articles, authors should state when they did not synthesize the totality of the evidence (e.g., engaged in cherry-picking) or if they did not evaluate or contextualize the included literature, etc.

As for peer reviewer obligations, *C&RL* guidelines currently state that peer reviewers are presented with basic questions about perspective and building on existing work but are not directed to consider the rigorousness with which supporting citations were gathered and evaluated. We know that *C&RL* is currently re-examining the peer review process, and we encourage them to insert language about rigor.

Benefits

Implementing policies for review articles would have numerous benefits for *C&RL*, notably:

- They would result in an increased quality of submitted and published review articles.
- Through setting standards for transparency and reproducibility, they would make the journal less prone to accusations of bias, such as those recently brought by the academic librarians of #CripLib (2025) in response to an article that narrowly selected and misrepresented evidence.
- They would support the practice of evidence-based librarianship and information literate practices.

These improvements would have an overall positive impact on the entire field of librarianship, thus making us, as librarians, producers of the same high-quality evidence that we seek to procure for our patrons.

Examples

The types of policies for review/critical articles we are asking *C&RL* to implement are common across other journals in LIS and other social sciences. We have gathered several examples to demonstrate what this looks like in their policies/instructions to authors.

portal: Libraries and the Academy provides explicit guidance for evidence synthesis submissions, recommending that, "*authors adhere to a pre-existing guideline* for conducting systematic reviews, such as the Cochrane Handbook, the Campbell Collaboration, or another established, discipline-relevant guideline. The format of the paper submitted to *portal* should conform to *reporting guidelines such as PRISMA* or one of its extensions" (2025, emphasis added).

Evidence Based Library and Information Practice states in its instructions to authors that, "Review articles aim to establish new and authoritative findings based on an analysis of existing evidence *using an established review framework and objective, reliable, and reproducible*

research methods. Reviews may take several different forms, including systematic reviews, scoping reviews, narrative reviews, meta-analyses, or state-of-the-art reviews, among others" (n.d., emphasis added). The journal further provides a structure and headings to use in the reporting of review articles and refers authors to Grant & Booth (2009) for an explanation of review types and expectations.

Psychology of Music requires rigor and transparent reporting for theoretical critical papers, stating for its authors that, "Theoretical critical papers which stimulate intellectual discourse and further research through engagement with existing concepts, models, or frameworks. This format broadly encompasses papers of various types, such as critical, methodological, and conceptual contributions to music psychology research, and systematic reviews. *All such papers must constitute a rigorous, structured approach to evaluating and advancing theoretical knowledge*" (Psychology of Music, 2025, emphasis added). It allows for flexibility in which reporting standards are applied, stating that, "Authors of theoretical critical papers should choose an effective and transparent reporting structure appropriate to their work," and that, "Our journal's editorial policy prioritizes methodological integrity over standardized reporting" (Psychology of Music, 2025).

Environmental Evidence Journal specializes in publishing evidence syntheses and, as such, provides extensive guidelines for multiple types of reviews (Collaboration for Environmental Evidence, 2025). Further, this journal's managing body, the Collaboration for Environmental Evidence, calls out the importance of these guidelines in their "Aims and Scope," stating "The need for rigour, objectivity and transparency in reaching conclusions from a body of scientific information is evident in many areas of policy and practice, from clinical medicine to social justice. Our environment and the way we manage it are no exceptions and there are many urgent problems for which we need a reliable source of evidence on which to base actions. Many of these actions will be controversial and/or expensive and *it is vital that they are informed by the best available evidence and not simply by the assertions or beliefs of vested interest groups … For evidence synthesis to be credible, legitimate and reliable, standards regarding its conduct need to be clearly defined*. Such standards include examining possible sources of bias both in the evidence and in the way the review and synthesis are conducted. In so doing, *the goal is to provide an explicit level of trust and confidence in the findings to the end-user*" (Collaboration for Environmental Evidence, 2021, emphasis added).

Conclusion

C&RL plays a prominent role in academic library scholarly literature and with that power comes responsibility. It is time for revisions to *C&RL*'s author guidelines to reflect rigorous expectations regarding synthesizing the existing literature, evaluating literature, and addressing limitations and weaknesses. Examples we have provided from other journals demonstrate a variety of ways this can be accomplished to suit the needs of the journal and its authors to provide the best evidence to readers, practitioners, and policy makers.

References
Academic librarians of #CripLib. (2025). Open letter to CRL from the academic wing of #CripLib. *ACRLog*. https://acrlog.org/2025/05/27/open-letter-to-crl-from-the-academic-wing-of-criplib/comment-page-1/#comment-3712283

Aloe, A. M., Dewidar, O., Hennessy, E. A., Pigott, T., Stewart, G., Welch, V., … & Campbell MECCIR Working Group. (2024). Campbell Standards: Modernizing Campbell's Methodologic Expectations for Campbell Col-

laboration Intervention Reviews (MECCIR). *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, *20*(4), e1445. https://doi.org/10.1002/cl2.1445

American Library Association. (2022). ACRL plan for excellence. https://www.ala.org/acrl/aboutacrl/strategic-plan/stratplan

American Psychological Association. (2025). Bias-free language. https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language

American Psychological Association. (2020). Publication manual of the American Psychological Association: The official guide to APA style. (Seventh edition). American Psychological Association.

Antelman, K. (2025). Respecting privacy of thought in DEI training. *College & Research Libraries*, *86*(3), 430. https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.86.3.430

ASHA. (2025). *Author Resource Center*. ASHA.org. https://academy.pubs.asha.org/asha-journals-author-resource-center/selecting-a-journal/jslhr/

College & Research Libraries. (2025). *Author guidelines*. https://crl.acrl.org/index.php/crl/about/submissions#authorGuidelines.

Collaboration for Environmental Evidence. (2021). *Aims and scope*. Environmental Evidence. https://environmentalevidence.org/information-for-authors/aims-and-scope-2/

Collaboration for Environmental Evidence. (2025). *Submission guidelines*. Environmental Evidence. https://environmentalevidencejournal.biomedcentral.com/submission-guidelines/preparing-your-manuscript

Evidence Based Library and Information Practice (n.d.). *Instructions for authors*. https://journals.library.ualberta.ca/eblip/index.php/EBLIP/guidelines

Evidence Synthesis Institute. (2025). University libraries. https://z.umn.edu/esinstitute

Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education. (February 2, 2015). Association of College and Research Libraries. https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework

Grant, M. J., & Booth, A. (2009). A typology of reviews: an analysis of 14 review types and associated methodologies. *Health Information & Libraries Journal*, *26*(2), 91-108. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-1842.2009.00848.x

Higgins J. P. T., Lasserson T., Thomas J., Flemyng E., Churchill R. (2023). Methodological expectations of Cochrane intervention reviews. Cochrane. https://www.cochrane.org/authors/handbooks-and-manuals/mecir-manual

Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C., Mulrow, C. D., … & Moher, D. (2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *bmj*, 372. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71

portal: Libraries and the Academy. (2025). https://www.press.jhu.edu/journals/portal-libraries-and-academy

Psychology of Music. (2025). *Submission guidelines*. Sage Journals. https://journals.sagepub.com/author-instructions/POM

Sayre, F., & Riegelman, A. (2018). The reproducibility crisis and the role of academic libraries. *College & Research Libraries*, *79*(1), 2. https://dx.doi.org/10.5860/crl.79.1.2

Sayre, F. & Riegelman, A. (2019). Replicable services for reproducible research: A model for academic Libraries. *College & Research Libraries*, *80*(2), 260–272. https://dx.doi.org/10.5860/crl.80.2.260

Totleben, K. (2025). Letter from the editor. *College & Research Libraries*, *86*(4), 530. https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.86.4.530