

lit-tag: an app for adding custom tags and notes to a citation database

12 January 2026

Summary

To facilitate the review, evaluation and analysis of scientific literature, the lit-tag R Shiny R Core Team (2024); Chang et al. (2026) application provides a convenient interface for users to generate a citation database with custom, user-defined tags and notes. Lit-tag is not subject-specific and is useful for any field of research. Starting with a table of citations exported from a Zotero library and a user-generated Excel file describing a set of tags and notes fields, lit-tag provides tools for assigning tags and notes to papers (“lit-tag-builder” module) and for exporting, graphing, and generating reports from the resulting database (“lit-tag-viewer” module). The application has been used in several scientific reviews related to marine carbon dioxide removal Grabb, Wood, and McElhany (n.d.); McElhany et al. (n.d.); Gurney-Smith et al. (n.d.).

Statement of need

Scientific literature review and meta-analysis projects often involve summarizing the contents of many, often hundreds, of papers Snyder (2019). During the review, data are collected on many different attributes of the study (e.g., experiment type, treatment conditions, location, results, etc.). Although literature review projects may start out collecting this information in a spreadsheet, the approach quickly becomes unwieldy as the number of papers and attributes increases. Dedicated citation tools, such as Zotero, have very limited tag and notes capability that is insufficient for projects requiring a complex hierarchical tag structure with managed input options. At the same time researchers are compiling data on the contents of papers, they need to conveniently collect and use the full citation information for each paper. The lit-tag app links the contents of a library generated with Zotero Digital Scholar (2025), an open-source reference management software which has tools for easily downloading citation information and adding references to documents, with a database of user-defined paper attributes and notes.

Design

The lit-tag app has two modules: 1) lit-tag-builder for generating, editing and updating the database and 2) lit-tag-viewer for generating tables, graphs and reports from the database (Figure 1).

The main editing tab in the builder module contains panels for selecting papers, viewing paper details and notes, and assigning tags to papers (Figure 2). Other tabs in the builder module have tools for syncing with the Zotero database when adding new papers, database maintenance for global edits of the database (e.g., renaming a tag option, deleting categories), creating and linking to a new Zotero database and viewing the module user guide.

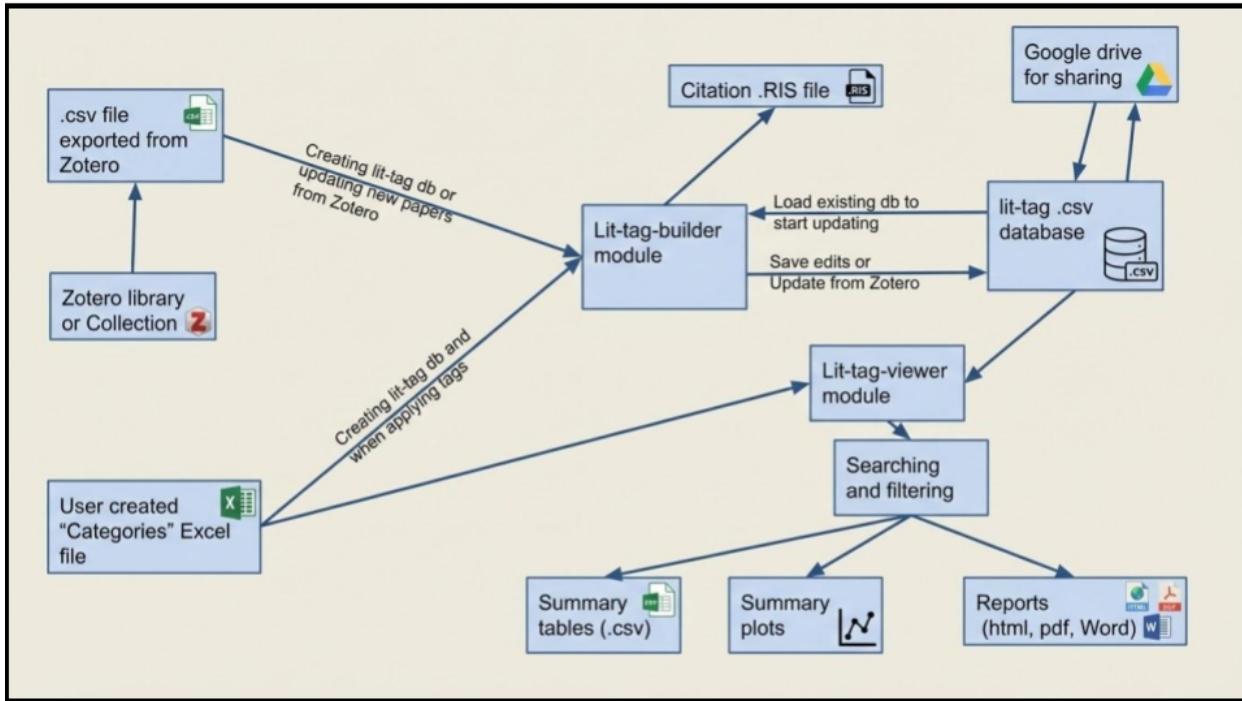


Figure 1: Relationship between Zotero, lit-tag-builder module, lit-tag-viewer module and imported/exported files. The lit-tag database is stored as a .csv file on a local computer, so it is not designed for simultaneous edits by multiple users. Sequential editing by multiple users can be accomplished by sharing the database on a platform such as Google Drive.

The viewer module contains options for searching and filtering the database (including custom searches using R syntax), plotting summary tables using any two tag variables for full and filtered datasets (Figure 3), and generating custom tables (csv files) and reports (html, pdf or word).

Acknowledgements

Madison Wood's work on this project was supported by a Sea Grant Knauss Fellowship. Kalina Grabb's work on this project was supported by funding from NOAA Ocean Acidification Program and NOAA Northeast Fisheries Science Center through IBSS. We would also like to thank the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) mCDR x Fisheries Workshop group for inspiration and app testing.

References

- Chang, W, J Cheng, J Allaire, C Sievert, B Schloerke, G Aden-Buie, Y Xie, et al. 2026. *Shiny: Web Application Framework for r*. <https://shiny.posit.co/>.
- Digital Scholar. 2025. *Zotero*. Digital Scholar. <https://www.zotero.org/>.
- Grabb, Kalina, Madison Wood, and Paul McElhaney. n.d. “An Annotated Literature Database to Support Research on Marine Carbon Dioxide Removal (mCDR) and Fisheries Impacts.”
- Gurney-Smith, Helen, Kalina Grabb, Peter Edwards, Elizabeth Jewett, Gabriella Kitch, Paul McElhaney, Ken Paul, and Sarah Schumann. n.d. “State of the Knowledge on the Interactions Between mCDR and Fisheries.”

Builder Tag edit Sync Zotero Database Maintenance New Zotero Help

Paper table

Database File

Browse... lit-tag-database (4).cs
Upload complete

Categories File

Browse... lit-tag-categories (2).x
Upload complete

Load database

Papers in database: 870
Papers in filtered database: 870
 Exclude obsolete papers

Filter variables

Select

Filter database

Show all papers

first_author	publication_year	title
Aberle_N	2013	High tolerance of microzooplankton to ocean acidification in an Arctic coastal plankton community
Adkins_J	2021	The Dissolution Rate of CaCO ₃ in the Ocean
Admiraal_W	1977	Tolerance of estuarine benthic diatoms to high concentrations of ammonia, nitrite ion, nitrate ion and orthophosphate
Aghel_B	2022	Experimental and modeling analyzing the biogas upgrading in the microchannel: Carbon dioxide capture by seawater enriched with low-cost waste materials

Paper info and notes

Save edits

Authors: Aberle, N.; Schulz, K. G.; Stuhr, A.; Malzahn, A. M.; Ludwig, A.; Riebesell, U.
Year: 2013
Title: High tolerance of microzooplankton to ocean acidification in an Arctic coastal plankton community
Journal: Biogeosciences
Abstract
summary_notes
OA study looking at high pCO₂/low pH effects on zooplankton community.

mcdr_relevance_notes
Biological response to carbonate chemistry change (pH).

fisheries_relevance_notes
Microzooplankton composition and diversity was not directly or indirectly affected, suggesting tolerance to pH change.

Tags

general review_status location species treatment

treatment

Exposure	Chemical/mineral added
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> chemical	<input type="checkbox"/> calcium_carbonate
<input type="checkbox"/> deep_water	<input type="checkbox"/> dust
<input type="checkbox"/> electrochemical	<input type="checkbox"/> iron_sulfate
<input type="checkbox"/> low_co2	<input type="checkbox"/> naoh
<input type="checkbox"/> manufacturing_byproduct	<input type="checkbox"/> nutrients
<input type="checkbox"/> mcdr_effluent	<input type="checkbox"/> olive
<input type="checkbox"/> mineral	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other
<input type="checkbox"/> natural_exposure	<input type="checkbox"/> steel_slag_concrete_waste
<input type="checkbox"/> other	<input type="checkbox"/> not_applicable
<input type="checkbox"/> not_applicable	

Response Observed

-
- biological_effect_not_investigated
-
- biological_effect_observed
- no_effect_on_biology

Figure 2: Example screen shot of the “Tag edit” tab of lit-tag-builder module user interface.

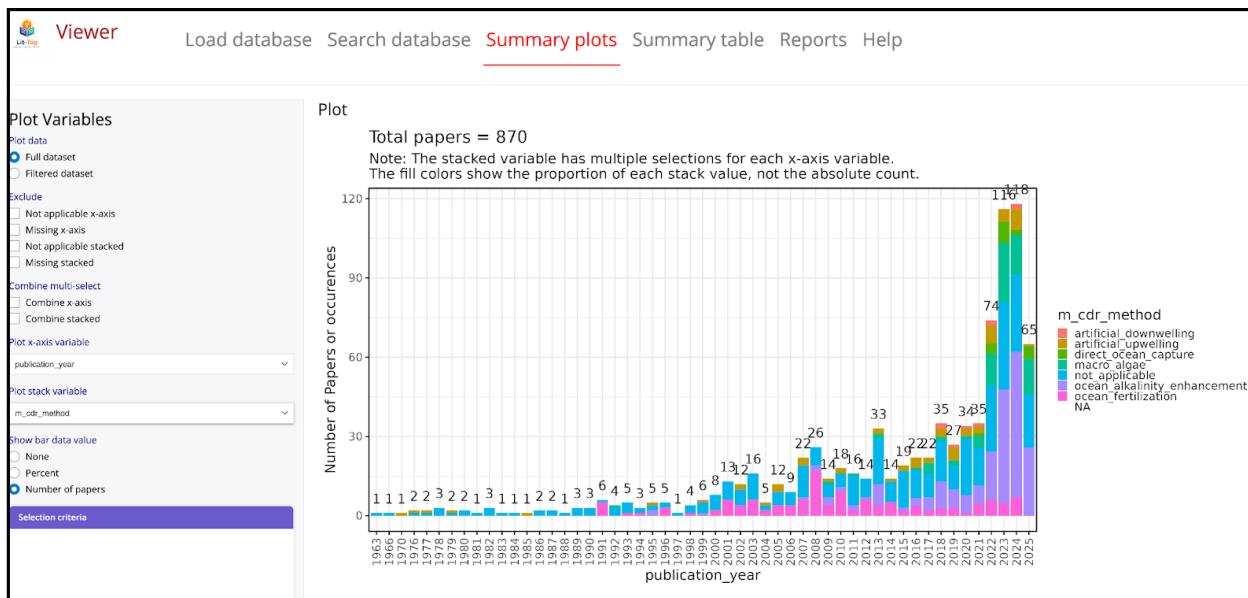


Figure 3: Example screen shot of the “Summary plots” tab of the lit-tag-viewer module.

McElhany, Paul, Mattias Cape, Giulia Faucher, Christina Frieder, Lenaig Hemery, Debora Iglesias-Rodriguez, and Chris Murray. n.d. “Biological Thresholds for mCDR Changes to Seawater Carbonate Chemistry.”

R Core Team. 2024. *R: A Language and Environment for Statistical Computing*. <https://www.R-project.org/>.

Snyder, Hannah. 2019. “Literature Review as a Research Methodology: An Overview and Guidelines.” *Journal of Business Research* 104 (November): 333–39. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039>.