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Writing an MA Thesis:

What's it about, and how do I get started?

Peace Research Institute Oslo

Independent • International • Interdisciplinary

Objectives

- What is an MA thesis for?

- Audience: Who am I writing to?

- Core argument: How do I formulate a research question and thesis statement?

- Structure: What do I need to think about at an early stage?

- Writing habits: How do I get started?

- Peer review: How can I get the most out of feedback?

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What is academic writing?

- The scientific dialogue: The on-going scholarly discourse that builds cumulative knowledge
- At Master's level show that
  - *You've been listening*
  - *You can make something out of what you have heard*


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A cultural perspective on academic writing

- ## The Anglo-Saxon tradition:
  - *The writer's job to be clear*
- ## The Francophone tradition:
  - *The reader's job to figure it out*
- ## The Asian tradition:
  - *The writer must strive to emulate predecessors*

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Audience: Who are you talking to, and what do they want from you?

- ## Scholar to scholar   Master's thesis
  - *add to cumulative knowledge*

- ## Scholar to layperson
  - *enlighten, entertain, or motivate*

- ## Scholar to user group (decision makers, practitioners or business/industry)
  - *solve a problem*

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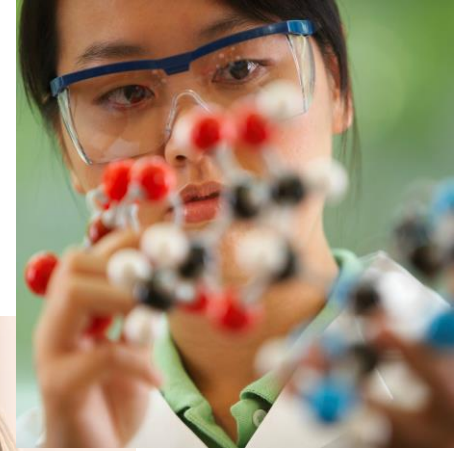
"I don't know. Tell me"

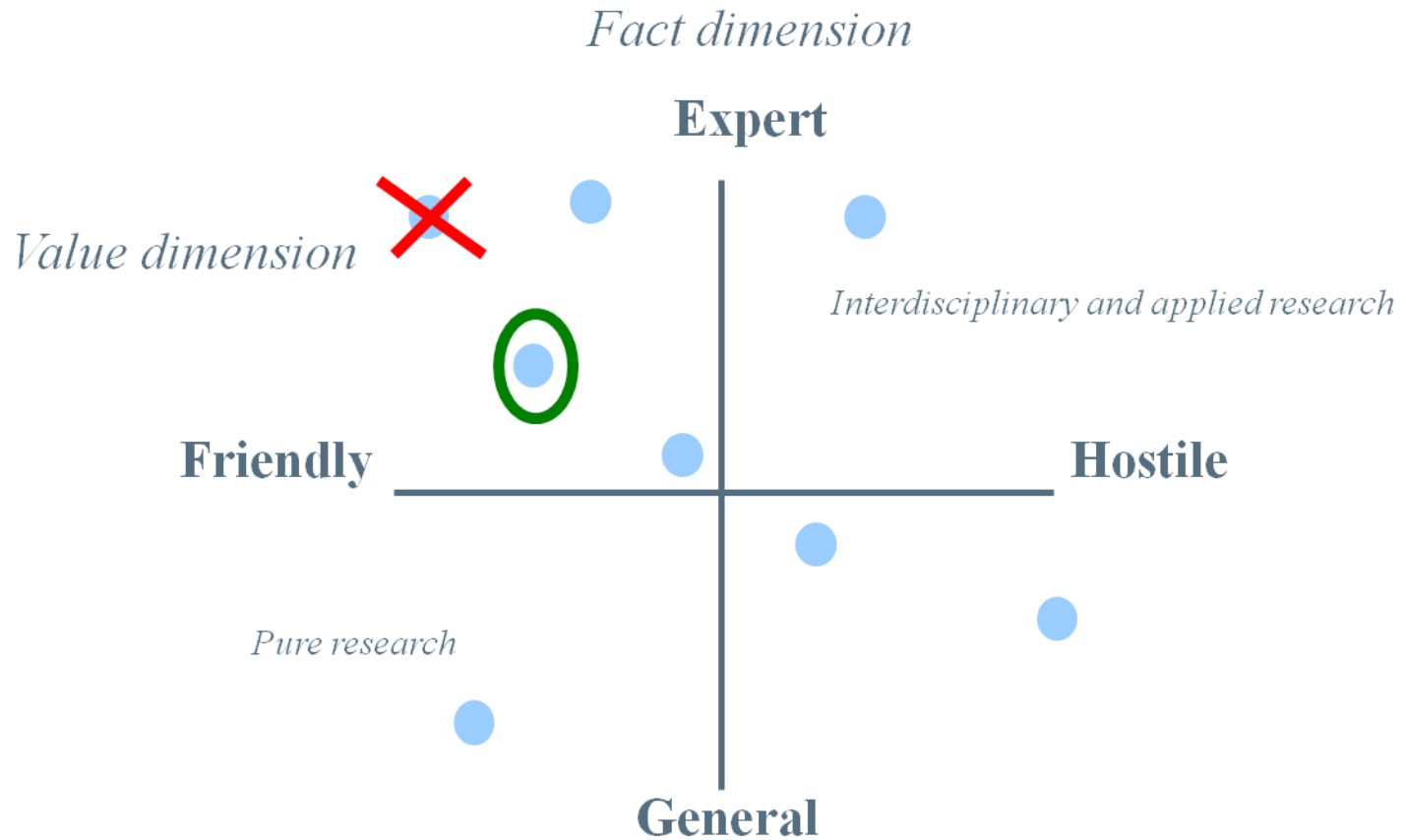- How much can you assume they know?
- How much do you need to fill in?

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- ## What aspect are controversial?

- ## Where might your assumptions differ from your audience's?
    - *Epistemology*
    - *Theory*
    - *Disciplinary knowledge*
    - *Best outcome*

"I'm not convinced. Persuade me."

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Placing your audience

Write with a single person in mind

- ## Writing for everyone = writing for no one

- ## Focus on a single person who represents your main audience

  - *How much do they know?*

  - *What would they be skeptical about?*

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- **All scholarly writing comes down to**
  - *Asking a question*
  - *Then answering it*

- **Research question + Thesis statement = Core argument**

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- Topic too broad
- Impossible to answer

But a natural part of the research process
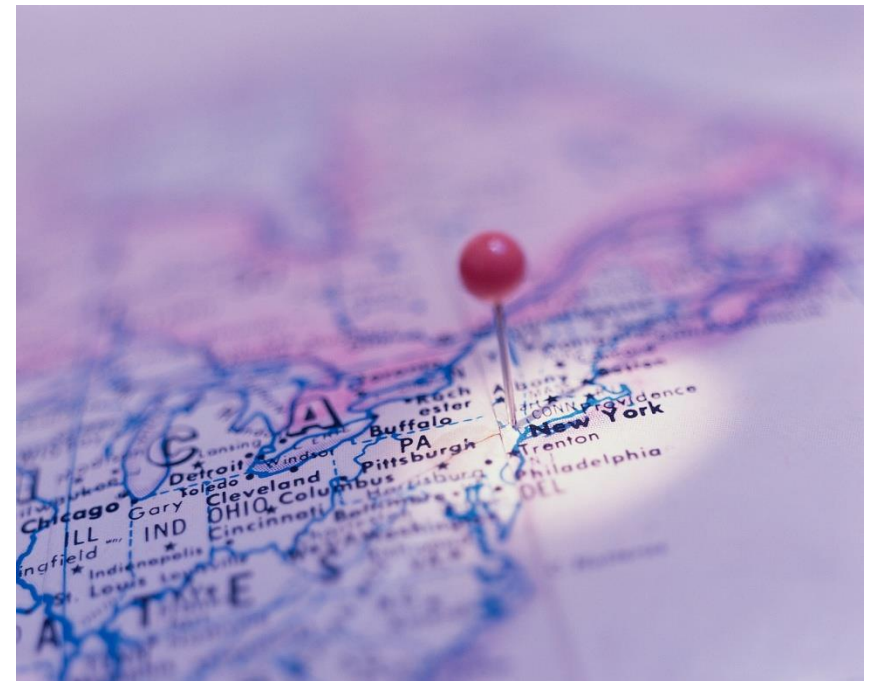
- **For the reader:**
  - *Establishes relevance*
  - *Sets expectations*
  - *Functions as your contract*
- **For the writer:**
  - *Defines scope and direction*
  - *Determines what belongs and what doesn't*
- *The secret of writing a successful paper is not coming up with the right answer, but rather the right question*

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- ## For the reader:
  - *Pinpoints author's contribution to the conversation.*
- ## For the writer:
  - *A guideline for how to structure your argumentation.*
- *If you don't know where you are going, how can you tell when you've arrived?*

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- What is this a conversation about?
- What is my contribution to this conversation?
- What do I need to prove to the reader to justify my claim?

- ## X is y because z
  - *x = the **topic**:*
    - the subject of the conversation
    - Should be subject of introduction and research question
  - *y = the **claim**:*
    - What you say *about* x
    - your point; your contribution to the conversation; the «new thing»
  - *z = the **support**:*
    - what you are providing to back your claim
    - combination of theory, empirical data, and logic
    - NOT "because I say so"!

- GWPs are not accurate systems of measure because they do not adequately take into account the different lifetimes of the various gases

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Example

- How does regime theory explain the role of the IPCC?
  - *X = role of the IPCC*
  - *Y = can be seen as negotiating arena*
  - *Z = because theory says (a), and case study shows (b)*

- INTRO: Focus on IPCC

- How *well* does regime theory explain the role of the IPCC?
  - *X = regime theory*
  - *Y = cannot capture the inherent "organizationness" of int'l orgs*
  - *Z = because it is based on assumption of anarchy*

- INTRO: Focus on regime theory

What does "because" imply?

Empirical observation

- The duration of civil war is likely to be longer when insurgent groups are located far from the center *because this is a statistically significant relationship.*

Theoretical causality/ logical inference

- The duration of civil war is likely to be longer when insurgent groups are located far from the center *because distant groups are too costly to control.*

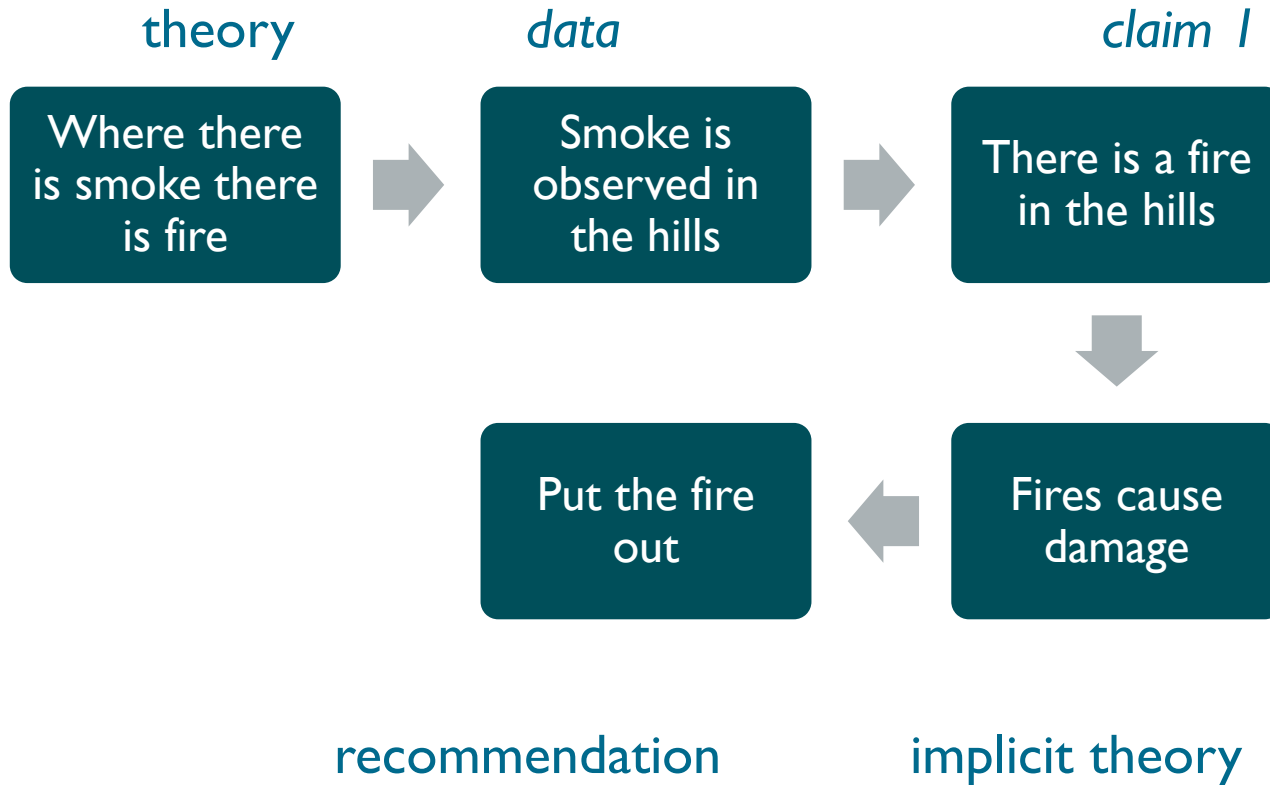**What does your method allow you to say something about?**

Do you need both to make sense?
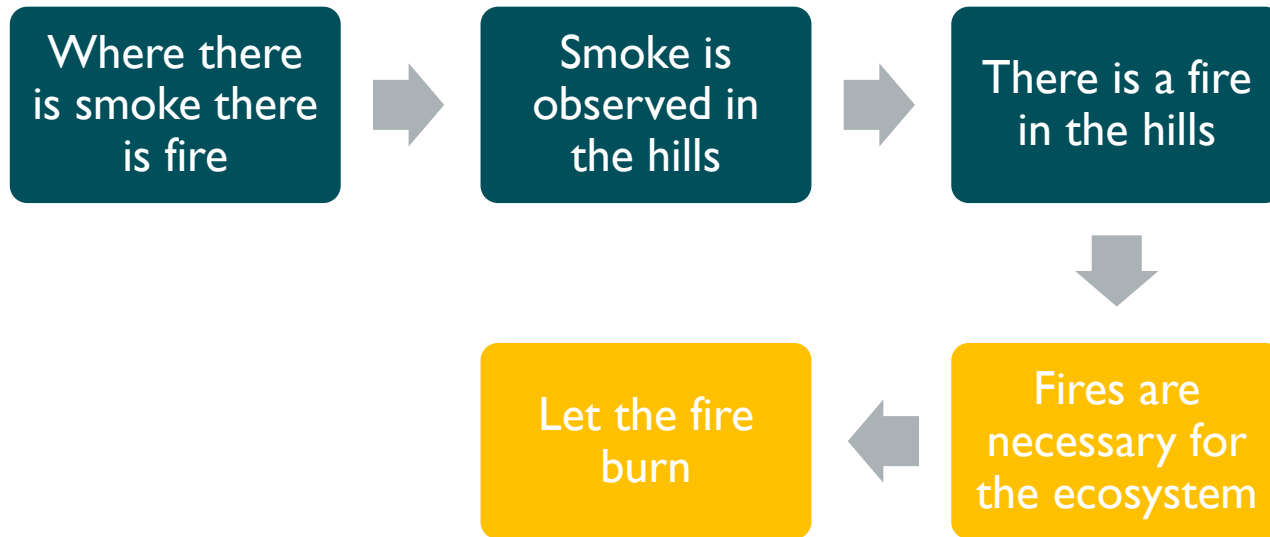
What kind of question do you have?

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Categories of research question and burden of proof

- Descriptive questions
  - *Describe a current or past phenomenon*
  - *"What are the current trends in political violence?"*
  - *Z= support through data*
- Analytical questions
  - *Search for mechanisms, causal relationships, changes over time*
  - *"What explains the trends in political violence?"*
  - *Z= support through data AND reason through theory*
- Theoretical questions
  - *Designed to push theory development forward*
  - *"How do trends in political violence reflect weaknesses in Collier's "greed" theory of civil war?"*
  - *Z = reason through theory AND support through observation*
- Problem-solving questions
  - *Aim to alleviate a given problem or improve a condition*
  - *"What steps can the state government take to minimize political violence?"*
  - *Z= Recommendation needs support from data, reason through shared assumptions/theory*

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The trickiness of recommendations and support

theory

Where there is smoke there is fire

data

Smoke is observed in the hills

claim 1

There is a fire in the hills

Fires cause damage

Put the fire out

recommendation

implicit theory

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Different underlying theory, different recommendation

```
┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐
│  Where there    │      │   Smoke is      │      │ There is a fire │
│ is smoke there  │  →   │  observed in    │  →   │   in the hills  │
│    is fire      │      │   the hills     │      │                 │
└─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘
                                                           ↓
┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐
│  Let the fire   │      │   Fires are     │
│     burn        │  ←   │  necessary for  │
│                 │      │  the ecosystem  │
└─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘
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Importance of transparency in recommendations

- No real question, just a topic
- Ask more than you can answer
- Answer more than you asked
- Answer a *different* question than you asked

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Intellectual drift…

- **Research question:**
  - *What is the role of the IPCC in international climate negotiations?*
- **Preliminary argument**
  - *Regime theory says…*
- **Discovery of anomaly**
  - *Regime theory doesn't work here…*
- **Identification of causal mechanism and thesis statement**
  - *Regime theory cannot account for the full role of any international organizations because it cannot capture their "organizationness".*
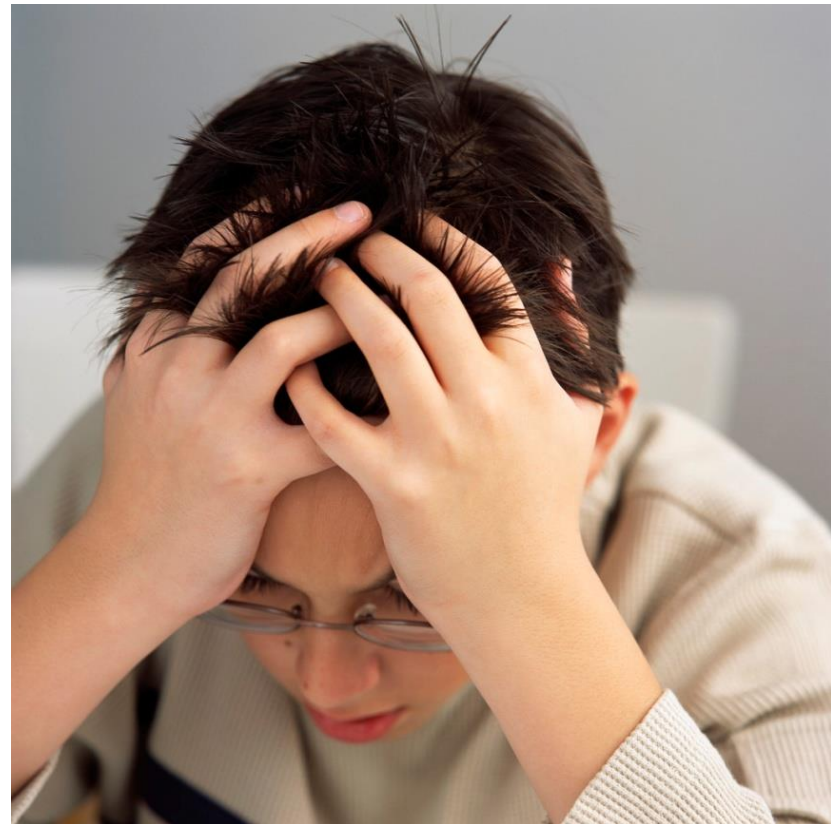
- Write down your question(s)
- Write down essential parts of your answer(s)
  - *X is y because z*
  - *Even at an early stage*
- See whether they hang together
- Revise as necessary
- Recheck often throughout the writing process

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- Why did I start this in the first place?

- What can I bring to the table?

- What is the relationship between theory (the general) and case (the specific)?

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The role of theory

- Theory is a lens through which you observe the world

- Theory helps make observations generalizable
  - *Connects individual cases*

- Different theories will give you different views
  - *Close-up (micro)*
  - *Long-distance (macro)*

What is your theory doing in your thesis?

Theory as a tool

- How did decision-making patterns in China affect the Three Gorges Dam?

- Who receives remittances from Norway to Pakistan, and what is the relationship between sender and receiver?

Theory as the subject matter

- What does the experience with the Three Gorges Dam say about decision-making patterns in China?

- What does the case of Pakistan say about the household as a unit of analysis for analyzing remittances?

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- **Load-bearing beams:**
  - *What is this a conversation about?*
  - *Why is it important?*
  - *What is your point?*
  - *Why should we believe you?*
- **We need more than just your word for it**
  - *Show us*

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IMRAD revisited: The bare bones

- **Introduction**:
  - *What are we talking about here and why should we care?*
- **Method**:
  - *How are you going to go about answering your question?*
- **Results**:
  - *What can you show me that will support your claim?*
- **Discussion/conclusion:**
  - *What is your main point and what does it mean?*
- NB: These functions also evident in essay

- ## What discourse are you taking part in?
  - *What is the puzzle?*
  - *Paint a picture of the conversation*
    - May need to construct it
- ## Locate a knowledge gap
  - *What remains unresolved in this conversation?*
  - *What do we know, what don't we know?*
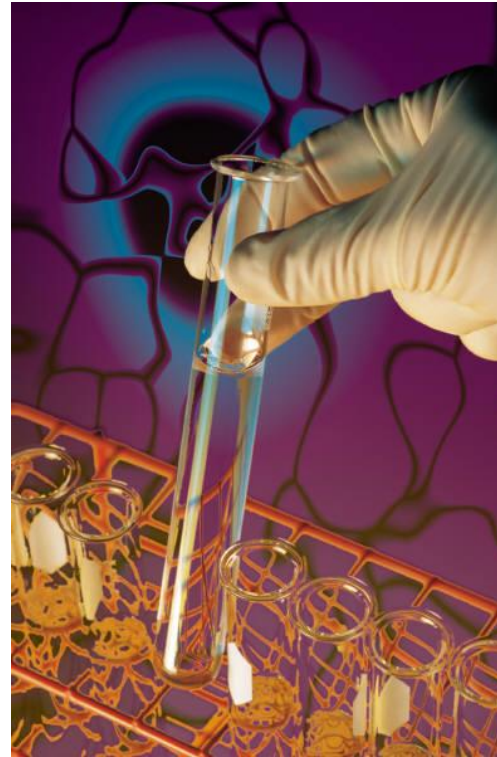 - *"Drilling down at points of dispute"*

- ## Show how your work helps fill the gap
  - *Or addresses those points of dispute*

- ## Avoid the "so what" problem
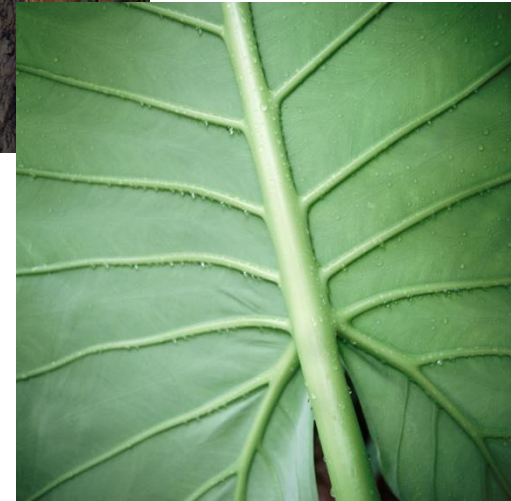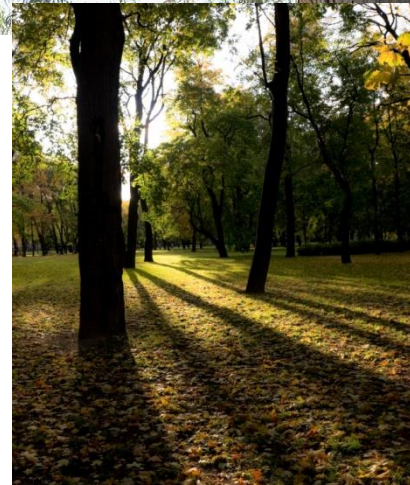 - *Make sure you have a meaningful knowledge gap*
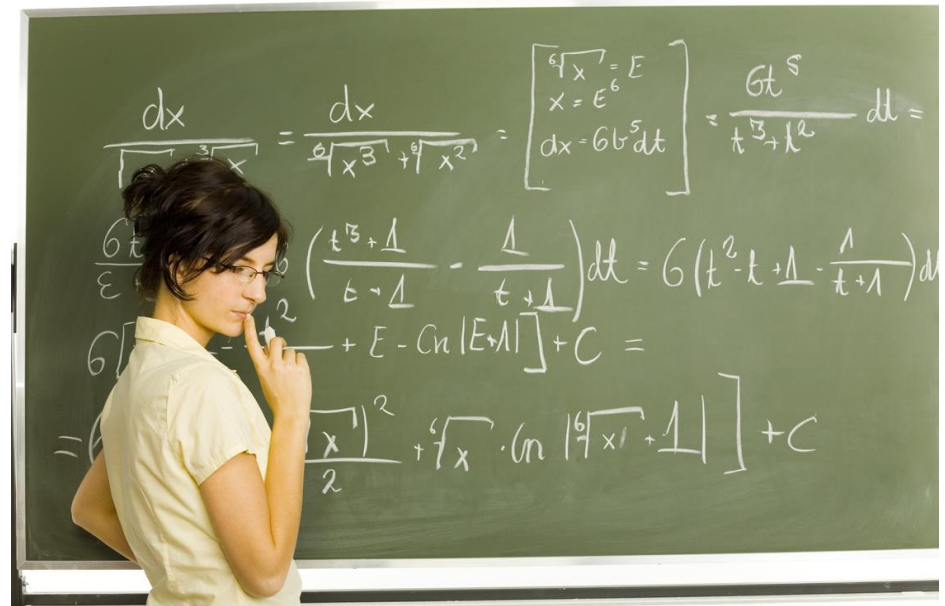

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Illustration of "so-what?" problem

- How much forest? How many leaves?
- Avoid the background trap by knowing your audience

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- Show how you went about answering your question
  - *Theoretical perspective*
  - *Analytical tools, instruments*
- Focus on explaining your choices (e.g., sources)
  - *Sources, sample size*
  - *Limitations*
- Explain both data collection *and* analysis

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Obectivity and transparency

- **Opinion and judgment an important part of research**
  - *Many choices*
  - *Objectivity important*
- **Different notions of objectivity**
  - *Positivist*
  - *Constructivist / Feminist / Marxist*
- **Transparency means *showing* the reader**
  - *What choices you made*
  - *Your assumptions*
  - *Where your data or ideas came from*
  - *How you interpreted your findings*

- Define and operationalize terms that can be misunderstood
- State assumptions
- Good citation practice

- *We found that juveniles from non-traditional family structures were significantly at risk of displaying habitual criminal behavior.*

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Citation practice: Giving credit where it is due

- Sources that have inspired you should be given credit
- Look for the primary source
  - *Track down original quotes or facts*
- Add page numbers even when not a direct quote
  - *Especially when text is longer than a few pages*
- Watch out for translation issues
  - *Quotes*
  - *Titles of articles, books, reports*

Rekdal, Ole Bjørn (2009). Fakta på ville veier og henvisninger hinsides fornuften. [Facts gone astray and senseless references.] *Tidsskrift for Samfunnsforskning* 50 (3), 367-383

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- Highlight the important parts
- Make sure the reader knows the difference between what you found and what you think it means
  - *Particularly difficult in the softer sciences*
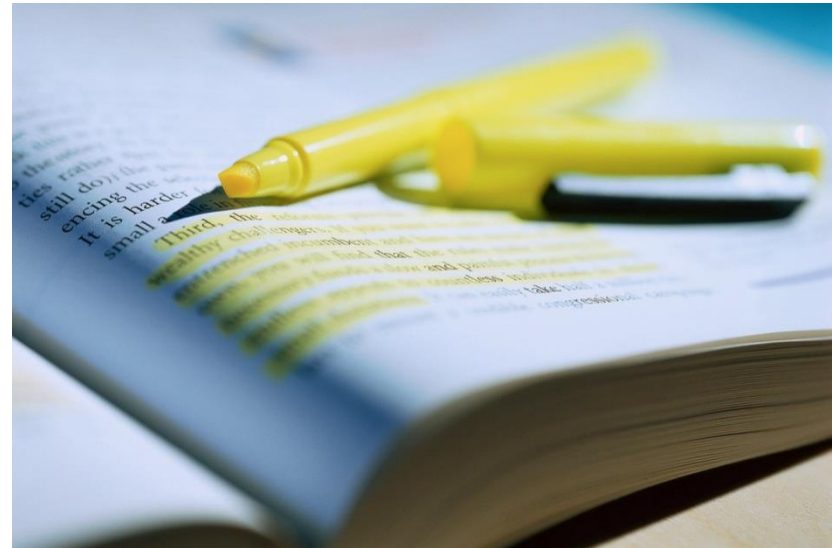
Discussion and conclusion: What does it all mean?

- ## Tie it all together:
  - *Explicitly answer your question*
  - *Address implications*
    - "So what?"
    - Comparison with other research
    - Future research
    - Recommendations
- ## Summarize only highlights
- ## Last paragraph most powerful (not a place for limitations)
- ## Conclude and don't just stop
 - *What is the one thing you want the reader to remember?*

Getting the most out of the writing process

- Writing reveals holes in your thinking
- Many good ideas appear while you are writing
- Writing is part of the research act itself

- Writing process reflects thinking process
- Unrealistic expectations
  - *Expecting perfection on the first try*
- Trying to do too much at the same time
  - *Creative vs critical*

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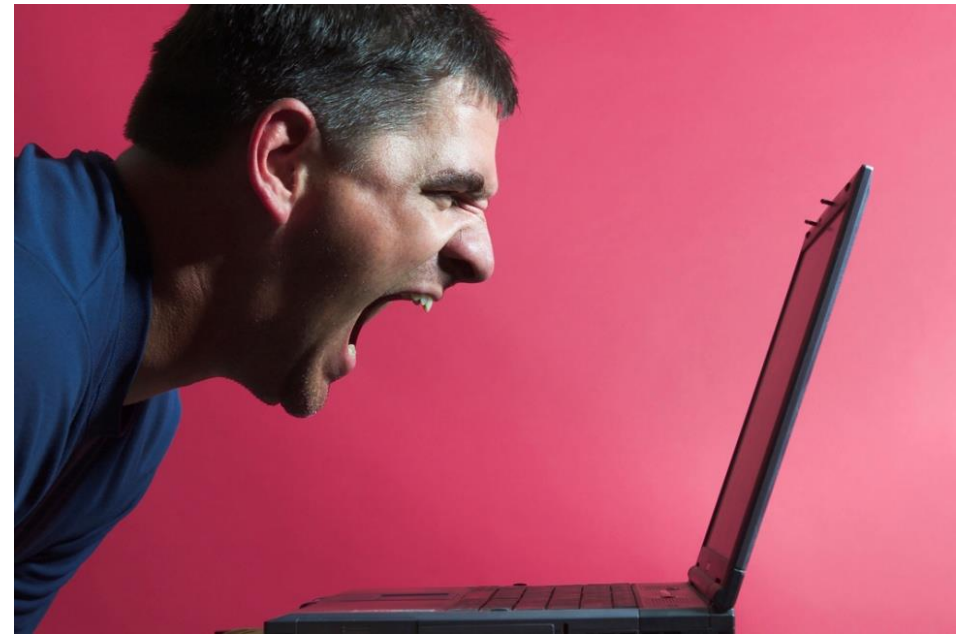
- Set aside predictable (and non-optional) writing times

- Base this on your own personal writing rhythm

- Be realistic

- Make it clear to the outside world that your writing time is sacred.

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You *won't* remember later

- ## Ideas come unexpectedly
  - *Write them down*
- ## Writing early and often helps develop critical thinking
  - *Keep a thought journal*
- ## Writing regularly helps your writing flow
  - *Make notes of what to do next*

Practice makes perfect

- Avoid perfectionism in early drafts
- Expect things to change a lot over time
- Experiment with freewriting

Giving and receiving feedback

- Feedback at different stages will let you focus on different things
  - *Getting it all at once is overwhelming*
- The more often you get feedback, the less scary it becomes
  - *And not all feedback is useful*
- Make *and keep* regular appointments with your supervisor
- Learn to use each other

You can't judge your own work

- What you think you wrote is seldom the same as what you did write
  - *Knowledge curse*
- Reviewer should help you see the difference

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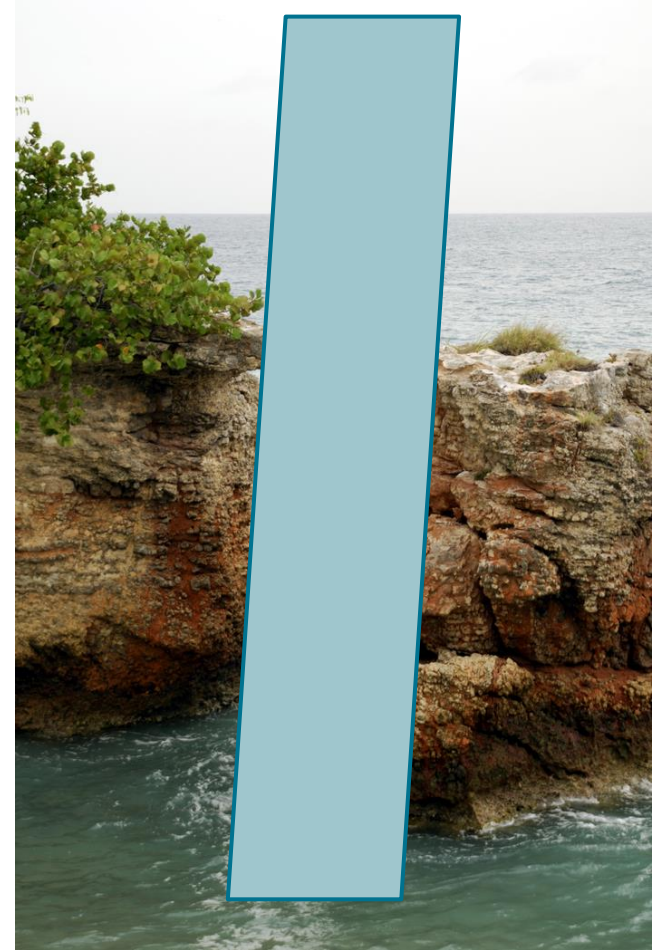
Guiding questions for feedback

- **What am I looking at here?**
  - *What kind of writing is this? (e.g, intro chapter, independent paper)*
  - *What stage in the writing process? (early draft, nearly finished)*
  - *Who is the audience? (How much do they know? What will they be skeptical to?)*
- **What is the knowledge gap (relevance, context)?**
- **What is the research question (aim)?**
- **What is the author's main claim (thesis statement)?**
- **What reasoning or evidence is needed to back up that claim?**
  - *Is the research design sufficient for providing that support?*

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- **Listen to author**
  - *Let author talk about the status of the paper and where he/she needs help*
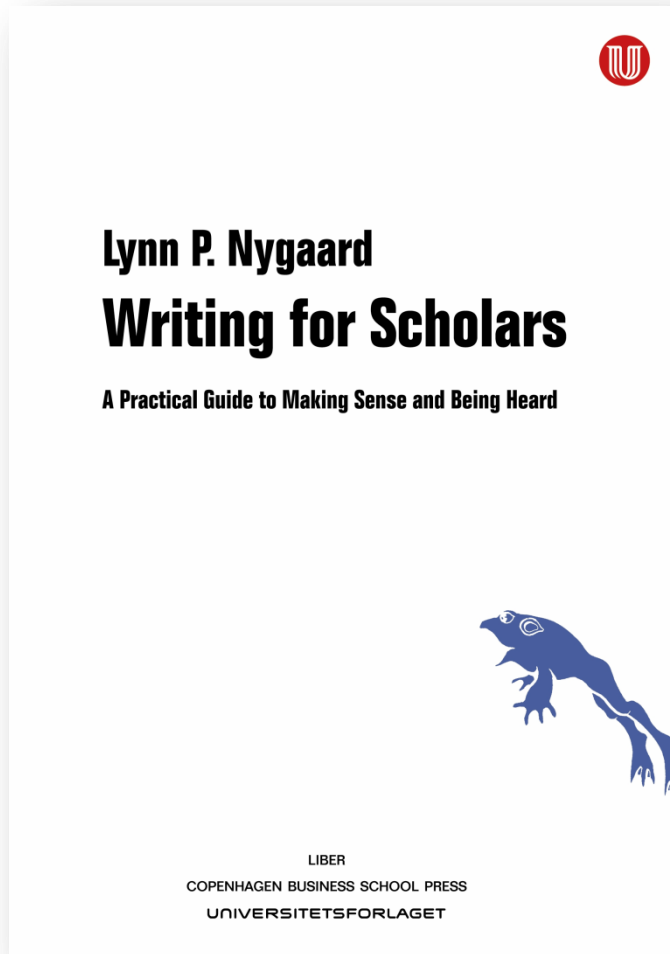 - *Have the author tell the basic story*
- **Respond**
  - *Use guiding questions to talk to author about paper; compare what they say about their work to what you read*
  - *Ask author to clarify areas about which you are unsure. (Don't be afraid to admit you did not understand something!)*
  - *Remember to point out strong points so authors won't fix what isn't broken*
- **Plan next step**
  - *Together with the author, focus on the work ahead: what needs to be done next?*

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Thank you for your attention!

Lynn P. Nygaard
Writing for Scholars

A Practical Guide to Making Sense and Being Heard

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COPENHAGEN BUSINESS SCHOOL PRESS
UNIVERSITETSFORLAGET

And good luck!