



PRIO

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Writing an MA
Thesis:
*What's it about, and
how do I get started?*

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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?
- Writing habits: How do I get started (and keep going)?
- Peer review: How can I get the most out of feedback?

What is academic writing?

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



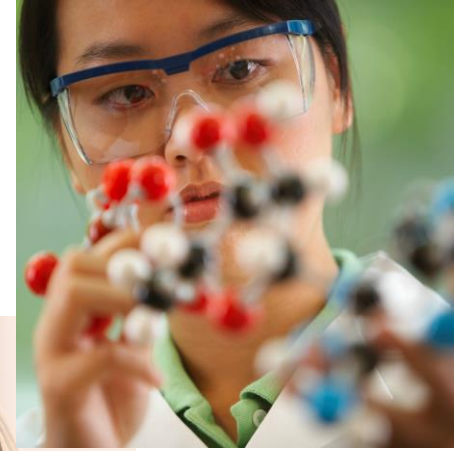
A cultural perspective on academic writing

- 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*



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

- Scholar to scholar
 - *add to cumulative knowledge*
- Scholar to layperson
 - *enlighten, entertain, or motivate*
- Scholar to user group (decision makers, practitioners or business/industry)
 - *solve a problem*



How much does your audience already know?

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



”I don’t know. Tell me”

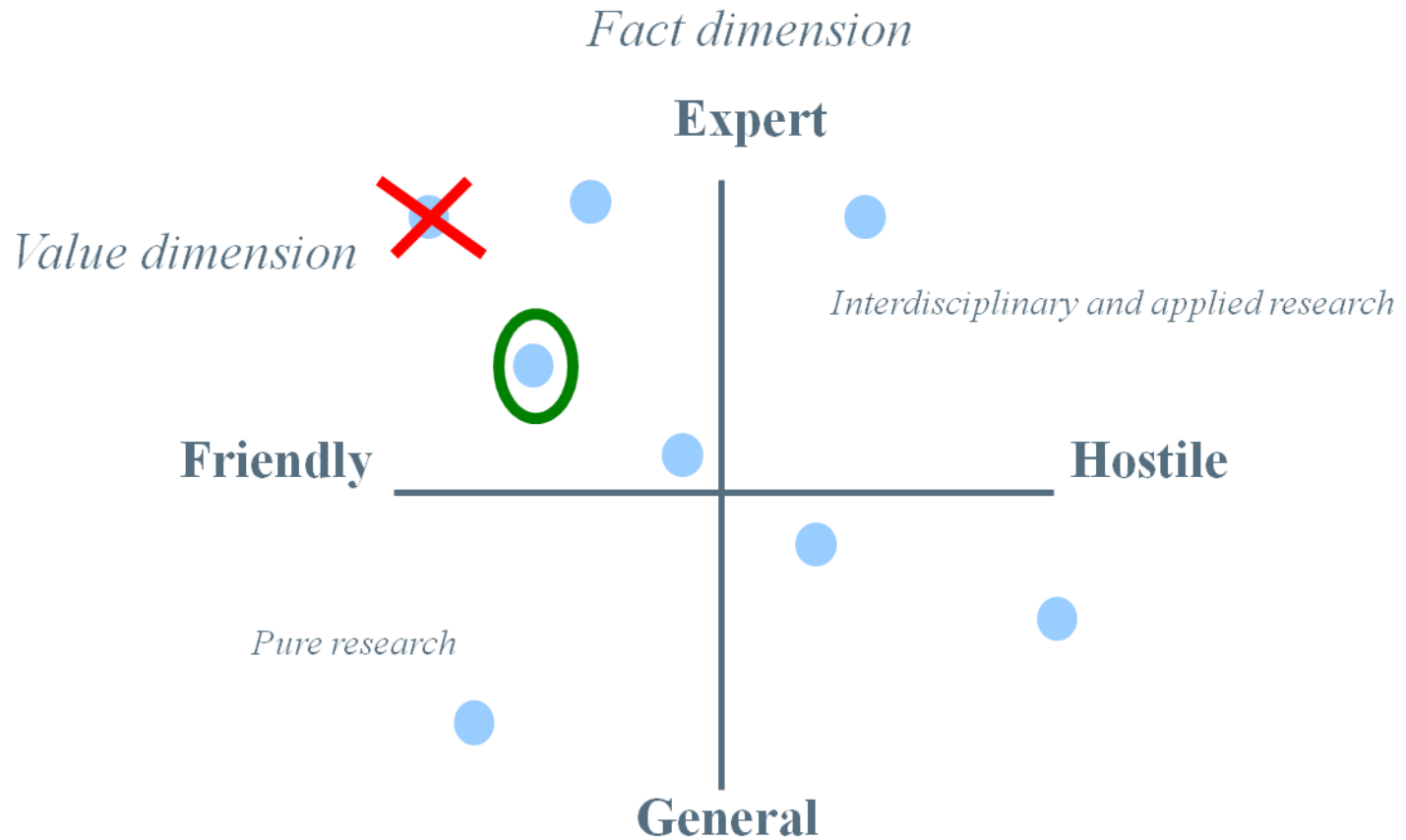
How skeptical is your audience?

- What aspect are controversial?
- Where might your assumptions differ from your audience's?
 - *Epistemology*
 - *Theory*
 - *Disciplinary knowledge*
 - *Normative assumptions*



"I'm not convinced. Persuade me."

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?*



Finding your core argument



- All scholarly writing comes down to
 - *Asking a question*
 - *Then answering it*
- Research question + Thesis statement = Core argument

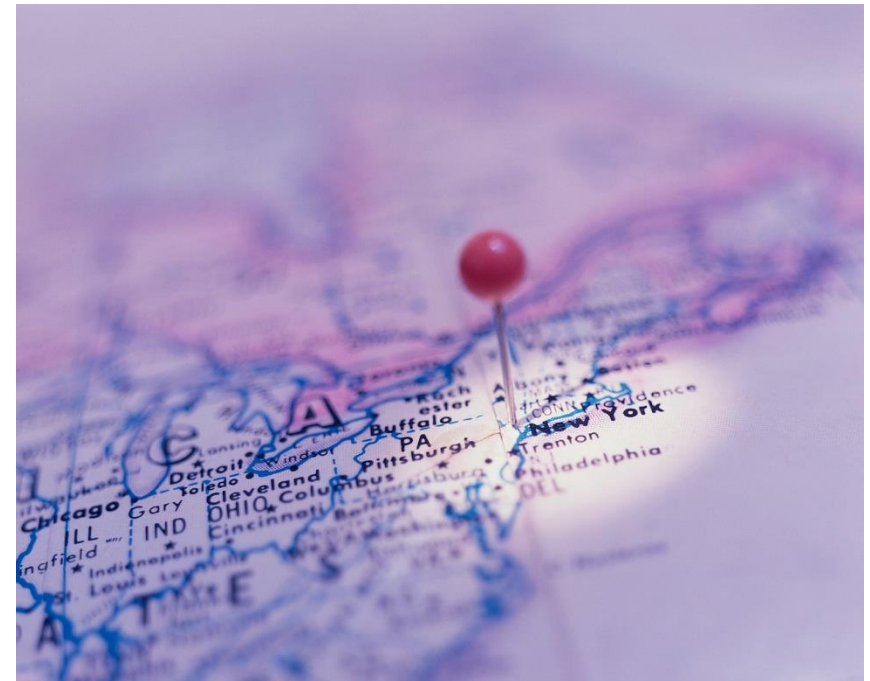
The question: Your starting point

- **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 question will usually start off too broad**
 - *The more you learn, the more you can narrow it down*



The answer: Your destination

- For the reader:
 - *Pinpoints author's contribution to the conversation.*
- For the writer:
 - *A guideline for how to structure your argumentation.*
- You usually discover your destination through writing

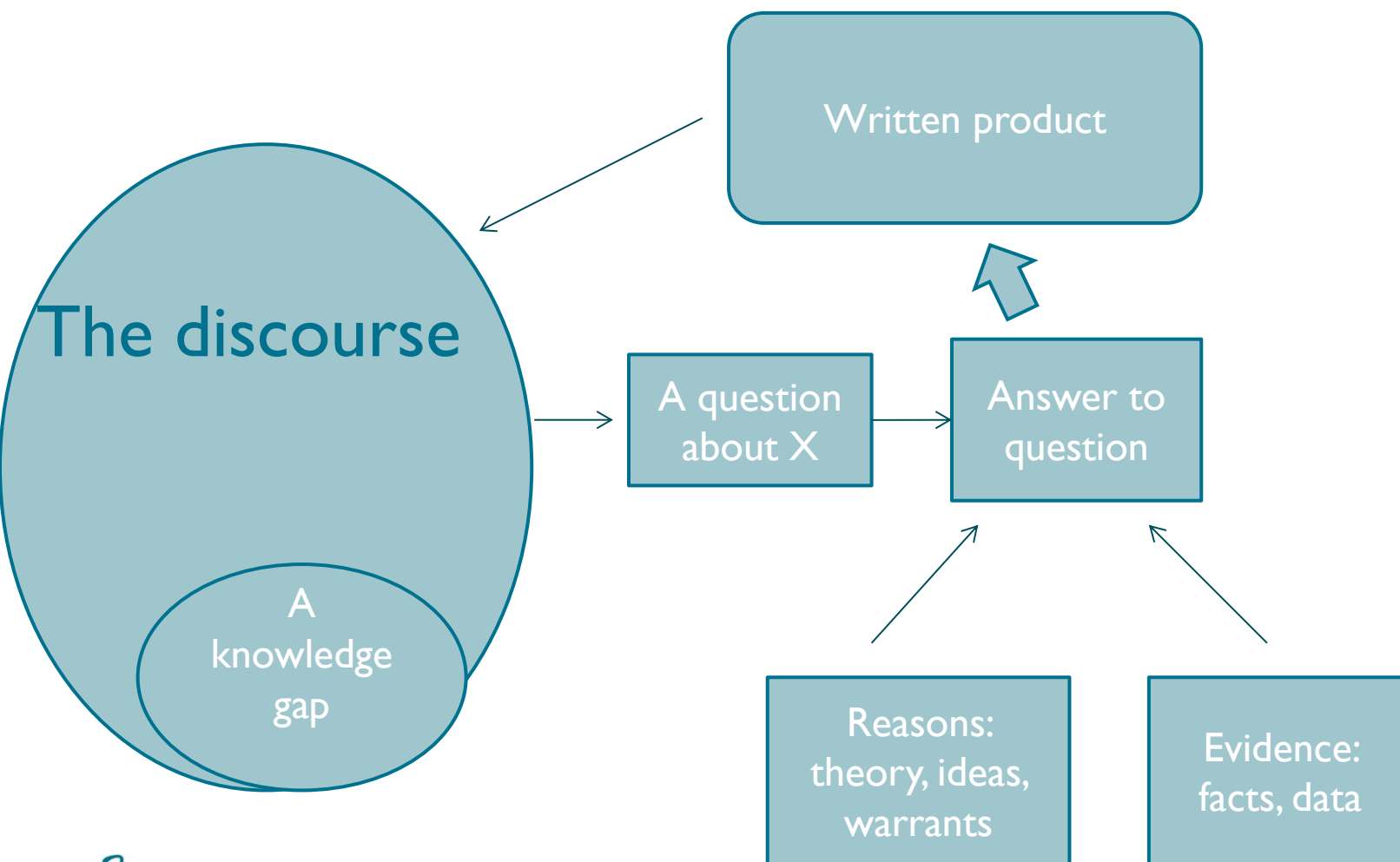


Developing your core argument: Three key questions



- 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?

Big picture



What can go wrong?

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



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”.*



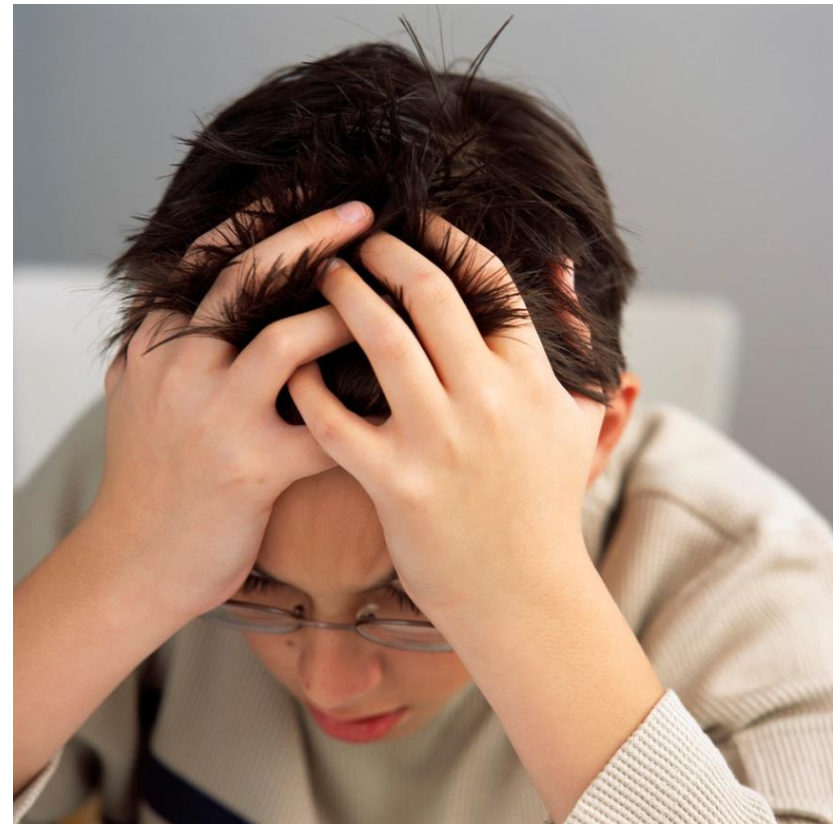
How to prevent problems

- Write down your question(s)
- Write down essential parts of your answer(s)
 - *Even at an early stage*
- See whether they hang together
- Revise as necessary
- Recheck often throughout the writing process



Questions to ask yourself occasionally

- 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)?



The role of theory

- Lens through which you observe the world
 - *Guides your gaze*
- Informs your question, method, and analysis
- Helps make observations generalizable
 - *Connects individual cases*



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?

Building structure on your core argument

- **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*



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



Introduction: What is the puzzle?

- **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"*

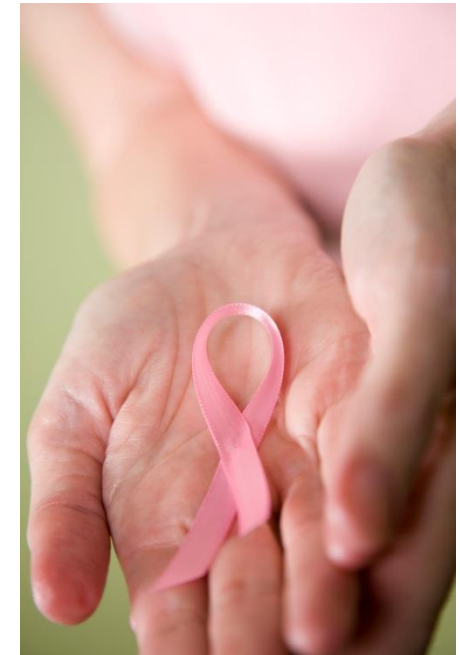
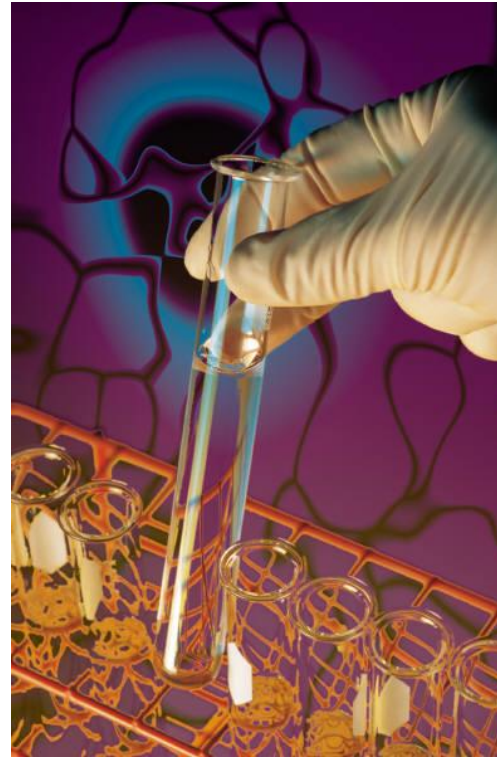


Make your work relevant

- 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*

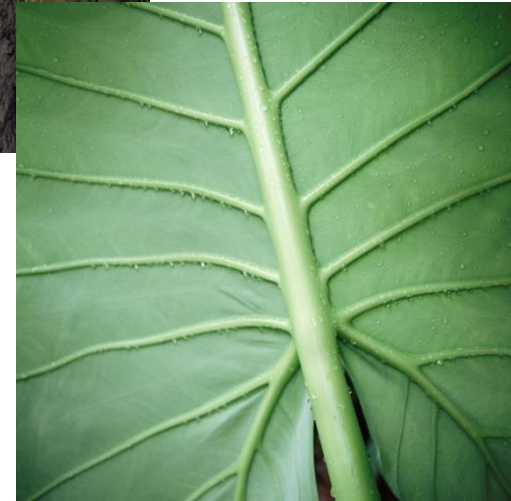
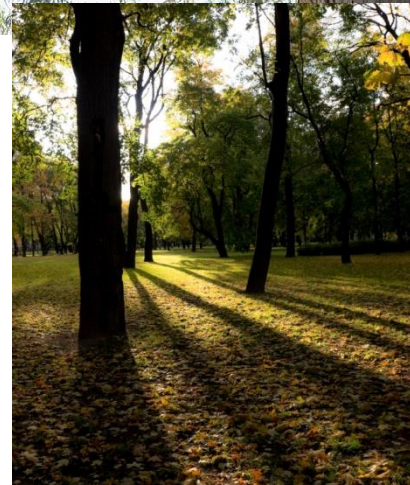


Illustration of “so-what?” problem



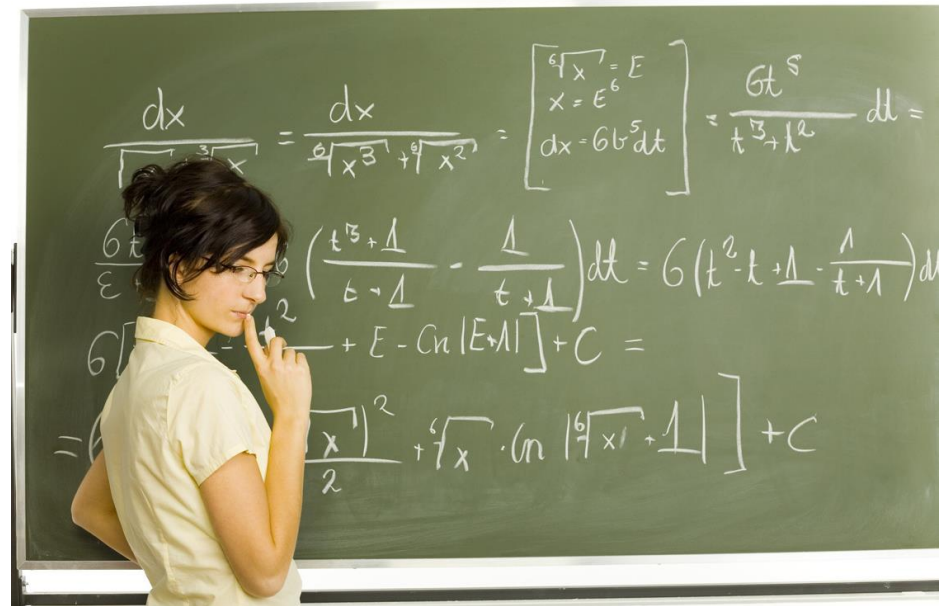
How much background is enough?

- How much forest? How many leaves?
- Avoid the background trap by
 - *Knowing your audience*
 - *Focusing on what is relevant for your core argument*



Method: Showing how you got there

- 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



Objectivity 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*



Increasing transparency

- 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.*

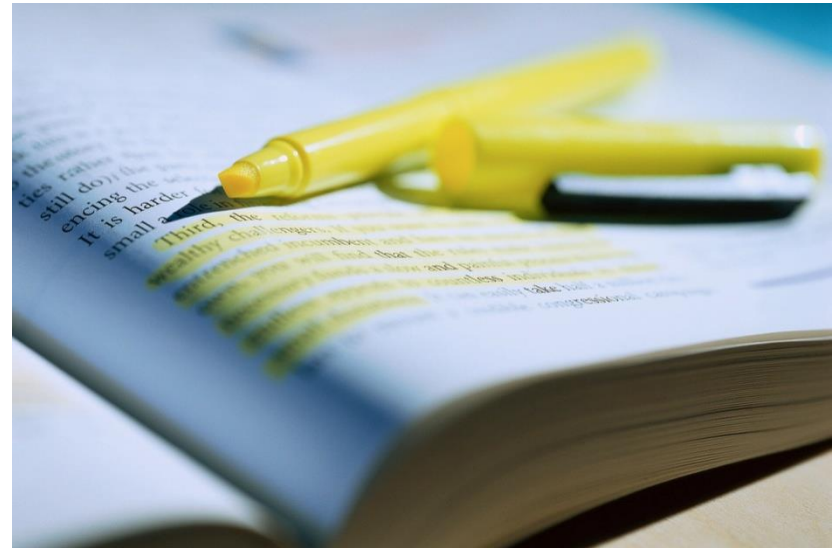
Citation practice: Giving credit where it is due

- 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

Results: What did you find?

- Facts do not speak for themselves
- Analysis vs interpretation
 - *Pulling things apart, and putting them back together again*



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 highlights**
- **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



Why is writing so hard?

- 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*



Set aside time and space

- Build momentum by setting aside predictable, **obligatory** writing times
 - «*Workout*» not «*performance*»
 - *Bingeing vs snacking*
- Develop good rituals
 - Question your «*buffer*» time
 - *Avoid interruptions*
 - *Warm up, freewriting*



«Shut up and write»: Example schedule

- 9.00-9.15 Prepare work area, set goals
- 9.15-10.00 WRITE (45 min)
- 10.00-10.15 Break
- 10:15-11.15 WRITE (60 min)
- 11.15-11.30 Break
- 11.30-12.15 WRITE (45 min)
- 12.15-13.00 Lunch
- 13.00-13.45 WRITE (45 min)
- 13.45-14.00 Break
- 14.00-15.00 WRITE (60 min)
- 15.00-15.15 Break
- 15.15-16.00 WRITE (45 min)

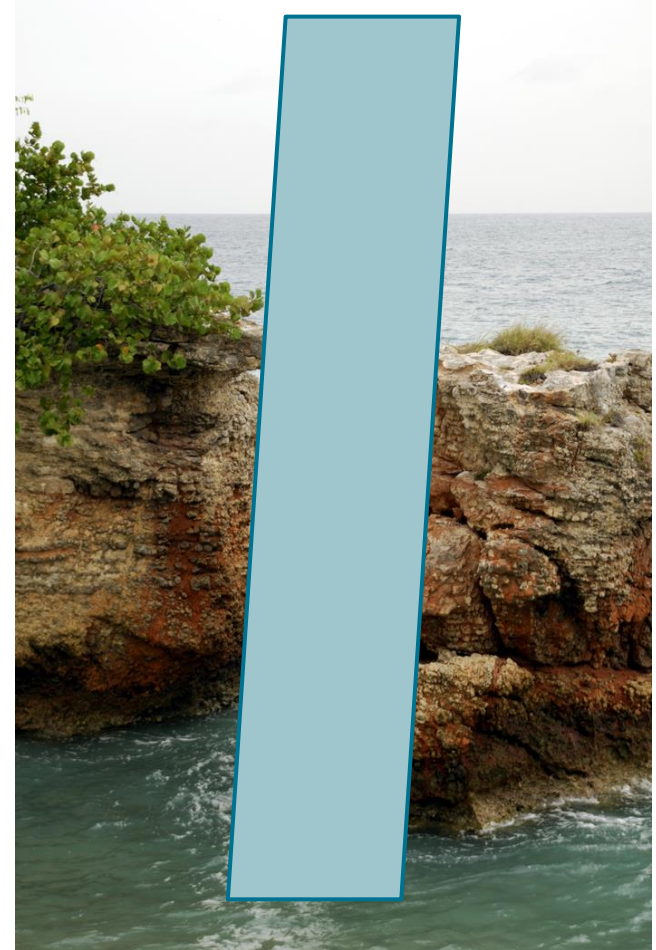
You *won't* remember later

- 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*



Need for feedback: The knowledge curse

- The more you know about something, the harder it is to explain
 - *What you think you wrote is seldom the same as what you did write*
- You cannot trust your judgement about
 - *Whether you are finished*
 - *Whether it is good*



Peer feedback: The good conversation

- Help build bridge between author and reader by
 - *Asking trigger questions*
 - *Reading actively*
 - *Meeting face to face*



Some trigger questions before reading

- What is the most interesting thing you've found so far?
- What have you found most difficult to write about?
- What do you want readers to remember?
- What do you need help with?



Guiding questions for active reading and discussion

- 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?*

Thank you for your attention!

