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Writing *Your* Master's Thesis:

From A to Zen

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Peace Research Institute Oslo

Independent • International • Interdisciplinary

Purpose of this session: Chance to reflect

- The big picture of academic writing
- Your specific situation
    - *Context*
    - *Purpose*
    - *Audience*
- The product
    - *Elements of a Master's thesis*
- The writing process
    - *Getting words on paper*
    - *Getting help*
- Discussion as we go
    - *No claims of «right» or «wrong»*
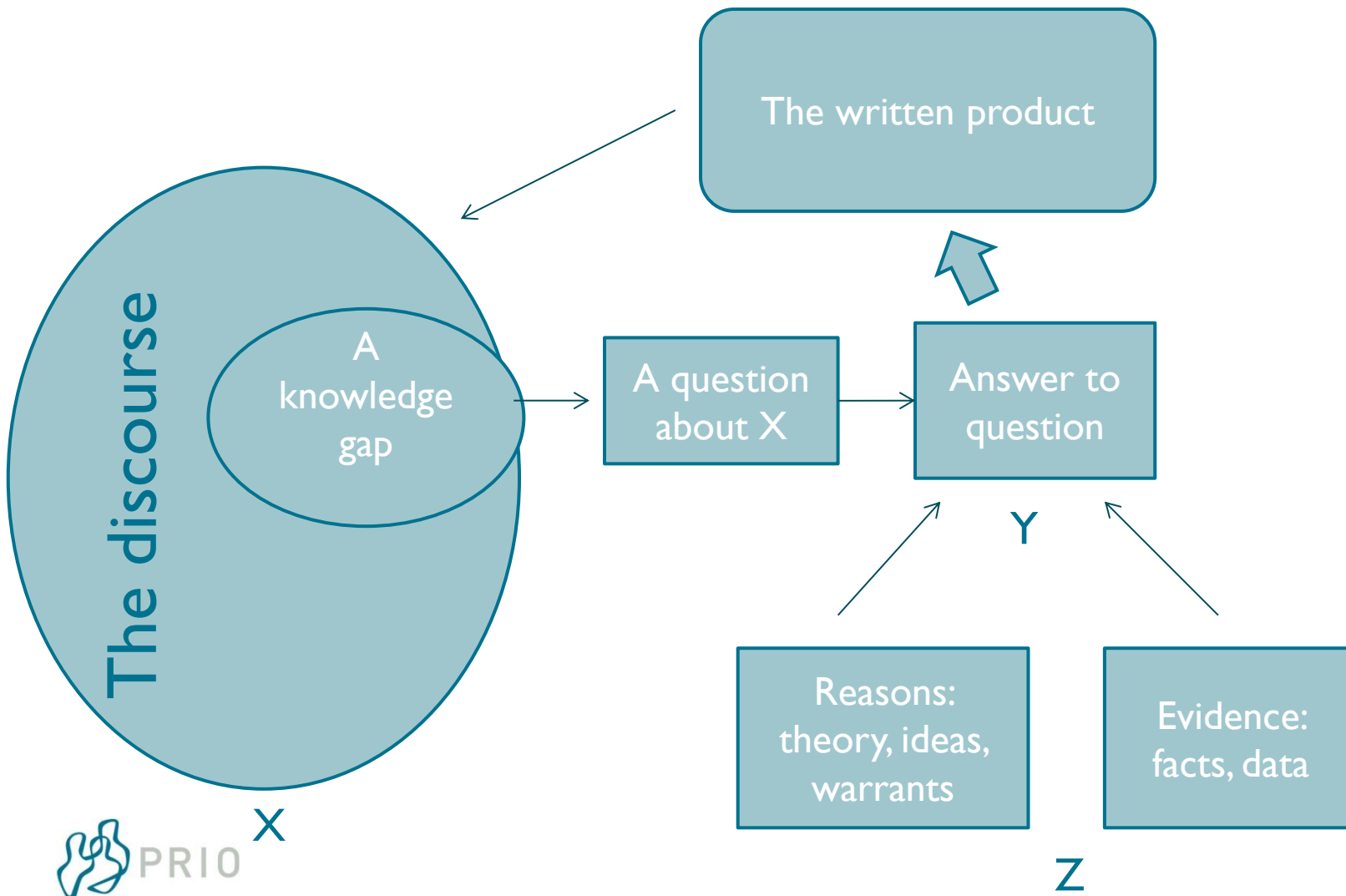- Opportunity to think about this in terms of your specific thesis

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The Zen of dissertation writing

- Big picture of academic writing
  - *Ask a question and answer it*
- But also situated
  - *In a particular context*
  - *For a particular purpose*
  - *And a particular audience*

- Zen: knowing where you stand
  - *...And where you sit*

The written product

The discourse

A knowledge gap

A question about X

Answer to question

Y

Reasons: theory, ideas, warrants

Evidence: facts, data

X

Z

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The context: situated in place and time

- Norway
  - *Anglo-Saxon style*
- Your institute
- What are the rules for MA thesis?
  - *Page limits, format*
- What are the conventions?
  - *Expectations for language?*
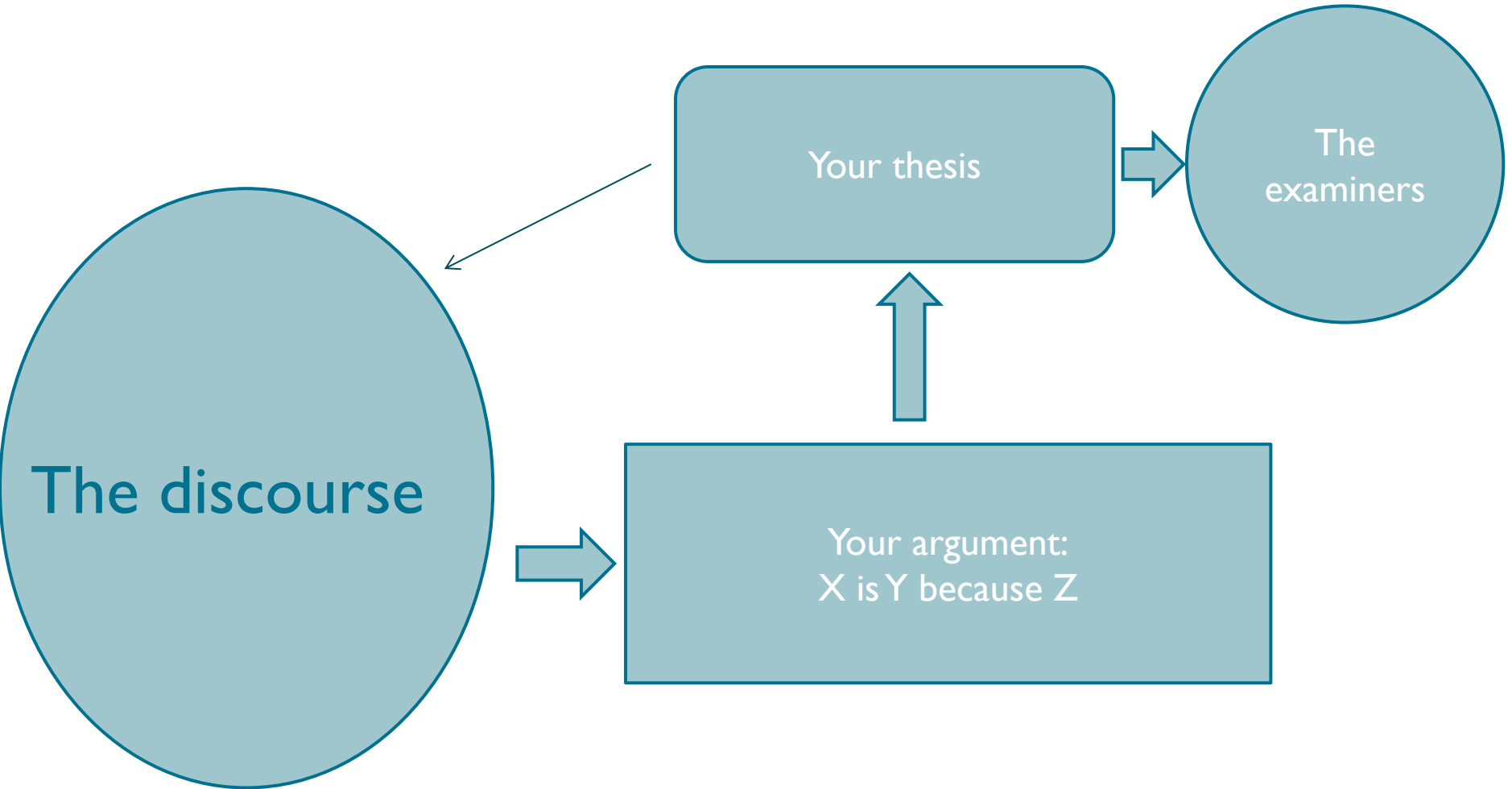 - *Expectations for topics?*
  - *Expectations for theory?*

The purpose of a Master's thesis

- For your university/examiners: Demonstrate competence
  - *In reading*
  - *In writing*
  - *In understanding key ideas in your discipline*
  - *In formulating ideas*
- For you:
  - *Participate in discourse?*
  - *Create something that is yours?*
  - *Get a title?*
  - *Get a job?*

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- ## Like other types of conversation
  - *Builds on what other people say*
  - *To make a good point, you need to listen*

- ## Except for
  - *Time lag*
  - *Artificial reconstruction*

- ## Your role as MA student
  - *Show you can understand and interpret academic conversation*
  - *Contribute your thoughts*

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

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

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- **For the reader:**
  - *Establishes relevance*
  - *Sets expectations*
  - *Examiner: basis on which they judge your answer*
- **For the writer:**
  - *Defines scope and direction*
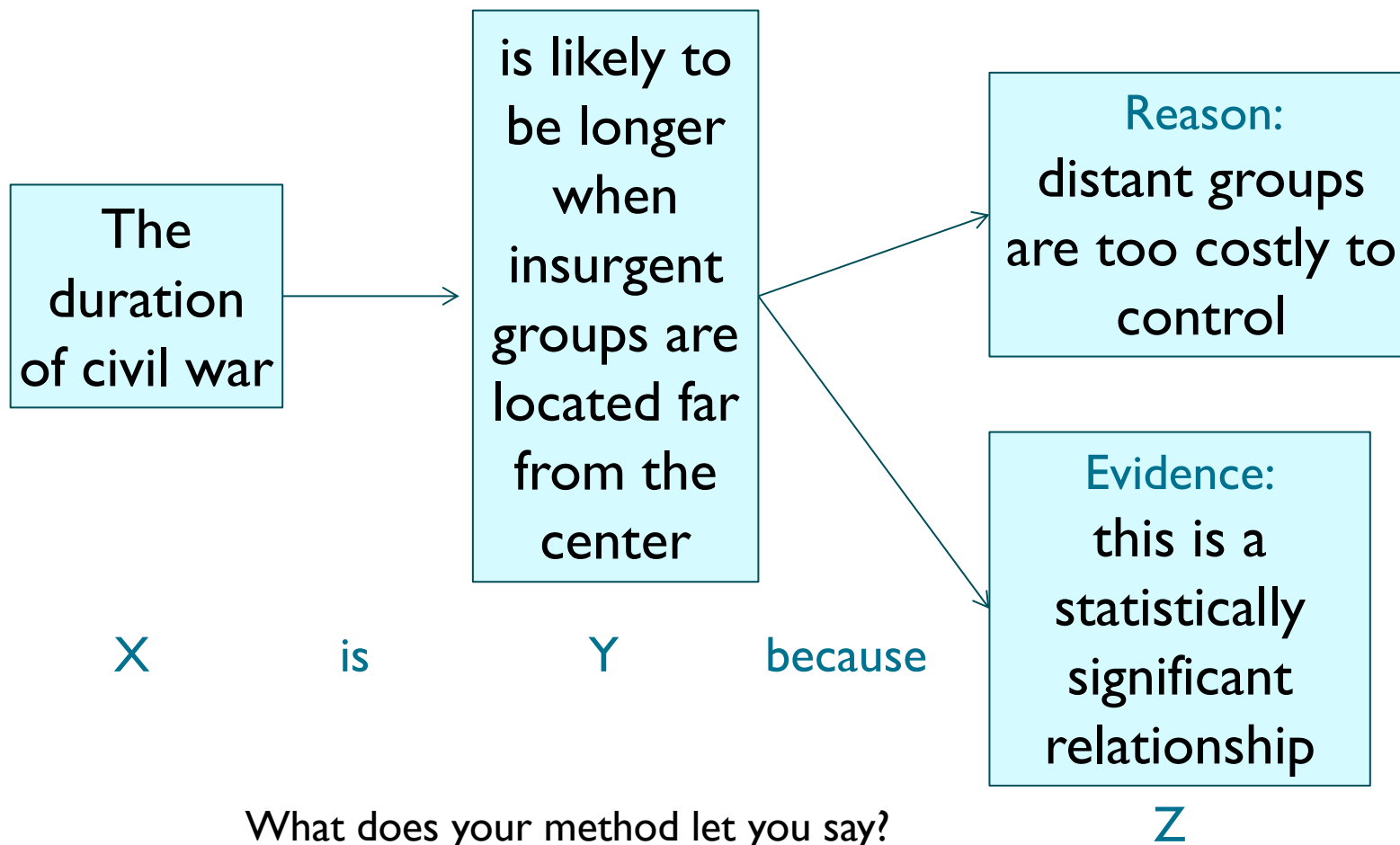 - *Determines what belongs and what doesn't*

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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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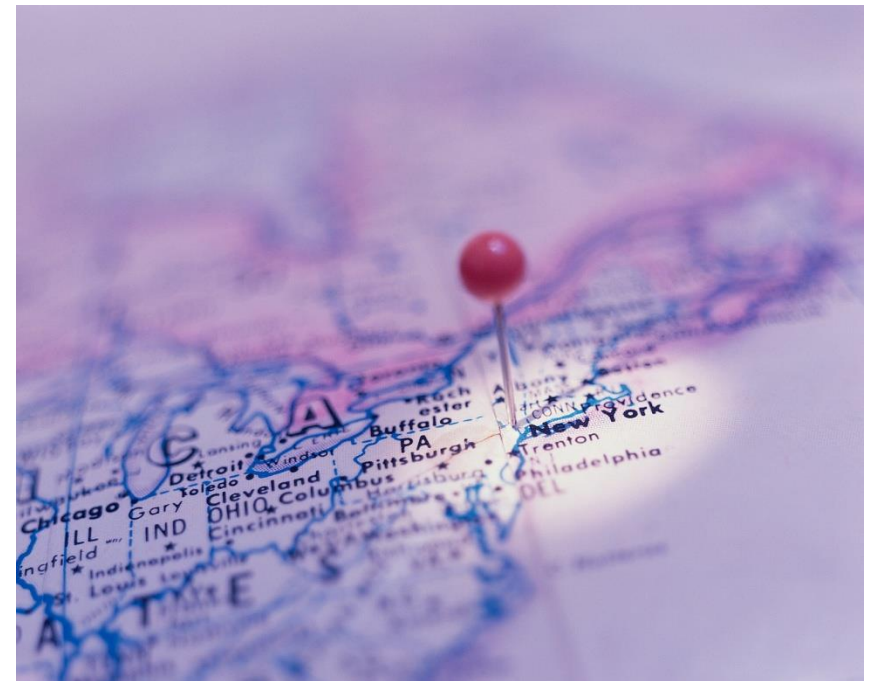
- *X* is *y* because *z*

- *x* = the **topic**:
  - the subject matter you are trying to say something about
  - basis of your research question
  - The focus of your introduction

- *y* = the **claim**:
  - what you are saying about the topic
  - your contribution to the discourse

- *z* = the **support**:
  - what you are providing to back your claim
  - NOT "because I say so"!

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The duration of civil war

is likely to be longer when insurgent groups are located far from the center

Reason: distant groups are too costly to control

Evidence: this is a statistically significant relationship

X   is   Y   because   Z

What does your method let you say?

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- 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?*
- ## Initial 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 research question
- Write down your thesis statement
  - *Even at early stage of writing*
  - *Try to identify x, y, z*
- See whether the question and answer hang together
- Revise as necessary throughout the writing process

Three key questions for developing your argument

- What is this a conversation about? (x)
- What is my contribution to this conversation? (y)
- What do I need to prove to the reader to justify my claim? (z)

Who is in the conversation, and what do they want?

- ## Other scholars
  - *Demonstrate or add knowledge*
- ## General public
  - *enlighten, entertain, or motivate*
- ## User groups (decision makers, practitioners or business/industry)
  - *solve a problem*

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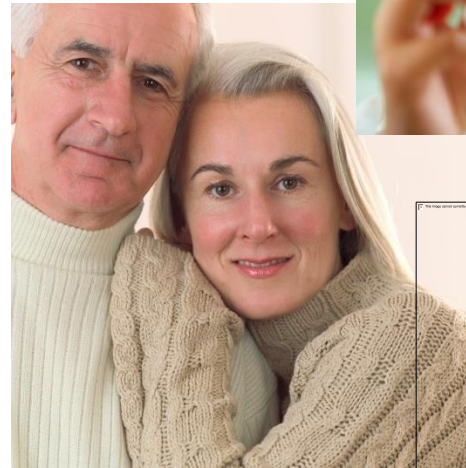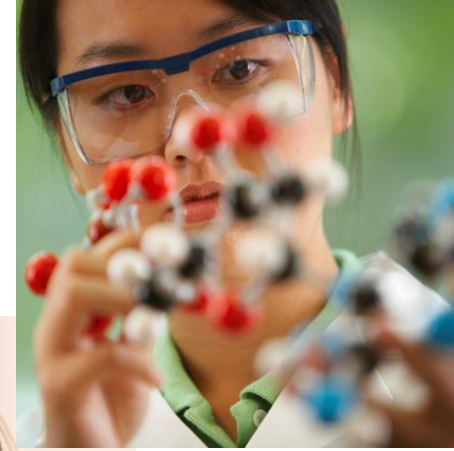
"I don't know. Tell me"

- How much can you assume they know?
- How much do you need to fill in?
- Remember!
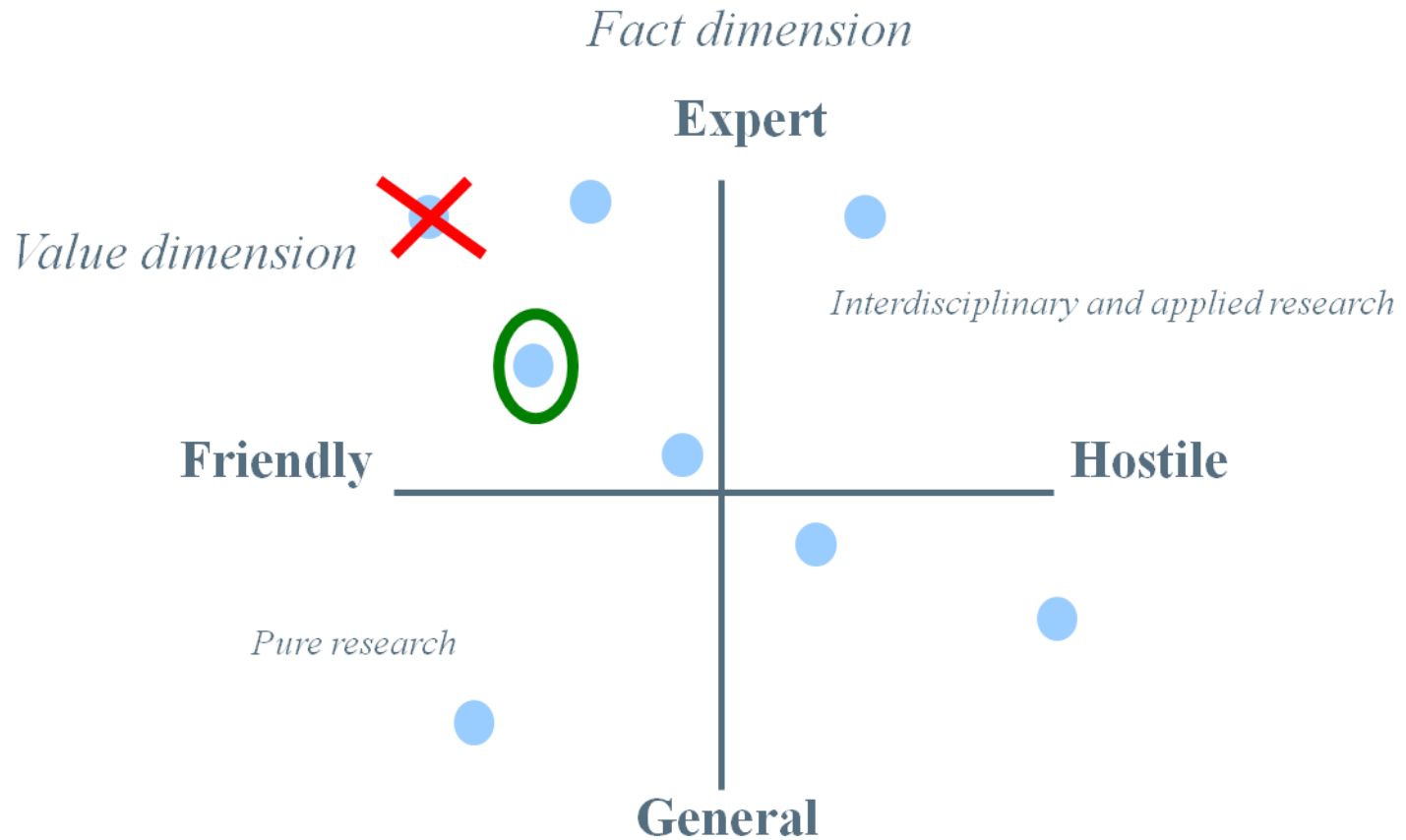 - *Examiners are looking for a demonstration of YOUR knowledge*

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How skeptical is your audience?

- ## What aspect are controversial?

- ## Where might your assumptions differ from your audience's?
  - *Epistemology / ontology*
  - *Normative ideas*
  - *Theory*
  - *Disciplinary knowledge*

"I'm not convinced. Persuade me."

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Placing your audience

TIP: Write (first draft) 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?*
  - *What do they want from you?*

Process vs product

Process

Product

- ## 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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- **Introduction**:
  - *What are we talking about here and why should we care?*
- **Method**:
  - *How are you going to go about answering your question?*
    - Tools, instruments
    - Ideas (theory)
- **Results**:
  - *What can you show me that will support your claim?*
- **Discussion/conclusion:**
  - *What is your main point and what does it mean?*

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- Few arguments make sense out of context
- Create context by painting a picture of the discourse
  - *You can draw from several conversations*
- Create a tension by showing the puzzle
  - *What is not known?*
  - *What can be disputed?*

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

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

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Theoretical framework vs literature review

- **Literature review covers "what's out there"**
  - *Status of knowledge*
  - *Knowledge gaps*
- **Theoretical framework presents *tools* you use**
  - *How am I framing the problem?*
  - *How will I analyze my material?*

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Theory can be terrifying

- We fear that
  - *we don't understand it*
  - *we are using it wrong*
  - *we are using the wrong one*
  - *it's not officially theory*
- Unsure what it's for
  - *Or if we really even need it*

Theory shopping

- **Where do you find theory?**
  - *What theories are common in your field?*
  - *Do you need to «import»?*
- **Tailor a combination**
  - *Not: «Theory on sexualized violence in Uganda»*
    - Theory on violence
    - Theory on sexualized violence
    - Theory on African geopolitics and history

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Getting lost in theory

- Look at anything long enough and it gets weird
  - *Deconstruction of your theme*
  - *So many big ideas (e.g., «power», «identity»)*
- What is everyone else using?
  - *Same ideas with different names*
  - *Different ideas with same names*

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Getting unlost: Thinking through "fit for purpose"

- ## Theory as lens through which you observe the world
  - *Concepts: what things are*
  - *Mechanisms: how things work*
  - *Normative ideas: how things should be*

- ## Ideas that shape our research
  - *The questions we ask*
  - *The way we answer them*

- ## What ideas are you using and why?

Role of theory in your thesis

Theory as a tool to interpret data

- How does regime theory explain the role of IGOs in international negotiations?

- 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?

Data as tool to develop theory

- How *well* does regime theory explain the role of IGOs in international negotiations?

- 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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- 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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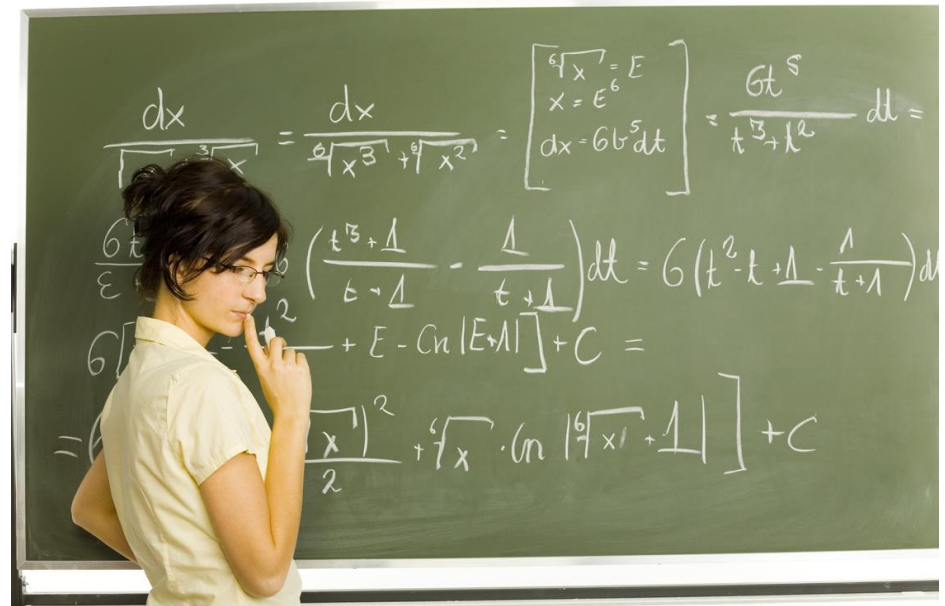
- Define and operationalize terms that can be misunderstood
- Good citation practice
  - *Where did you get this?*
  - *Can reader track it down?*

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

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- Facts do not speak for themselves
- What constitutes evidence in your approach?
  - *Data, statistics*
  - *Quotes from informants*
  - *Relevant passages from documents*
  - *Logical inferences*
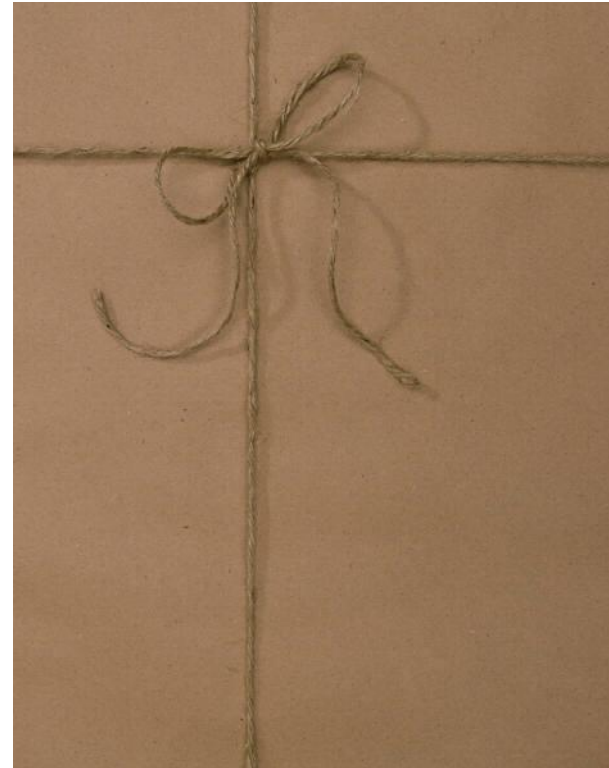- Distinguish between finding and interpretation

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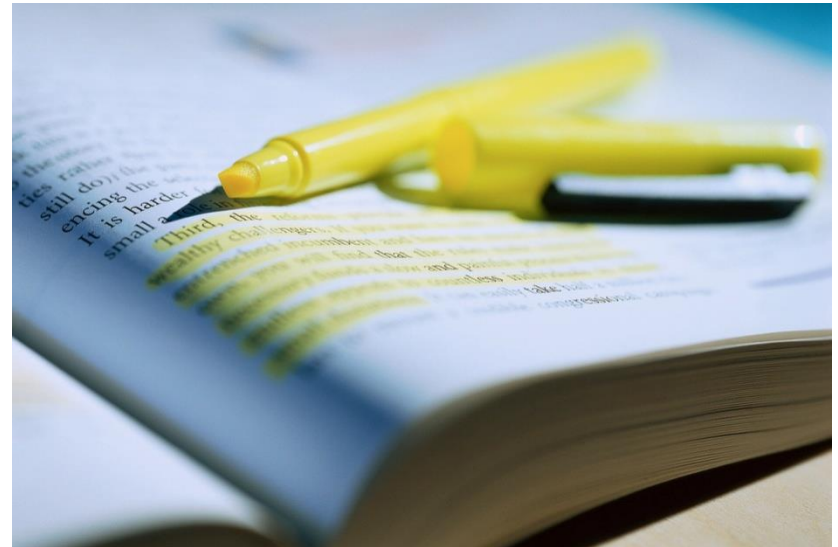
Discussion: So, what does this all mean?

- Interpretations of findings?
- Implications for theory?
- Implications for practice?
- Implications for future research?

- Explicitly answer your question
- Conclude and don't just stop
  - *What is the one thing you want the reader to remember?*

Bottom line: Tell a story!

- **Genre helps you tell your story in the way your readers expect**
  - *Set up a problem*
  - *Tell the reader what you did about it*
    - Show them the tools you used
  - *Explain what it all means*

Checklist for revising your structure

- Do you properly set the stage, provide context for your paper?

- Is the research question (aim) clear?

- Is it clear how (and why) you went about doing what you did?

  - *What ideas did you use, and how did you use them?*

- Do you provide sufficient support for your claim(s)?

- Do you answer your question, your whole question, and nothing but your question?

- Do you tell a coherent story?

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

- ## You can never read enough
  - *But you can easily read too much*
- ## You don't understand what you've read until you write about it
  - *Writing early develops critical thinking*
- ## Keep a reading diary
  - *Engage with what you have read, don't just «learn» it*
  - *Keep track of random ideas*

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- 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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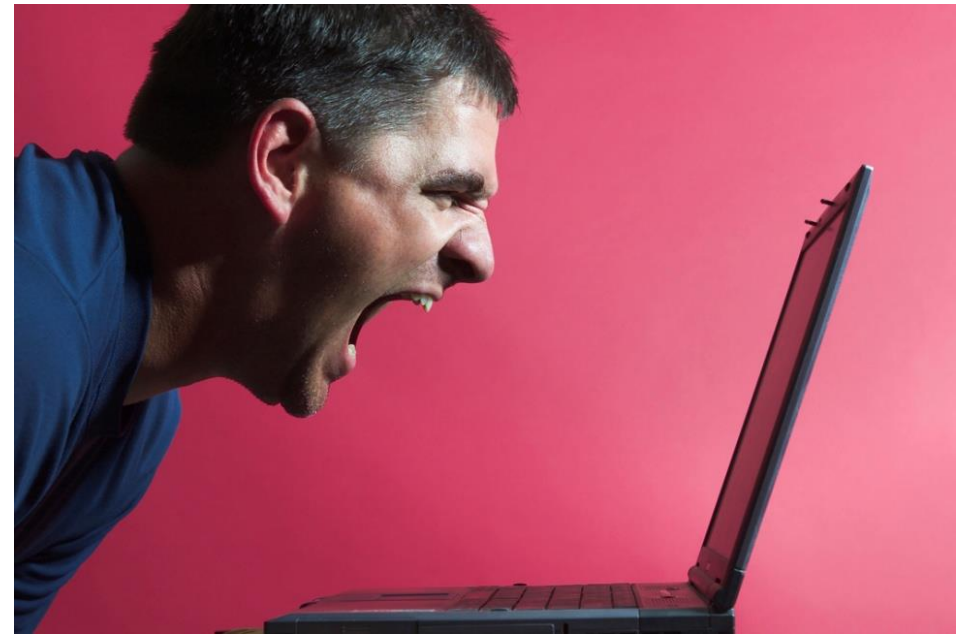
- ## Imposter syndrome:

  – *Belief that if anyone knew how little you know, you would be kicked out*

- ## Impact

  – *Can't stop reading*

  – *Write too much on things you don't understand*

  – *Write too little about things you think are obvious*

- Set aside predictable (and **non-optional**) writing times
- Be realistic
  - *Number of hours*
  - *Time of day*
  - *Writing goals*
- Binge vs snack writing
  - *Retreats*
  - *Daily hour*
- Join with others to minimize need for self-discipline

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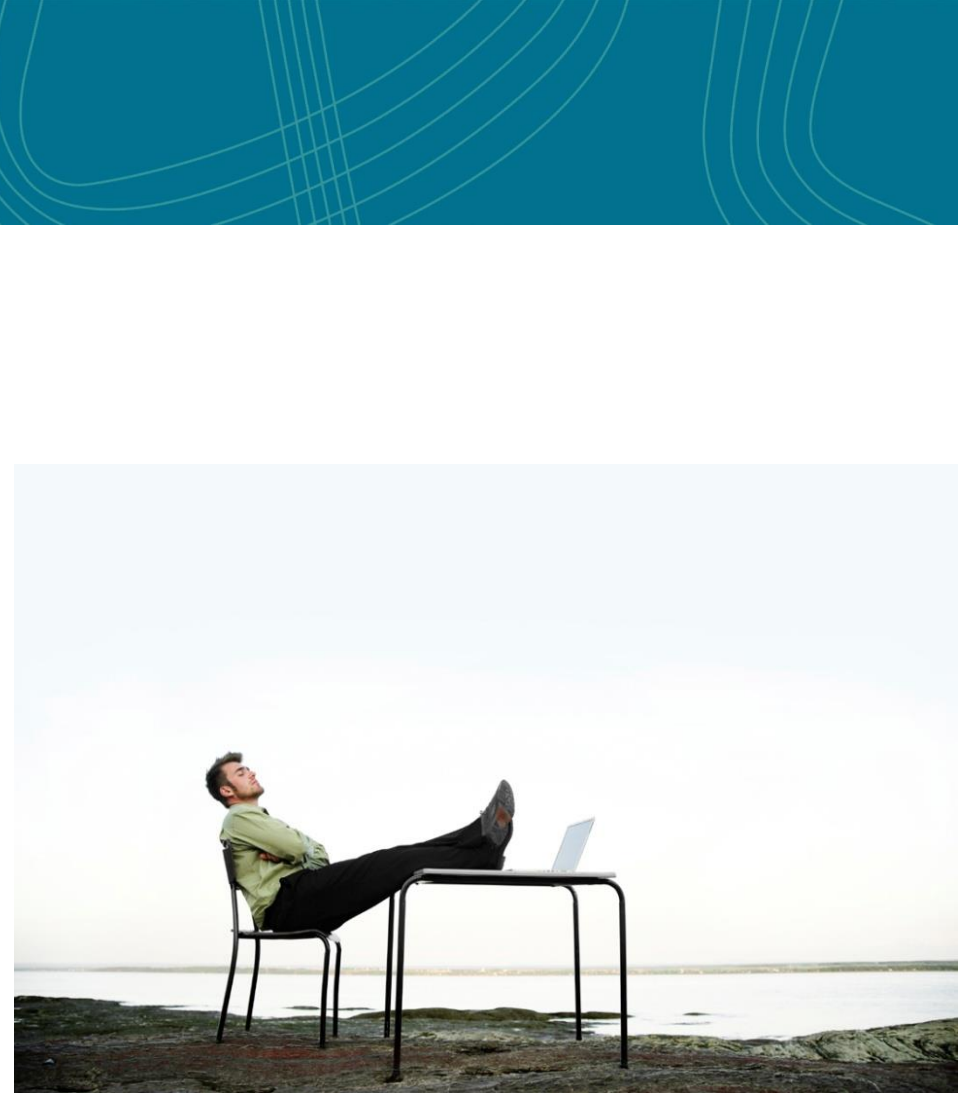
«Shut up and write»: Example schedule

- 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)

- ## Not all feedback is equally useful

- ## Default reading is to look for «mistakes»

  - *Sometimes don't see whole picture*

- ## Supervisors aren't always right

- The more you know, the the harder it is to explain to someone else
  - *What you think you wrote is seldom the same as what you did write*
- You can't trust your own judgment about
  - *Whether you are finished*
  - *Whether it is good*

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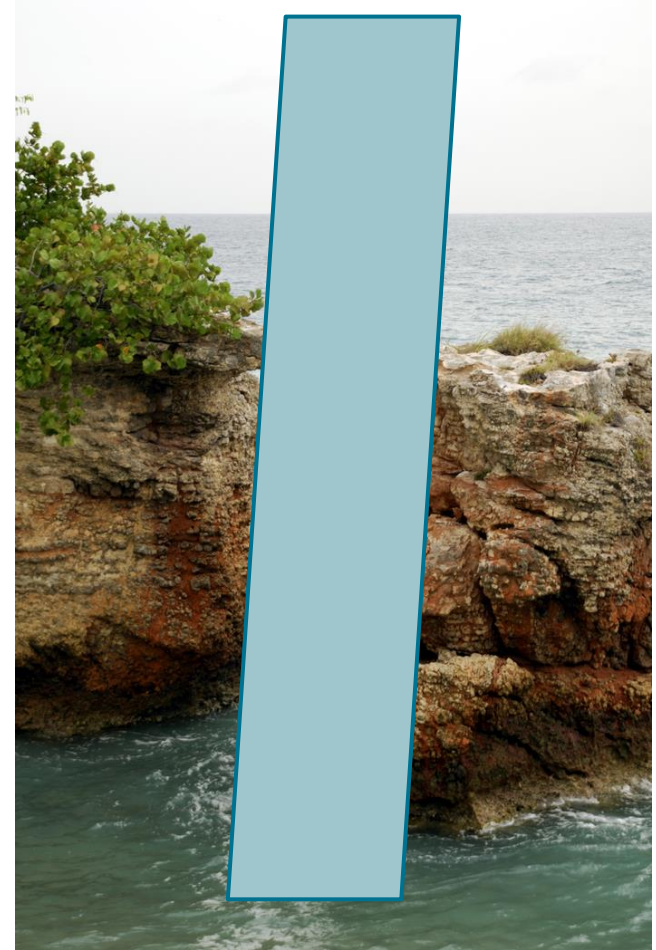
- Find a group
- Brainstorm ideas for your thesis:
  - *What are possible topics?*
  - *What are the "puzzles"?*
  - *What kind of questions can you ask?*
  - *How would you answer them?*
    - What kind of method would you need?
    - What kind of claims could you make?

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