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
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
Big picture: The essence of academic writing

The discourse

A knowledge gap

X

A question about X

Answer to question

The written product

Reasons: theory, ideas, warrants

Evidence: facts, data

Y

Z
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?
The discourse

Your thesis

The examiners

Your argument:
X is Y because Z
The discourse: Understanding scholarly dialogue

- **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
Core argument: Your contribution to the discourse

• All scholarly writing comes down to
  – Asking a question
  – Then answering it

• Core argument
  – Research question + Thesis statement
The question: Your starting point

- **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
The thesis statement: Your destination

- 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?*
Anatomy of a thesis statement

• **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”!
Example

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.

What does your method let you say?
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?

• 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
How much does your audience already know?

• 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

"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/ontology
  - Normative ideas
  - Theory
  - Disciplinary knowledge

"I'm not convinced. Persuade me."
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
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
• **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?
Introduction: Framing the question

• 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?
Introduce your research question(s)

• 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
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?
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
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*
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?
### Theory as a tool to interpret data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How does regime theory explain the role of IGOs in international negotiations?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did decision-making patterns in China affect the Three Gorges Dam?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who receives remittances from Norway to Pakistan, and what is the relationship between sender and receiver?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Data as a tool to develop theory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How well does regime theory explain the role of IGOs in international negotiations?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does the experience with the Three Gorges Dam say about decision-making patterns in China?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does the case of Pakistan say about the household as a unit of analysis for analyzing remittances?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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
Increasing transparency

- 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.
Results: Highlight the important parts

• 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
Discussion: So, what does this all mean?

- Interpretations of findings?
- Implications for theory?
- Implications for practice?
- Implications for future research?
Conclusion: Tie it all together

- 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?
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
Reading and writing

• 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*
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
Imposter syndrome: Making the process harder

- **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 time and space

- 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
«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)
Nature of feedback

• 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 knowledge curse

• The more you know, 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
Group work

- 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?
Thank you for your attention!