

How to write a project

Some techniques for History and African Studies

Research methodology

The research proposal - initial questions

- **Is the proposed research doable?**
- **Is the research worth doing?**
- **Can the I do it?**
- **If done, will it produce a successful article/book/dissertation?**



The research proposal - the conventional hierarchy of concepts

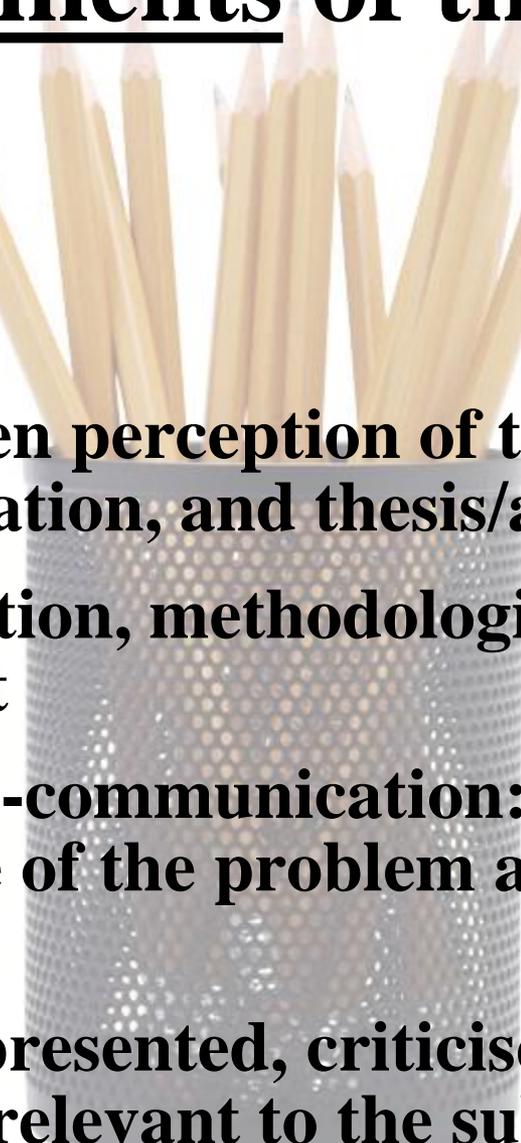
- **Research area**
- **Research topic**
- **General research questions**
- **Specific research questions**
- **Data collection questions**

Overriding considerations

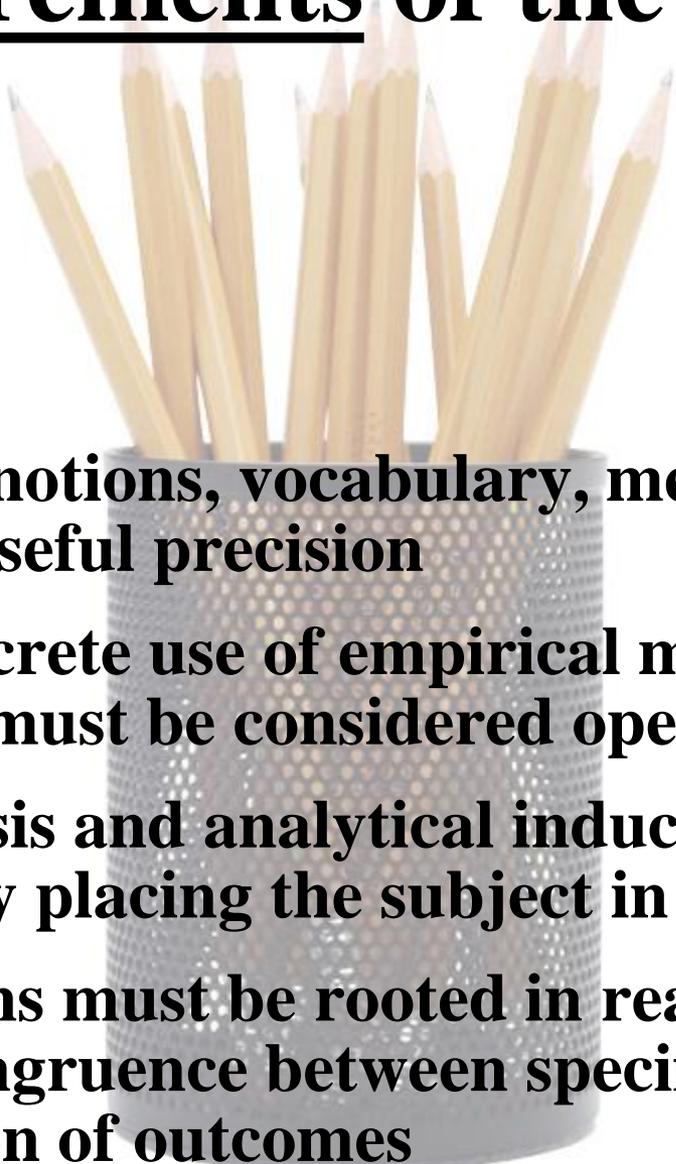


- **What are we going to learn as the result of the proposed project that we do not know now?**
- **Why is it worth knowing?**
- **How will we know that the conclusions are valid?**
- **To get research right, it must not only be done well - it must be meaningful**

Basic requirements of the project I

- 
- **Consistency between perception of the problem, criteria for delimitation, and thesis/argument**
 - **Conceptual innovation, methodological rigor, and rich, substantive content**
 - **Text-external meta-communication: Coherence between the nature of the problem and the choice of theories**
 - **Theory should be presented, criticised, and operationalised as relevant to the subject matter**

Basic requirements of the project II

- 
- **Define / develop notions, vocabulary, measures, and indicators with useful precision**
 - **Validity and concrete use of empirical methods as well as sources of error must be considered openly**
 - **Structural analysis and analytical induction can advance understanding by placing the subject in a wider context**
 - **Viable conclusions must be rooted in reality – seek accuracy and congruence between specific operations and interpretation of outcomes**

Project formulation I

- **Scholarly knowledge is the result of questions asked**
- **Start early; mind mapping a problem takes time**
- **A satisfactory database/reference list testifies that the project will complement, not duplicate other research**
- **Turning points, crucial breakthroughs, central personages, fundamental institutions often appeals**
- **Demonstrate awareness of alternative viewpoints and argue for your position**
- **Avoid topics typically styled and of central interest to the discipline, unless you have something original say**

Project formulation II

- **Sought-after: intellectual history in the making**
- **Surprising contradictions could complement systematic model building or formal theorising**
- **Text-internal meta-communication: specify research operations and the way you will interpret results**
- **Identify the archives, the sources, the respondents, and the proposed techniques of analysis**
- **Argue why these tasks are the best feasible approach to attack the problem**
- **A design proposing comparison between cases often has special appeal**

Project formulation III

- **Is the section/selection representative of the situation/population from which generalisations are made?**
- **How can it be decided if your idea was wrong or right?
Falsifiable hypothesis wanted**
- **Is something genuinely at stake in the inquiry or is it tendentiously moving toward a preconceived end?**
- **Will the influence of the unknown generate interesting, orderly propositions?**
- **Do you have a realistic subject/time-frame?**

Parameters decisive for quality of research

- **Importance of question**
- **Relevance to policy-making in a broad sense**
- **Originality in development of hypothesis**
- **Inventive in testing of theory**
- **Innovative methodologically**
- **Continuous synthesis of literature**
- **Quality of data and data analysis**
- **Clarity and soundness of reasoning/writing**

Advice on how to handle the subject I

- **Subject must deal with Africa in a broad sense**
- **Not purely antiquarian even if historical, but...**
- **Relevant for current social science problem**
- **Subject should be narrowly defined**
- **Having a far-reaching perspective**
- **Sensitive to elite trends in the profession**
- **Attentive to new philosophical tendencies**
- **Should contribute to ongoing research discussion**

Advice on how to handle the subject II

- **Summarise the current state of knowledge**
- **Be clear about your own position as author**
- **Source material should refer to professional debate**
- **Source matter should be defined clearly as a logically manageable entity**
- **Sources should promote a detailed discussion**
- **Loyal, but critical to sources, getting on top of them**
- **Analytically discussing rather than empirically accounting**
- **Meta-communicate: explain your choices**

Advice on how to handle the subject III

- **Research should make a difference, which means pointing to a deficiency, a weakness, or a fault**
- **Be courageous; do not expect that your discoveries will be loved; it can be disturbing to show people what they don't want to know; even your colleagues may label you as a crank or an infidel**
- **Show some respect for the “rational prejudices of scholarship” no matter how stupid they may seem, but...**
- **Be eccentric if needed, however, watch out for being too fast-thinking, too rapid in drawing conclusions, too impatient to revise, too lively observant in your scientific curiosity**

Advice on how to handle the subject IV

Get your arguments right

- **The argument is the core of scholarly writing, it must be yours, and you must be prepared to defend it**
- **The highest tribute we can pay to a doctrine is to call it into question**
- **Taking historical evidence or author statements into account is not the same as believing them and a proposition can hardly be judged trustworthy by the ground that it have caused some to believe it**
- **There is some difference between condemning a view and condemning the author of that view, though many scholars never manage that difference**

Advice on how to handle the subject VI

Get your arguments right

- **Beware the fallacy of the galloping hypothesis: a hypothesis without evidence remains only a possibility, and it should not grow it into an easy assumption in the next sentences**
- **Only in rumination, one is ever likely to see where the elements of an argument properly belong**
- **An argument cannot afford to be self-contradictory; a theory can hardly be taken seriously if allowing unexplained exceptions to itself...**
- **However, incompatibilities can't automatically be dismissed; individuals can believe in both sides of them**

Advice on how to handle the subject VII

Get your arguments right

- **Terminological confusion can weaken arguments; definitions and meanings must be clarified...**
- **But remember that it is possible to “know” something without being able to give an account on it based on universal definitions and that things may exist even when they are unnamed; beware the no name, no thing fallacy**
- **Familiar phrases and common knowledge should not be taken for given but considered afresh...**
- **But no claim is true or false just because it can be shown to be an archetype or a stereotype**

Advice on how to handle the subject VIII

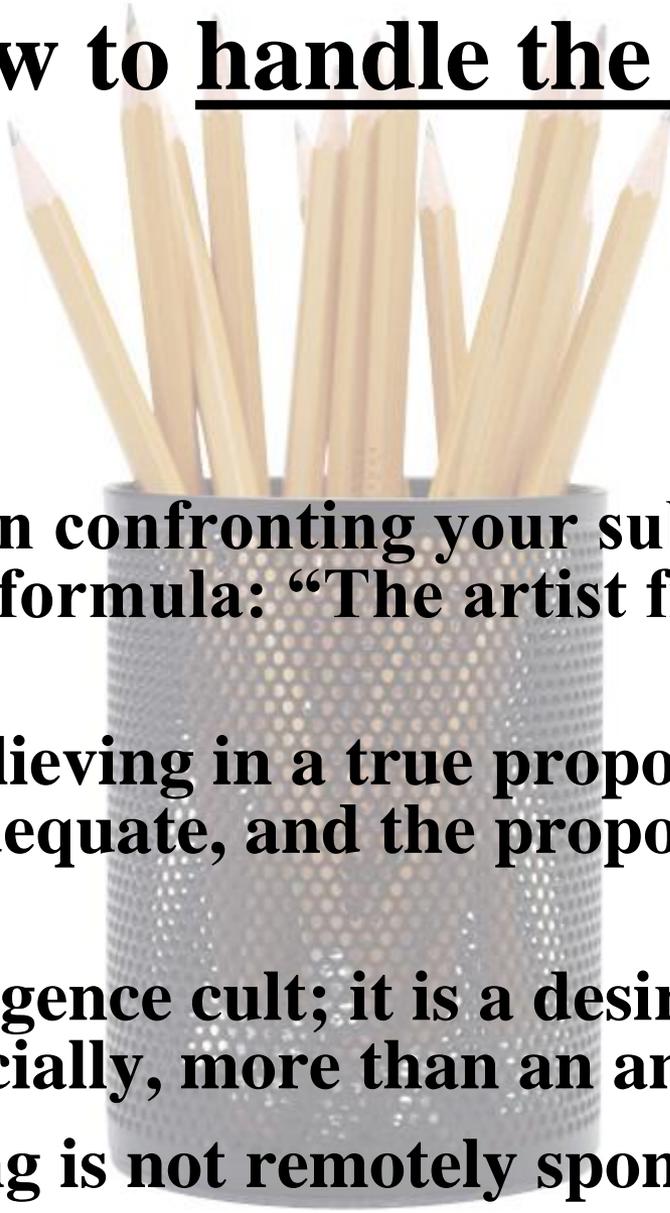
Get your arguments right

An argument usually consists of these or more elements in a spiralling chain:

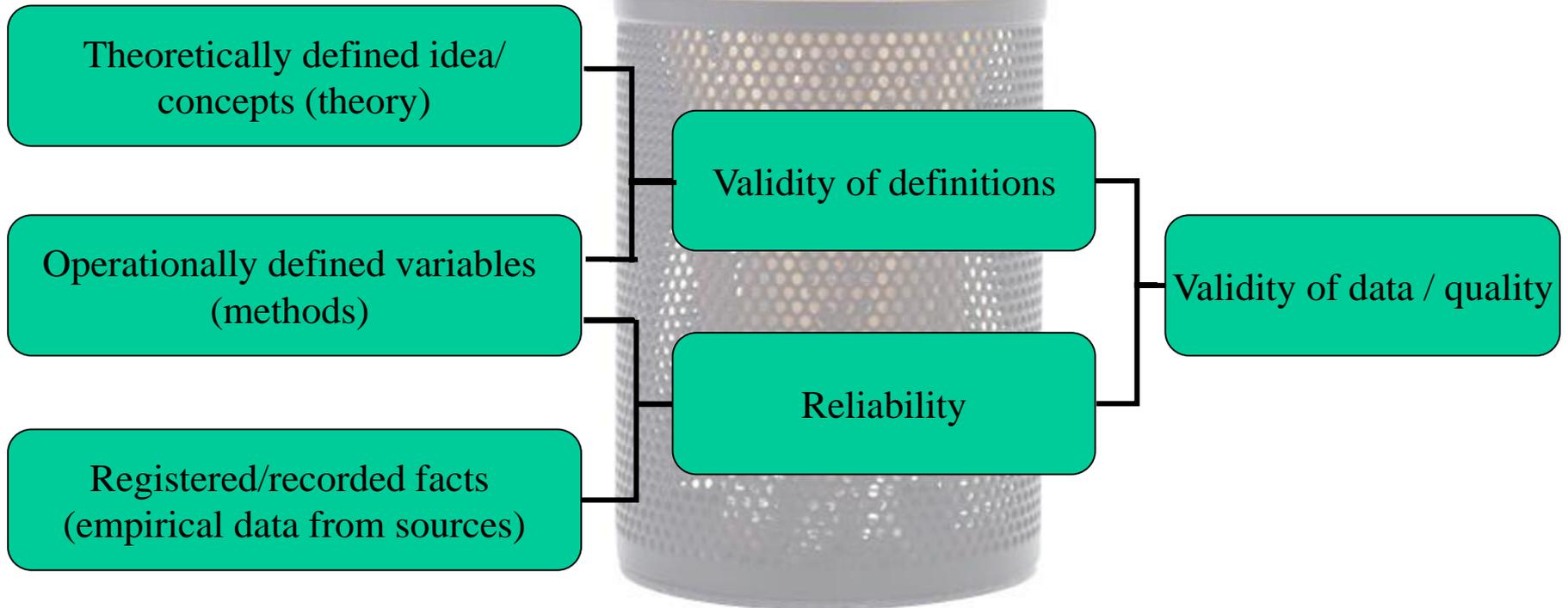
- 1. Claim**
- 2. General, legitimising principle**
- 3. Grounds, reasons, justification**
- 4. Evidence, proof, demonstration, perspectivation**
- 5. Reaction, confirmation, objection, naturalisation**

Each link in the chain needs an appurtenant explanation

Advice on how to handle the subject IX

- 
- **Be sensitive when confronting your subject, but don't follow Picasso's formula: "The artist first finds, and later seeks"**
 - **A ground for believing in a true proposition may have been highly inadequate, and the proposition no less true for that**
 - **Reject the intelligence cult; it is a desire to be admired and accepted socially, more than an ambition to create**
 - **Academic writing is not remotely spontaneous; writing is largely rewriting**

Reliability of conclusions

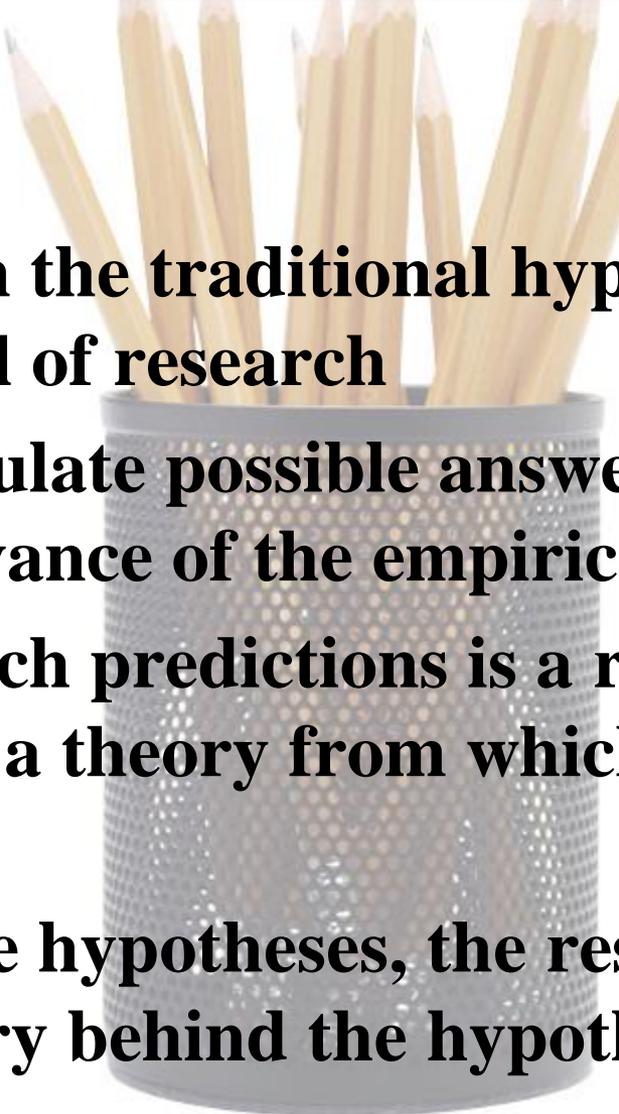


Possible research procedure

- **Hypothetic-deductive method**
- **The hermeneutic circle**
- **Idea / Focus / Objectives**
- **Formulation of the problem/research question**
- **Search phase / data collection / literature exploration**
- **Theory / Hypothesis / Method**
- **Analysis / Verification / Results**
- **Discussion / Argumentation** 
- **Conclusion / New theory**

Theory used on data

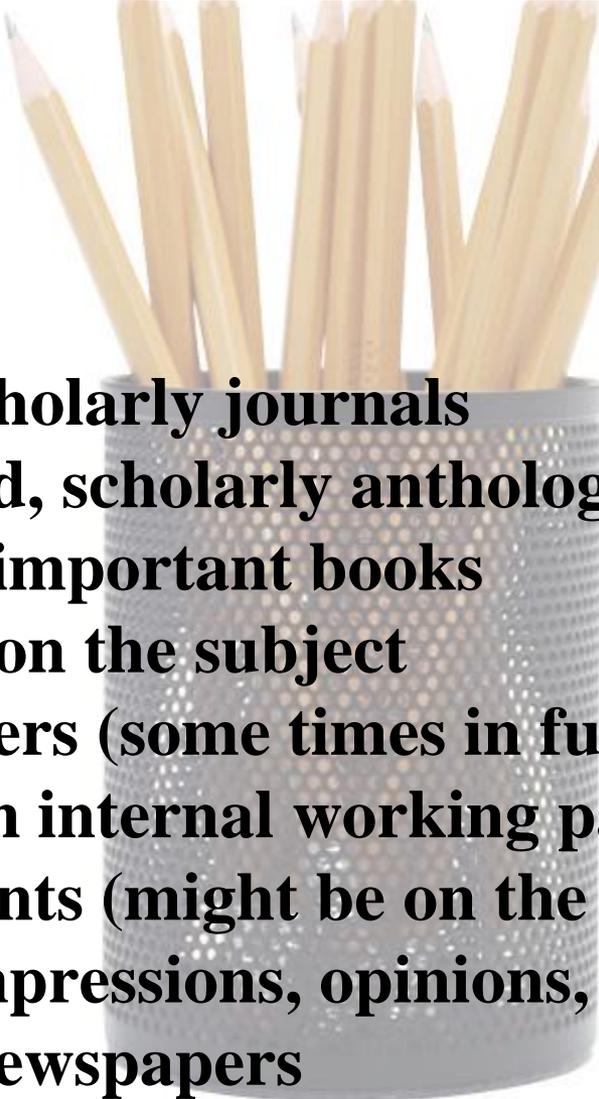
Possible use of hypotheses

- 
- Often applied in the traditional hypothetico-deductive model of research
 - If you can formulate possible answers to research questions in advance of the empirical research
 - The basis for such predictions is a rationale, some set of propositions, a theory from which the hypotheses follow
 - So, in testing the hypotheses, the research is really testing the theory behind the hypotheses

Researching the subject

- **Collecting and elaborating knowledge**
- **Tracking down literature, theories, persons...**
- **Bibliographies, dissertation databases, literature lists...**
- **Archive registers, media archives...**
- **Reading and free writing / Notes and first drafts**
- **Writing helps you to understanding and perspective**
- **Organise the evidence by building your own annotated databases around the subject area**
- **Wonder, observe in detail, develop reflexivity**
- **Seek serendipity; find what you are not looking for**
- **Discussions / feedback from colleagues and community**

Possible types of source material

- 
- A pencil holder filled with pencils is positioned in the center of the slide, behind the list of source material types. The holder is a grey, perforated cylinder, and the pencils are light-colored with sharpened tips.
- **Articles from scholarly journals**
 - **Articles in edited, scholarly anthologies**
 - **Peer reviews of important books**
 - **Classical books on the subject**
 - **Conference papers (some times in full-text on the web)**
 - **Discoveries from internal working papers**
 - **Official documents (might be on the web)**
 - **Self-collected impressions, opinions, statistics, interviews**
 - **Films, photos, newspapers**

Potential primary source material

- 
- **Seek closest and most immediate original expression**
 - **Any source where you cannot go further back to any existing source for this source**
 - **Actual artefacts/evidence (not just descriptions of it)**
 - **Archival documents, unpublished manuscripts, maps, accounts, and balance sheets**
 - **Original diaries, memoirs, letters, auto-biographies**
 - **In textual/literary studies and historiography, second hand literature can function as primary sources**

Elementary source criticism – as I construe it I

- **Establish characteristics/origins/date/ownership of source (what, nature, where and when, who says)**
- **Ascertain value (source to what, kinship, reliability)**
- **First hand sources can be just as untrustworthy, actual participants can be inaccurate or in a peripheral position**
- **Even important events may not be registered, archives are often defective, and the flow of information random**
- **Official sources can be just as tendentious**
- **Practitioners of knowledge-power can disguise subjective /normative judgements as factual/cognitive data**
- **Interest, on the other hand, seldom lies (why can outrank who and how)**

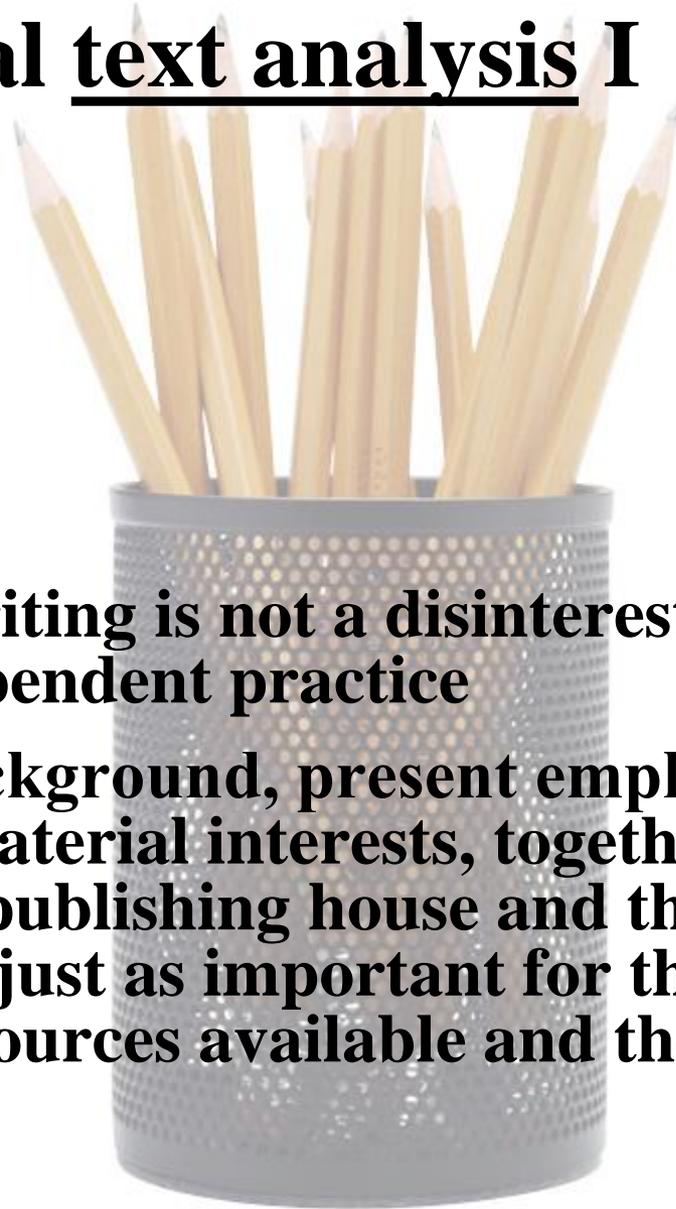
Source criticism II

- **Complete objectivity don't exist, histories can't be "free"**
- **All translation implies interpretation**
- **Reliability of oral sources can be extra problematical**
- **The absolute truth of what really happened (the total past or realhistory) can not be constructed, since any event is too complex to be re-established in full by history writing**
- **However, even if historical events are unique; partial truths, regularities, models, and generalisations can be established, determined by past experience**
- **Seek to prioritise openly between causal explanations by way of comparative analysis and active judgement**
- **Try to determine the relative importance of structural context and personal motives**

Source criticism III

- **Feelings do not necessarily conflict with truth, but...**
- **Prefer intellectual understanding before condemnation**
- **Be aware of your own chronological and personal distance/closeness to sources and evaluate these also in their own context and time**
- **Admitted speculations are allowed and necessary, but problematic if in opposition to verified sources**
- **A thesis/claim is not falsified just because it can't be proven**
- **There can be many different interpretations of a source, but depth and quality of the interpretation can be assessed**
- **Historians often use source criticism in a cantankerous manner**
- **Exercise contra-factual thinking as fairness: how much different could the course of events have developed?**

Source-critical text analysis I



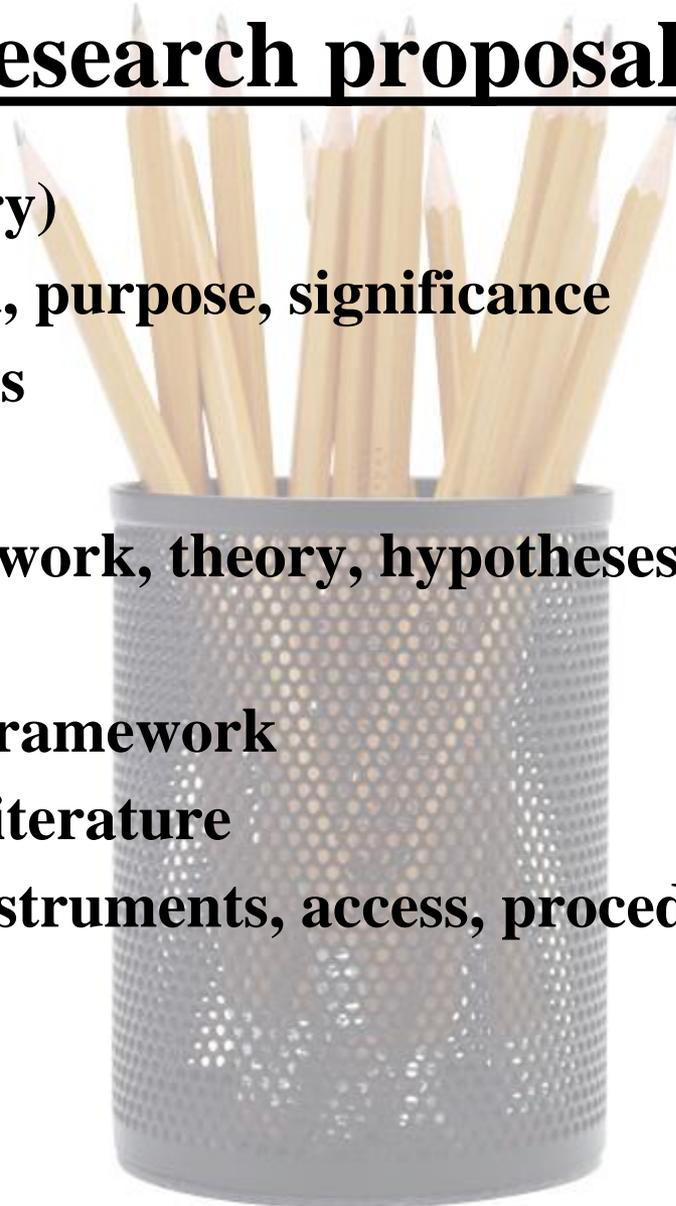
- **Research and writing is not a disinterested, non-influenced, independent practice**
- **The author's background, present employment, networks, and material interests, together with the priorities of the publishing house and the ownership of the product, are just as important for the outcome of the research as the sources available and the methodology used**

Source-critical text analysis II

- **Expose own pre-understandings when characterising texts**
- **Survey creation of source, its provenience, and archival sit.**
- **Read many different sources of different type in same context**
- **Look at the whole text as an entity, but be aware of its fragmentary character, don't read it as literature**
- **Sources will most often only answer on what they are asked**
- **Indicate witness value and determine authority of assertion**
- **Look for contradictions and the unspoken, read between the lines, find the voice of the silent, use triangulation**
- **Concluding on preceding intentions and motives from an established actual event can be a problematic exercise**
- **Speculations from known, investigated material to unknown should always be done consciously and conditionally**

Writing the research proposal

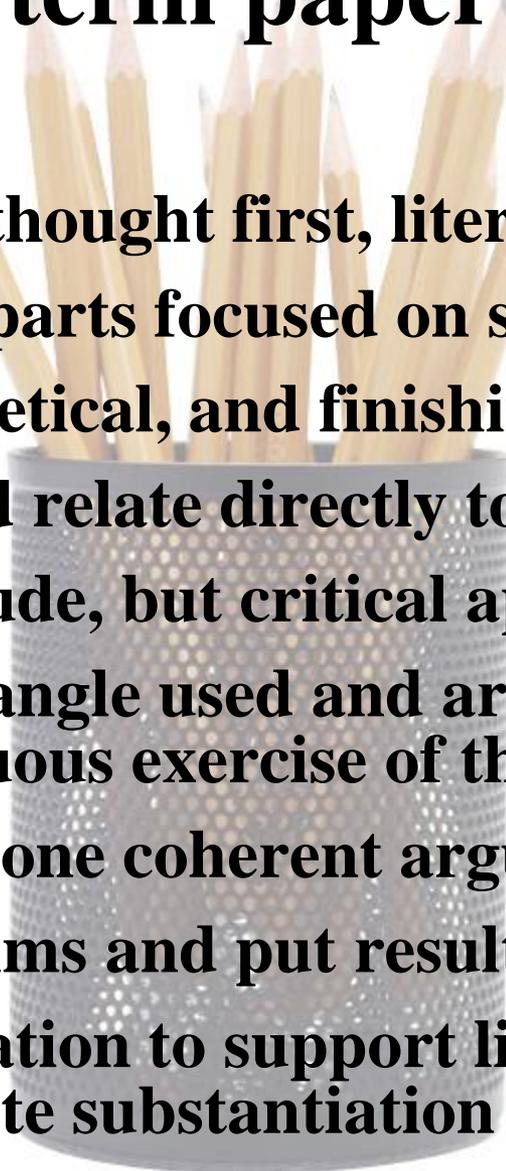
- **Abstract (summary)**
- **Introduction, area, purpose, significance**
- **Research questions**
- **Existing research**
- **Conceptual framework, theory, hypotheses**
- **Methods**
- **Design, strategy, framework**
- **Sample, sources, literature**
- **Data collection, instruments, access, procedures**
- **Data analysis**
- **Limitations**
- **Ethical issues**
- **References**



Straight tips on term paper writing I

- **Choose an appropriate genre / writing style**
- **Start with free writing, without fear of wrongness**
- **Kick start registering, using journalist style; details rather than abstractions - how rather than why**
- **Put your reflections on paper immediately**
- **Use both description, narration, exposition, and argument as modes of expression**
- **Put experience into expository writing and write with power**
- **Aim at rich, clear, professional terminology, but restrict the use of jargon**

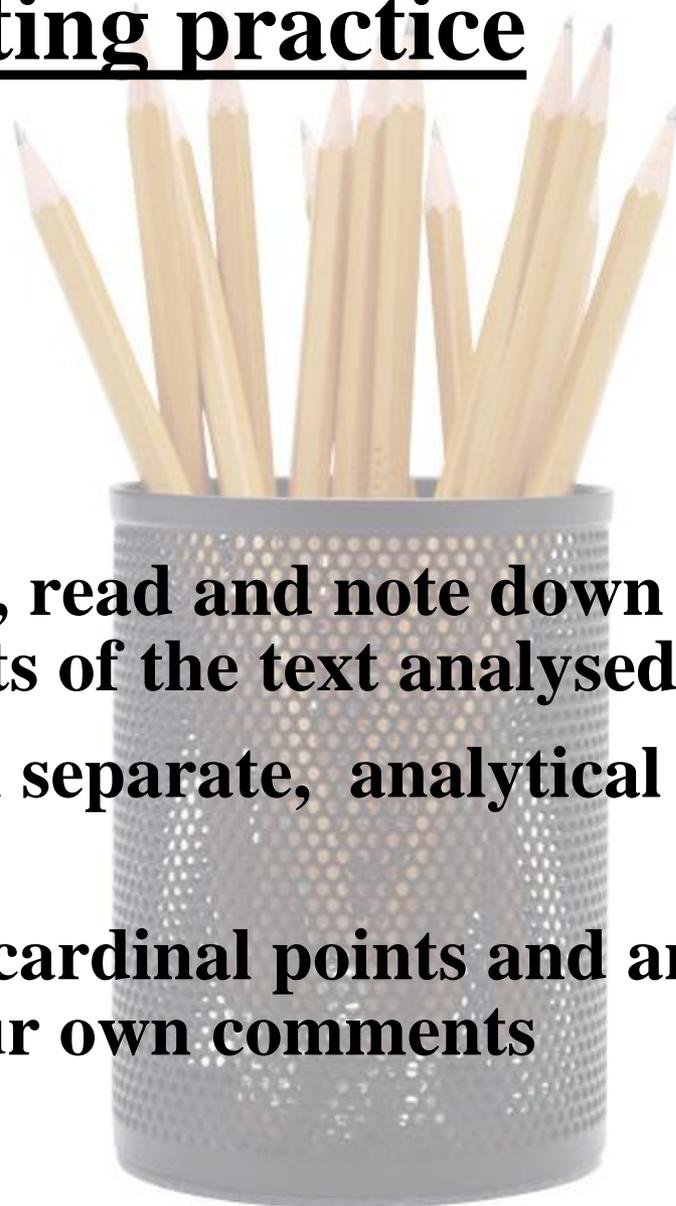
Straight tips on term paper writing II

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- **Logic and clarity in thought first, literary style later**
 - **Organisation: main parts focused on subject**
 - **Short opening, theoretical, and finishing parts**
 - **All texts parts should relate directly to the problem**
 - **Open empathic attitude, but critical approach**
 - **Original overriding angle used and argued all the way through with continuous exercise of theory**
 - **Regard the paper as one coherent argument**
 - **Try to document claims and put results into perspective**
 - **Sufficient documentation to support limited conclusions is better than incomplete substantiation of larger statements**

Straight tips on term paper writing III

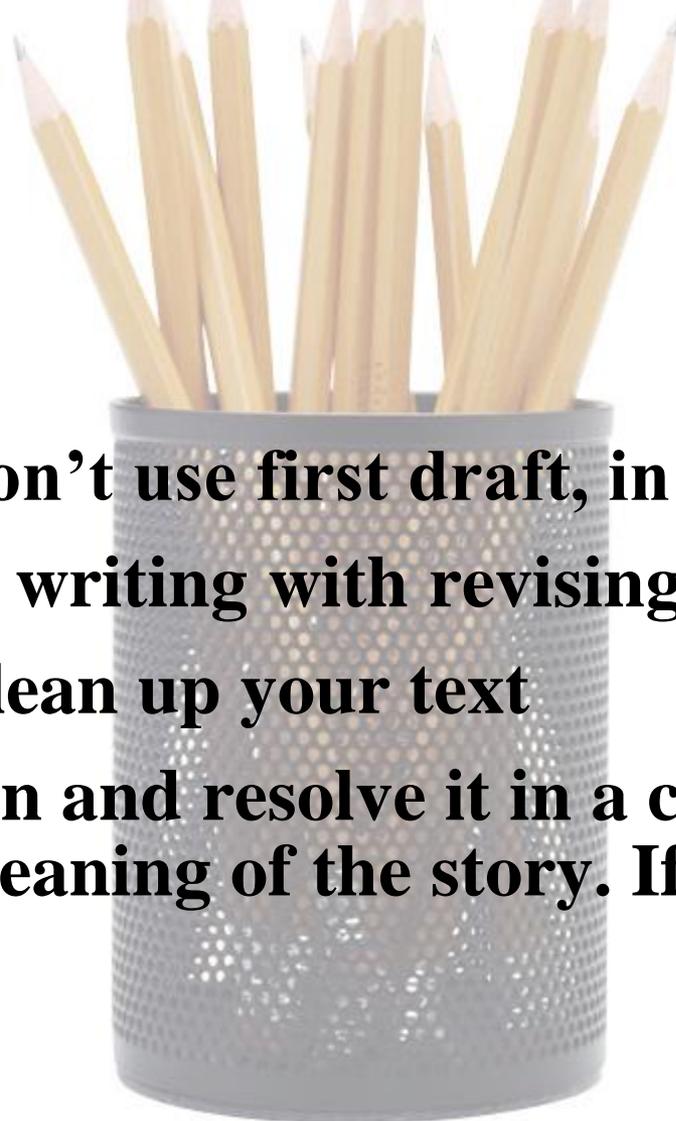
- 
- A cylindrical pencil holder with a perforated, metallic-looking texture is filled with several sharpened wooden pencils. The pencils are arranged in a slightly haphazard manner, with their tips pointing upwards. The holder is positioned in the center of the slide, behind the list of tips.
- **Stay on the subject, everything included must have connection to main purpose**
 - **Don't burden with unnecessary details, sense what to include and what to exclude**
 - **When making a generalisation, immediately support it**
 - **Take into account contradictions in evidence**
 - **Use only short quotations that clearly illustrate points**
 - **Fair treatment of adversaries, admit weaknesses in own argument**

Concrete writing practice



- **Simultaneously, read and note down the most important points of the text analysed**
- **Make your own separate, analytical comments concurrently**
- **Bring together cardinal points and analyses of others loyally with your own comments**

Inspirations from literary writing



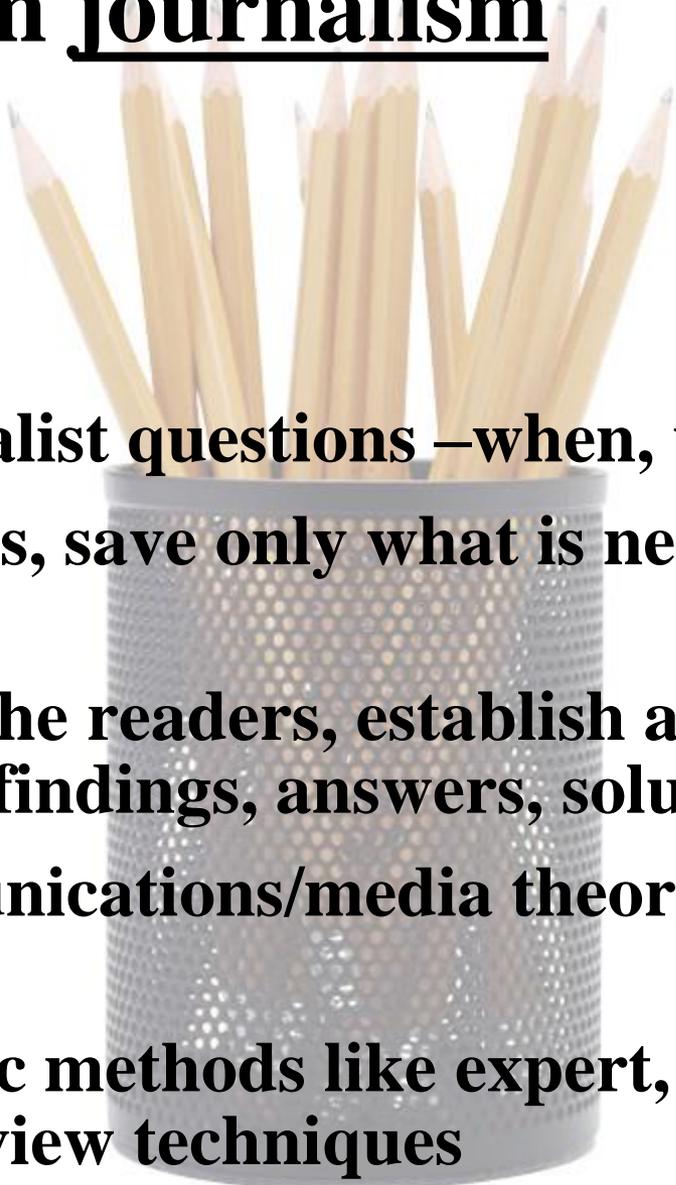
- **Write plenty, don't use first draft, in stead rewrite**
- **Do not mix free writing with revising**
- **Less is more. Clean up your text**
- **Establish tension and resolve it in a climax that embodies the meaning of the story. If you can't; reorganise all**

Find your own writing style



- **The art of writing as a form of pleasurable mastery**
- **Clear, coherent, and stylish prose**
- **Mindful and judiciously, rather than robotically**

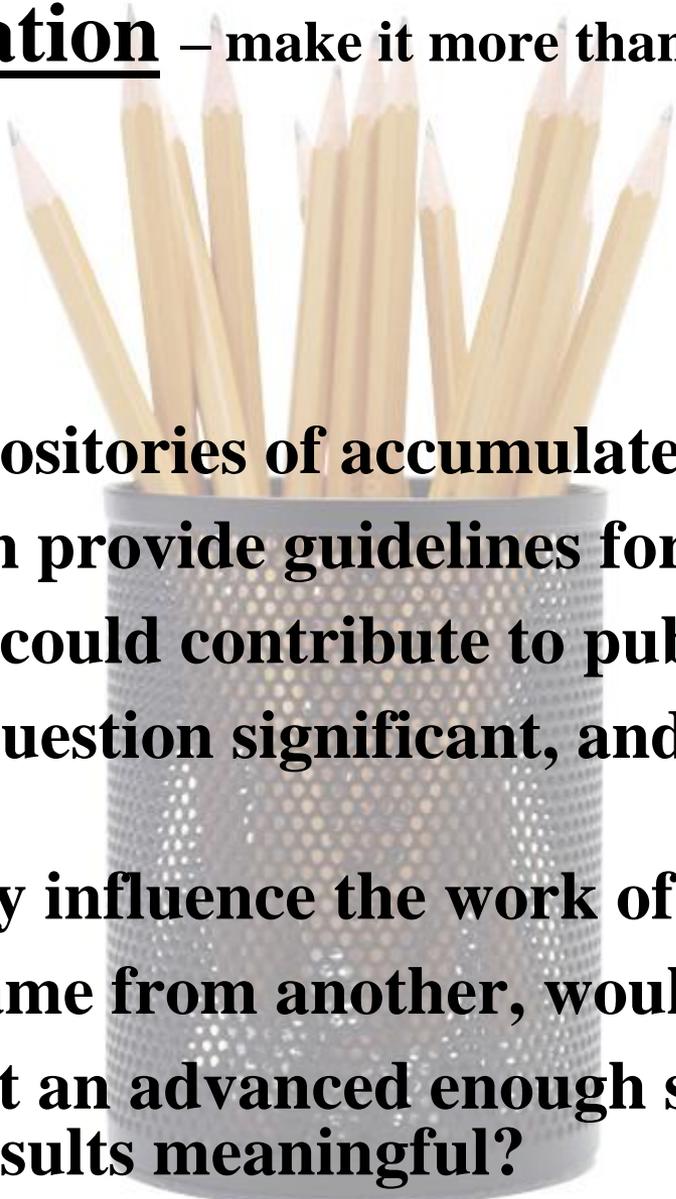
Learning from journalism

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- **Start with journalist questions –when, who, why, how**
 - **Kill your darlings, save only what is necessary and relevant**
 - **Assign a role to the readers, establish a relation to your audience – offer findings, answers, solutions**
 - **Consider communications/media theory such as framing analysis**
 - **Train journalistic methods like expert, opinion, or experience interview techniques**

Writer's revising checklist

- **Revising is the hardest, most time-consuming process**
- **Is there enough content to allow readers to follow?**
- **Are conclusions inferred from prioritised evidence?**
- **Fair presentation also using contrary evidence?**
- **Are all references consistent?**
- **Consequent style on quotations, footnotes, punctuation?**
- **Are transitions effective?**
- **Does the conclusion mirror the opening?**
- **Is the tone direct and right for the audience?**
- **Are sentences clear at first reading? Active voice?**
- **Are phrases repeated? Can paragraphs be eliminated?**

Aim for publication – make it more than just an exercise

- 
- **Journals are repositories of accumulated knowledge**
 - **Edited books can provide guidelines for action**
 - **Media exposure could contribute to public debate**
 - **Is the research question significant, and is the work original?**
 - **Could your study influence the work of others?**
 - **If your report came from another, would you read it?**
 - **Is the research at an advanced enough stage to make the publication of results meaningful?**

Typical flaws in research/publication design

- **Exhaustion of a problem, reporting trivial changes in previous research**
- **Piecemeal publication, separation of results**
- **Lack of deep analytical knowledge on the subject**
- **Reporting only a single correlation with no wider implications**
- **Outcome measures not clearly related to the variables with which the investigation is concerned**
- **Ethical standards not observed, conventions violated**
- **Angle undesirable for the publisher's credibility**
- **Low literary quality, clumsy language, unfinished form**
- **Subjective weaknesses of narrative: unconscious bias, (self-)deception, and blunder**

African Studies methods I

- **Clarify to which extent they exist in your case. Most generalisations on Africa, anthropological methods, and fieldwork techniques have common third world or universal relevance**
- **Be a professional first; take departure in methods from your main study area, course, or profession**
- **Map the various ways in which different disciplines perceive social realities**
- **Find combinations of disciplines, complementarities of knowledge and methodologies, and interaction between them**
- **Then add specific, cross-disciplinary methods relevant for your subject or cause**

African Studies methods II

Examples

- 
- **Often focus on Africa-specific patterns of thought, languages, family life, division of labour, tribal-cultural inclusiveness, original democratic forms, etc.**
 - **British Africanist research methods developed at the Rhodes Livingstone Institute; social drama/extended case study/situational analysis**
 - **The Francophone Griaule School; representation in the field and in the text**

Africa-relevant interdisciplinary studies, examples I

- **Development studies using different versions of modernisation, underdevelopment, or world system theory**
- **Conflict and nation-building theories**
- **Evaluations of aid efficiency**
- **Evaluating the impact of agricultural research on poverty by way of rural sociology**
- **Looking at people and pests; human-insect interactions**
- **Testing climate change perspectives**
- **Getting close to human agency by civil society theories**
- **Administrative studies on local government**

Africa-relevant interdisciplinary studies, examples II

- 
- **Remaining impacts of imperialism and neocolonialism; new forms of western dominance**
 - **Urban studies, informal sector functionality**
 - **Cultural production and reception; narratological theories, analysis of images, and literary contexts**
 - **Interviews and focus group qualitative analyses**
 - **Oral history investigations**
 - **Use of knowledge brokering to promote evidence-based policy-making and as a strategy to close the know-do gap**

Approaches to north/south research co-operation



- **Research projects without any counterpart except for the researched group (southern or northern)**
- **Research generated on the basis of data collected by a partner in the South**
- **Projects co-implemented by invitation**
- **Co-designed research projects**
- **Practitioner-researcher using action-research model including political activism / international solidarity**

South Africa relevant study subjects - some examples I

- **How South African children in township areas were stigmatised by Apartheid**
- **Military-civilian relations of the South African Defence Force in past and present**
- **The relationship between ANC and SACP 1950 - 1990**
- **Land reforms in the new South Africa**
- **The political role of the church during and after the transformation to democracy**
- **NGOs in urban development: participatory planning in township areas**

Possible study subjects - some examples II

- **Regional differences in welfare development between South Africa's provinces**
- **South Africa's Truth Commission – a road to reconciliation?**
- **The importance of the sanctions policy in the undermining of apartheid**
- **Interaction between civil society NGOs and the education sector**
- **Apartheid client-making analysed through post-structural identity theories**

Literature on study techniques

- **Search LitSA / LitProf on Stolten's website | Databases, queries; keyword = studieteknik (study techniques)**
- **A manual for writers of term papers, theses, and dissertations, University of Chicago Press, 1996**
- **Writing with Power, Peter Elbow, Oxford Uni. Press, 1998**
- **The practice of theory: rhetoric, knowledge, and pedagogy, Cambridge University Press, 1998**
- **Den gode opgave, Rienecker og Jørgensen, 2002**
- **The Chicago Manual of Style, Uni. of Chicago Press 2003**
- **Writing a thesis: a guide to long essays, G.Watson, 2003**
- **Problemorienteret projektarbejde, Olsen/Pedersen, 2003**
- **Tekst for viderekomne, Klaus Kjøller, 2004**

Some techniques for African studies



The end