

How to write a project

Some techniques for History and African Studies

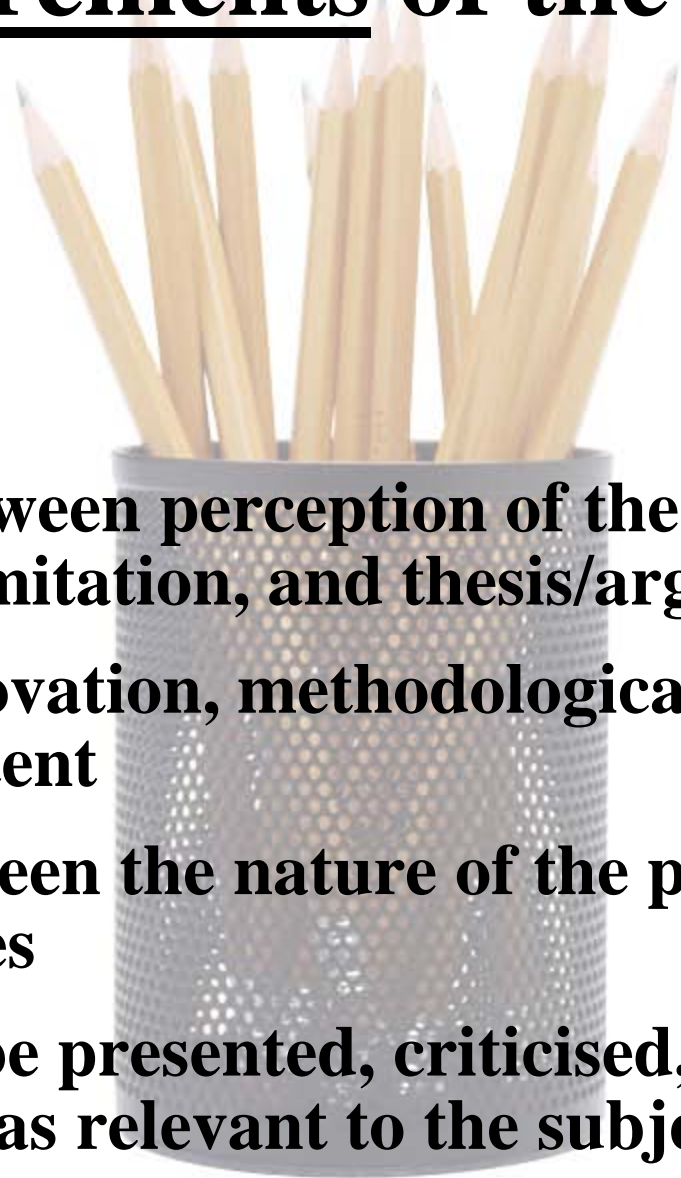
Research methodology

Overriding considerations



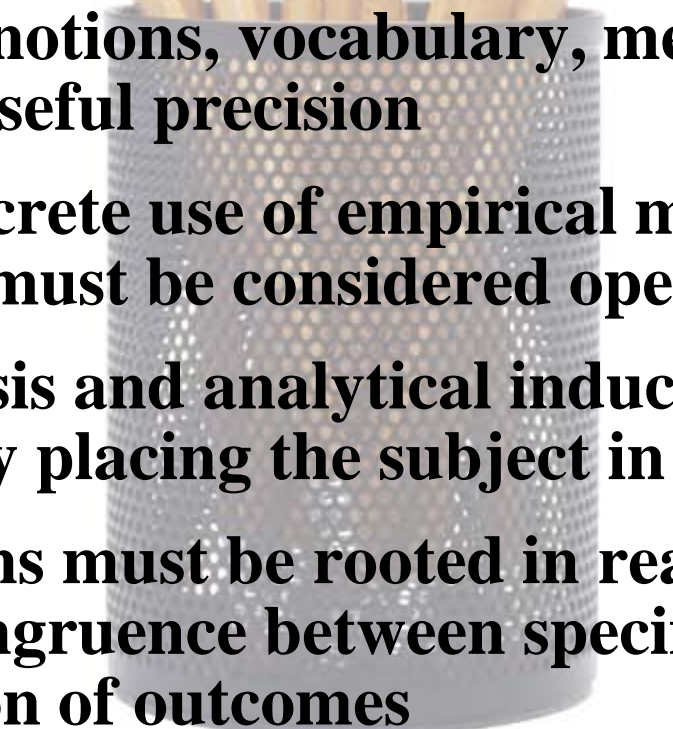
- **What are we going to learn as the result of the proposed project that we do not know now?**
- **Why is it worth knowing?**
- **How will we know that the conclusions are valid?**
- **To get research right, it must not only be done well - it must be meaningful**

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**
- **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

A pencil holder with several pencils. The holder is a dark, textured cylinder, and the pencils are light-colored with sharpened tips. The background is white.

- **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**
- **Specify the 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**

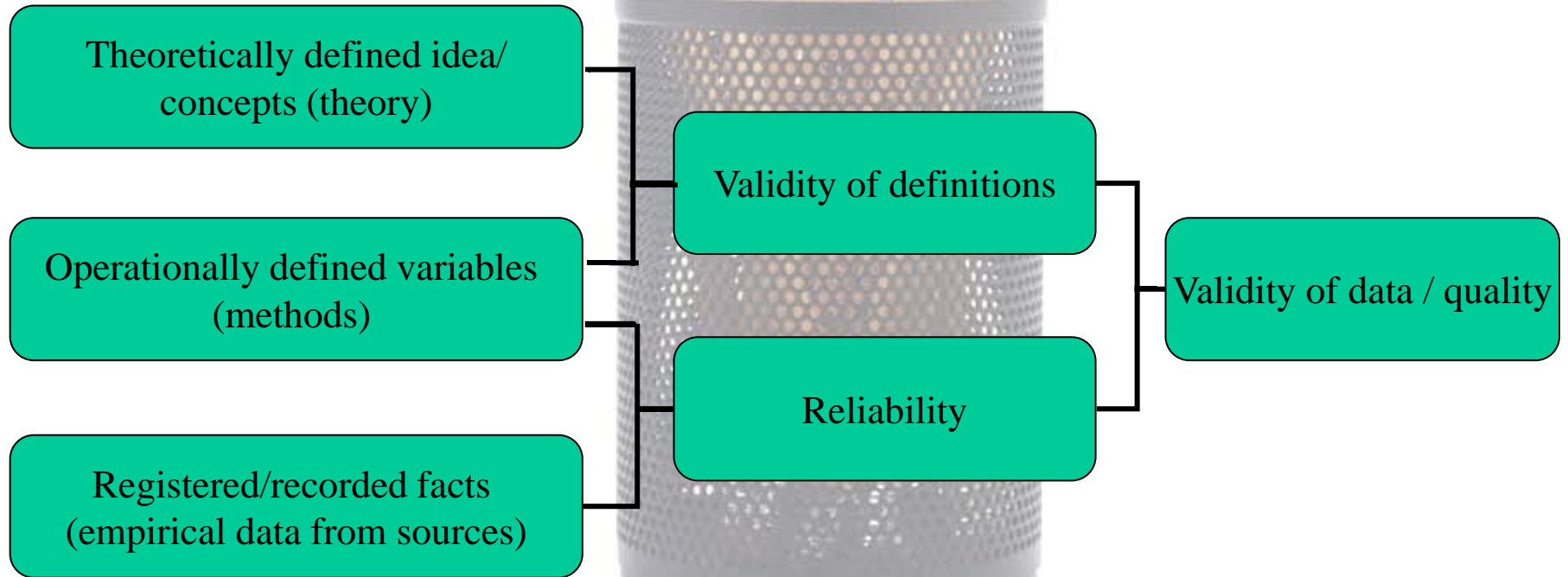
Advice on how to handle the subject I

- **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**

Reliability of conclusions



Possible research procedure

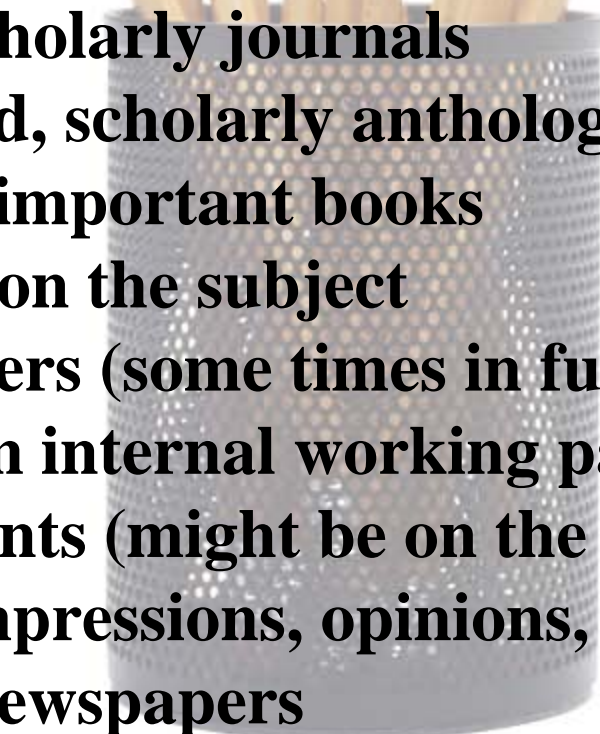
- **Hypothetic-deductive method**
- **The hermeneutic circle**
- **Idea / Focus / Objectives**
- **Formulation of the problem/research question**
- **Search phase / data collection / literature exploration**
- **Theory / Hypothesis / Method**
- **Analysis / Verification / Results**
- **Discussion / Argumentation**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

Theory used on data

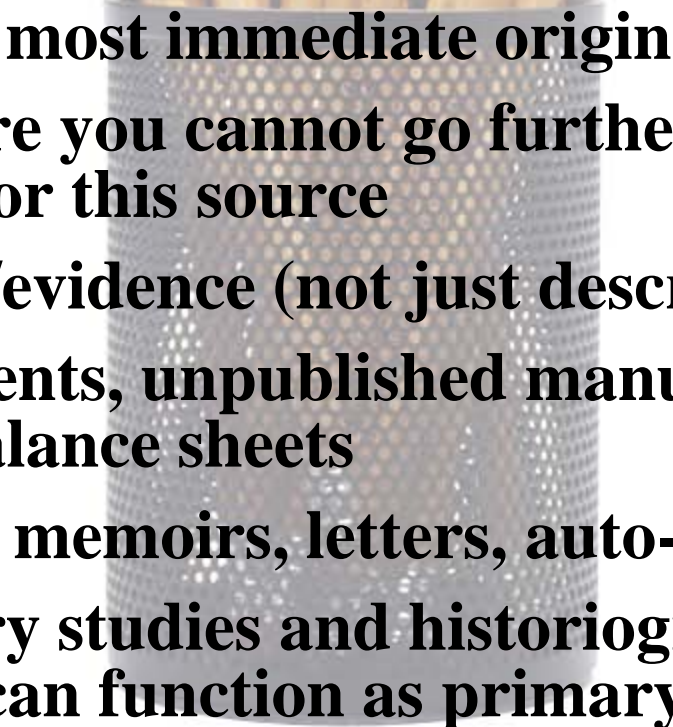
Researching the subject

- **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

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- A pencil holder filled with pencils is positioned in the background of the slide. 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

- 
- A pencil holder with several pencils. The holder is a dark, textured cylinder, and the pencils are light-colored with sharpened tips.
- **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 problematic**
- **The total (or absolute) truth of what really happened (the past) can not be constructed, since any event is too complex to be re-established in full by history**
- **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**

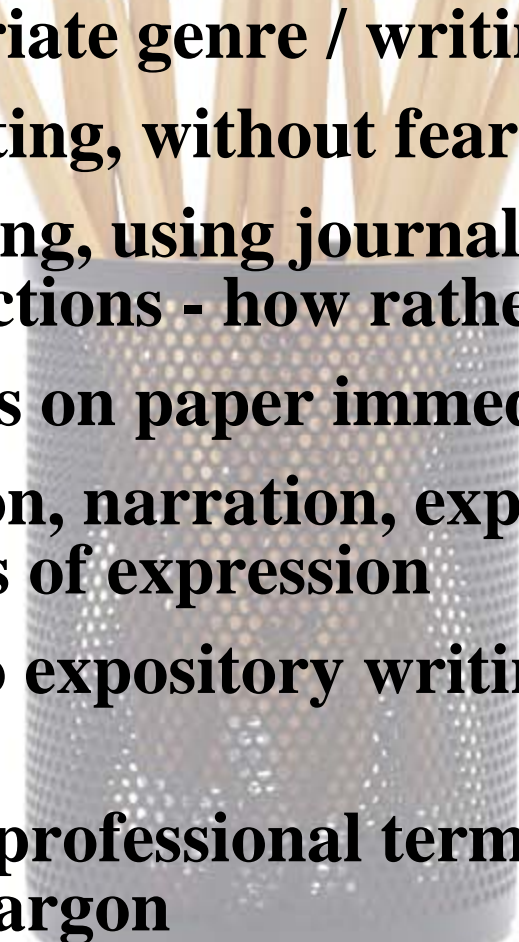
Source criticism III

- **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 not 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

- **Expose own pre-understandings when characterizing 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 is a problematic exercise**
- **Speculations from known, investigated material to unknown should always be done consciously and conditionally**

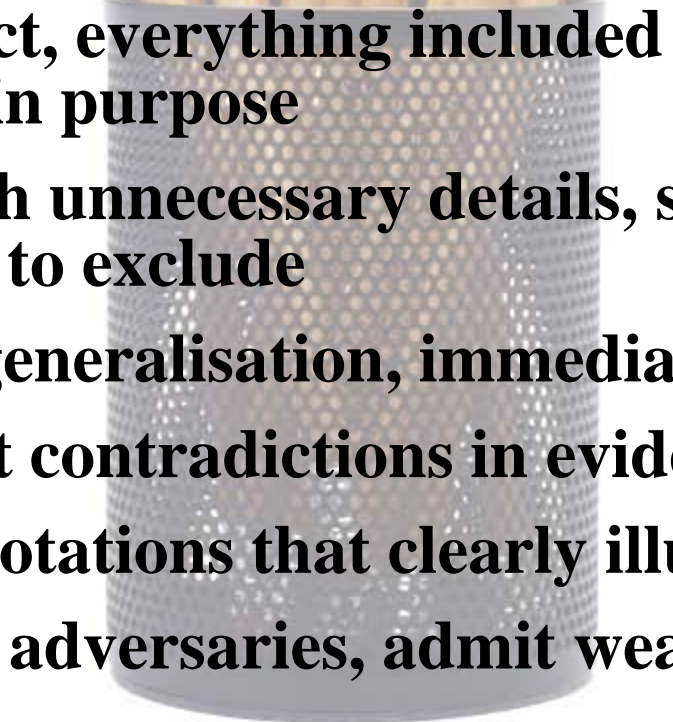
Straight tips on term paper writing I

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- **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**

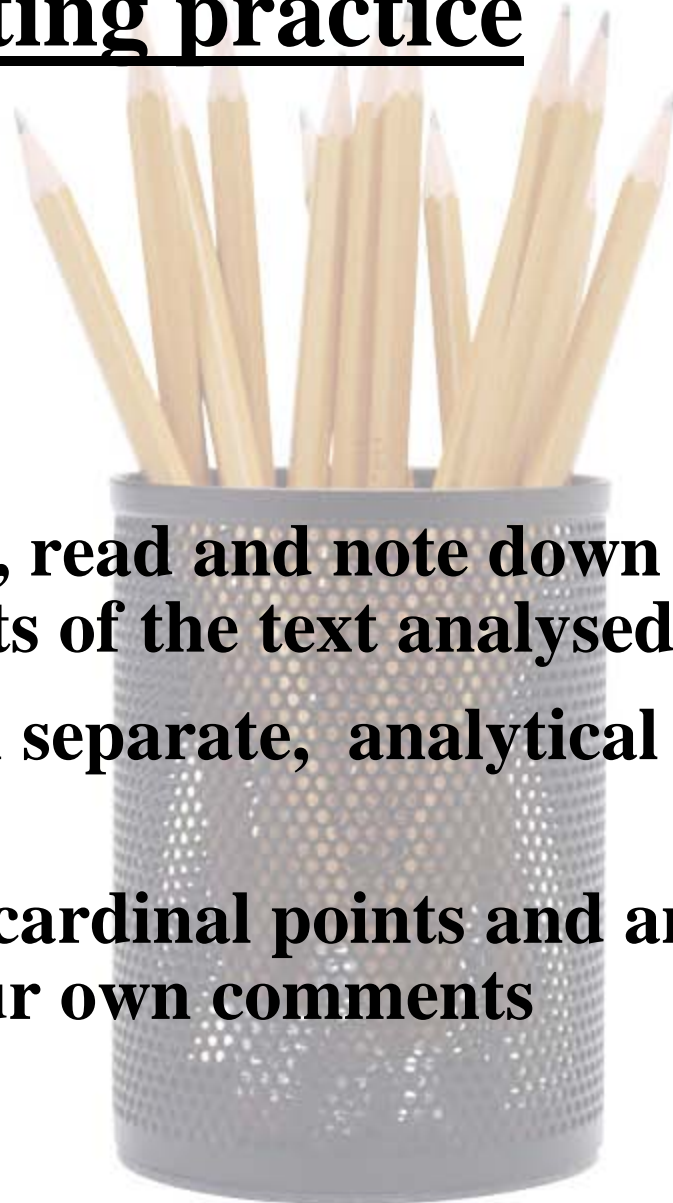
Straight tips on term paper writing II

- **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

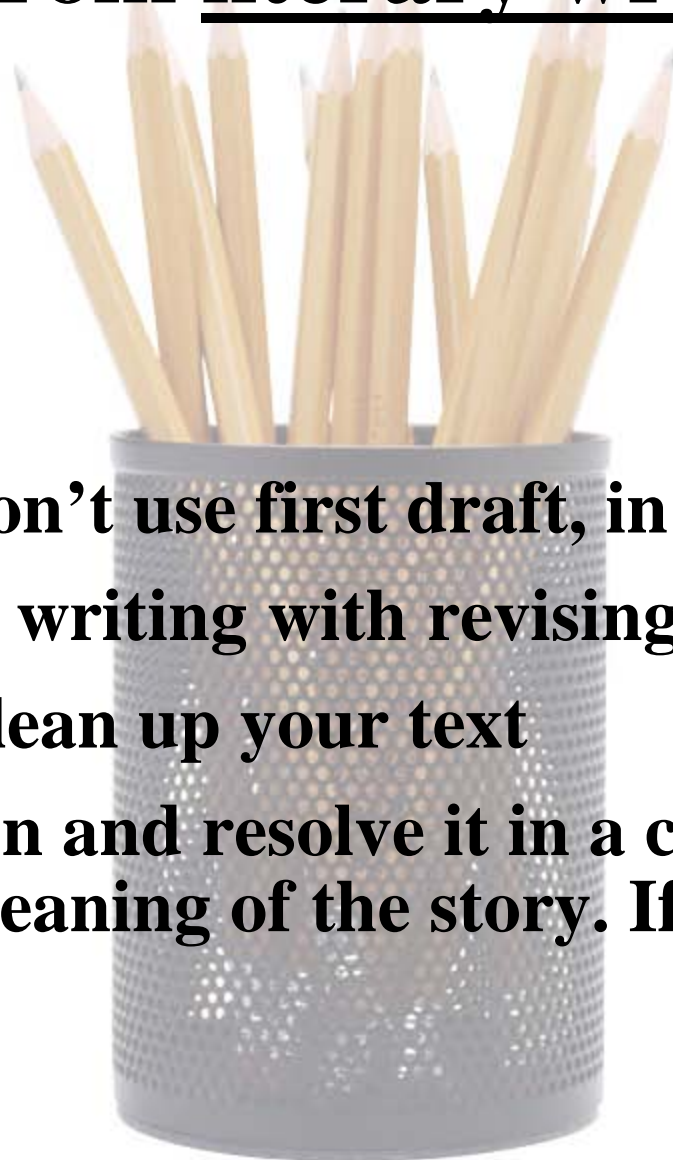
- 
- A pencil holder with several pencils. The holder is a grey, perforated cylinder. It contains several light-colored pencils with sharpened tips, some pointing upwards and some slightly angled. The background is white.
- **Stay on the subject, everything included must have connection to main purpose**
 - **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; reorganize all**

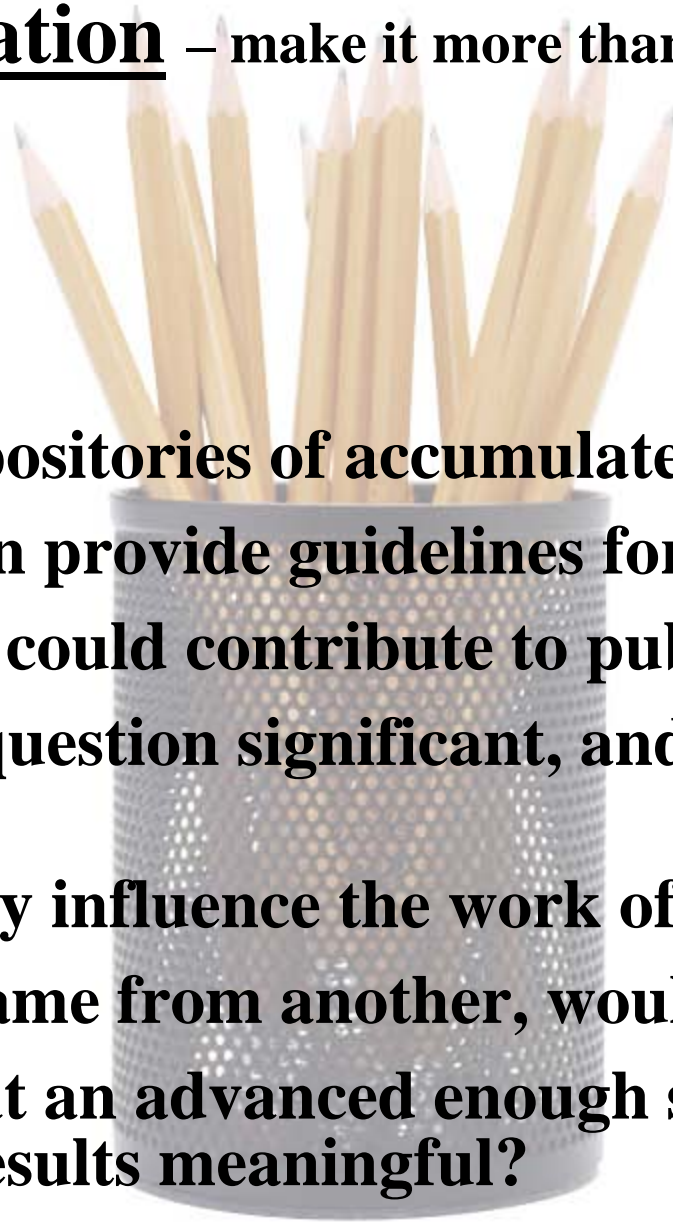
Learning from journalism

- **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 prioritized 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 generalizations 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

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- **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