Finding Your Academic Voice

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Finding Your Academic Voice

Becoming a scholar is a process.
You don’t wake up one day with all the answers.
Hypotheses and arguments don’t emerge flawless and fully formed.
Ideas are messy.
Methods are complex.
Data tend not to conform.
And there’s already a body of work out there that tackles similar questions.

You are trying to find a niche, a voice, in your field.
But what to say when it seems everything has already been said? How to determine where and how to position your work?

This intellectual struggle is at the heart of academic work.
It’s fulfilling and exciting.
It’s also very hard.
And in early and messy stages (they feel like they will last forever) it can be discouraging.

Months or years may be spent with that devil of a question in mind:

‘Do I have anything to say at all?’

The answer to that question is YES. You do.
The academic world is waiting to find out what you have to say (even if it doesn’t feel that way).

But before that: YOU are waiting to find out what you have to say.

It is the purpose of writing a PhD.

Join me in discovering your academic voice.

Let’s get started.
Some of my suggestions may seem a little basic to you.
I include them not to insult your intelligence.
I include them because these questions and tools are essential.

It’s easy to get lost in complicated technical detail and to think that is what doing academic work is about.

It’s not.

**Doing academic work is about asking the right questions, and answering them the right way.**

It’s simple really.
Just not easy. At all.

What is easy is to get lost and overwhelmed in the sea of scholarship and ideas.
You task is to stay centred and create, and hopefully the tools, techniques and suggestions discussed will help you do just that.

They are simple but powerful.
Your Core Argument
Your Core Argument

Your core argument is the backbone of your work. It is the argument that holds all the pieces of your paper/chapter/PhD together. It is the answer to your main research question. It is your punch line. Your contribution to the literature.

Developing your core argument is your job. Your work. Your aim.

Three mistakes are easily made:

The first is to think your core argument can emerge from a series of single sessions of hard thinking, brainstorming and reviewing the literature.

It cannot.

Core arguments grow. They develop. And the process is cumulative and deliberative. Organic, if you wish.

You start with a hunch.

It develops into a tentative argument.

Revision after revision your argument takes further shape.

In the final stage your argument feels solid.

The literature to date holds and supports it. But your argument isn’t lost in it.

Head in that direction. It’s all you can do. It is enough.

The second is to think you are not getting anywhere, because your argument isn’t ‘there yet’.

In the early years of an academic career, the process is one of learning, discovery, and creation.

This process goes mostly unrewarded.
The publications come after you have done the figuring out. After you have done the positioning.

The process to get there can take years and is filled with dead ends and failure.

These failures aren’t celebrated.

They should be.
Academia is a process of failing forward.

Every failure helps sculpting your core argument, as what it is not is chiselled away.

The third is to hide until your core argument is fully formed.

I understand.

The academic world revolves around criticism.

It can be hard enough to put yourself out there when your work feels (relatively) solid and well researched.

Let alone when you’re still flailing.

“They’ will find the flaws and shoot it down.

Or so it feels.

Get used to it.

Use criticism to your advantage.

There is a time for being an academic hermit, but that time ends well before you feel you are ready.

In the end you want to join the academic community.
So join.
You have something to say.
Say it.
It will be appreciated.

You cannot do it curled up home alone.

You have to show up
Finding Your Core Argument

Finding your core argument starts with a hypothesis. They tend to come in two sizes:

**One large, broad and inclusive.** It is your research question answered in the most inclusive way possible. It’s a broad description of what your work is about. It is your core argument.

**The second small and specific.** These are punchy researchable statements that are the (potential) building blocks of your argument.

The broad hypothesis helps you (and your audience) keep track of what you are working on. (It is what you can answer to that irritating question: what’s your PhD about?) It is capable of holding multiple arguments. It defines what you are researching, but does not go into the specifics. It answers the ‘what’, not the ‘how’. It evolves slowly, and becomes clearer and more specific as your work progresses.

The small hypotheses form the specific researchable elements of your work. They provide grip and traction. They define the mechanisms of your argument. The nuts and bolts. The ‘how’. You can tackle and knock them off one hypothesis at a time. These are the intermediate milestones. The small triumphs. As you tackle them, answers emerge that inform your research question. But they cannot answer it in its totality.

To get started on your broad hypothesis, develop your research question. It cannot be found in the literature (though it will be informed by it). It has to be found within yourself.

**Sit, and deliberate.**

Which question needs answering?

Which question needs answering by you?

Do not despair if the answer does not come readily. Just start somewhere. Sketch the contours of your research. Sketch it in a couple of sentences. That’s where you begin.

Once your broad research question and hypothesis has taken shape (for the first, second or nth time), develop your smaller, specific hypotheses.

How can your research question be answered specifically? What parts does it contain? What answers are possibilities?

Do not enter the stage of formulating specific hypotheses before you have your broad hypothesis somewhat sorted.

If you do, beware of drowning.
Specific Questions To Ask

The following questions are questions to meditate on. Answering them will lead you to your core argument, and provide structure to your writing.

They are tough questions to answer well. It’s what academics do for a living. It’s an iterative process. Keep asking. Keep answering.

To find your core argument ask:
- What am I trying to say?
- If my readers could remember only one message after reading my work, what would that be?
- If I would strip away all disclaimers, jargon and nuance, what would be left?

To find your sub-hypotheses ask:
- Which additional messages should my readers remember, after reading my work?
- Which partial arguments might support, or might prove my main argument wrong?
- Are they specific and researchable?
Does It Feel Right?

Your core argument should feel good. 
You should get a sense of excitement when you read it: Ah! I nailed it! 
Don’t worry if your core argument is awkward and uneasy in the beginning. 
It will evolve over time. 
Allow it to take you on a slow, bumpy journey to completion. 
You will know when you get there. 
Yes! This is it! This what I am trying to say! 
You have arrived when it feels lucid, solid and sharp. 
You will know.
The Creative Cocoon

Core arguments need space to grow.
Give them that space. Daily.
Sit beneath the apple tree every day.
Reflect while blowing bubbles soaking in the bath.
Take long walks along the river.
Immerse yourself in a creative cocoon.
The cocoon is devoid of criticism.
It is allowing in every way.
It is private.
It is fun.
Drink hot tea, and contemplate.
Allow ideas to float up and take shape.
Then: Quick! Jot them down.
Once you have (the beginning of) your core argument sorted allow it to shine!
It’s your argument we need to hear. It’s why we are reading your work in the first place.
Shape your chapter or paper around it.
In the early stages core arguments can be shy.
They do not know how brilliant they are.
They have confidence issues.

Help your readers, help yourself:
Don’t hide your argument!

What that means is do not wrap your argument in a million disclaimers.
It means discuss the literature that supports you argument, and discuss the literature that does not, but in such a way that your reader still knows where you stand and why.

Your argument is the centrepiece.
Allow it to shine.

Explaining where you stand and why is the objective.
It means do not be intimidated by research already done.
It means do not be timid.
It means be clear, concise, precise.
If your core argument is clear, everything else - theory, methods, data, results, conclusion – logically follow.
Don’t Hide. Don’t Boast.

Some core arguments hide.
Deep down they want to be seen, but they feel uneasy in the spotlight.
Their authors help them hide behind the rest of the literature, posh language and complex sentences.
They are defensive.
They are shy.

Other core arguments are brash and boastful.
They pretend they are the only argument worth considering.
They pretend their voice is singular, wholly new and disconnected from the rest of the literature.
They are arrogant and blow hot air.
They reason that a good offence is the best defence.
They too are scared.
Afraid of taking a beating in the crossfire of criticism called academic debate.
So they polish up their armour, and make it as shiny and intimidating as they possibly can.

Even in the land of core arguments, real strength comes from within.
If the substance isn’t there, your luck will run out.
Hot air and fluff do not count.

Develop your argument’s strength.
It grows through creation, testing, and revision.
Allow criticism to build your argument up, not tear it down.
In the process: Allow it to be seen. It is the only way.
Important: Tell Us A Story

Tell Us Why We Should Give a Damn

   Fascinate Us

   Compel Us

   Convince Us

Make Us Want to Read More

Nothing Less Will Do

Your ideas and findings matter. Communicate them in a way that engages us.
How to Use the Literature
Get Inspired

Search for the papers or books that you wish you would have written.
Search for papers and books that have a voice you admire.
Search for papers and books that excite you.
Find scholars that speak to you.
Find scholars that annoy you.

They will point the way.

Lose yourself in their words.
Lose yourself in their thinking.

Once you have gorged on the literature, put it all aside and let it simmer.

Come back to your own thinking.
Find your own words.
Find your own voice.
Use the Literature. Use It Well.

Academic writing involves designing and selecting arguments, and putting them together in patterns that make sense.

Every argument and reference needs to have a function and a natural fit, within the whole text.

To use the literature well, you need a method of sorting through it, to know which arguments to keep and which to exclude in your writing.

To find out whether a reference or argument in the literature is ‘right’ or not to include in your paper or chapter ask: ‘How does it relate to my core argument’?

If it addresses the argument (provides context, supports or opposes your argument/ method/ findings) you keep it.

If not, you toss it.
Do Not Write an Encyclopaedia

In your paper or chapter, you don’t want to be writing an overview of every single article in the literature to date pertaining to your topic.

There is no voice, no author, in encyclopaedias.
There is no point.
There is no argument.

To avoid ending up with an encyclopaedia: be selective.
Be exclusive.
Focus on what you want to say. Say it.
And use the literature to date to embed, discuss and structure your work.

Being selective does NOT mean leaving out papers that disagree with what you’re trying to say.
It’s not about cherry picking.
In fact, if you find papers that disagree with you, those are the papers you need to address most.

It means providing focus. Not allowing yourself or your reader to get lost in the maze of what has already been said.

When reading, read through the lens of function.

What function would this paper have in the context of my argument?

It’s all that matters.
Do Not Allow Your Canoe to Sink

When I was finishing my PhD I suffered from low energy, and I could not add many new papers to my repertoire. At the time, I was worried about it, as I thought my work might not be as current as it should be.

The opposite turned out to be the case:
I was forced to focus on the most important arguments already out there, and it markedly clarified my thinking.
It improved my work. A lot.

Dare to improve your work, by incorporating less.

My late mentor Gordon Smith advised me to ‘never allow my canoe to sink’.

‘All you need to do is think. In your mind, that’s where it’s all happening. Think!’
‘Imagine you’re on a deserted island.
No, even better, you’re in a canoe.
And you’re only allowed to take one paper for each topic with you.
If you take more on board, your canoe will sink.
Now read these papers and think about what the author is telling you.
Reflect on it. Get inside the papers you’ve chosen.’

How many papers have you got in your canoe?
Don’t let it sink.
Do’s and Don’ts

Do become an expert in your field, by making sure you read the most important scholars and papers.

Do your research: find out who they are, and get to know their work intimately.

Do Not think you need to read every single paper in your field. You Do Not and can not.

Do Not allow your canoe to sink.

Do allow yourself to be inspired by what is already written.

Do Not allow yourself to become (too) confused or overwhelmed by the volume and magnitude of it all.

Do Not cherry pick.
Writing well is about leaving out the unnecessary. Papers that oppose your views are highly necessary.

Do allow other scholars to inform and inspire you. You Do Not have to invent the wheel.

Do Not copy them (even in early versions of your work). It’s called plagiarism.

Do use the structure of other papers to show you how things are done.
Follow the lead of those with experience on how to communicate your research, ideas and results.
Your Research Design
Research Design: Questions to Ask

To find the relevance of your work ask:
- What does my research project contribute?
- How does it add to the existing literature? (It does. Just listen.)
- Why? Why this piece of research, when there are so many other options?
- Does my topic have a broader relevance?

To position yourself in your field ask:
- What has everyone else done? (The important ones, not everybody.)
- Why do they claim what they claim?
- What do I make of all of it?

To develop your theoretical framework:
- How to think about this topic?
- Which ideologies, concepts and approaches to use, and why?
- How do other people in my field think (paradigms wars?), and does it make sense?

To find and validate your method ask:
- How to measure this best, and why to measure this way?
- Why are other ways of measuring less useful?

To validate your choice of data ask:
- What data am I using and why?
- How do they relate to my hypotheses?
When answering these questions: keep it simple.

Use plain language.

You are designing the skeleton of your work.

Skeletions are bare.

Everything else comes later.

Be a minimalist.

Look past the complexities.

Every unnecessary addition has to go.
Now Sit

Sit with your questions.
Sit with the literature.
When your critical and creative mind meet, answers emerge.
It is magical.
The next step pops up.
The idea you need to pursue.
The direction you need to explore.
The argument that needs investigating.
The paper you need to pay closer attention to.
The solution that had eluded you.

The process is not so much about thinking up, as about getting down.
Getting the ideas that pop up, down on paper.
Do not listen to negative thoughts. Pay them no attention.
You might think your ideas suck. They don’t.
Allow insights to emerge. They will.
Be quiet. Hear yourself think.
Give yourself time and space to explore.
Be sharp and still. Allow.
And capture. Write it down.
If you listen intently, this process will find an elegant way forward.
No overwhelm. Just the next right idea.
What It Could Look Like

To get started it makes sense to get an idea of what research in your field looks like.

If you’re writing a PhD: find defended PhDs in your field, and have a look what they have done.

What is there to like?
What do you dislike?

If you’re writing a paper: look up relevant articles in your field.

Which questions do they ask?
What do they answer?
How do they answer?
How do they structure their paper?
Is it a model you could emulate?
What are the standards in terms of authors structure their argument, and their research findings?
How ‘large’ are the hypotheses?
How specific are their answers?
Which theories do they refer to?
Which methods do they use?

Use this information to inform your decisions regarding your own research.
There is no single way of getting it ‘right’. But it helps to be informed by the standard practices in your field.
Use the Literature to Inform Your Research Decisions

Be inspired, but strategic.

Which approach speaks to you?  versus  What are acceptable and successful approaches in your field?
Which papers excite you?  versus  Which papers use an approach you have the skills to pursue?
Which methods compel?  versus  Which methods are practical?
Which direction would I like to take?  versus  Which directions could my supervisors/colleagues help me with?

What could you take from the work that has already been done?
Take notes, and find out what would work for you.

Above all: keep it simple. (Easier said than done. Confusion abounds).

Do not torture yourself over the diversity of approaches.
You do not have to fit all approaches into one coherent framework in your head.
It is not possible.
Be clear on what authors have to say, how they do it, why they do so, and whether they manage to convince you.
That’s it.
There is no grand theory in which everything fits.
Using Structure

Think of your core argument as the **skeleton of the content** of your work.
Think of the conventional structure of an academic paper or chapter as **the skeleton of its form**.

Having such a structure in place helps immensely in providing direction and momentum.
Writing becomes a little like painting by numbers.

Find out how other papers in your field are structured, and ask yourself whether you could emulate their form.

Be precise: which information do the authors share?
How do they build up their argument?
Could you do the same? Which information have you already got? What is still missing?

Try making a highly condensed list of the arguments and information to present in any given section of the paper.

It keeps the mind focused on the main argument and the way you are building it up, and provides an anchor when you are getting overwhelmed and losing a sense of direction.

**Structure helps tell a story in a way readers will understand and accept it.**
**It helps you get your point across, and provides higher chances of getting published in the process.**
Structure: An Example

- **Abstract**
  - Introduce Topic
  - Introduce core argument and findings

- **Intro**
  - Introduce Topic
  - Relevance of research question
  - Relevance of this particular paper
  - Core argument / hypotheses / findings in one paragraph
  - Structure of the paper

- **Theory**
  - Discussion of relevant literature pertaining to core argument
  - Where the paper’s theoretical approach stands in the literature and why
  - Hypotheses elaborated

- **Method**
  - Aim of Empirical Research
  - Discussion of Method and Relevant Literature
  - Discussion of Data

- **Findings and Analysis**
  - Main empirical findings
  - Analysis in relation to hypotheses / core argument
  - Discussion of Data

- **Conclusion**
  - Synthesis Discussion of hypotheses, findings and analysis
  - Open ends, and room for further research
  - Catchy ending reinforcing core argument
Purpose Is Everything

Keep Asking Yourself: What is the purpose of the next section?

What is the purpose of the next paragraph?

The Purpose of Structure is to Build Up Your Core Argument

Stay connected to what you are trying to say.

Get INSIDE your argument, get INSIDE your paper, get INSIDE your paragraph and ask what it needs next.

What purpose does your next section serve, and what does it need to meet those needs?

Structure is mechanical, but telling a story is not. Making an argument has the best of both worlds.
Finding Your Place in The Field
Risk Taking in Research

There are many degrees of freedom in academic research. It’s up to you where you position yourself on that continuum.

On one end of the continuum is a way of doing research in which you position yourself right in the middle of an existing school of research.

Your questions mirror the questions already asked.
Your methods mirror those of papers already published.
The theories used fit within a well-defined research tradition.

What you change is in the details:

- you use a new data-set,
- slightly modify an existing model,
- ask a new sub-question,
- apply existing methods to an adjacent, but under-researched topic,
- ‘fill a gap’ in the existing literature.

Doing so, you become a student and contributor in a specific research tradition.

It’s a low-risk strategy with many potential rewards:
you are likely to get published relatively easily (important!), as your work fits well with research already conducted.

It is also the best way to get familiar with theories, methods and data sets already used in your field.

Your supervisor is going to be well pleased.

The downside of this end of the continuum is that it’s already pretty crowded out there.

It will be difficult to do innovative work.

Finding new answers to familiar questions, using familiar methods and data, is a challenge.

You may end up with a pile of papers that rehash what is already written and adds to it only very marginally.

It is a good strategy to learn the drill, it is a good strategy to get published, and it’s a good strategy to become a decent researcher, but whether it carves out a niche that feels inspired and true is questionable.

That last bit won’t be easy.
On the other end of the continuum is a way of doing research that is more creative, risky and personal.

It is informed by your thinking first and foremost.
It is informed by the current literature also, but does not mirror it too closely.

It is more loose and free.

It’s about formulating a research question that may or may not fit within a well-defined scholarly tradition, and then asking: ‘How could I best answer this question?’

It’s a high-risk strategy, as there are no guarantees what you are doing will start to make sense down the road.

It’s a slow strategy as you have to do a lot of original work.

It is a demanding strategy as there will be a lot of chaos, before structures and answers become clear.

It is not likely to lead to speedy or easy publications.

It will probably give your supervisor a heart attack.

The upside of doing research on this end of the continuum is that you are asking questions that matter to YOU.

That entry point will allow for original and inspired work that will potentially make a profound contribution to the literature.

Warning:

If you have megalomaniac and know-it-all tendencies this end of the continuum is not for you.

If you think you are going to do ‘ground-breaking’ research beware!

Best to tone yourself and your thinking down.

But if you have bright sparks of ideas: give yourself and your ideas the benefit of the doubt.

Give it a try.
Find your own path.
Create your own niche.

Engage Us
Personally I was on the creative end of the research spectrum. It was highly rewarding, once things started to come together.

**Once things started to come together.**

It took a while.

But once everything started falling into place, my contribution felt real, and valuable.

My work was extremely well received.
It’s innovative.
It’s ambitious.
But it cost me.

It cost me, in the sense that I had zero publications when I finished my PhD (although it did provide me with a large body of work that could provide material for years of potential publications to come. I have an argument. I have a voice).

It also cost me, because the process of getting to the latter stages was arduous and filled with uncertainty.

I knew I was onto something. But the process felt unruly at best.

It was also difficult for others in the academic community to support me, as my work did not conform. I wasn’t entirely sure what I was doing (except that somehow I knew I had to do it this way), and they were entirely baffled!

So in terms of inspiration and outcome: good! On other terms: not quite so good.

Maybe the biggest mistake was not investing enough in the skills and methods of academic research in my field (which is becoming increasingly technical).

I was high on the art of academia, but low on the specifics of craft and skills.
Most of my colleagues were on the other end of the spectrum. They are high on methods and skills. They are technicians, and are extremely good at what they do.

Some colleagues have producing publishable papers down to an art. They see possibilities for papers in every new dataset, using tried and tested methods and techniques. They are prolific and successful.

Being a well-published academic isn’t a bad idea. The problem looming here, lies in the questions asked.

Question asking can become too routine, too embedded.

If you always work from well within familiar frameworks, the framework itself will never be questioned.

The questions become secondary to method, theory and existing data.

That’s (in my opinion) doing everything the wrong way around.

The papers produced add to the existing literature, but only within the very narrow margins of the existing literature.

The upside: you don’t need a lot of imagination.

The downside: it gets dull and repetitive very quickly.

And your own thinking doesn’t get much of a chance to shine.
The Writing Process
Three Stages of Writing

Dividing the writing process into stages creates clarity and direction

Stage 1: Brainstorm

Brainstorming happens in the creative cocoon.
Shut everything off except your imagination.
Do not allow critical thoughts to enter.
You will need them later on but not quite now.
You need a wealth of ideas.
Let’s explore!

In this stage, nothing is off-limits.
You can think outrageous thoughts.
Or small precise ones.
Whichever come up.
What you are looking for are hunches and cues.

Which argument needs to be developed and written?
Which line of thinking needs to be explored?

Explore

Take your time. Mull it over.
When ideas pop up jot them down.

The ideal place to be in is one of momentum:

It means you take your time for creative thinking, but stop before you lose energy and direction.

It means you use the literature to foster creative thinking, but do not allow yourself to be overwhelmed.

It means you stay connected to the piece of work that you are about to develop.

◆ In this phase I prefer using pen and paper, and notebooks (the paper ones).
Think of papers and chapters as if they already exist, fully.
You don’t have to invent them, as they already exist (what a relief). But it is your job to ‘download’ them correctly.

You only get access to one small piece of the puzzle every step along the way.

That is, unless you suddenly see how every thing fits together.

Ah! Bliss.

That may happen, and when it does it’s exhilarating.
But most of the time, the argument forms bit by bit, step by step.

Get everything down on paper, even if it’s only remotely related.
You will pare it down later.

For now be creative.
Think big.

Write, draw diagrams, be messy if you need to.

Find out what direction your work needs to take by exploring on paper.

Play with possibility.

In the last phase of brainstorming, ask yourself how to implement your insights.

What do you need to do to move from grand and vague ideas to researching specific arguments in a logical and practical manner?

What should be the next step?
Make it specific.
Make it doable.
Make a list.

Get ready to shift gears and Write.
Get Excited, & Write Like You’ve Never Written Before!

Just Write
Stage 2 Writing

The writing stage is the most difficult.
It’s also the most rewarding.
Having ideas in your head is easy.
They have a lot of room to float around.
That all changes when you put pen to paper.

The most important thing to get right is **focus**.
You need to be focused enough to hear yourself think, translate those thoughts to the page, and *not be distracted*.

I say: go offline.
Switch off your phone.
Do not let anyone interrupt.

Put other papers (except maybe one or two critical ones) aside.
You do not need them.

What you need is in your mind. Trust that.
Trust you already know everything you need to know (for now).

When you are tempted to look up other papers for references, or to check whether something you are saying is correct *resist temptation*.

Make a note in your document to check it.
Do not do it now. It comes in the next stage.
For now, what you need to do is keep your eye on the ball.
Keep your mind on the argument you are creating.

If you were to look up every thing that needs checking as you go along, you will lose your train of thought.

**You will lose the flow.**
**You cannot afford to lose the flow.**
**It’s the most important thing of all.**

‘But!’ You may object, ‘My flow is not even a trickle.’

That’s exactly why you have to guard against distractions.
You have to keep your eye on the trickle.
It is fleeting.
Take your eye off it, and it may get lost.
The most dangerous moment in writing is the moment you think:

‘This is too hard. I am not getting anywhere’.

Don’t allow such thoughts to deceive you.
The thoughts are not real.
You *are* getting somewhere.
It’s supposed to be hard.
Stay with it. Do not waver. Stay on track.
Write in bursts. In sprints.
No one can write for hours on end, for weeks and months on end.
It doesn’t work.
Write for a set period of time.
Know when to start.
Know when to stop.
In between: write like your life depends on it.
Stage 3: Do scholarly stuff

In the third stage, you add substance, references, disclaimers, footnotes, body and bulk.

This stage makes the difference between a wobbly or sloppy and a mature argument.

It’s time to do scholarly stuff: the nitty-gritty checking of arguments, facts, and ‘who said what’s’.

This phase can be time-consuming, but it’s mentally less demanding than the writing phase.

It’s the phase where your ferocious inner critic is allowed to come out to play.

Does your argument hold up?
How could you shoot holes in it?
How could you defend against intellectual attack?
Which references do you need to include to support your argument?

Now is the time to think about the details.
Allow your written work to guide you.
Go back and forth between your work and the rest of the literature.
What does your written argument need to become fully formed?
What does it need to become grown up and respected?
Whose voices echo yours in the background?

Find out and implement.
Get all your references in.

Be meticulous.
Go deep.
Do not allow unsubstantiated claims to get away.

It’s likely you will find out that more research needs to be done. Make a list of things to check, papers you need to find and analyses to add.

Just don’t go off and do it all immediately.
Give it a little time.
Give it one night’s sleep.

That way you won’t get carried away in details that seem necessary at the time but really aren’t.

The danger in this stage of writing is that you lose sight of the big picture. Every detail becomes important.

This stage is supposed to work that way, and it is very important to get the details right.

But oftentimes, that detail you think will trip you up, and will render your argument useless, is only just that: a detail.
Get the balance right between assessing every argument you make as critically as possible, and not giving up in despair because your work isn’t waterproof.

No single argument is 100% waterproof.
(Though that shouldn’t stop you from trying).

If arguments were waterproof there would be no need for academic debate.

Do not get disheartened.

Your task is to waterproof your argument to the best of your ability.
Not to do the impossible.

(I always thought I had to do the impossible.
Take it from me: you don’t.
Your work can lie within the realm of what is possible.)

It gets easier, as you become more proficient in knowing what is necessary and unnecessary to include in your paper.
You’ll discover how good is good enough.

It is the craft of scholarship.

Learn by doing.
Write in bursts

To increase your productivity work in focused bursts, instead of sitting at the computer for long hours.

Attention spans have a maximum.
The absolute maximum is about 90 minutes.

Find out how long your attention span is and work accordingly.
Anything between 20-90 minutes will do.

Work for x minutes!
Then relax for a bit.

Repeat a number of times for best results.

Make sure you don’t set yourself up for failure by trying to work all day.
If you work on your PhD for only 2-3 hours a day in total using this technique, you will be moving ahead fast.

That’s a promise.

◆ I personally like to work in bursts of 45 minutes. It’s long enough to really get into work, but it’s short enough to stay focused.
Two apps for staying focused

The key to being productive in little time is to not let yourself be distracted.

These two apps may help.

The first is the **Freedom App**, which temporarily takes you offline.
It’s indispensible for the writing stage.
Every time writing gets too hard and the temptation to click over to check email, Facebook or twitter comes too much to bear – the app saves you, and your writing.
Focusing on work becomes a habit. It feels good!

The second is a **Tea Timer**.
I use it in the same way I use the Freedom App, but it’s for the third stage of scholarly stuff, when you need to look things up online.
Setting the timer is a little ritual.
It is a promise to myself to focus.
And a promise of a small reward (tea!) afterwards.
Cherish Constraints

Constraints help get things done. Nothing like a good old old-fashioned deadline to get you going. Unfortunately, they can get the fear machine going as well.

Use constraints productively. Use them to cut out the unnecessary. Focus on what needs to get done.

Keeping yourself in a positive mental place is important. Focus on your work, not on your anxieties about your work.

When I was finishing my PhD with no energy I had two options:

Either use my limited energy on moving my argument and my chapters and inch forward every day,

Or use my limited energy to engage with self-doubt and fear about the whole situation.

I can’t say I got the balance right all of the time, but I learnt something: seriously doubt self-doubt.

It’s pretty useless. It gets you nowhere.

I needed to change. I no longer had the luxury to doubt myself and my work. I needed to stop engaging with unconstructive thoughts. And I needed to allow my writing to gain momentum.

Gain momentum it did. Against all the odds.

I finished my PhD in a couple of hours a day. I made all my deadlines.

You can do the same.

Impose constraints.

Impose limits in terms of time spent on your PhD (improves focus and boosts productivity)
&
Impose limits in terms of the amount of negative thinking you engage in (improves everything).

Be nice to yourself in the process. It’s about lifting yourself up, full stop.

You can do it. I truly believe you can.
If I can do it, anyone can.
Along the Way
When Nothing Is Going the Way It Should

Finding your voice in academia takes its own course. Sometimes, the process seems to be a relatively linear and straightforward process. (Though it rarely feels that way)
You start with a broad research question, and keep developing and narrowing down.
You may go down a few dead-end streets, but don’t linger there too long.

Other times sudden insights come after months of going round in circles. (Probably feeling frustrated)
You study topics for ages, and all of a sudden, wham!
You know what you are supposed to do.
It all comes together.

Know this:
It gets easier.

Once you have a beginning of a voice, it will become increasingly easy to focus on what is relevant, and not waste your energy on the unnecessary.

Even so, it’s a struggle all academics are engaged in.
We’re in this together.
If you think seasoned academics have it easier: maybe a little. They have already carved out a niche.
But the essence of intellectual struggle doesn’t change.
The intellectual struggle is part of the deal.
It IS the deal.

The not knowing is essential.
When you think nothing is going the way it should: take heart.
Give yourself a break.
It won’t stay like this forever.
Your ideas are taking shape, even if it doesn’t feel that way.

**It is how academic work works.**

Often it feels like nothing is getting done, but when you look back a year from now you will see you made a lot of progress.

That paper will be written, that argument will be straightened out.
The methods issues will be resolved, and your thinking will have clarified.

**Stay with it. Step by muddled step.**

Congratulate yourself on keeping going.
It is the only thing that counts.
Keep going and allow your writing to happen.
Allow your voice to take shape.

It will happen.
Trust me.
It will.
Want More?
Would You Like More?

I would like to invite you to my online course.
In the course I will teach you how to write your best PhD in only a couple of hours a day.
With a smile on your face!

Let me help you make it happen.
It is possible, and you can do it.

Click on the picture on the right to learn more.

Good luck with your PhD,

With love,

Amber

P.S. I would love to hear from you: do drop me a line.

Contact me at: happyphd@amberdavis.nl
Or on twitter: @_AJDavis

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