

An introduction to writing of assignments

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Planning the assignment

The assignments that you write at the university should be answers to research questions. Therefore, *arguing convincingly for your answer* is totally essential when writing an assignment. This applies to assignments that are primarily of an empirical nature (such as ‘Do men earn more than women?’; ‘Why do people with criminal records face high barriers to employment?’) as well as more theoretically oriented ones (such as ‘Is the concept of “habitus” too deterministic?’; ‘What are the differences between Marx’s and Weber’s theories on the growth of capitalism?’), and whether you have been supplied with an assignment or have chosen the topic yourself.

The answer that you give to the assignment question is called the assignment’s *assertion*. It is essential to keep in mind that you will make an assertion and provide arguments for it in your assignments (descriptive assignments are never given). In other words, your assignment should be read as an argument in favour of an assertion (e.g. ‘Men earn more than women’; ‘The concept of “habitus” is not too deterministic’; or ‘Prejudices among employers constitute a barrier to employment of people with criminal records’). For the reader to be convinced that your assertion is correct, the necessary information to support your argument should be presented in a specific order, i.e. you need to *structure* your assignment in a specific way.

1. Introduction

In the introduction you present the assignment’s research question and its background, so as to show why it will be interesting to find the answer. Is it important to answer this research question because it concerns a controversial issue? Is it important because this may bring knowledge that can prevent people from injuring themselves or help achieve a more equitable distribution of resources? Is it important because this social phenomenon has been widely misunderstood in previous research? The issue may be interesting for many reasons; what is important is that you should not just assume this, but show the readers your reasons at the very start of the assignment.

In the introduction you should also indicate the main points of your line of argumentation. Their nature obviously depends on how you will address the assignment’s research question – this could involve conflicts between various ‘schools’ of thought or specific researchers, possible objections to different aspects of a theory, various interpretations of a key text or a social phenomenon.

In the introduction you should also hint at your conclusion, the *assertion* that you argue in favour of in your assignment. Your success in delivering a convincing line of argumentation will make your text interesting to read. In other words, do *not* make a secret of your assertion initially – your assignment should not ask the question first and provide an answer at the end. You can make your assertion clear by starting a sentence with ‘I will therefore assert that...’ or ‘I will argue that...’. During the writing process you should keep your assertion in mind, even if it may change as the work progresses.

If you follow this recipe for an introduction – the research question, reasons why the question is important, main points and an assertion/answer to the research question – you present the reader with your assignment in miniature. If you just list these using one sentence for each point, your introduction will be informative, but very schematic. Keep in mind that the introduction should draw the readers into the text, not just inform them about what is coming. You can experiment by moving the sections around – perhaps it is appropriate to open the entire assignment with an assertion (‘No matter how we measure it, men earn more than women’), or as a reformulation of the research question (‘Do men really earn more than women, or are there other gender differences that may explain this well-known wage gap?’)

2. Background

The purpose of the background description is to provide the reader with the premises for the remainder of the assignment, i.e. the basic information that the reader needs to be able to follow and assess your arguments. After the introduction you should therefore provide an account of key problems, concepts, theories and empirical findings. For example, if you intend to compare and contrast two alternative theories about a social phenomenon, you need to give an outline of the phenomenon that these theories set out to explain, followed by some relevant basic aspects of how these theories explain this phenomenon. If you notice that you need to provide comprehensive explanations of theories and previous research when writing the discussion, this indicates that you have written too little about this in the background.

In your background section you need to include what is relevant for the assignment’s research question and the answer that you will argue for. You should therefore provide an account of previous research that demonstrates *why* this is relevant to your research question. You can ask yourself ‘why should I include this?’ for all content of the background section: Is it because this previous research forms the basis for the research question? Will I argue against this interpretation of the data or this theory? Are there any gaps in previous research that this assignment sets out to fill? For example, if you are to investigate why people with criminal

records have difficulties in finding a job, the background section needs to show that previous research has actually established that former prison inmates have difficulty finding a job – otherwise, it will be meaningless to investigate why. In other words, the background section is *not* a review of everything that has been written about the assignment topic – you should not just list a series of previous theories and findings.

Most assignments will not require any biographical information on the researchers that have produced the studies that you include in your account (e.g. that he studied theology in Christiania and suffered from depression and similar information).

In many cases, the background section will help emphasize the importance of finding an answer to the research question. For example, if you intend to compare two theories about a social phenomenon, the background section might well emphasize possible contradictions/conflicts between these theories. If there are any deficiencies in previous studies that you will discuss in a later section, these should be at least hinted at here, in order to provide a direction for the background outline.

3. Discussion

After having introduced the reader to the research question and the fundamental premises for being able to answer it, you deliberate your way to a conclusion regarding what will be the most reasonable answer to the research question. In doing so, you assess the aspects that corroborate your answer as well as those that undermine it – for and against. In other words, you use the discussion section to provide the line of argumentation for your assignment, but making a clear assertion in the text is not necessarily the same as being dogmatic. It is fully acceptable to state that there is no unambiguous answer to the research question; for example, you can argue *for* the assertion that we do not fully know why men earn more than women.

It is important to have a clear structure in the discussion to permit the reader to follow the line of argumentation. For example, if you set out to assess two theories about a social phenomenon, you can first discuss the strengths and weaknesses of one theory, followed by the strengths and weaknesses of the other. An alternative solution is to address various elements or stages of the social phenomenon, and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of both theories with regard to each element. A discussion can be structured in numerous ways, and often one will be as good as the other. The way in which you structure your discussion will partly depend on the matters to be discussed, although this may often be a matter of style.

The discussion should be dominated by clear points, each of which supports your assertion in a different way. Each such point should have its own section/indent/paragraph, and vice versa: each section should include only *one* point. This applies to the background as well as the discussion sections, and makes the text orderly and easy to read. The point presented in a section should thus have an obvious relevance for the assertion that you argue for in the text.

For example: If you compare and contrast two theories, you can, for example, argue that one of the theories has the advantage of explaining variations over time more adequately than the other. If so, you should include a section that has the *sole* purpose of corroborating the claim that one theory explains variation over time better than the other. This point is thus part of the general line of argumentation for the assignment's assertion (the answer to the research question).

Another example: If you set out to discuss the assertion that 'men earn more than women', you can include a section making the main point that 'the gender difference in wage levels is not only a result of differences in education' and another about how 'the gender difference in wage levels is not only a result of differences in rates of sickness absence'. Each of these sections should focus exclusively on the point that you wish to elucidate in that section.

A simple way to make the text easily readable is to state the main point in the first sentence in each section. For example, a section that sets out to show that 'gender differences in wage levels is not only a result of differences in education' could start with the phrase 'even when researchers take into account differences in educational choices between men and women, they find that the gender differences in wage levels persist'. In the remainder of the section you provide evidence for this assertion by referring to specific studies, avoiding reference to other points.

To provide a convincing argument, all relevant objections must be treated seriously. Your argument will not be more convincing if you just ignore or minimize relevant objections. To identify possible objections, you may often need to be creative and imagine how a critical reader might perceive your argument. If you can provide clear answers showing that such objections are irrelevant, you will have strengthened your assertion. If you have no clear answer, it might be important to address such objections towards the end of your discussion as possible weaknesses of your argument. Often, the major objections should be addressed close to the end of the discussion, so as not to let the assignment start with too many reservations before you have the opportunity to present good arguments in support of your assertion.

If you identify many relevant objections that you cannot respond to, this is a sign that your discussion is insufficiently thorough. You may need to restructure your discussion and/or find another and more moderate answer to the research question.

4. Conclusion

In the conclusion you can emphasize your findings. Nothing new should be added at this point. You may nevertheless formulate your assertion with more certainty, now that the discussion has shown the reader *why* this is the most reasonable answer to the research question. If you wish to indicate something about further research and so on, you should keep it brief.

Tips for the writing process

1. Work on the structure

As soon as you have formed an idea of your topic, you can start outlining a detailed structure of what you plan to write. Start with the main sections and fill in what needs to be included in each section, experimenting with various sequences. Such a structural outline provides an opportunity to establish your argument in an abbreviated form first, to see whether it has a good flow or obvious gaps, and then fill in with notes wherever suitable.

When you start working on the text proper, such a structure can function as headings for each section. These headings should be brief and clearly state the gist of the section (such as ‘Gender differences in wage levels do not disappear when controlling for education’). This will make it easier to see what should go where. You can also move phrases that look good, but back up another argument, to a more appropriate place. You may also start writing a section in the middle of the text without having finished the others, because you already know more or less what the as yet unwritten sections will say. Many of these headings can be deleted before you submit the text, or they will be embedded in the body text as the first sentence in each section.

2. Work on the text

You should never have the ambition to write an assignment from beginning to end without rewriting, deleting, adding or moving parts of the content. The text is a construction, and it does not emerge in a finished state; parts must be moved, exchanged or deleted, and sentences need to be fine-tuned, to ensure that they are grammatically correct as well as easy to read.

If you notice that your discussion lacks impact without more definitions or references to previous studies, you need to consider whether these should be added to the background section. You should never just throw such material into the place where you happen to be writing at the moment when it occurs to you. (This obviously does not mean that you should avoid referencing in your discussion).

You should therefore invariably set aside a lot of time to writing, which means that you need to start early and structure your time. It is advisable to spend most of the day writing and defer other matters to the evenings, rather than the other way round. Remember to take breaks and stop working on the text if you sense that you are so tired that you are mangling it.

In the case of home assignments, this means that if you have an overview of the reading list before you are handed the assignment, you will have more time for writing, because you will need to spend less time reading.

3. Words and terms

Unless they might play a special role in the assignment, it pays to avoid words and phrases that are typically used in daily speech, such as ‘having a hard time’, ‘busy days’, ‘he acted tough’, ‘she chickened out’ and similar. This applies especially with regard to phenomena for which sociologists have developed specific terms. For example, we often say that it ‘confers status’ to do or possess something, but people in general rarely have a refined theory about status. Sociologists do, however, and saying that something ‘confers status’ may not be meaningful in terms of these theories. Similarly, people will often refer to ‘socializing’ or ‘meeting people’ as reasons for engaging in various activities, but these are not explanations of a kind that sociologists will deem immediately satisfactory.

Some terms may also appear to be academic and to the point, but academics have abandoned them for several reasons. For example, alcohol researchers no longer speak of ‘alcoholics’, but of various forms of ‘abuse’ and ‘addiction’. In other words, focus is placed on the activities, not on the person. You should also avoid phrases and words such as ‘verily’, ‘the actuality that’, or ‘contemporaneous’, which may cause a text to appear superficially more ‘scholarly’. Examiners will not be deceived by this. To complicate matters even further, there are some terms that are frequently used in daily speech, but stem from academic concepts, such as ‘being in the zone’, coined by Csikszentmihályi, or Freud’s concept of ‘the subconscious’. Even if you do not agree with the original meaning, reference should be made to a source and some form of definition provided, not only relying on readers to know these concepts from daily speech. In sociology, this is especially essential for concepts such as gender, class, institutions, capital, culture etc.

Some students attempt to make their texts more academic by avoiding the pronoun ‘I’, but this is often a misconstrued notion. Some sentences will appear extremely odd if you leave out yourself as a subject in the text. Compare, for example, ‘against the background of existing research it will be argued that men earn more than women’ with ‘against the background of existing research I will argue that men earn more than women.’ The former phrase is not more objective than the latter, only more pompous and hard to read. If you perform an action in the text – analyse, argue or assert – you do not need to hide the fact that you are the person doing it. If a text is overly subjective, this will not be because the author has used terms such as ‘I’

or ‘me’ too frequently, but because the assertions are unfounded and the arguments fail to hold water – and this will of course be reflected in the grade. If you focus on arguing convincingly for your answer to the research question, you will automatically refer to yourself less.

4. Format

The instructions regarding the formatting of the assignment – font size, font type, margins etc. – should be closely followed. There is no reason to be creative in this regard, and the reason is that everybody must be assessed on an equal footing. In other words, this is not because the person responsible for the course has any special preferences, it is to make the assignments easily comparable. When a standard format is used, the examiner has no need to pay attention to the layout of the assignments, because they all look the same. Any act on your part that makes it seem as though you have written more or less than what you actually have, will therefore leave a negative first impression and may raise the examiner’s suspicions. This includes anything from changing the margins, having a large number of headings, varying the font type, decreasing or increasing the font size etc. You should therefore stick to the format as instructed, so that the examiner can concentrate on assessing the content of your assignment.

Unless stated otherwise, the most common format is this:

- Font: Times New Roman, throughout the document
- Font size: 12 pt throughout the document
- Margins: 2.5 cm, all four margins (top and bottom, right and left)
- Line spacing: 1.5
- Headings: **Title** (bold type), **Level 1** (e.g. ‘**Introduction**’, ‘**Previous research**’, also bold type), ***Level 2*** (bold and italicized type), *Level 3* (italicized type)
- Remember to insert page numbers.

Use of sources

You must refer to the sources that you use. Normally, these will be academic books and journal articles, but you must also add a reference when using sources such as newspapers, websites, TV programmes, lectures, public documents, leaflets, previous master's theses etc.

You must refer to the source when quoting verbatim (in which case you must also add the page number), but also when using ideas or arguments or describing findings without a verbatim quote. This applies irrespective of any reformulations to the phrasing in the original; if any idea, assertion or finding is retrieved from or based on another source, you must add a reference to this source.

In some cases, ethical concerns may call for an anonymization of written sources as well. Some people who themselves have published the information you use should be anonymized in the same way as in field notes and interview data. This is especially true if the person in question is not a public figure and if the data describe potentially sensitive topics (e.g. if an unknown blogger writes about experience from bullying or criminal acts). In such cases you should provide the source with an alias and state the ethical reasons for this choice. Keep in mind that if you quote text you have found online, locating the source will be quite easy. If you are in doubt, contact your seminar leader, your supervisor or the person responsible for the course for guidance.

1. Citations

There are two ways to cite a source. Citations of less than three sentences are placed in 'quotes' in the text, while those of three sentences or more should have a line spacing before and after the quote and an indent to make the left margin wider. The font size for long citations can be the same as for the overall text, and the citation shall not be enclosed in quotes, italicized or formatted in any particular way.

The same principle applies if you cite a source from an interview or fieldwork, with a separate indented paragraph for long citations and in quotes in the body text for short citations.

2. References in the text

In the body text you place your references in brackets, with the surname(s) of the author(s), publication year and page number, if relevant, like this: (Fangen 2010: 72). Here, the author's name is Fangen, the number 2010 is the year in which this issue of the book was published, and the page number referred to is 72. The reference looks like this whether it follows a citation from this book or whether you refer to it without having quoted any text from it. It is

essential to include the page number when quoting content and when referring to concrete assertions. Place the full stop in the sentence *after* the reference. Normally, the reference is placed at the end of the sentence; it does not suffice to add references at the end of each paragraph.

Example of a reference without a verbatim quote:

A key distinction involves participating in the activities going on in the field versus not participating, although this will be a matter of degree between two extremes (Fangen 2010: 72).

Example of a reference with a verbatim quote:

A key distinction involves participating in the activities going on in the field versus not participating, although ‘participation may vary from complete association to complete separation’ (Fangen 2010: 72).

If the author(s) is (are) referred to in the text, you need not mention him/her (them) in the reference, as long as it remains clear to whom the reference applies.

Example of a reference that names the author in the sentence:

According to Fangen, a key distinction involves participating in the activities going on in the field versus not participating, although ‘participation may vary from complete association to complete separation’ (2010: 72).

If you need to refer to a sentence or passage that covers more than one page, you put a hyphen between the page numbers, like this: (Fangen 2010: 72-4). If you need to refer to more than one place in the same text, you place a comma between the page numbers, like this: (Fangen 2010: 72, 75).

If there are two authors, you should always include both of them in the reference, like this: (Hermansen and Birkelund 2015). If there are three authors or more, you include all of them the first time the reference occurs, like this: (Armstrong, Hamilton, Armstrong and Seeley 2014), and subsequently only the first author and et al., like this (Armstrong et al. 2014).

If you need to refer to more than one text in the same place, you separate them from each other inside the brackets with a semicolon, like this: (Fangen 2010: 72; Grue 2011). The references are entered in chronological order.

If you need to refer to more than one text by the same author in the same place, you put the author's name first, followed by the publication years in ascending order, separated by a semicolon, like this: (Grue 2011; 2015).

If an author has published more than one text during the same year, you distinguish them from each other by placing an 'a' behind the first of these that you quote, a 'b' behind the second one etc., like this: (Grue 2011a) and this (Grue 2011b), etc. You must use the same letters in the list of references at the end of your assignment to distinguish between these same works.

News articles published online, blog posts and so on that have a stated author are referred to by the author's name and publication year, same as above, for example (Lindi 2014). Give the web address (URL) and access date in the reference list at the end of your assignment.

If a publication has no stated author, as in the case of leaflets, you give the name of the organization that published it, like this (Directorate of Health 2013). However, if this publication that has no stated author is part of a work of reference or a series, such as a series of reports, you should use the full name of the work of reference, like this: (Wikipedia 2016) or the name of the series, like this: (NOU 2001).

If two authors with same surname have published texts during one and the same year, you use their initials to distinguish between them, like this: (B Smith 2015) and this: (W Smith 2015). This will obviously apply only if you refer to both texts.

You may want to refer to a text or an idea found within another text, for example when Fangen quotes Quinn Patton and you want to refer to Quinn Patton but have no access to his original text. In this case you refer to Quinn Patton, who wrote the words you wish to refer to, but within Fangen's text, like this: (Quinn Patton in Fangen 2010: 103). The publication year and page number are those of Fangen's book, but you recognize Quinn Patton as the author of these words. You need not refer to the year of publication, title etc. of the original work (in this case Quinn Patton's book).

3. *The list of references*

At the end of your assignment you include a list of all references you have used, before the appendices, if any. The list should have the heading 'References' or 'Literature' and include all sources used in the assignment. You must also commit to this by stating 'All sources that have been used in this assignment are listed' at the end of the reference list. The references are listed alphabetically by the first author's surname. If you refer to more than one publication by the same author(s), you sort them by year of publication, starting with the oldest publication. Note that only the first author's name is given with the surname first, all other names should be written in the format First name Last name. Different types of sources are referred to as follows:

Books: Last name, First name (year of publication), *Title*. Edition, if relevant. Place of publication: Publisher

Example of a reference to a book:

Fangen, Katrine (2010), *Deltakende observasjon*. 2. utg. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget

Contributions to an edited anthology (collection of articles): Last name, first name (year of publication), "Title". In editor's (-s') First name Last name (ed./eds.) *Title of the collection*. Edition, if relevant. (p. from-to page numbers). Place of publication: Publisher

Example of a reference to a contribution in an edited anthology:

Grue, Jan (2011), "Maktbegrepet i kritisk diskursanalyse: Mellom medisinske og sosiale forståelser av funksjonshemming". I Tonje Raddum Hitching, Anne Birgitta Nilsen og Aslaug Veum (red.) *Diskursanalyse i praksis: Metode og analyse*. (s. 111-136). Oslo: Høyskoleforlaget

Journal article: Last name, First name (year of publication), "Title". *Title of the journal*, volume number: page from-to

Example of a reference to a journal article:

Hermansen, Are Skeie and Gunn Elisabeth Birkelund (2015), "The impact of immigrant classmates on educational outcomes". *Social Forces*, 94: 615-646

Publication with no author (e.g. leaflets): Publishing organization/series (publication year), *Title*. Type of publication. Place of publication: Publisher/issuing organization

Example of a reference to a leaflet with no stated author:

Helsedirektoratet (2013), *Ansvarlig vertskap*. Brosjyre. Oslo: Helsedirektoratet

Example of a reference to a report in a report series with no stated author:

NOU (2001), *Vårens vakreste eventyr...?*. Offentlig utredning. Oslo: Statens forvaltningstjeneste

Webpage with no author or identifiable originator (e.g. works of reference):

Issuing organization/work of reference (year of last update), "Title". Type of publication. Web address (access date: dd.mm.yyyy).

Example of a reference to a webpage with no stated author:

Wikipedia (2016), "Rosetta Stone". Reference work.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosetta_Stone (access date: 04.01.2016)

Webpage with an author or other identification of the originator: Last name, First name (publication year), "Title". *Name of the portal/website/blog*. Web address (access date: dd.mm.yyyy)

Example of a reference to a webpage with an author:

Lindi, Marte (2014), "Ble tegnet med sprittusj i øyet av russen". *NRK.no*.
<http://www.nrk.no/nordnytt/tegnet-i-oyet-av-russen-1.11721655> (access date: 04.08.2015)

Example of a reference to a webpage with an identified originator:

TheViralFungus (2012), "Massive concrete construction fail". *Youtube.com*.
<https://youtu.be/D3WOFtJaWks> (access date: 06.12.2015)

It is an advantage to insert a small spacing between the references in the list or a small indent after the first line in each reference. A list of references with the examples above will then look like this:

References

- Armstrong, Elizabeth A., Laura Hamilton, Elizabeth M. Armstrong and J. Lotus Seeley (2014), ""Good girls": Gender, social class, and slut discourse on campus". *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 77: 100-122
- Fangen, Katrine (2010), *Deltakende observasjon*. 2 utg. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget
- Grue, Jan (2011), "Maktbegrepet i kritisk diskursanalyse: Mellom medisinske og sosiale forståelser av funksjonshemming". I Tonje Raddum Hitching, Anne Birgitta Nilsen og Aslaug Veum (red.) *Diskursanalyse i praksis: Metode og analyse*. (s. 111-136). Oslo: Høyskoleforlaget
- Helsedirektoratet (2013), "Ansvarlig vertskap". Brosjyre. Oslo: Helsedirektoratet
- Hermansen, Are Skeie and Gunn Elisabeth Birkelund (2015), "The impact of immigrant classmates on educational outcomes". *Social Forces*, 94: 615-646
- Lindi, Marte (2014), "Ble tegnet med sprittusj i øyet av russen". *NRK.no*.
<http://www.nrk.no/nordnytt/tegnet-i-o-yet-av-russen-1.11721655> (access date: 04.08.2015)
- NOU (2001), *Vårens vakreste eventyr...?*. Offentlig utredning. Oslo: Statens forvaltningstjeneste
- TheViralFungus (2012), "Massive concrete construction fail". *Youtube.com*.
<https://youtu.be/D3WOFtJaWks> (access date: 06.12.2015)
- Wikipedia (2016), "Rosetta Stone". Reference work.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosetta_Stone (access date: 04.01.2016)

4. What NOT to do with your references

- Do not use first names in the references in the body text. If two authors with the same surname have published works during the same year, you use initials to distinguish between them, like this: (B Smith 2015) and this: (W Smith 2015).

- Do not include the title or other information on the work in the body text; such information shall be included *only* in the reference list at the end. Only the author's name, publication year and page number should be included in the references in the body text.
- Do not use 'ibid' and 'op.cit', even though you may have learned this somewhere else.
- Do not use footnotes or endnotes for entering references. You should include references in footnotes only if you need to refer to a source for text used in a footnote.
- Do not subdivide your reference list according to how you have used the sources or the type of source (such as books, journal articles, anthologies). Nor should you include headings in your reference list (such as "Works by Bourdieu", "Webpages" or similar).

5. Plagiarism

Plagiarism means presenting the work of others as your own. This applies to everything from ideas and arguments to phrases and specific formulations. Plagiarism is one of the most serious violations of good referencing practice. If this is discovered in journal articles, the publisher will normally retract the publication. In university assignments, plagiarism is considered cheating and may in especially serious cases lead to exclusion from higher education.

If you render someone else's ideas in your own words without giving a reference, this will be considered plagiarism. It is therefore crucial that you refer to your sources, even when you are not quoting them verbatim. If you copy a phrase from another publication and include a reference to this publication, but fail to place the copied content in 'quotes' to signal that this is a citation, this will also be considered plagiarism.

When writing their first assignments and struggling to formulate ideas in their own words, many students commit the error of copying the content of another text, changing a few words here and there to avoid having to mark it out as a citation. This practice is extremely questionable, but very easy for examiners to detect, and it will have a strongly negative impact on the assessment. Depending on the scope and the way in which it is done, this may be considered plagiarism. If you are unable to find alternative formulations that fit your text, it is better to cite the original than to replace a few words here and there.

Tips for books on academic writing

Førland, Tor Egil (1996), *Drøft: Lærebok i oppgaveskriving*. Oslo: Gyldendal.

Booth, Wayne C., Gregory G. Colomb and Joseph M. Williams (2008), *The craft of research*. (3rd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago press.

Becker, Howard S. and Pamela Richards (2007), *Writing for social scientists: How to start and finish your thesis, book, or article* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.