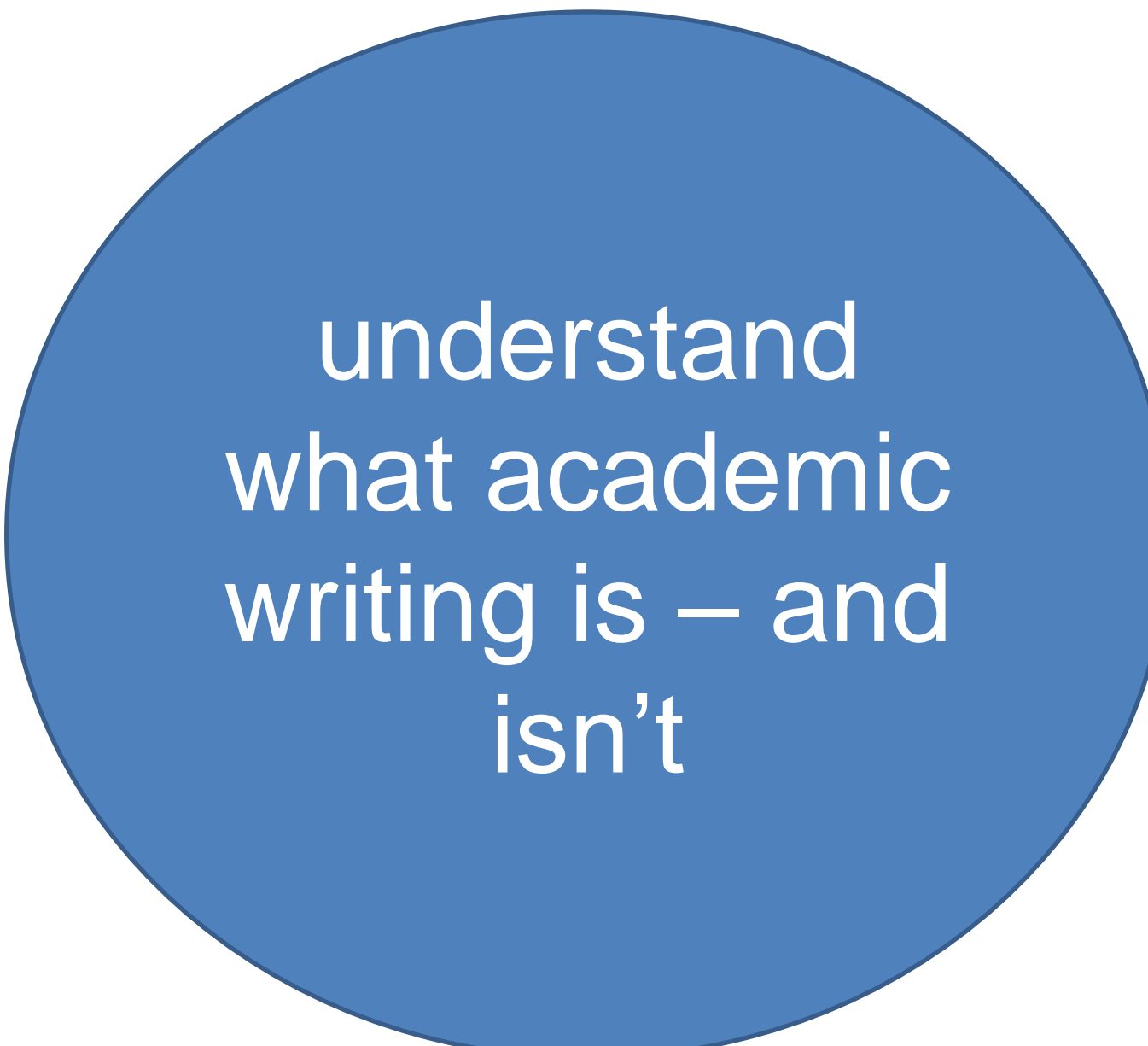


five ways to  
improve your  
academic writing



understand  
what academic  
writing is – and  
isn't

## Direct, clear, concise

Ablute your upper extremities in advance of consuming comestibles.

Wash your hands before eating.

It has been established that a canine is the most superior companion of a person of the male gender.

A dog is a man's best friend.

A small quantity of items of which you are desirous has a beneficial health effect.

A little of what you fancy does you good.

# What is academic writing?

Academic writing = the writing we use to communicate research

Research = answering a question as a persuasive argument, supported by evidence.

Academic writing can be used to:

- describe
- analyse
- evaluate
- argue
- reflect (through personal experience)

Academic writing should be:

- authoritative (well read)
- persuasive (well evidenced)
- readable (argued logically and with 'flow')

# Karen Ottewell's four pillars of academic writing in English



Karen Ottewell, "Researching, Supervising and Working in and with Other Cultures and Languages", seminar, 22nd March 2017, Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE), London

# Karen Ottewell's four pillars of academic writing in English


## Rhetorical heritage



Academic writing in English evolved from Anglo-European culture and philosophy – the art of rhetoric. Academic argument is not the same in every language.

Aristotle identified three aspects of persuasion – logos (the facts), pathos (the emotional aspects of the argument) and ethos (your position or moral standing).

# Karen Ottewell's four pillars of academic writing in English



Rhetorical heritage

Writer responsible

In English, the writer is entirely responsible for the readers' understanding and experience.

Readers of academic English expect you, the writer, to give them your ideas in a sequence that makes intuitive sense to them.

This is not true in every language.

- a low context culture is one in which things are fully (though concisely) spelled out. Things are made explicit and there is considerable dependence

## Karen Ottewell's four pillars of academic writing in English

A low context culture is one in which things are fully (though concisely) spelled out.

Ideas are made explicit rather than being implied.

There is considerable dependence on choosing the correct words to convey the idea explicitly.





# Karen Ottewell's four pillars of academic writing in English

English is linear in structure at every level - sentence / paragraph / section.

Sentences follow the sequence:  
subject -verb- object. **The dog**  
(subject) **sits** (verb) on **the table**  
(object)

Paragraphs form a sequence of ideas, each paragraph building on the last  
AB BC CD DE etc.

Linear




# Insights from research

- what is considered ‘good’ academic writing within a specific ‘community of practice’ tends to be socially defined (Lave and Wenger, 1998)
- Academic writing practices tend to be habitual, tacit and rarely discussed within ‘communities of practice’ (Lave and Wenger, 1998)
- “Writing is only the end product of a far more comprehensive and complex process that entails dealing with specific information within the broad context of the discipline's epistemology and literacy conventions.” (Wingate, 2015)

# Challenge your supervisor to define good writing



Ask for examples, and keep asking until it's clear



accept and  
manage  
uncertainty

# Y1 / early stages - chaos and confusion



# Managing uncertainty

- uncertainty important part of creative process
- feeling overwhelmed at start of long project normal and necessary
- If you can sit with it, your project will be more focused and your path to the finish, smoother
- uncertainty is *the seedbed in which ideas germinate*\*
- it takes courage to resist the call of certainty
- give yourself permission to play with ideas and arguments
- develop strategies to capture and organise notes / thoughts / insights

\* Guy Claxton, *Hare Brain, Tortoise Mind*

# Also in Year 1....

- exploring the literature (existing knowledge)
- scoping and refining your research question
- focusing on your practice (if practice based)
- exploring new techniques to think / plan / write
- developing relationship with supervisor

## Our Real Work

*It may be that when we no longer know what to do  
we have come to our real work,  
and that when we no longer know which way to go  
we have come to our real journey.*

*The mind that is not baffled is not employed.  
The impeded stream is the one that sings.*

*- Wendell Berry*



Y1 / early stage mantra  
*I have no idea what I'm doing  
– but that's OK!*





reflect on your  
process

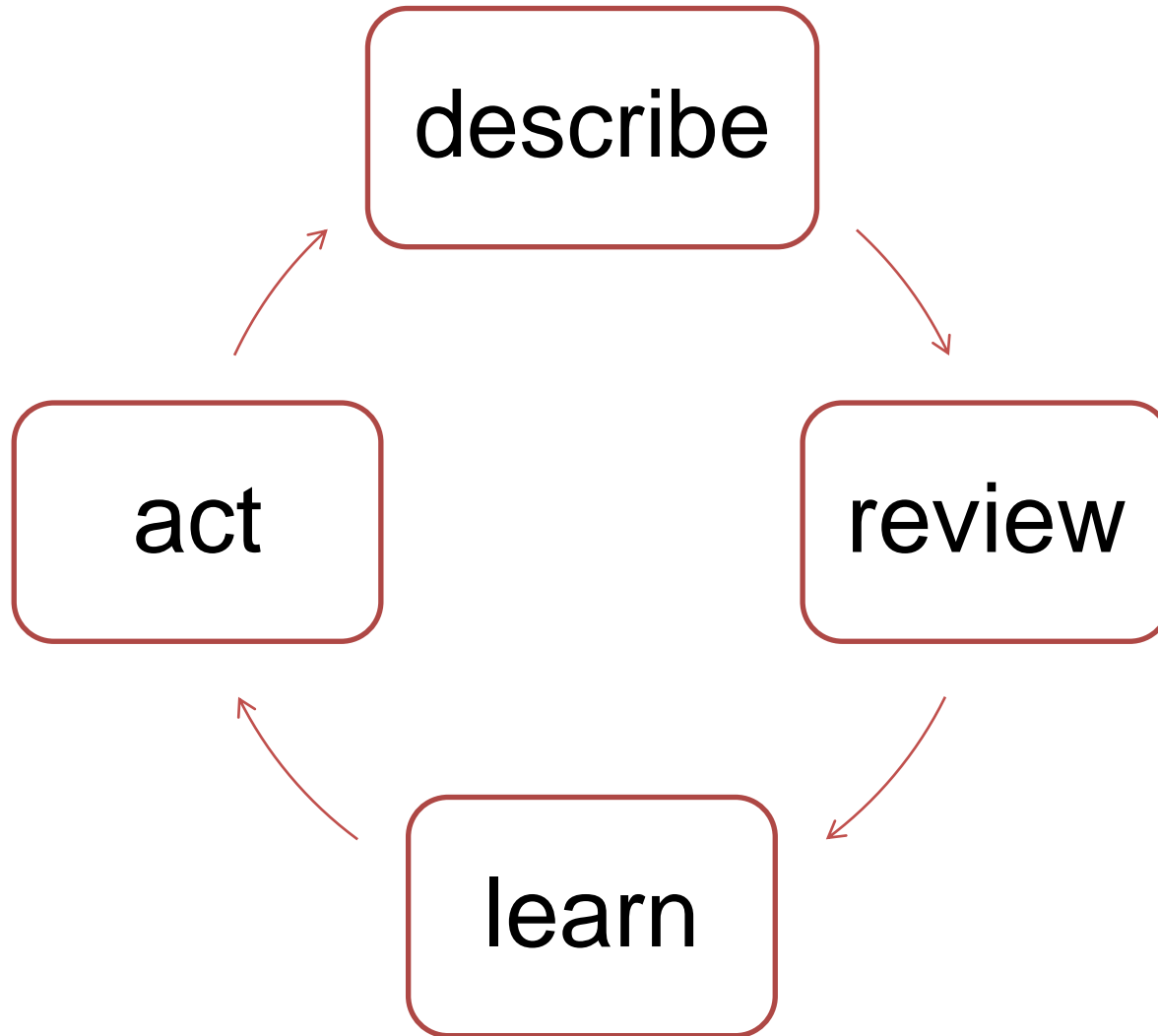
# Writing is a skill, not a talent



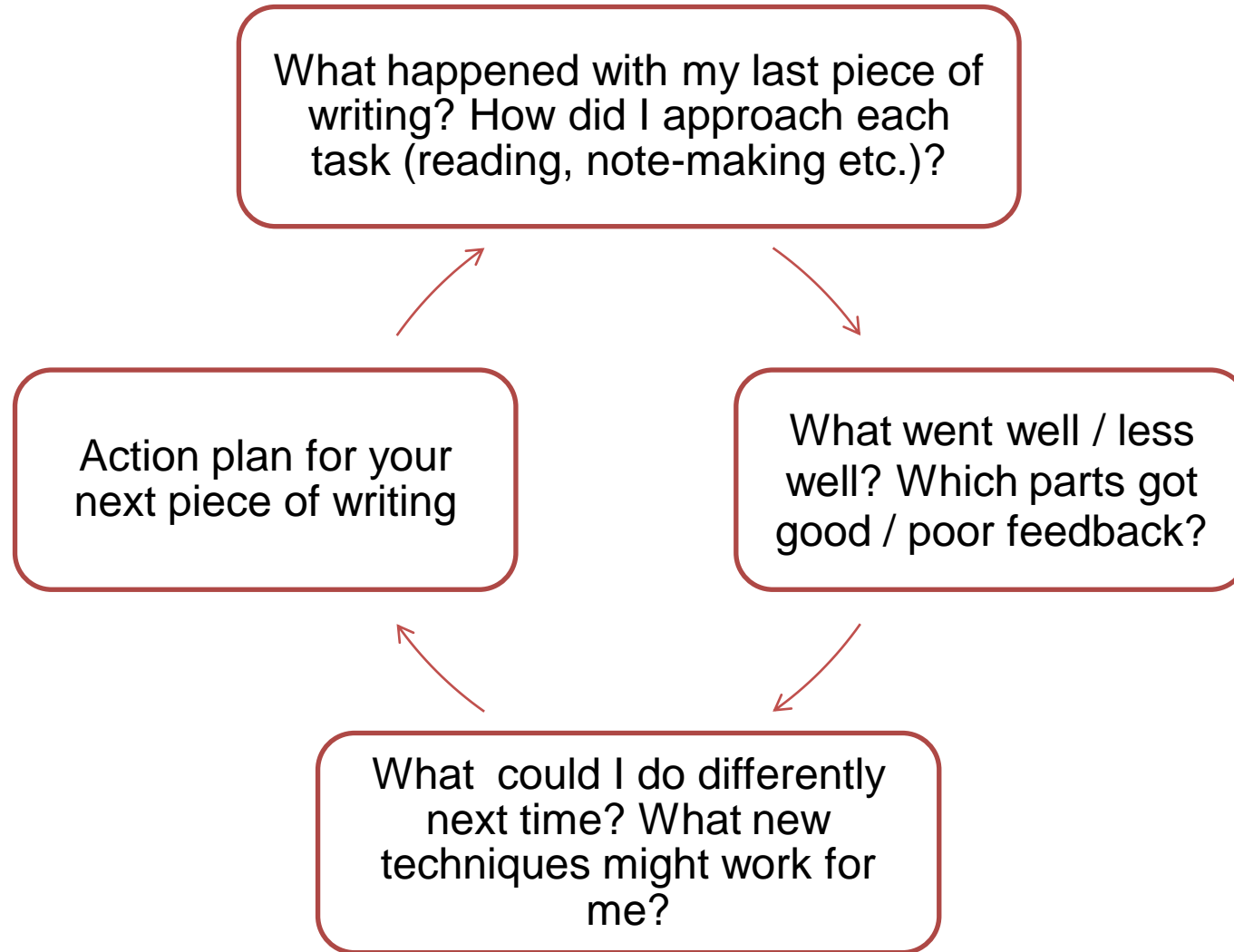
As in sport, you need to:

- break down process / tasks / techniques
- reflect on your strengths to develop confidence
- work on your challenges – be open to new ways
- practise, practise, practise!

# Reflective cycle



# Reflective cycle (writing)



# The writing you show is the tip of the iceberg



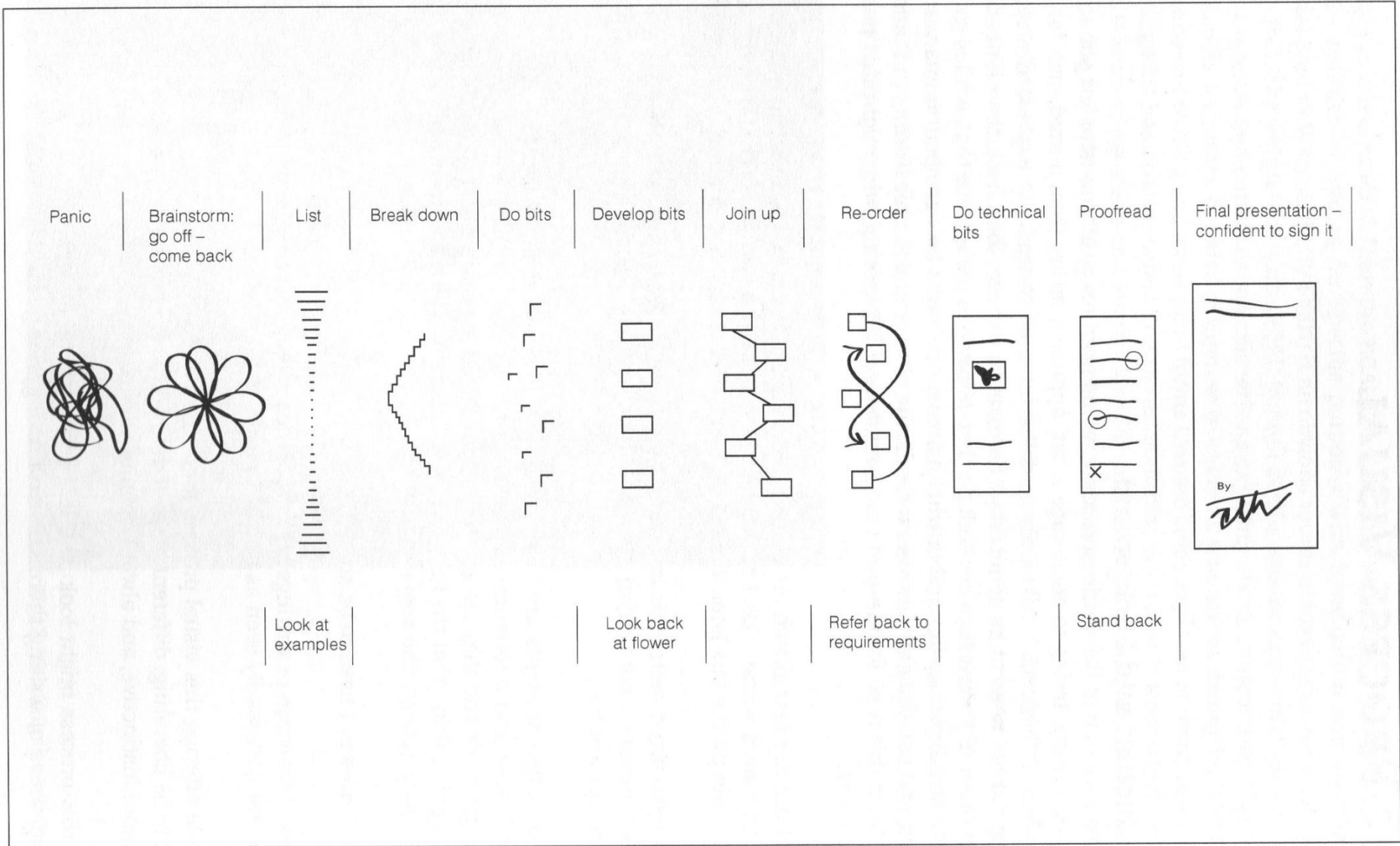
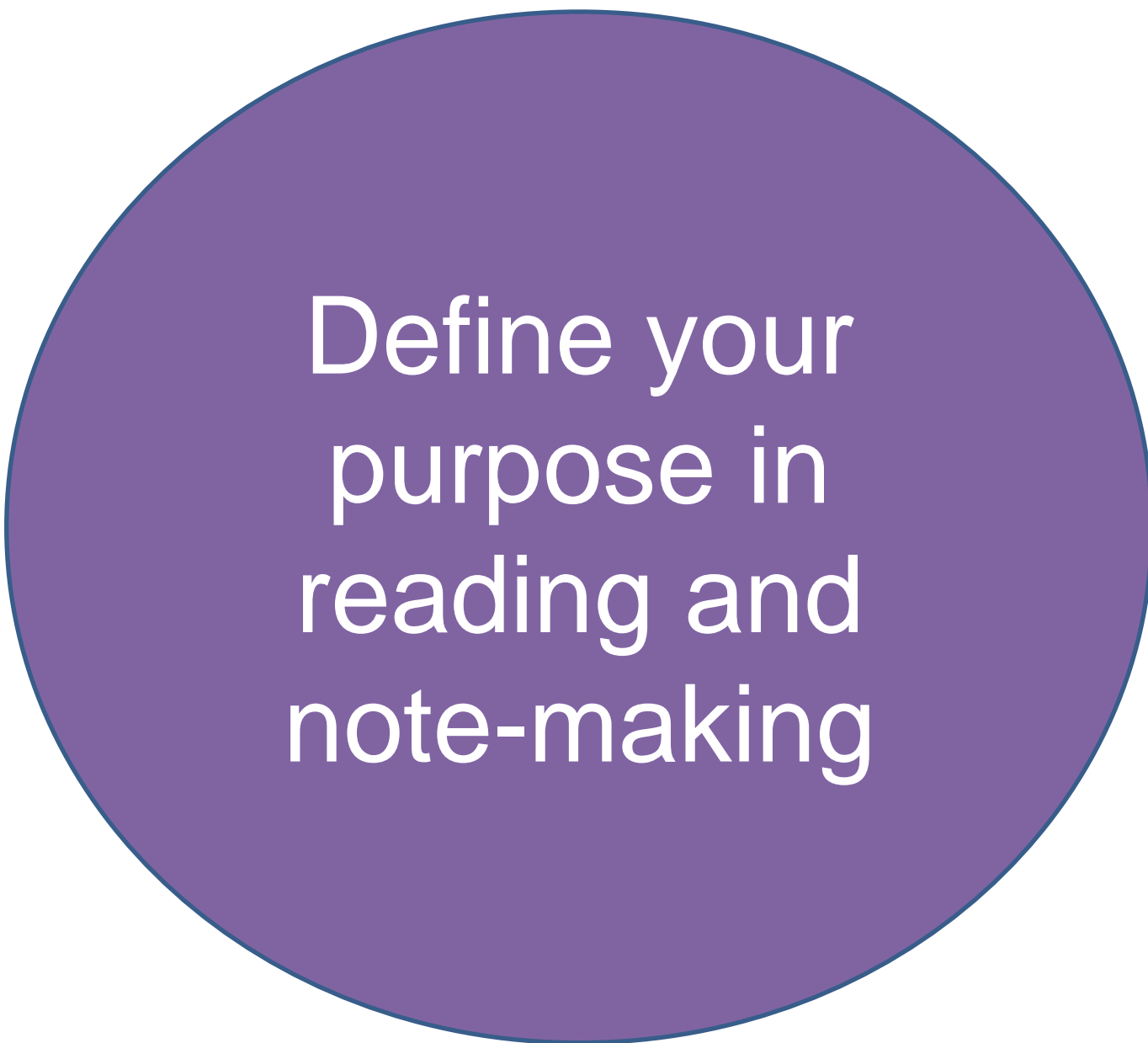


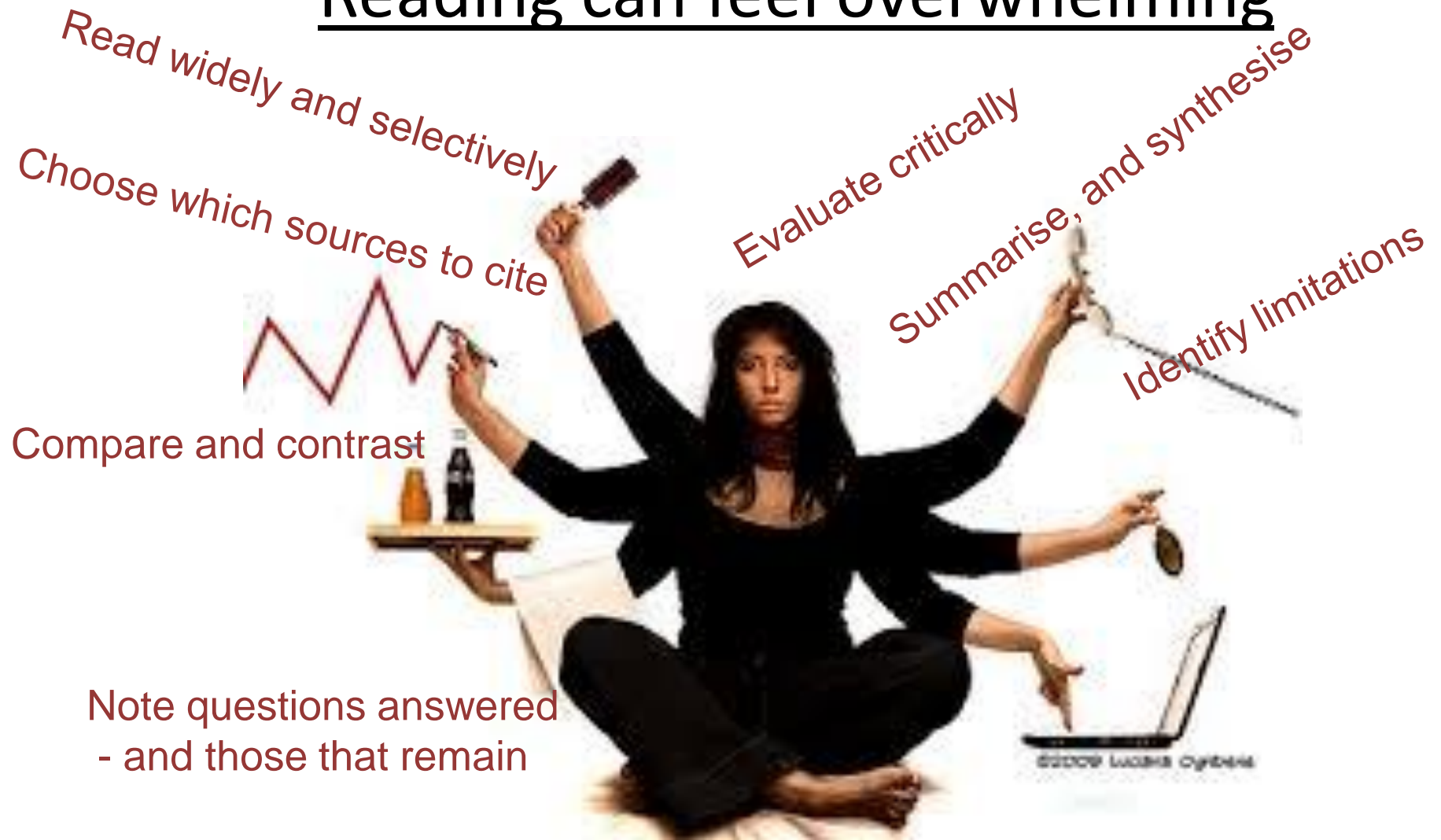
Fig. 4: Panic to production.

© Pat Francis "Inspiring Writing in Art and Design"



Define your  
purpose in  
reading and  
note-making

# Reading can feel overwhelming



Can you articulate the purpose of your reading?



# Why are you reading at this stage?



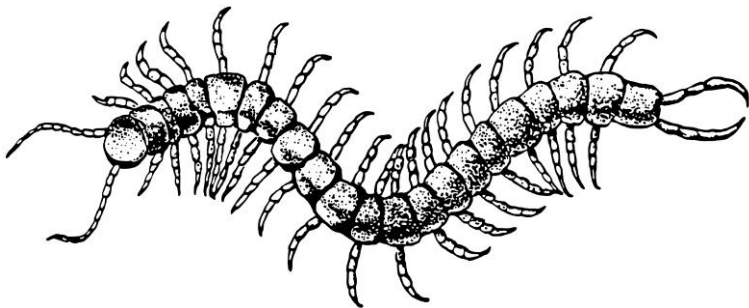
## Skim / scan / read



Look for main points, skim over the rest – what's it about?

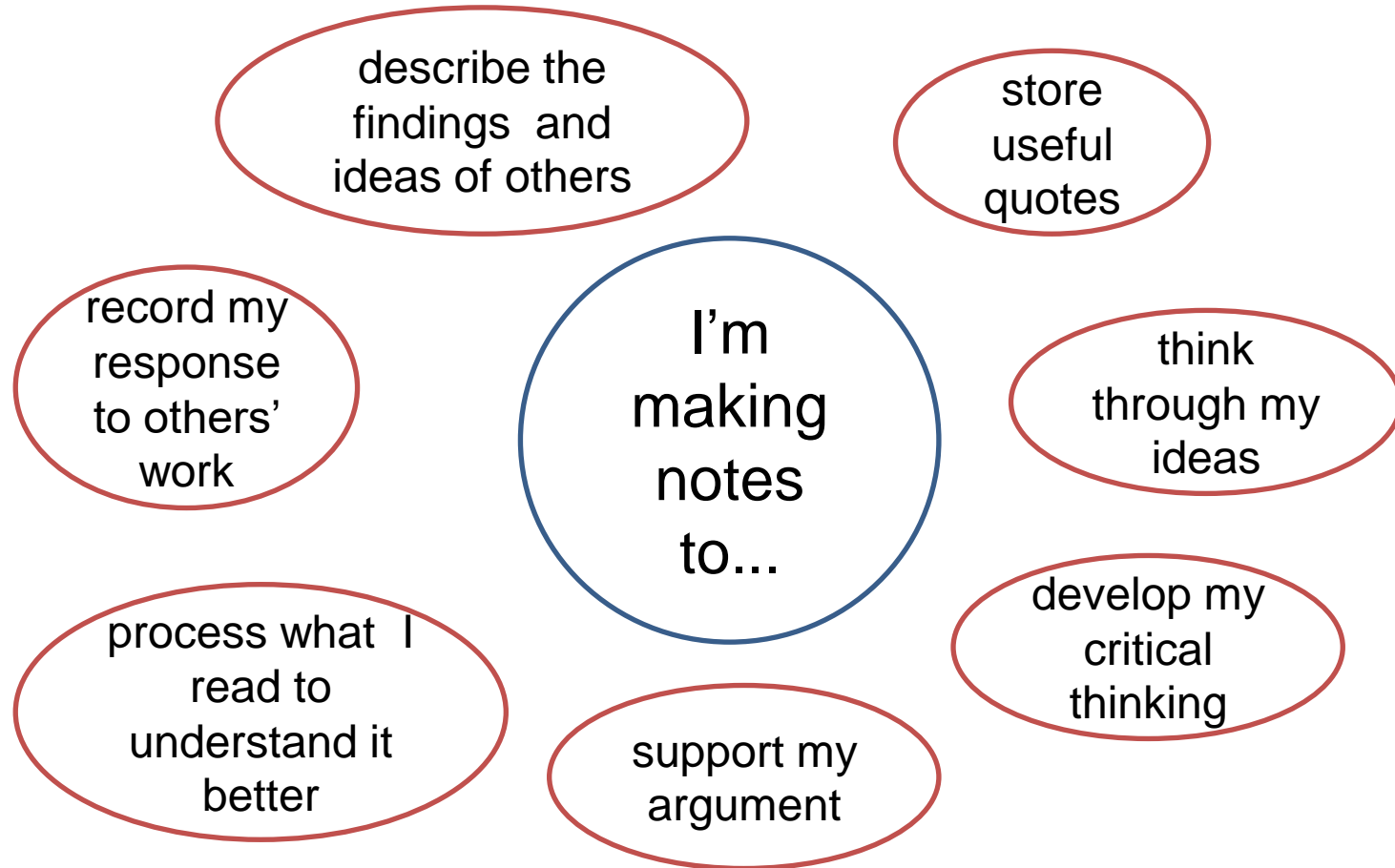


Scan for key words that relate to your current research focus



Read every word

# What is the purpose of your notes?



# Can you 'colour-code' your notes according to theme?



# Think critically as you read

What is the main argument?

Is there another way of looking at this?

? Does the evidence support the argument?

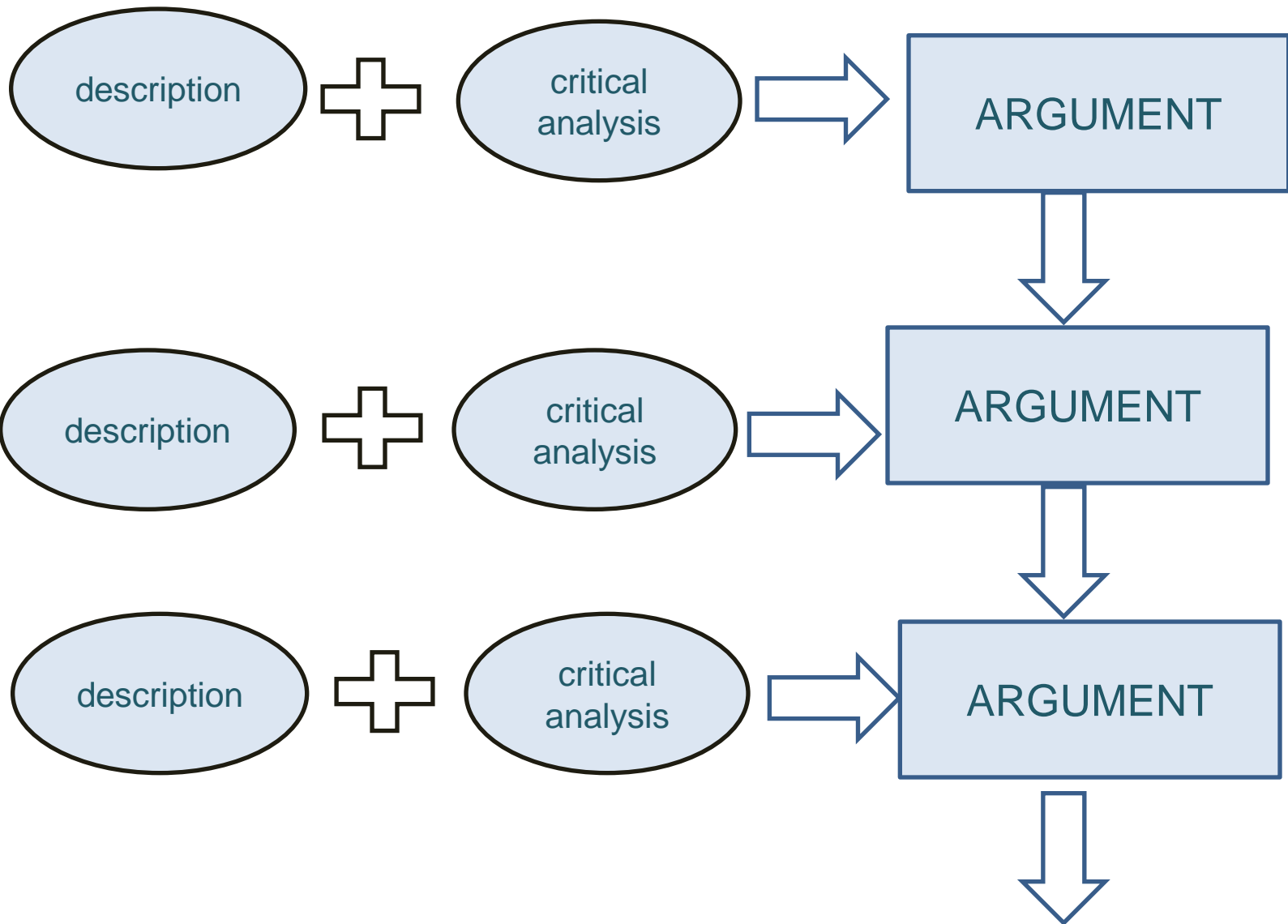
Does the evidence support the conclusion?

Be thorough - ask questions – dare to doubt



plan your  
argument  
before you write

# Why critical analysis is not enough in postgraduate writing



# Get your story straight before you start



Once you are familiar with the literature – THINK!



## Identify the key stages of your argument



- write sentences which express 'through line' of what you are trying to say
- not topics or themes, but the important points of YOUR argument, in the correct order
- ask yourself: what do I want to get across in this section? In this paragraph?
- answer by speaking it **OUT LOUD** then write it down