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Column: PhD

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News

Column

Stijn van Gils

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My heart races when I think about the manuscript I have submitted. That one comma and that strange word choice – should I have changed them? ‘No!’ I tell myself out loud, ‘It is gone, you are not going to look at it again.’ I take a few deep breaths.



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Just as I manage to breathe more calmly a slight feeling of panic comes over me. Should I have taken another look at table 2? What if there's a 0.031 somewhere instead of a 0.032? Or, worse still, what if a whole row has moved and policymakers make wrong decisions based on my ineptness?



I take myself in hand: ‘Stijn, you have gone through it at least a thousand times; it is fine.’ More deep breaths. Slowly my panic gives way to general anxiety about my thesis. This manuscript is just a start. Soon a complete book needs to be ready, with endless figures and millions of opportunities to make mistakes.

I try to think about something else. Not research for a change. A break from thinking about things in the past that should have been done better or things that could go wrong in future. I call an old friend. He looks after Scottish highlanders in nature reserves: that must be very calming.

‘So how are you then?’ he asks eventually. ‘Well, I’ll be happy when I’ve finished my PhD,’ I say quietly. ‘If I don’t manage what’s to become of me?’

Silence. ‘Um, sorry,’ he says hesitantly, ‘but what’s a PhD?’

Stijn van Gils (28) is doing doctoral research on ecosystem services in agriculture. Every month he describes his struggles with the scientific system.