

THE 'SAY NO' GUIDE



NEW!
VERSION!

Sanne Frandsen

10 QUICK QUESTIONS

ABOUT ME



SANNE FRANDBSEN

I am an Associate Professor in Leadership and Organizational Studies at the Department of Business Administration at Lund University, School of Economics and Management. I also serve in a managerial role as Head of Section.

In addition to my academic job, I have extensive experience coaching academic faculty individually and in groups. As a conversation partner, I help women in academia craft their work in ways that play to their strengths and values. I use a narrative approach that enables female academics reclaim their own story in their research, work, and life – as a way to challenge the pressures of fast-paced production and overwork in contemporary academia. I have guided many academics to clarify their academic profiles, replacing self-doubt and setbacks with purpose, resourcefulness, and joy. As an Associate Professor, I do research on topics of identity work, meaningful work, resilience, storytelling, crisis, and change.

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10 QUESTIONS

Say no...

Is it difficult to prioritize your worktasks? This is the guide for easy decision making for complicated situations. 10 questions to figure out which work tasks/writing projects/invitations to 'say no' to.

10 quick questions to ask yourself when you need to decide if you should do a work task. Yes or no?

1. Does it promote your career?
2. Does it enable you to live your passion?
3. Does it fit with your academic mission statement?
4. Does it have an impact on your field of research?
5. Does it help people or make a difference in the world?
6. Does it put you in front of an important audience?
7. Does it enable you to collaborate with "good" people?
8. Does it 'pay off' in terms of either money or publications?
9. Is it within your zone of genius? (what I am great at and love doing)
10. Is it a hell yes? If not - then it is a hell no!

TWO WAYS TO USE THE QUESTIONS

Say no

Two ways to use the questions:

1. Every time you receive a request to do a task, run it through the questions and mark each question with a ★ if the answer to the question is 'YES'. Decide that if the task has enough ★★★★★ you accept the task - and if not, say NO.

When declining the task you can even write that you have done an assessment of the task and it turns out that other tasks have higher priority to you.

2. Make a list of all the work tasks on your plate. Ask each question and mark the task with a ★ if the answer is 'YES'. Prioritize the tasks that have received most ★★★★★.

What about the tasks with no or only a couple of ★★? These are the tasks you say no to right away - if possible - or you work towards eliminating those tasks from your daily work.



EXAMPLE

Say no

This is an example of how you can use the questions.

GOAL: You are trying to decide which writing projects to focus on.

Make a list of all your writing projects. From a fleeting idea, to half-baked projects, to those that you are actively working on and those that are in the review process. All of them. When I did this the first time I had 12 writing projects in various stages. I decided to focus on three. So should you.

Decide which three to focus on. Why three?

- It is easier to let go of overwhelm if you only have to hold three writing projects in your head at once.
- It is important to be able to focus and “move the needle” on a few priority projects rather than writing a little here and a little there.
- Less is more. Focus on a few and do those well. With three projects you will spend less time shifting your mind from one project to another.

Process: Evaluate each individual writing project based on the questions. Mark each writing project with a ★ if you find the answer to the question is “YES”. Choose the three articles with the most starts! And only three projects! The rest? Say no to working on those writing projects!



WHY 10 QUESTIONS?

Say no

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Question 1: Does it promote your career?

In the book “The No club” the authors report insights from research that shows that women are more likely to be asked to do non-promotional tasks than men. Women are also more likely to say yes to non-promotional tasks than men.

Result? Women spend way too much time working on dead-end tasks that will lead no where, meanwhile men have time to work on their promotional tasks.

Reference: Babcock et al. (2022), The No club. Putting a stop to Women’s Dead-End work. New York: Simon & Schuster

Question 2: Does it enable you to live your passion?

Passionate? As academic women we have often chosen our line of work due to our passion. And we can’t say no to all non-promotional tasks, because our organization needs someone to do them. So why not choose to do the non-promotional tasks you are passionate about - and say no to the rest? Perhaps you love mentoring. Then say yes to mentoring.

WHY 10 QUESTIONS?

Say no

Question 3: Does it fit with your academic mission statement?

Does it fit your academic mission statement? Unsure what your academic mission statement is? Then check out this [blog](#) post by Cathy Mazak to write your own academic mission statement. It is a great tool for prioritizing which tasks to say no to. If it doesn't fit. Don't spend your time on it.

Question 4: Does it have an impact on your field of research?

Does it impact your research field? As academic women we do so many things during a workday, but how many really make an impact on our field of research? Prioritize promotional work tasks that also make an impact outside of your university.

Question 5: Does it help people or make a difference in the world?

Do you consider your work meaningful? If not, perhaps it is time to tune in on your 'WHY'. Prioritize work tasks that have an impact on the world - either through helping others or contributing to a change you would like to see in the world.

QUESTION 6: DOES IT PUT YOU IN FRONT OF AN IMPORTANT AUDIENCE?

A work task may be prioritized as a promotional work task in case it provides you with access or competencies that are helpful in moving you to your next career level. For example doing a keynote in front of a large audience or working on a strategic project for your university, may put you in front of an audience that is important to you in order to reach the next level. In not, then say no.

WHY 10 QUESTIONS?

Say no

Question 7: Does it enable you to collaborate with “good” people?

Are collaborations important to you? Then you should only work on tasks that enable you to collaborate with the right people. Those that are not only competent and experienced, but simply just ‘good people’ with good energy. Those whom you love to work with.

Question 8: Does it ‘pay off’ in terms of either money or publications?

Any concrete output? Money? Publications? This is a controversial one because we as academic women get asked to do SO MANY things that do not result in any concrete output. I don’t think this should be your only way of assessing a work task but it should be part of your considerations. Are you asked to give a free talk or a paid presentation? Then prioritize the paid one.

Question 9: Is it within your zone of genius?

Zone of genius: Gay Hendricks argues that in order to unlock your highest potential. Your zone of genius is different from your zone of excellence. Zone of genius is where you are in flow, you work on tasks you are exceptionally good at and that you find easy to do. Tasks that you love doing!

Reference: Hendricks, G. (2009). The big leap. New York: HarperCollins.

QUESTION 10: IS IT A HELL YES? IF NOT - THEN IT IS A HELL NO!

Intuition: Is it a hell yes? If not - then it is a hell no! My own decision-making process has been much faster after adopting this simple intuitive rule. Do I go ‘hell yes’, when I think of a task? If not - then it is a ‘hell no’. I heard this rule somewhere on the great internet, but I haven’t been able to find a definite source of origin. Perhaps it is [Elizabeth Cogswell Baskin](#).

THE WISDOM

Say no

"What do you consider good reasons to say no to a task?" I asked this question to my community: NEXT LEVEL CAREER COMMUNITY FOR WOMEN IN ACADEMIA. Here are their answers:

It is a difficult question. One could simply say no if it does not benefit you. But, it's not that simple. One could also say yes if it means you are helping someone. But, then you run the risk of never making it to your own tasks. So, the answer must be a balance between protecting one's own time and one's own work - and at the same time contributing to the collective, solidarity and, helping a colleague/friend/whoever-is-now-asking.

We certainly don't want an Academia made up of egoists who only think about their own careers, but we shouldn't burn ourselves to the ground and stress to death either. So, a balance. But how to find it, I don't have a good answer to that. (Professor, A)

For me, good reasons for saying no are, that the task is too far from my current focus area or from my research area. I try to pick 2-3 focus areas and use those to cut tasks. If a focus area is to write a book, I say no to participating in applications. If the focus is on applications, I should not be included in the book chapter. If the focus is networking, I say yes to presentations, but again if I have to write, I have to say no to those presentations and to reviewing. All 'no's are tough. But I practice not taking too much responsibility for the collective, e.g. avoid 'yes' if you are simply asked because there are no others who have the skills - or because others think I would do X well and have not bothered to investigate if there could be another person doing it... (Associate Professor, J)

For me, relationships are what make me decide between a yes and a no. There is so much toxicity in Academia. Caring, educational, fun, energizing relationships (regarding research, teaching, conferences, retreats you name it) I gladly agree to, even if I have to cut a heel and a toe elsewhere. (Associate Professor, M)

BONUS: THE TEMPLATE

Say no

"Once you have made the decision to 'say no' the next difficulty is often communicating the 'no' in a way that feels clear and still in integrity with our values.

I often use the 'the focus sandwich' when 'saying no'. It goes like this:

Positive - Focus - Positive

Example 1:

Positive: Thank you so much for considering me for this opportunity! I really appreciate you thinking of me.

Focus: Right now, I'm focusing on writing a paper that's important for me to complete before the deadline for the special issue, so I won't be able to commit to anything new at the moment.

Positive: That being said, I truly value these opportunities and look forward to working together on future projects!

Example 2:

Positive: I really appreciate you thinking of me for this opportunity – it means a lot!

Focus: I'm currently committed to finishing a grant application that's crucial for my research. So I'm going to have to pass this one.

Positive: But I'm grateful for the opportunity, and I'm excited to explore similar chances in the future!

Reference for 'focus sandwich': Molfino, M. (2020). Break the good girl myth. New York: HarperOne, p. 126

BONUS: THE AFFIRMATIONS

Say no

'Saying no' more often requires ongoing work and it can feel challenging to keep making the difficult decisions on your own.

Here is a list of mindset affirmations to keep you on the growth path of 'saying no' more.

- **It is safe for me to say no.**
- **It is possible to say no and still be a good person.**
- **Saying no helps me do more important things.**
- **I will allow myself to say no to things that do not align with my plans and values.**
- **When I say no to things, I say yes to myself.**
- **I will say no when needed.**
- **I can set boundaries without being rude.**
- **I find it easy to say no.**
- **People admire me for my ability to prioritize and say no.**
- **Saying no is a normal part of my work life.**

How to use the affirmations: It's all about reminding yourself. Pick one that speaks to you, write it on a Post-it, and stick it next to your computer screen. Put it somewhere you look often. It could be next to your office door - or make an electronic version and use it as a screen saver or the background on your phone.



BONUS: THE 'NO' TRACKER

Say no

One way to break the cycle of 'saying yes' too often is tracking your success in 'saying no.' Over time, it will build your confidence and provide proof that the affirmations are not just 'hot air'. You end up proving to yourself that you are indeed good at 'saying no'.

DATE	TASK/REQUEST	WHY DID I SAY NO?	HOW DO I FEEL?	OUTCOME
12TH OF DECEMBER 2024	E.G. DECORATING THE CANTEEN FOR OUR STAFF PARTY	E.G.. I HAVE A RE-R DEADLINE COMING UP	E.G. NERVOUS, RELIEVED, EMPOWERED	E.G. FOCUSED ON MY PRIORITIES AND MET MY DEADLINE



NEXT STEP?

‘Saying no’ is just the first step. Have you ever tried to change the way you work? Or change how you feel about your work? Yet, you keep being stuck in the same unproductive patterns? Patterns of overwork, invisibility, or feeling that you are not enough, don’t know enough, or don’t have enough time to do #allthethings.

That’s why I created “The Breakthrough Scholar”—a group coaching program designed for female academics like you who are ready to overcome the barriers that are keeping you feeling stuck. If you’re ready to step into your full potential and finally create the academic career you truly desire, I’d love to invite you to learn more.

👉 Learn more about The Breakthrough Scholar program [[HERE](#)], 👈

With love/ Sanne 🙏

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