How to write your Discussion section

1) If you obtain significant results:
   Great! Summarize the results, and discuss how they advance current understanding of your topic. Tie your results into the literature by related studies that find similar effects. Discuss possible limitations of your findings, and how future studies could address these limitations, or answer new, related research questions.

2) If you obtain non-significant results with a trend in the hypothesized direction:
   It could be that your sample sizes were too small to detect a true underlying effect (this would be an issue of power). If you believe this to be the case, explain why your hypothesis is likely to be supported with greater sample sizes, by citing relevant studies. Then, you can discuss your results as if they had come out significant (i.e. as described above). If instead you believe there is no true effect, see #2 and #3 below.

3) If you obtain non-significant results with no noticeable trend or a trend in the opposite direction:
   1. This could be an issue of power (i.e. small sample sizes, too much “noise” in the data). However, with no trend or a trend in the opposite direction, this possibility is less likely. If you do strongly believe in your theory despite your results, explain why, citing studies where the hypothesis is supported. Describe future studies that might have a better chance of capturing the true effect.
   2. It could be that your manipulated variable has no true effect on your dependent variable. If you believe this to be the case, discuss studies that support alternative theories (i.e. that might explain why the manipulated variable would not have an effect on the dependent variable). Suggest future studies that would be useful for answering related unresolved research questions.
   3. It could be that your manipulation did not actually influence the intended independent variable (e.g., perhaps you tried to manipulate mood by having some participants listen to hyper-upbeat 90’s pop music, but based on some participants’ comments, you realize that many people actually found the “happy” music annoying). If you think this might explain your null result, explain why you think your manipulation did not work. Then discuss studies that do support your hypothesis, and describe future studies that would better capture the effect.

Note that these points generally apply to discussing your results in presentations as well. Happy writing. ☺