

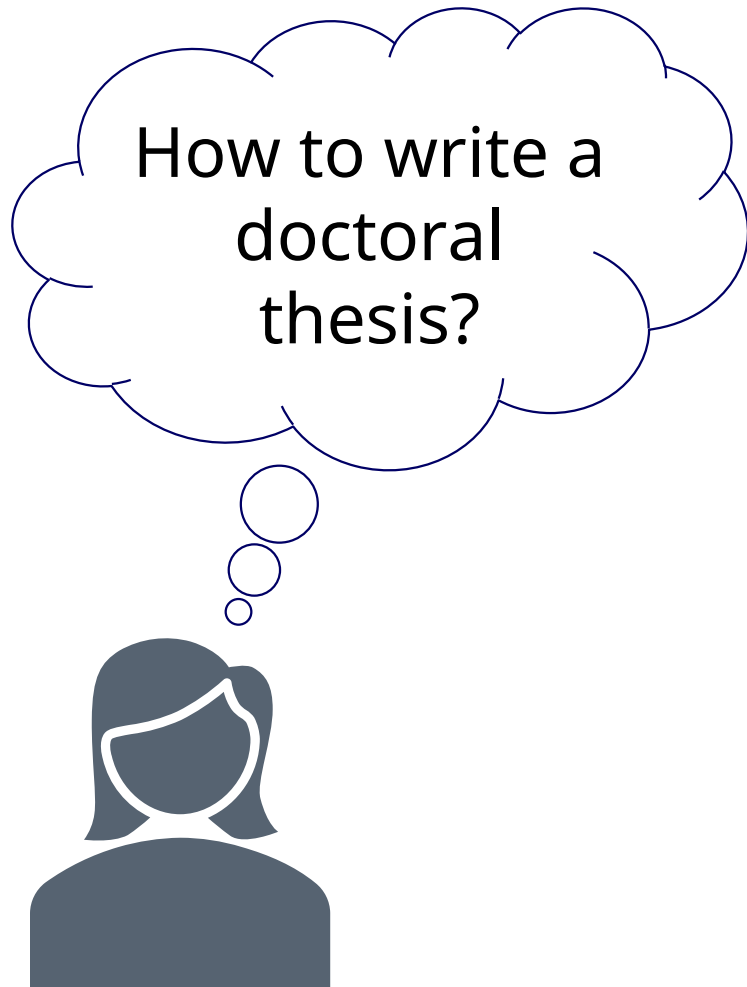
Graduate Academy | Dr. Katharina Ulbrich

Academic Writing during the Doctorate

13 May 2026 | PhD Day

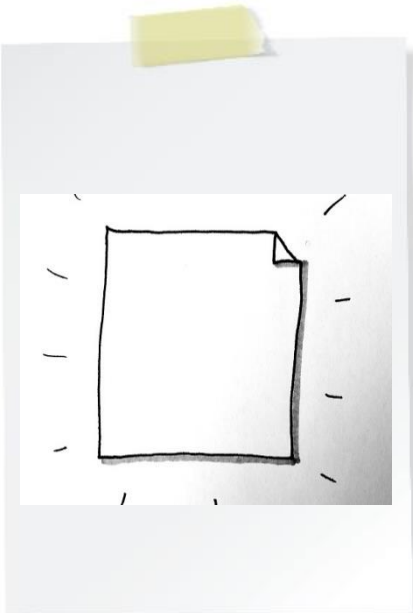
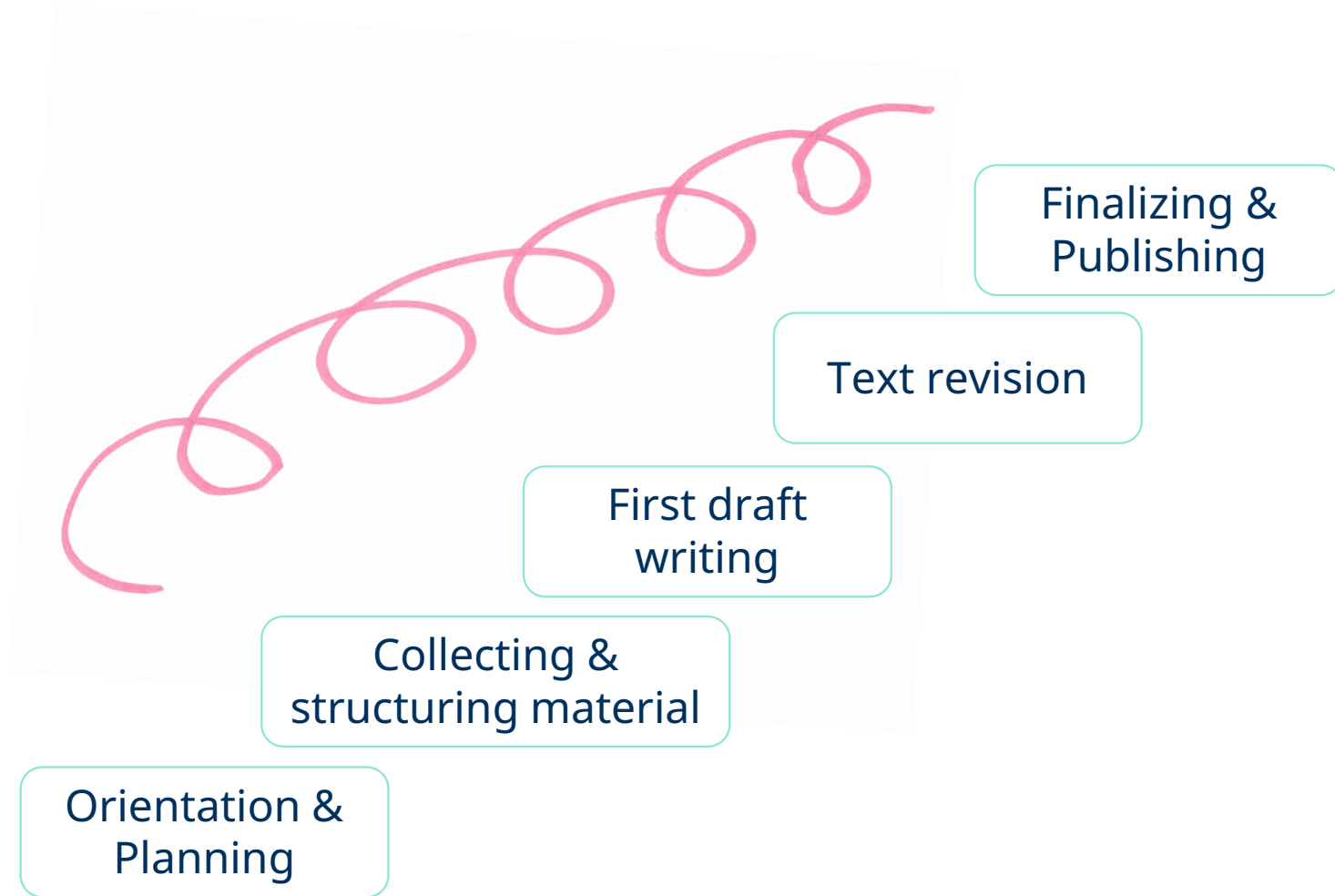


Welcome! | Agenda

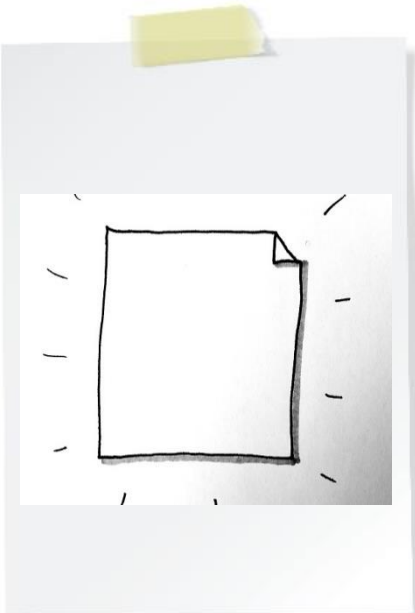
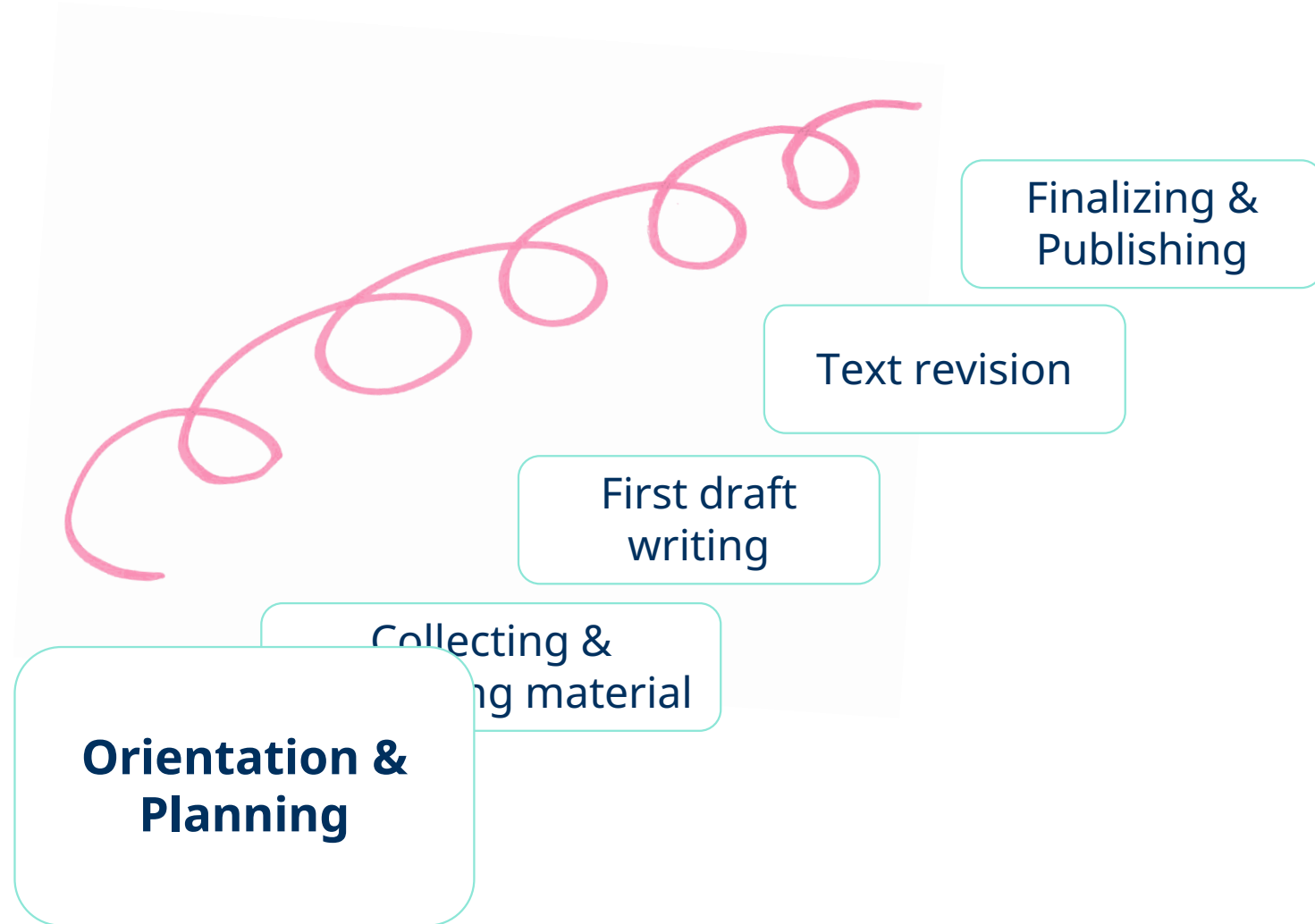


- ❖ Warm-up & Check-in
- ❖ Academic writing as a process
- ❖ Phases of the writing process
- ❖ Writing exercises, tips and suggestions

The Writing Process



The Writing Process



Planning & Orientation

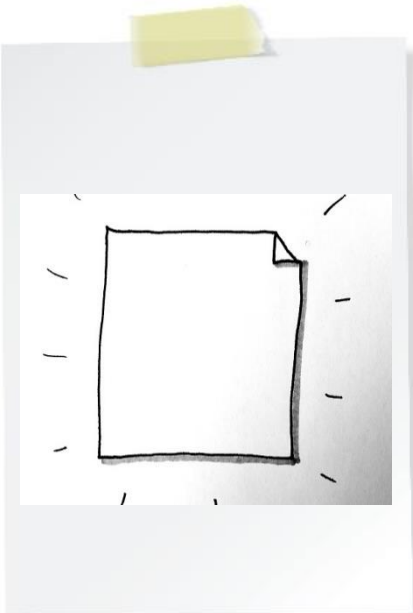
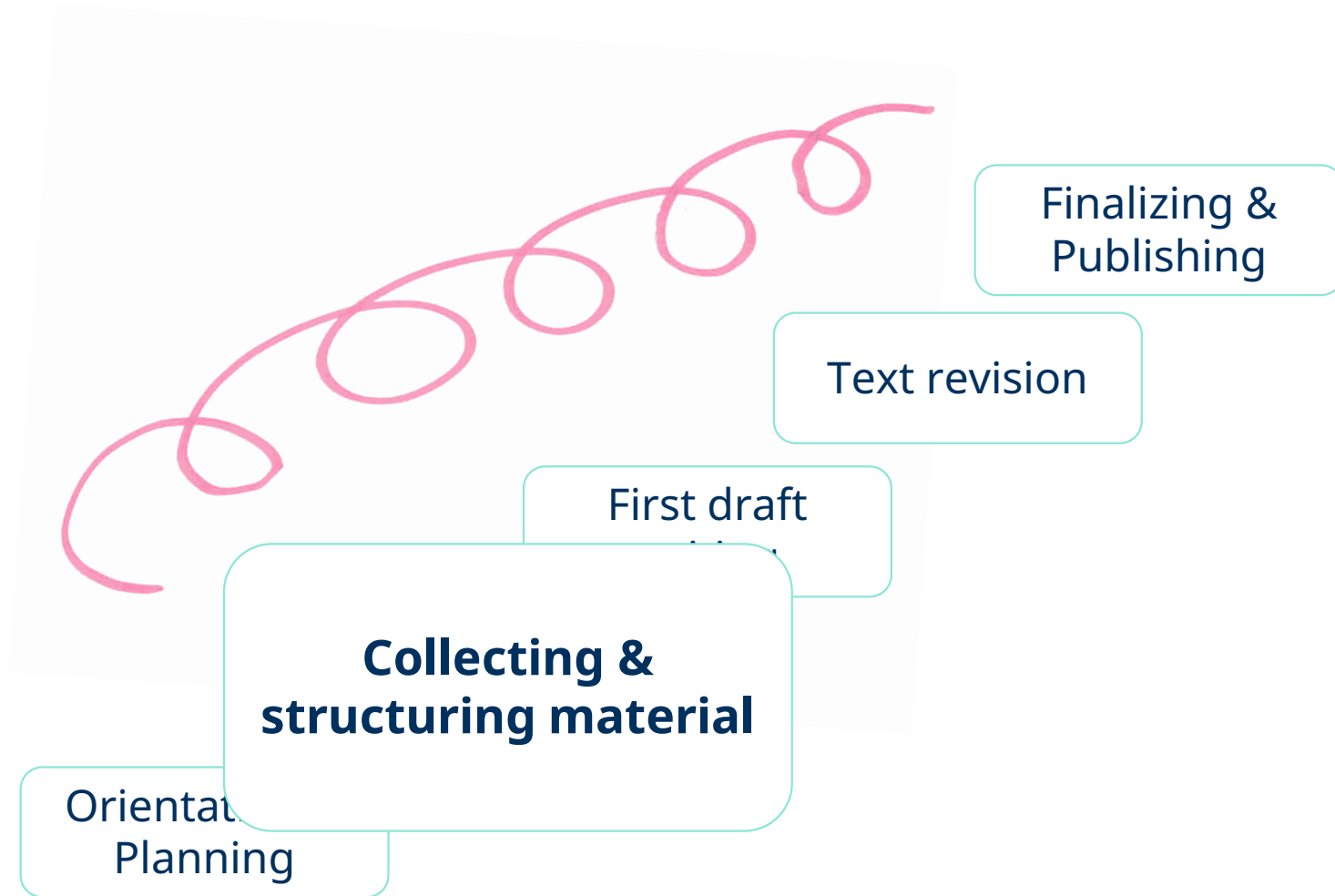
- ❖ See the big picture:
 - ❖ WHAT is the topic, the problem, the research question?
 - ❖ WHY is it important?
 - ❖ HOW will I approach it (methods & materials)?
- ❖ Define the **scope** of your research with an overall **time and work plan**
- ❖ Write an **exposé / doctoral proposal**:
 - ... to give yourself an orientation framework
 - ... to create a written basis for exchange with your supervisor(s)
 - ... to convince supporters

Writing exercise: **Quick fix proposal**



- 1. Topic:** What should my project be about?
- 2. Problem / Relevance:** Which problem, am I going to address? Why is it important to solve this problem?
- 3. Question:** What do I want to find out?
- 4. Objective:** What should be the outcome of my thesis?
- 5. Method:** How do I want to proceed?
- 6. Material:** What do I want to investigate (data, sources)?
- 7. Work plan:** Which milestones do I define? When do I want to finish my thesis?

The Writing Process



Collecting & structuring material



- ❖ **Use your research question to navigate the ocean of material** (data, literature):
 - What is relevant for my topic and what not?
 - What do I need to answer my research question(s)?
- ❖ **Develop an overall outline**
 - How are single parts connected? What is a meaningful line of argumentation? How do I want to organize the content of my thesis?
- ❖ **Accompany your academic reading with writing** (exzerpts, comments, summeries)
 - Use a **reference management system** to document your academic reading and manage your sources (GA & SLUB)

Writing excercise: **From mindmap into outline**



From mindmap into outline: organizing content

This exercise helps you ...

- to get an overview over your topic, its subtopics and their interconnections,
- to structure your topic on various levels,
- to keep the structuring process open until you find a final linear order,
- to identify gaps and inconsistencies,
- to decide where to start writing,
- to plan the writing process.

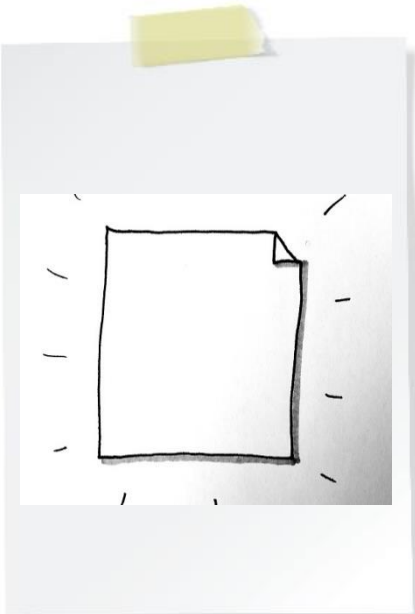
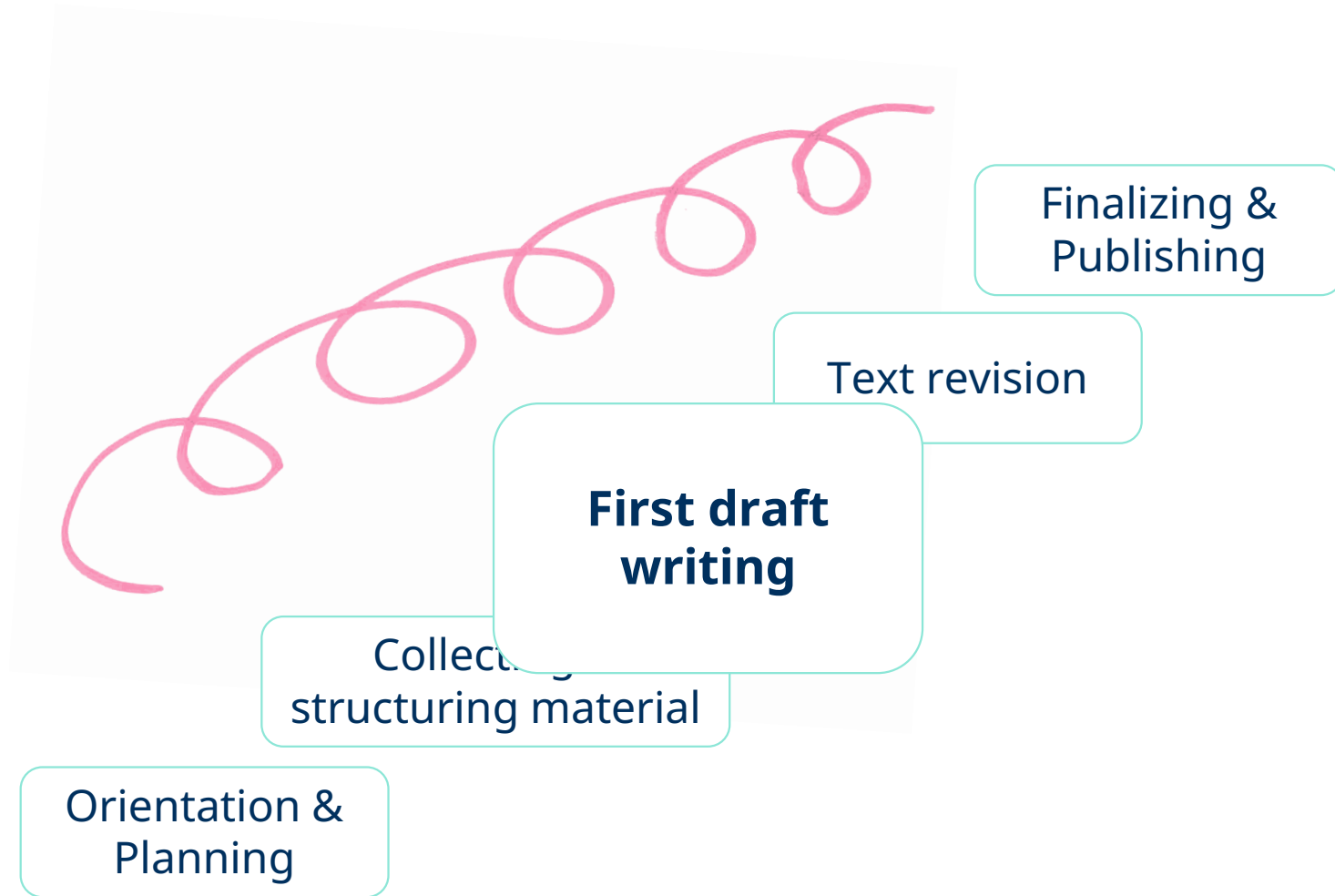
You need:

- a sheet of paper (A3), pens (in different colours)

How it works:

- Draw a mindmap including all relevant aspects of your (PhD) topic:
- Start with your overall topic or research question and write it in the middle of a sheet of paper (landscape format).
- Now, develop the branches and subbranches of your mindmap differentiating subquestions/subtopics on different levels. Work clockwise creating a reasonable order of the various thematic aspects.
- Now, with a different colour, add key sources/literature, the planned number of pages, the planned time to be allocated for the writing of the single parts etc.
- Once you think, your mindmap is complete and shows a definite order, you can transform it into a linear outline and check it for coherence using the method „The red thread“.

The Writing Process



Writing exercise: Freewriting

- ✓ Just start writing by hand!
- ✓ Keep your hand moving and the pen in contact with the paper! You can write down anything – feel free to stray from the topic!
- ✓ Don't cancel anything or make corrections!
- ✓ Stick to a set time limit and start with a writing prompt:

- ✓ Time: 4 minutes



*„Academic
writing is... “*

Writing exercise: Freewriting

Use this method

... as a **warm-up exercise** at the start of a writing session,

... to **explore ideas**, bring **implicit knowledge** to the surface, and develop **new perspectives** on a problem,

... for **self-reflection** and **problem-solving**,

... to experience the **joy of writing**,

... to **overcome writer's block**.



What is freewriting?

Freewriting is an associative and creative writing technique that helps you put your thoughts down on paper very quickly. This method can be helpful when you face problems with finding the right formulations, when you feel blocked in your writing or when you are searching for new ideas.

Furthermore, freewriting can also be used as a way to converse with yourself in order to become aware of and develop your thoughts, impressions and ideas. The writing process forces you to put your ideas in a linear order and to build connections. This might help structure your ideas but also lead you to completely new ideas.

How does it work?

Some basic rules should be followed:

- Define a concrete duration for your freewriting session. Start with not more than 5 to 10 minutes.
- Start writing without hesitation, put down everything that comes to your mind.
- Keep your pen in touch with the paper and your hand moving.
- Continue writing, even if nothing seems to come to your mind. Then you can write "I don't know what to write" or anything like that.
- Do not revise, modify or correct anything while writing.
- Only when the predefined time has passed, take your time to read what you have written and highlight or comment interesting parts.

Variations

Focused Freewriting

For this freewriting version, choose the topic you would like to write about as a heading. This can be a question, a term or the beginning of a sentence. Keep the freewriting rules described above. Try to get back to your writing focus repeatedly during the whole writing session.

Loop-Writing

Start with a first focused freewriting session of max. 5 minutes. Read your text and identify the core sentence or core concept of what you have written. Use it as the writing focus for a second 5-minutes freewriting session. Repeat this procedure several times exploring a topic in depth.

Version writing

Choose a writing focus and write several versions one after another in subsequent freewriting sessions of max. 5 minutes. Keep the same writing focus for all sessions. After each session, read the text you have written and highlight what seems essential. In the end, formulate one core sentence for all versions you have written.

What is freewriting good for?

Freewriting helps you find, explore and concretize ideas and can therefore be useful during the initial phase of your writing project. Regular freewriting sessions help you establish writing routines (i.e. so-called morning pages).

Freewriting is also a good warming-up exercise at the beginning of every writing sessions. It helps you directly find your way into writing. During the phase of first draft writing, freewriting is useful as it prevents you from getting stuck with puzzling, correcting or revising on the search for better formulations. It helps you produce a lot of text rather quickly even if it is not yet of a final-draft-quality. You will have time to revise and modify later on. Freewriting might ban your "inner critic" while writing.

First draft writing



- ❖ Write **forward**, not backward: Revising the text comes later!
- ❖ Write to **clarify for yourself** what you actually want to convey: Reader orientation comes later!
- ❖ Have the courage to break free from the literature and **formulate your own thoughts**!
- ❖ Use **creative writing techniques** (freewriting, clustering) to get into the flow of writing and keep going.
- ❖ **Let go of perfectionism** and don't give the inner critic a platform: zero/first drafts aren't perfect but are full of potential!
- ❖ Make writing **the top priority** (before data analysis, literature review, illustrations, etc.)!
- ❖ Set a **writing schedule**: regular writing sessions with a clear structure and focus (Pomodoro, writing sprints)

First draft writing – quick and dirty

Preparation:

- Decide, based on your thesis outline, of which (sub)chapter or section you would like to write a first draft.
- Schedule one to three hours for this first draft writing, ideally during a daytime when you are most productive and undisturbed. Chose an inspiring place for your writing session.

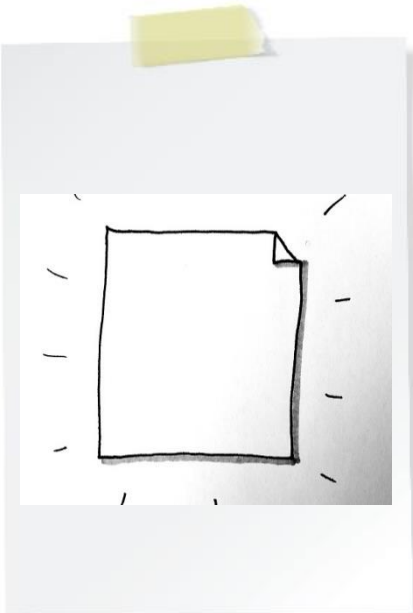
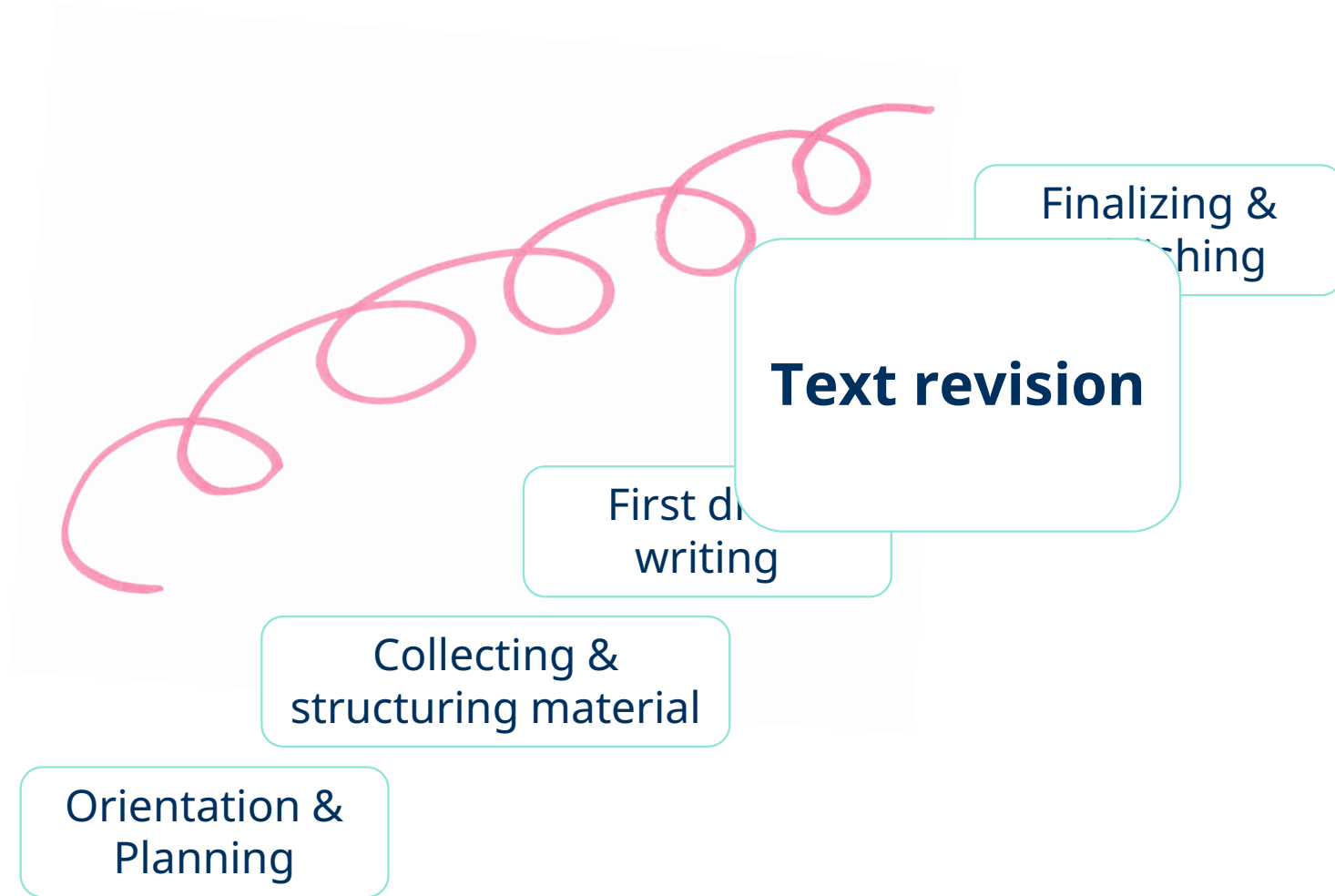
How to proceed:

- First, create a **cluster** (see worksheet „clustering“), a **mindmap** or a **bulleted list** (see worksheet "text path") on the content of the text. Then supplement the individual aspects of the topic with some key points from the research literature that you have already read (and excerpted if necessary) on this topic. Also add the corresponding source references (incl. page numbers)
- Having done this, **put away** all the literatur and continue working only with your cluster/mindmap/list as an inspiration for your first draft.
- Limite each writing session to 20 – 40 minutes maximum. Chose one thematic aspect of your cluster/mindmap to start with and **keep writing troughout the set period of time at a stretch** (see worksheets „freewriting“ and „pomodoro technique“). Use your own voice and a way to express your ideas which comes naturally and easy. This can imply a raw, functional, scarce, exsessive, personal or colloquial style, and also the explicit use of „I“. Write as if you were telling a colleague what your text is about. You can also try to write your first draft by hand.
- Should you get stuck at some point, maybe due to missing information, open questions or inapt formulations, **take a short note** either as a comment into the text or on an extra sheet of paper **and keep on writing** (see worksheet „replacement characters“).
- **Take a break** of at least 5 minutes after each writing session before you continue with a second (and a third) session. Get up from your chair, move your body, get something to trink, have a look out of the window.

Wrap-up:

- Print your first draft at the end of your writing session(s) and save it in a folder. Let your first drafts rest for a while before you start with text revision.
- If you have written your first draft by hand, you can make first modifications during the typewriting process.
- Be kind and generous with your first drafts, they have a great potential to become a brilliant final version! After a break, read your first draft in order to extend it, to rewrite it, to cut it down, to modify its structure, to polish its language and to add supporting evidence and references.

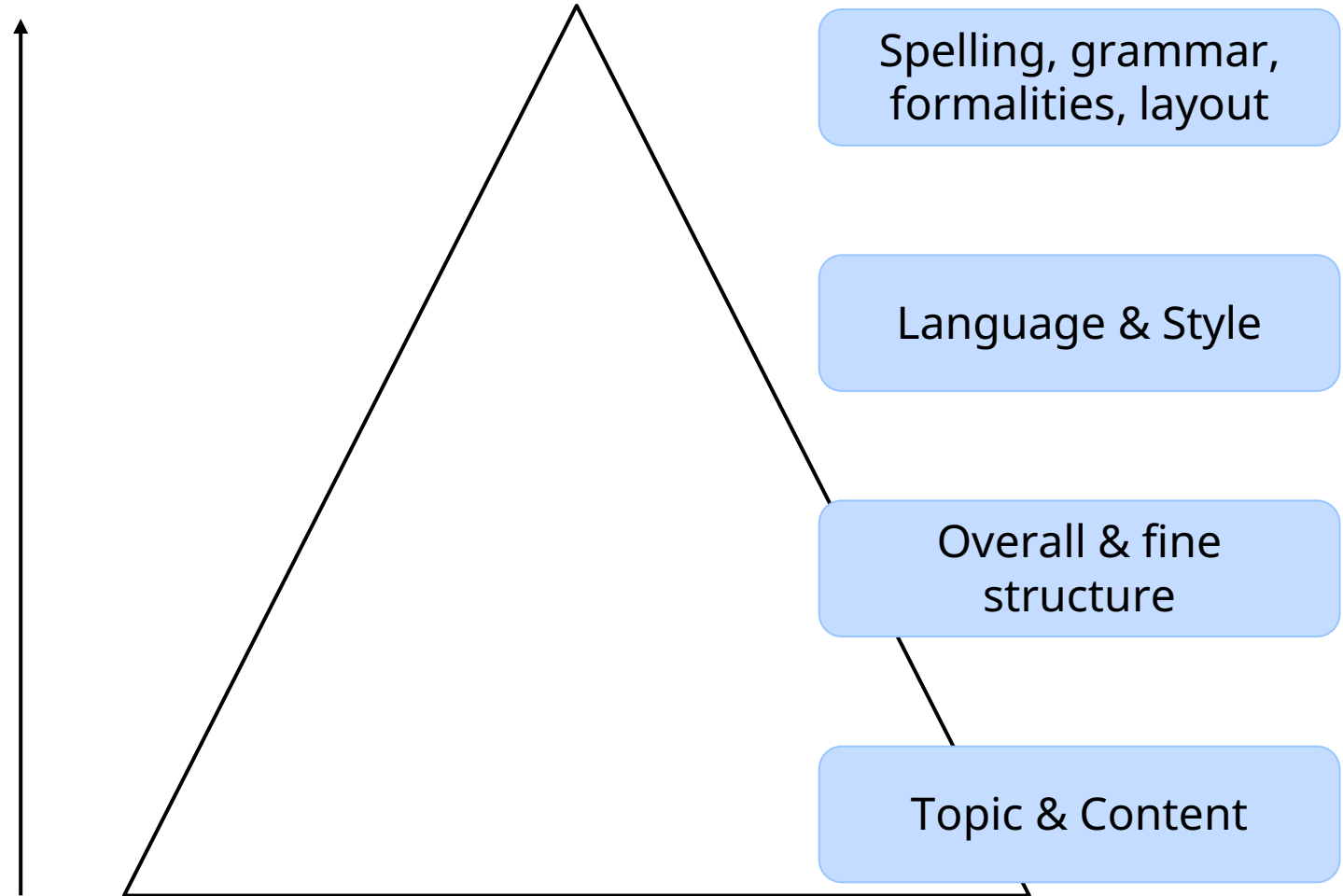
The Writing Process



Text Revision

How do I organize text revision?

- ✓ Create distance: print it, change the font, let it rest (> 6 weeks if possible)
- ✓ First reading = focus on strengths
- ✓ Gain an overall impression before editing details.
- ✓ Note key revision ideas and constructive comments before you start.
- ✓ Revise systematically: move from macro-level to micro-level



Revising texts in four steps

This exercise helps you to systematically divide text revision into consecutive steps. Starting with the overall impression you have from your text and its parts, you subsequently focus on content and structure, revise language and style and finally check for correct grammar, spelling and punctuation.

If you proceed this way, you will be able to revise your text in a comprehensive way which will include finding more general inconsistencies as well as spelling errors. As a result, you will enhance the overall quality and the reader-friendliness of your text significantly.

Preparation:

- Let your text rest for some time before printing it out for text revision.
- Choosing an unusual font and format will help you to keep a certain distance when reading your text. Choose double space and large margins.
- If possible, choose a place for reading and revising your text other than from where you have written it.

Proceeding:

1.	Receiving an overall impression	Read the whole text with an even speed. Just highlight the parts that attract your attention and seem to need revision without going too much into detail. Proceeding like this helps you to get a first overview and to roughly estimate the amount of revision needed. What is your general impression of the text while reading? At which points of the reading do you notice an impulse to change something?
2.	Revising content and structure	Consider the whole text (especially introduction and conclusion): ▪ Have you clearly stated the research problem and its relevance? ▪ Have you formulated a clear research question? ▪ Have you clearly described the chosen method and is it adequate with regard to your research object and question? ▪ Have you given an overview of the structure of the text (in the introduction)? ▪ Have the central research questions been answered and hypotheses been proofed (in the conclusion)? ▪ Have you made your own findings and position sufficiently clear and given a convincing motivation in the context of scientific discourse in your field? ▪ Is the line of arguments thorough and convincing? Are there any gaps or repetitions? ▪ Do the conclusion refer back to the introduction, the findings to the research questions? Have you stated the

		relevance of your findings and formulated further questions and the need for further research? Consider the succession of the chapters (structure): ▪ Does the extent of the chapters reflect the focus of the study? ▪ Do the chapters refer to the overall research question/main findings in a meaningful way? ▪ Is there a „red thread“ in the sequence of the chapters? ▪ Are the chapter headings clear and significant? Considering the internal structure of each chapter (i.e. sub chapters): ▪ What is the topic? What is the core message? ▪ „Red thread“: Do the sub chapters/larger paragraphs follow a red thread/comprehensible line of argumentation? Is anything missing? Are there any redundancies? ▪ Are the single paragraphs/subchapters well connected with each other? For each paragraph: ▪ What is the topic? What is the core message? ▪ If necessary put more emphasis on the core messages by formulating them in a more explicit way. For the sequence of paragraphs: ▪ What is the function of each paragraph in the overall context (sub chapter/chapter)? ▪ Is anything missing? Are there any gaps in the argumentation/narration? ▪ Are there any redundancies? Within the single paragraph: ▪ Put the sentences in a meaningful order: topic sentence, elaboration of the topic, concluding sentence. In this phase of the revision process, you can also use the following worksheets „Revising the structure“ and „Cutting down“
	Intermediate step	Now go back to working on your text file on the computer and incorporate the modifications made in step 1 and 2. Print the revised version again for further revision steps.
3.	Sentence structure, wording and style	General: ▪ Are you using an academic style (objective, clear and concise)? ▪ Are you using neutral, non-judgemental formulations? ▪ Are you using the right tense in a coherent way?

		- In which way are you referring to the author of the text (active or passive voice) and is this in line with the conventions of your discipline? Concerning sentences: - Avoid wordiness and nested sentences. Keep your sentences short (max. 20 words if possible). - Are you using too much passive voice, which makes the reading cumbersome? - Are you stating main facts in the main clause and minor matters in the sub clause? - Are you using connectors (thus, however, despite) in order to emphasize the logical structure of the text? Concerning wording: - Are there repetitions? - Eliminate filling words (really, basically, anyway, finally)? - Are you using abbreviations without explaining them? - Are you using technical terms which might not be familiar to your readership? - Substitute phrasal verbs (i.e., carry out → execute). Use the Academic Word List. - Avoid colloquial language.
4.	Formal correctness, spelling, grammar	Quotations: - Are quotations embedded into the text in a meaningful way (not just inserted)? - Is it clear why you are quoting at a particular point in the text? Is the quotation really needed there? Figures: - Are figures, tables, graphs, formulas embedded into the text in a meaningful way (that means not just inserted)? - Is it clear which function a particular figure, table, ... has at a particular point of the text? Grammar: - Are you using collocations correctly? (i.e. heavy rain, strong sense, save time) - Is the agreement in the syntax correct (i.e. by number, person, gender)? - Are you using the correct tense in a coherent way? Formal accuracy: - Are you using the correct citation format in a coherent way and in line with the conventions of your discipline? - Are you citing other authors always with or without their first names?



- Are you giving references always in brackets or in a footnote?

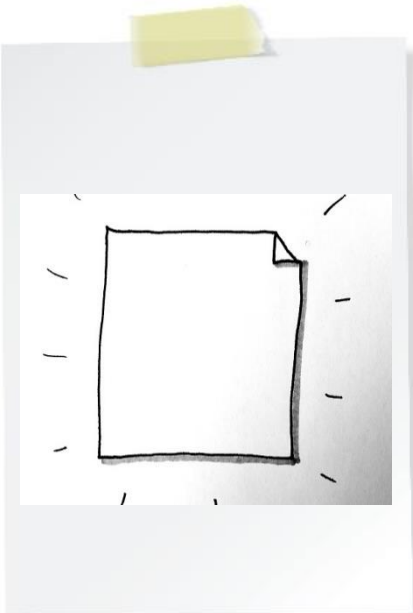
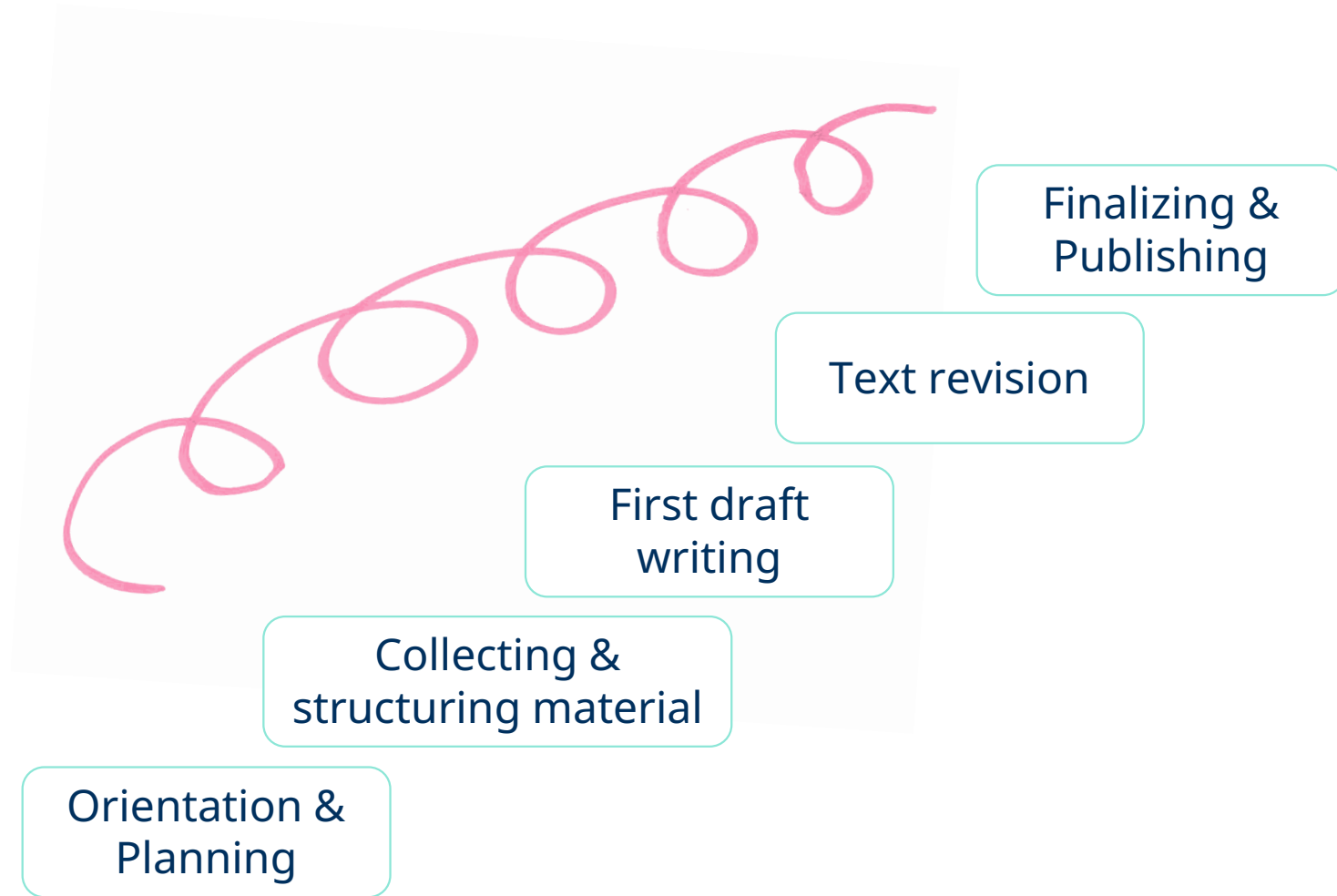
Spelling, punctuation and careless mistakes

- Have you checked the whole text with the spell-checker of your computer?
- Have you read (parts of) the text aloud (to yourself) in order to identify mistakes which might derive from shifting text passages?
- Have you checked the correct use of commas?

Layout:

- Does the cover page contain all the necessary information?
- Is the table of content clearly structured and the headings concise?
- Do headings, the numeration and the page references correspond to the running text?
- Are all requirements from you faculty/professor concerning formatting fulfilled?
- Are all figures, tables etc. easy to read in the printed version and numbered?

The Writing Process



We support you with your writing!

The [GA Writing Lab](#):

- Individual writing advice
- (Short) writing workshops: [How to write a PhD?](#)
- **Writing week** at the Graduate Academy: 31st August – 4th September 2026

