# How Can I help? A *less-is-more-approach* to responsible, supportive and sustainable, doctoral supervision

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The significance of writing for PhD students, particularly at faculties of Humanities, cannot be overemphasized; the written manuscript is *the* final product to be publicly discussed by external examiners. This article takes as its starting point a "quick & dirty" study of a student-initiated writing group at a humanities department (HD) and the assumption that thesis supervisors nowadays need to take more responsibility for doctoral students' writing because of existing demands on PhD-students to publish or perish *and* finish on time (Brodin 2020). It asks the question how, in times of stress and demands on productivity, increased responsibility may be practiced sustainably in terms of work-load and still benefit students' development and goals. In other words: How can I, as supervisor, help? What support is needed and how much?

The article has as its starting point the experiences and perspectives of the doctoral students and what *they* think supervisors could do to support. Their answers indicate the significance of minimal intervention and the article discusses the implications and potentials of this: perhaps less is more? Is it enough for supervisors to hold the beacon of vision and purpose in the background? If so, when, and how can this be understood? This article suggests that a *less-is-more approach* may be implemented as significant non-invasive responsibility and supervisory support, given that there is intentional, collective, mutual awareness and communication among students and supervisor colleagues. The *less-is-more approach*, as contextualized in this article, is advocated as a sustainable practice, promoting not only self-sufficient successful doctoral students, but a long and healthy work-life and continued careers for students and university teachers alike.

*Keywords:* doctoral writing groups, academic socialization, identity, sustainable supervision, life-long learning, sustainable work life

## "WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?" TOPIC AND QUESTIONS

Passing seminar room X at my department, several weeks in a row, I observed a group of doctoral students intensely focused on their screens, happily tapping away on their keyboards. A tray on wheels magically appeared outside their seminar room, morning and afternoon, loaded with an abundance of goodies and beverages. Having spent more than two decades as professional editor, translator and publisher of academic articles, journals and books, chasing authors and reviewers to send manuscripts and article reviews, and as teacher, guiding students to write, write, write, and encouraging colleagues to overcome their writing blocks, I was intrigued. What was going on here?

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Peter[1], a third-year PhD-student, who appeared to be the informal leader, knew. It was a weekly writing day for doctoral students at the department:

> *The idea for a recurring "writing day" emerged during a writing retreat (skrivinternat) organized by HD[2] … in September '21. Towards the end of the retreat, several PhD students were sharing how beneficial the structure of the writing sessions had been for them, so we discussed how we could reproduce the sessions once back at the university. […] To be clear, it was not my idea, but it came from a discussion among several PhDs. I have been acting largely as the organizer/administrator of the efforts, with help from Goran.[3]*
> (Peter. pers.comm. Jan 7, 2022)

This would appear to suggest that the doctoral students had reproduced the format of a department-organized event, to continue writing in a structured manner on their own.

Before moving on, let me add that the purpose of this article is to address a question most doctoral supervisors ask themselves at some point: *How can I help*? Here, more specifically, in relation to the assumption that thesis supervisors nowadays need to take more responsibility for doctoral students' writing because of existing demands on PhD-students to publish or perish *and* finish on time (Brodin, 2020). What responsibility and/or help is needed and how much? In an attempt to probe, rather than give an exhaustive answer to, these questions, I did a small empirical study of the doctoral students' writing group introduced above. Collecting student perspectives appeared crucial for gaining a better understanding of the complex issue of how to help doctoral students, and for instance, how to best balance hands-on guidance with student autonomy. Self-governing is important, the literature claims. But how and why does it work in practice? My findings have here been read against a backdrop of relevant research on writing and supervision practices in higher education, as well as my own reflections about sustainable academic work. I chose this perspective in order to share with other teachers my own insights into why non-invasive supervision might work *and* be considered a responsible scholarly practice. In my conclusion I offer some ways to conceive of and possibly implement an approach to supervision that here is called "less-is-more". In doing so I hope to inspire thoughts about and modes of working with supporting doctoral students' writing in a way that is sustainable for all involved, now and in future.

Why focus on writing? Writing is essential in any PhD-program, but even more so where Humanities are concerned where *the* final product is a manuscript or compilation of published articles. Research indicates that writing groups of various kinds have proven constructive and important not only to "facilitate doctoral degree progress" (Maher et al., 2013), but also to build academic and writer identity (Maher et al., 2008; Mattsson et al., 2020), and to battle negative emotions of writing (Cameron et al., 2009). In general, writing groups seem to enable PhD-students to "write more" (Lee & Boud, 2003).

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1   Peter is a pseudonym. Names have been anonymized throughout the article.
2   A Humanities Department. Anonymized for the purpose of the peer review and retaining anonymity for the students. Writing retreats with this format have been regularly organized at HD since 2015, usually by the director of doctoral studies (Forskarutbildningsprefekten).
3   Anonymized, see footnote 1. Administrative staff, among whose tasks is to assist research students at this HD.

Although agreeing in principle on the many possible benefits of writing groups, there are nevertheless many views on how such groups should be configured. For example, Roulston et al (2016) issue the caveat that there is no "one-size-fits all approach" to use across disciplines, "contexts and countries". In the context introduced above, how was this writing group set up?

The writing group in question seemed to be what Eva Brodin speaks of as a "social space" (Brodin, 2020, p. 221) beneficial for writing. I could further define it by using Sarah Haas terminology: the locus *of initiation* was the "students'", the *level of facilitation* possibly "semi-facilitated" or "non-facilitated" (this was at the beginning of the study yet unclear to me), and the *mode of delivery* "synchronous" (Haas, 2014, Kozar & Lum, 2015).

As indicated above, a lot is potentially to be gained by PhD-students from writing groups. But how did this particular one work? I wanted to know more: *What motivated the students to participate (or not)? What were the actual outcomes of the writing group on an individual level?* As a supervisor, I knew what I needed the students to get out of the group, but *What did the doctoral students think and feel they got out of it?* As indicated above, I wanted to know more about how, or in what capacity, we doctoral supervisors could support the students, their writing and their initiative.

The role of the PhD-supervisor has changed radically over time, from once-upon-a-time being the author of the doctoral student's thesis (Sonesson & Lindberg-Sand, 2020), via something of a master turned role-model/coach, and, in the age of "publish or perish", to somewhat of a "whip", to put it crassly. When the forms for financing doctoral studies were changed in 1998, doctoral students were suddenly obligated to finish within four years (Sonesson & Lindberg-Sand, 2020), which increased the pressure on PhD-students to finish on time. In addition to this, there are a number of degree objectives (examensmål) expressed in terms of learning outcomes that have to be fulfilled. These are in turn to be broken down into specific tasks in individual study plans by supervisors and doctoral student together. Legislation thus firmly identifies contemporary doctoral studies as a program of education in which doctoral students are emphasized as learners, and supervisors as responsible (together with the faculty board and the head of department) for their development. In a text focusing on PhD-students' writing, Brodin writes that judging by the literature in the field of writing help, there is "an asymmetry" which indicates that "responsibility for the development of writing normally rests with the doctoral student, in the form of self-help" (2020, p. 206). This should be considered together with the claim, mentioned above, that supervisors "must assume greater responsibility for supervision of doctoral student's writing than was previously the case" (Brodin, 2020, p. 227), because the stakes are high and "the thesis text must be written here and now" (Brodin, 2020, p. 227). Research has indeed shown that supervision is crucial to a doctoral student's success (Gatfield, 2005; Lee, 2008; Overall, Deane & Peterson, 2011), yet acknowledges that getting this right is a balancing act including correct measures of content, frequency, and quantity and knowing what is good quality supervision. A whole issue of the Swedish pedagogical journal *Utbildning och Lärande* (2016) is dedicated to figuring out what characterizes good pedagogical practice for a supervisor. My question in this study definitely heeds such inquiries and like Disa Bergnéhr (2013), I am of course curious which supervision practices promote learning in students. However, a brief very specific study like this one does not attempt or claim to define what constitutes the ultimate supervision practice, rather it wants to tease out whether the supervisor has a role to play in a writing-group initiated by students, so as to maximize their experience and take-homes in relation to the ultimate goal of finishing their thesis.

Then, what about the assumption that supervisors need assume greater responsibility for their doctoral students' writing? Many tasks are laid at university teachers' feet these days. A generally high level of stress can be perceived among university teachers in today's academic landscape (Willart, 2019). Doctoral supervision may be one of our more cherished duties, but this is only a small part of what university teachers do. The pressure to handle new systems and digital pedagogies are mentioned as particularly stressful (Willart, 2019). Surprisingly, university teachers have a low rate of sick-leave. This would seem to be at odds with the many responsibilities university teachers are tasked with, for example, the aforementioned presumed demand on supervisors to take *more* responsibility for outcomes (Brodin et al., 2020), to also be reflexive and provide structure (Appel & Bergenheim, 2013; Bergnéhr, 2013), to implement administrative control (Carlsson et al., 2016) and provide "frequent" contact (e.g. Lovitts, 2001). The demands are many. Apart from asking how I can help the students in the writing group, I may also want to ask the question how the help desired (*if any*) resonates with sustainable work practices, sustainable supervision, as it were. I need to ask this question, if I presume we should also attain the goal of a sustainable work environment and life-long pedagogical practice for university supervisors.

## METHOD AND INTERVIEW MATERIAL

I would have liked to study, in-depth, the motivations and meaning-making of the HD[4] group, the "changes in" and "feelings about" the students' writing practice similar to a Gothenburg research group's study of a similar spontaneous grouping (Mattsson, Brandin & Hult, 2020). However, due to my limited time frame and the short format of this article, I narrowed the scope of my study and chose a "quick and dirty" (Q&D) method (Ehn & Löfgren, 2009; Handwerker, 2001), a rapid assessment procedure consisting of observations, corridor chats and short interviews-by-email.[5]

I sent a brief email with a short explanation of my rationale for the study and four questions with some clarifying sub-questions to eleven doctoral students at various stages of their doctoral studies, some of whom I had also spotted in the seminar room. The questions (in simplified and shortened form) were:

a)  *What is your reason for participating/or not? What motivates you?*
b)  *How do you experience the writing day? What do you get out of it?*
c)  *What about the AW[6] and fika time?*
d)  *Would it be beneficial to connect it to the supervision process in some way? Or is it better left alone? Supplemented by something else, or just good as is?*

The PhD-students were very helpful and quick to reply; only one did not answer right away. However, this person got in touch with me later, which to me significantly shows that all students were eager to assist; they wanted to chime in and have their voices heard.

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4   Department of Humanities. Abbreviated as HD.
5   Identifying as a conscientious qualitative researcher, I feel obliged to point out that for a bigger and longer study "quick and dirty" would be supplemented with several other types of methods for data collection.
6   AW= after work

THE ANSWERS

A few weeks prior to sending the emails, I had roamed the corridors of the department, mentioning briefly to a few of the PhD-students that I might ask them some questions about the writing day. I had also learned from my colleagues that it was Peter who was the informal leader of the group. I approached him in person and talked to him about the study and he declared himself willing to help me with some basic information.

Peter explained the format of the writing days to me over email as follows:

> *1. An entire day focused on writing, committing to eliminate/ignore other distractions i.e., answering email during the day.*
> *2. Organized sessions where we write for 45 minutes and break for 15 minutes (i.e., the Pomodoro method)⁷. Preferably, the break is taken together and away from the room/computers. 1-hour lunch together, as well.*
> *3. Sitting together in isolation increases the peer pressure to not distract oneself with social media, playing on the phone, etc.*
> *4. Fika⁸ 2x during the day, paid for by the Institution.5. Social activity afterwards. We usually have an AW at a local pub.*
> (Peter)

He also explained his own motivations and take-homes to me:

> *For myself, I can say that the reason I am committed to the 'writing days' is because I am more productive with my writing in this environment rather than when sitting alone. (And I think this is true for many others, as well.) Mentally committing to only writing for the day, plus the accountability provided by having others in the room, is a tremendous help for me. The days also usually turn out to be quite fun, with our common breaks and AW.*
> (Peter)

*Motivations – why/why not?*

Most of the students reported similar experiences to Peter as far as motivation goes. Their experiences could be grouped under the labels of "productivity" and "commitment", for example: *It allows me to be "reliably productive"* (PS1*); to "combat procrastination" with a "weekly routine" and I get "more work done" (PS3). It is a good "place to work and get to see the other PhD Students" (PS4). "I can focus on just this one task, which is nice" (PS6), "it is great social control"* (PS11).

Out of the three students who said they never used to participate; one explained their non-participation as a function of their "personality": "*I like meeting others but when it comes to writing I enjoy not being part of a collective. I find it stressful to write together with others, on a schedule*" (PS 7), one referred to "time-issues" related to "domestic obligations" and "the pandemic": [writing days] *they very rarely fall on days when I'm at HD and have a full free day dedicated to writing. This is mostly due to working from home because of the pandemic*" (PS5). The children being ill in combination with the rules for staying home due to the pandemic reduced

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7   The Pomodoro Technique®. See Appendix B for a visual from its originator F. Cirillo.
8   *Fika* = Swedish vernacular for coffee break with or without something to eat. You may also drink tea.

the time available: "*last term I was home [for VAB⁹] at least 35 days!*" (PS5), the same was true for the student who also holds a full-time job (PS11).

*The 'take-homes' of the event and What about AW and Fika?*
The PhD-students expressed very similar experiences when it came to what they got out of the days: in addition to "*surveillance*" and "*accountability*" (PS1), "*social pressure* "and a "*healthy work schedule*" (PS3) and "*getting work done*"), everyone mentioned that it was a fun, social event. "*Hanging out*", "*socializing*" and "*having fun with colleagues*", (PS2, PS5, PS3, PS6) were appreciated experiences.

To the answers above, I may add those that were given to my question about the *After-Work* and the *Fika*-breaks. They reported that they kept them "*going through the day energy-wise*" and "*AW is a good way of wrapping up the day*" (PS2). Another one said that "*the fika and AW moti-vate me to attend*", and "*they help with group morale*", and I connect "*with my colleagues during our AWs*" (PS1). Similar comments were that lunches and AW had been "*super important for me in getting to know other PhD-students*" and "*feeling at home here*" (PS3). In sum, as one doctoral student articulated it: "*Super-nice*" (PS6).

*So, how can I help?*
Obviously, the AW, and the *fika* and the writing sessions generated pleasurable experiences – in terms of healthy time-management, productivity and social fun. There is no doubt about it. Could the supervisor help in any way? In my mind's eye, charged with excitement and enthusi-asm about the writing days, I was imagining all kinds of possible scenarios where the writing day was incorporated into a bigger picture, maybe even introduced into the study plan.

But the answer was a unanimous: *No*! As I am writing this, I am laughing, because as a PhD-student my answer would have been the same. I think these PhD-students expressed it beautifully diplomatically: "*In my opinion, it is better left alone. Some days you struggle to put two paragraphs together, other days it just flows. it would be stressful to connect it to some kind of super-vision or "measuring" metrics.*" (PS6). "*I get to see my supervisors as often as I want to, and I have a very good working relationship with them already*" (PS4).

### CONCLUDING DISCUSSION — LESS IS MORE?
Judging by my "quick and dirty" study, the supervisor does not have much of a role to play when it comes to these doctoral students' weekly writing day, at least not when the doctoral students get their say. But, approached a different way, of course they can.

If a department or a subject group does not have a writing day, supervisors can take the initiative to inspire one. By working together with the head of department, financial support can be provided for perks and nurturing. As exemplified by this writing group, the department supports the initiative by booking rooms and paying for the *fika* to get delivered to the room. I had picked up through corridor chats, "post-study", that the free *fika* was indeed experienced as quite a luxury by several students, creating a feeling of being cared for.

The importance of this and other kinds of structural support has been pointed out by for example Bergnéhr (2013) and Brodin and Lindén (2020). This very specific material and con-crete support from the employer, certainly generates several benefits and positive outcomes for the students, who feel attended to, which generates a sense of well-being. They are given a

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9   VAB – Vård Av Barn. To stay home to perform parental care for a child in Swedish vernacular=*VABBA*.

supported context in which they can cultivate a sense of belonging and forge new social and intellectual connections. My findings here are echoed in research that stresses writing groups as having many "significant socio-affective benefits" (Kozar & Lum, p. 40).

Supervisors can also inform new students that the writing day exists, and my study indicated that it was very beneficial for 'old' students who came back to the department after a number of years to finish their theses, to again become part of a community. This part of the experience seems to be the major take-home of the writing days: the fun, the sociality, and a building of a sort of "community of practice" (Wenger, 1998), the feeling of finding one's place.

What else did this writing group do? While a teacher-led writing seminar might be focused on *quality*, the craft of writing or disciplinary writing, these student-led days are (at least at a quick glance) focused on *quantity* – getting *something* written – and, as indicated above, on the socialization process – developing *identity*. Brodin and Lindén (2020) emphasize that managing social and emotional aspects are important keys to a successful development of an academic identity. As supervisor, I need to remind myself that it is ok *not* to be needed. Sometimes this becomes the preferable and coveted goal. Becoming "independent" is both a stated intended learning outcome of PhD-programs, and integral to the doxa of humanities; graduating an independent *intellectual* being the ideal end goal (Brodin & Lindén, 2020 p. 136ff).

If I were to continue evaluating the initiative, it would be useful to ask *all* of the department's doctoral students about their writing practices, as there are other aspects that are important to take into consideration. One possible idea might be adding an online-component, as the non-participants' answers indicated a difficulty in physically attending. Following Kozar and Lum's study (2015) such a group would do best if synchronous, that is, taking place in real-time, and non-facilitated, if the group was somewhat homogenous in terms of background and language (Lum, 2015, p. 48). Other factors like age and progress, for example were not touched upon in my very limited study, neither was cultural difference. It might have been beneficial to look at these. Research on gender differences in relation to supervision for example indicates that "the socialization of women to the academy differs from that of their male counterparts" (Engstrom, 1999) and women may need even more structural support, and the supervisor should probably always apply a "gender-conscious" supervision approach (Schnaas, 2011). An intersectional approach might also be of value, in hetero- as well as homogeneous research environments to promote "democratic pedagogies" (see e.g., Kandiko Howson, Kinchin & Gravett, 2022). It is worth mentioning in this context that HD is the home of several divisions and even more disciplines. The writing group is thus highly interdisciplinary. Bergen et al. (2020) list a number of ways to support writing groups, when they are interdisciplinary, two of which are "institutional support", which I mentioned above, as well as helping to keep "vision and purpose", which seem very fitting in the case studied here.

So, *how can I help*? When I do not teach or supervise, I am a researcher of popular and digital everyday culture, and when I started the study that this article is based on, I picked a buzz-phrase from a TV-series, a medical drama from NBC called *New Amsterdam* (Schulner, 2018) that had made an impression on me as my title: "How can I help?". In this series, a newly appointed Hospital Director poses this question to his staff, as his main supervising and management technique, to solve problems, create drastic change and provide help that really makes a difference, regardless of the costs.

My case study showed that no drastic changes were needed. Instead, I found that sometimes less is more – as long as we know why. To do less requires espousing reflexivity, a quality which

indeed is advocated as crucial in several articles discussing good supervisory practice (Appel & Bergenheim, 2005; Bergnéhr, 2013; Lönn Svensson, 2007.

Needless to say, reflexivity is only one component of many on the road supervising a student towards graduating and getting their PhD. As Carlsson et al write, supervision is a complicated "interactional pattern … shaped and re-shaped, interwoven in a process within a framework of historical and social contexts¨ (2016, p. 21). They also write that too much structure might stifle the creative process. In their case they bring up the individual study plan (ISP) as an object of contention that may symbolize a logic of control that might affect relations of trust and knowledge formation (Carlsson et al., 2016). This I believe is applicable in this context as well. Bergnéhr (2013) points out that there may also be a risk involved in giving the doctoral student too much support. Referencing Overall, Deane and Peterson (2011), she suggests that the students who get a lot of support might risk lower levels of self-confidence and independence compared to those who have received somewhat less support (Bergnéhr, 2013, my transl. p. 175). These attitudes reflect a preference for what I will call a 'less-is-more approach'.

In my case study, I found that reflexive awareness became a key as help was 'rejected'. That included the awareness that I could potentially offer great and long-term support merely by *showing up* as a representative of institutional support. In the process, knowing the ramifications of this support, and allowing one's doctoral students to know in other supervision situations that this support is in place, it is possible to be (or at least strive to be) a conscious carrier of *vision*, *trust* and *purpose*, for the doctoral student's journey as a whole. That *trust* is important for well-being in general is a well-researched topic (see e.g., Helliwell & Wang, 2011) and research on supervision shows the same: building trust is essential to students' well-being as well as enhancing their performance (Al Makhamreh & Kutsyuruba, 2021).

So, yes, I *can help*, as supervisor, even in the cases where my help is not requested. I can inspire and support as *observer* and *builder*, as *space-holder* in the shadows, as it were. I can occupy the significant role of one being aware that this is all in order and heading in the right direction of independence and developing an academic identity, a community of reading and writing practice. These words of PS3, a first-year student, attest to this, and are quite reassuring as far as this conclusion goes: "*most of us know exactly what we need to get done, we just need the space to actually do it*".

The 'less-is-more approach' aimed at helping students become self-sufficient by minimal intervention, is of course only valid and helpful if it is intentional, if there is awareness of exactly what it is, what it does, and what the purpose is. One case study does not necessarily provide proof that this is always the case. In the end, it is natural to assume that each student-supervisor relationship requires different degrees of support, but in this specific case, of the writing group, less was preferred. Every supervisor would have to assess each case on its own merits, learning in the process, what works best. But to return to the previous assumption about increased demands for supervisors to take on greater responsibility for the doctoral candidates' writing and outcome these days, and a generally high stress-level among academics, which needs to be managed, a *conscious* less-is-more approach might be beneficial and educational also for university teachers.

## AUTHOR PRESENTATION

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INTERVIEWS

Not listed as per the APA style guide.

APPENDIX A.
**Email with questions sent over email to PhD-students at HD about their writing day**
(NB a separate email with similar but not identical questions was sent to the informal leader of the group, one person was interviewed in person over zoom. Similar questions were asked.)

Dear X
I am currently writing up a brief lit review on PhD-students' writing groups, and I would love to include some notes on how you have experienced your doctoral-student led writing day. (or not). Would you have time to answer my questions ? Your answers need not be very long!

   In case you can, I would be very grateful. If so, answer individually of course! In an email is great! If you can't don't worry at all, no strings.

Here are my questions:

– *What is your reason for participating - **OR NOT** - in a writing day? What motivates you?*
   *(if you don't participate you can skip the rest! except for giving me your year of acceptance to the program!)*
– *How do you experience the writing day? Does it work for you? if not, why, if yes: In what ways – do you get writing done or do you get something else out of it? In essence: what meaning or use does it have for you*
– *What about the AW and fika time?*
– *If I have understood the writing day correctly it is a tool to stimulate writing of any kind related to the PhD? and supervisors are not involved at all.*
   *I am wondering - Would it be beneficial to connect it to the supervision process in some way? Or is it better left alone? Supplemented by something else, or just good as is?*
– *and finally, when did you start your PhD-studies?*

Hopefully yours,
Jessica

APPENDIX B.

Source: https://francescocirillo.com/pages/pomodoro-technique

**The Pomodoro® Core Process consists of 6 steps:**

**1. Choose a task you'd like to get done**

Something big, something small, something you've been putting off for a million years: it doesn't matter. What matters is that it's something that deserves your full, undivided attention.

**2. Set the Pomodoro˚ for 25 minutes**

Make a small oath to yourself: I will spend 25 minutes on this task and I will not interrupt myself. You can do it! After all, it's just 25 minutes.
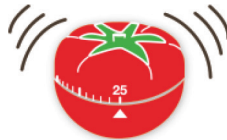
**3. Work on the task until the Pomodoro˚ rings**

Immerse yourself in the task for the next 25 minutes. If you suddenly realize you have something else you need to do, write the task down on a sheet of paper.

**4. When the Pomodoro˚ rings, put a checkmark on a paper**

Congratulations! You've spent an entire, interruption-less Pomodoro˚ on a task.

### 5. Take a short break

Breathe, meditate, grab a cup of coffee, go for a short walk or do something else relaxing (i.e., not work-related). Your brain will thank you later.

### 6. Every 4 pomodoros, take a longer break

Once you've completed four pomodoros, you can take a longer break. 20 minutes is good. Or 30. Your brain will use this time to assimilate new information and rest before the next round of Pomodoros.