
Getting to 'Flow'



Do you ever get in the flow when you write?

...When you have greater focus and attention to your goal?

...When the words and the writing seem to come more effortlessly?

That's called flow.

You use different cognitive processes when you write about your topic than when you just think about your topic. Once you get in the flow of writing, your mind is working in ways that often lead you in the direction you need to go. You can't always know when you sit down to write what you will write. The process of writing brings you there.

The term "flow" as Csikszentmihalyi (1990) described it is relevant to your writing.

"The task at hand draws one in with its complexity to such an extent that one becomes completely involved in it" (2003, p. 40).

Can you recall a time when you have been writing and you've gotten "in the flow?"

Csikszentmihalyi reports that this flow is accompanied by up to eight conditions. And although he was not specifically describing the experience of writing, most of these eight are clearly what we strive for when we write:

- Goals are clear
- Feedback is immediate
- Balance occurs between opportunity and capacity
- Concentration deepens
- The present is what matters
- You feel in control
- Sense of time is altered
- Loss of ego

For example, when Csikszentmihalyi describes the third one, the balance between opportunity and capacity, he writes:

"It is easier to be completely involved in a task if we believe it is doable. If it appears to be out of our capacity, we tend to respond to it by feeling anxious.... Attention shifts from what needs to be accomplished - the anxious person is distracted by worries about the outcome.... The ideal condition can be expressed by the simple formula: Flow occurs when both challenges and skills are high and equal to each other" (2003, p. 44).

"The very experience of flow thus becomes one incentive for growing to higher levels of complexity" (p. 45).

I hope you have experienced this flow already when you write. In this flow, you've likely overcome the obstacles of fear and anxiety and been able to continue to write better and for longer periods of time. If so, let me encourage you to shift from making yourself write for 15 or 60 or 90 minutes a day to making yourself write until you experience "flow" - that experience of being totally engaged in all the complexity of your task and you are fully involved and enjoying writing. (If it hasn't happened yet, it will. I promise.)

Let me offer one more suggestion to help you get and stay in the flow: **Reduce distractions!** Did you know that research with information workers and college students – those who spend much of their day using a computer – has found that we are interrupted about every 12 minutes while we are working? You will be more productive if you find a space to write away from your interrupters and distracters. But did you know that half of these every-12-minute interruptions are self-interruptions – when we distract ourselves with checking e-mails, making a phone call, getting a snack (what's on YOUR list?).

The most prevalent way we interrupt our own work is taking breaks, followed by distractions (when we “react to minimal external stimuli even when immediate action is not necessary”), reminders (to do a different task), stopping to remove obstacles to our work, and deviations from the primary task to other, less relevant, tasks (Jin and Dabbish, 2009). These interruptions can alleviate stress, increase mental stimulation, and even create a sense of accomplishment, for example, when a “reminder prevents forgetfulness through completion of short tasks.” But they also reduce productivity by stopping the flow of our thinking and writing because they require time, occasionally significant time, to refocus and return to the task at hand, i.e., your writing.

So let me encourage you to begin to write for 90 minutes without any self-interruptions. Try it. You will be amazed at how much this one change in your behavior will increase your productivity and how quickly you will get into Csikszentmihalyi's “flow.”

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: HarperCollins.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2003). *Good business: Leadership, flow, and the making of meaning*. New York: Penguin.

Jin, J., & Dabbish, L. (2009). Self-interruption on the computer: A typology of discretionary task interleaving. In *Proceedings of the 27th Annual International Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. New York: Association for Computing Machinery.

Adapted and used with permission from *The Productive Graduate Student Writer*, Jan Allen, Stylus Publishing (2019), with permission.