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Recommended Citation

Flick, Connor, "ENG 300: Trying to Make the Words Flow: Flow Interactions with Environment & Behavior in Writing & Studying Contexts" (2022). *English 100-200-300 Conference.* Paper 17.
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Trying to Make the Words Flow:

Flow Interactions with Environment and Behavior in Writing and Studying Contexts

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ENG 300-021: Writing in the Disciplines

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October 12, 2021

Many people can recall an experience in their life where, for one reason or another, they voluntarily ignored their personal health, upkeep, and the world around them to continue a project they were working on. This may have been part of one's work, entertainment, education, social interaction, or from another source entirely, but all these experiences bring the person to fixate on the task at hand and to act upon it, with the action in the moment being all that the person is aware of. Over the past century, the field of psychology has investigated this phenomenon, dubbing the moment as "flow." Today, flow is typically modeled as a point where one's skills match the challenge being presented to them in a task. If the challenge of a task is too high, the individual experiences anxiety from their skills being insufficient. If the skills of the individual are too great, boredom sets in from the task being unchallenging and unengaging. However, if both the skills and the challenge generally match, the individual can deeply engage with the task and experience flow (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Modern research looks at how flow appears and can be beneficial in the context of daily life, particularly as it relates to education and learning environments. A meta-analysis of 52 papers discussing flow in education found that most research presented significant positive effects for students who were able to engage flow with their work, with writing tasks being a primary focus and benefactor (Oliveira dos Santos et al., 2018). For the writing student, flow has not only been found to be useful but a powerful tool in getting the work done. However, many students find themselves struggling to begin or continue writing, often citing a lack of motivation. In this sense, by adjusting writing behaviors and environments, a student may induce a flow state where they otherwise wouldn't have been able to gather motivation. Specifically, targeted use of procrastination, media usage, and even occasionally avoiding a writing task altogether can assist in introducing flow into the writing process for long-term use.

As writers and students struggle with motivation, procrastination naturally begins to appear. An unmotivated writer that needs to finish a task may find themselves ignoring the problem in various ways, dismissing the need to write until the last possible second. From a pragmatic view, this behavior is easily seen as reckless. Despite that, some research suggests that procrastination may be advantageous for inducing flow and gathering the motivation to work at a higher level. In a study of 278 undergraduates' procrastination habits, performance, and flow experiences, psychologists found that students who chose to procrastinate a writing task and intended to use the shortened time as a motivating factor experienced greater, more frequent periods of flow and performed significantly better than those who did not (Kim & Seo, 2013). These students weren't lazy, but instead manipulating the process to increase the challenge of the task to match their skills and move away from boredom into flow to allow exclusive focus on the writing. Even so, procrastination-based flow isn't a consistent experience. A similar study done on 262 other undergraduates' procrastination habits found that students who procrastinated were less likely to experience flow or motivation, due to students inaccurately assessing their skills in comparison to the growing challenge for the task. Students who procrastinated in high amounts, generally, only found themselves in areas of anxiety and occasional boredom (Lee, 2005). This directly contradicts the first study, presenting a conflict in the literature. The resolution to this may not be found in studying writing and students, but instead rock climbers. One paper observed the ongoing experiences of six rock climbers as they surveyed the Himalayas, conducting a month-long expedition. The authors found the climbers would go out of their way to take risks and seek out challenging environments and problems, attempting to create novel experiences that matched with their skills. When the climbers were successful in finding these environments, they became much more likely to enter a flow state when mountaineering.

Conversely, moments when the climbers failed often led to boredom and frustration at a lack of engaging tasks (Fave et al., 2003). The results broadly suggest that people seeking out a flow state will intentionally raise the difficulty of tasks to enter it, even engaging in risky behavior to do so. Considering the writing studies, the first study found flow experiences in procrastinators who actively chose to do so to benefit, whereas the second study found a lack of flow experiences in procrastinators overall. As such, it's possible that procrastination may be a tool for inducing flow, but it comes with the caveat that procrastination must be solely to make the task just difficult enough to create flow. A writer simply putting off work and delaying until the last moment to begin writing will almost certainly struggle, but one that assesses their skills and the assignment to delay work just enough is likely to be more successful than their peers. Although this method can be effective for some, there is still a need to induce flow without resorting to the risks of procrastination.

Despite commonplace misconceptions, writing is rarely a quiet or isolated experience for many today. Writers often end up composing with some sort of background music, podcast, show, or some form of media present. This phenomenon is so prevalent that certain subgenres such as "lo-fi hip-hop" have marketed themselves around being effective contemporary music to study and write to. Several hypotheses exist to explain the role that background media has for writing, but flow may help explain this. Recent studies have established that different forms of media produce flow in varying forms, doing so extemporaneously. One piece of research uses video games as an example, showing how media can present different difficulties and demand the audience provide a particular level of skill to engage with the media. As difficultly and skills vary between works and audience members, a certain model emerges as the balance between one's ability to process and interpret media and the difficultly and complexity provided by a

piece at any given time (Sherry, 2004). This result highlights entertainment as a context where flow can flourish, potentially as an intentional result of that media. Additionally, what may flow for one person may lead to anxiety or boredom for others as skills vary, denoting the variation that comes with beginning flow. When people do experience flow, especially as it occurs in media, it's tracible in the brain. One group of neuroscientists examined 18 subjects as they played a video game, finding that flow during media use was predictable, centralized to a few parts of the brain, and that the brain operated more efficiently in a flow state with balanced difficulty than both harder and easier difficulty tasks (Huskey et al., 2018). When the brain is processing media and doing so in a way that is unique and challenging without being overwhelming, the brain seems to work better and naturally shift into a flow state. Media use to induce flow is not only contingent on the personality and skills of the individual, but also the demands, cognitive load, and type of the media. Despite this, both studies discuss flow as it relates to individual media but fail to examine how flow exists with multiple forms of media or tasks. Another study observed a group of students as were exposed to two forms of media at the same time finding that participants typically focused on one piece of media at a time and frequently entered an automatic processing state that didn’t require any effortful concentration (Kazakova et al., 2015). These results are indicative of flow experiences, as the automatic processing and high level of focus placed on one piece of media at the expense of others represents many of the major hallmarks of flow. Considering this, a picture begins to form that flow may be induced by media on its own, and multitasking seems to provide the brain enough stimulation to consistently enter a flow state. For writing, media use may stem from brain’s need for stimulation, being overwhelmed just enough to begin working more efficiently in a flow state. While the multitasking study examined a website and video, there is nothing to say that the same principles

wouldn't be at play for writing and music. When background music is introduced, the brain is constantly trying to synthesize it, which, in conjunction with a writing task that a writer may believe is easy enough to be boring, may be just enough to move out of boredom and into flow. Background media adds to the flow dynamics and the difficulty associated with the task, highlighting this dual processing as a way for a writer to create a more flow-oriented and inviting experience when conducting relatively easy writing tasks.

On top of this, it's also helpful to consider how not writing may help mitigate some of the challenges of writing. Any method someone uses for something, including writing, does not exist alone. Instead, the context of someone's life affects their processes, especially as work and stress may accumulate. Researchers examined this relationship as it relates to flow, finding that large amounts of unfinished work tasks frequently prevented participants from achieving a flow state, both during leisure and working times. Additionally, this negative correlation between unfinished tasks and flow remained even if the unfinished tasks were unrelated to tasks being examined for flow but seemed to diminish once the number of unfinished tasks lessened to more manageable levels (Peifer et al.). The unfinished tasks themselves did not make anything else harder, but the stress and lack of closure that comes from having incomplete work raised the overall challenge of one's life. A writer facing this type of issue may need to not write for a period and take care of the other tasks. This isn't procrastination, but rather taking care of what should be prioritized over writing to make the process and product better when the time comes. This intervention may be obvious, but budgeting time to not write when it's necessary to do so doesn't always come naturally, especially to students who may be only beginning to learn how to use their time. Someone allowing themselves to not always write can and likely will find themselves having an easier experience and being able to enter a flow state as they work.

Flow is a delicate place for the mind. Flow can easily be broken by switching tasks, changing the nature of the current task, or simply just through normal fluctuations in a person's life. For a writer, however, a flow state can allow for great work to be created at an exceptional rate, turning commonly procrastinated and dreaded assignment into something motivating, fulfilling, and engaging. While a few writers can find themselves in a flow state occasionally, having the words come to the page with ease, most never reach this. Despite its elusiveness, flow remains a powerful tool for the writer streamlining their process, employing specific interventions to motivate writing. For those that find writing too easy and unstimulating, active procrastination and consuming interesting media could be solutions to the problem, introducing further stimulation and complicating the process. Nevertheless, some student writers need to decrease, not increase, the challenge that writing presents to them to reach flow. For these writers even simply taking care of other tasks beforehand can help alleviate anxieties, adapting to their current skillset and allowing for greater flow opportunities. Keeping this in mind, it's important to consider that not all interventions will create flow experiences in all writers all the time and that flow is not the only way to have an effective writing experience. Every writer will develop a different process, which may or may not include flow. Despite this, flow remains an extremely powerful mechanism for writing, and research-based methods of introducing flow into the writing process should be considered when seeking to engage deeper with writing and create high-quality pieces.

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