

# The Right-Brain/Left-Brain Myth and Flow

By: Carolyn Kaufman, PsyD, December 2, 2007

Most of us find it hard to imagine bestselling authors struggling with their manuscripts or suffering from writers' block. Instead we assume they have something special we have to find or develop, and we search in vain for the magical formula.

In reality, that wonderful state in which the words just flow from our fingers is caused by certain kinds of brain activation – which means there's nothing mystical about it. You can still enjoy the euphoria of being in that state, but better understanding what's happening while you're there – or while you're having trouble getting there – can help you increase your ability to get there at will.

## Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Coined by a psychologist named Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced ME-high CHICK-sent-me-high), the term "flow" refers to that perfect creative state. Sometimes it feels like someone (the "muse") is whispering in your ear, or like you're channeling someone or something else, or even that you're just writing down "what's really happening" in your fictional world. Some writers have even returned to their desks to find wonderful material in their own handwriting that they have no memory of producing.

"Flow" is actually a way of referring to creative dissociation, and dissociation is a natural phenomenon in which some parts of the brain disengage or "split" away from others. It's what happens when you don't remember your drive somewhere because you've been thinking about someone else, or you miss out on part of a conversation because you're daydreaming, or time flies by because you're enjoying a book or movie.

## The Experience of Flow

Flow is always a positive experience; in fact, some people refer to it as "optimal experience." And flow doesn't just happen for writers—athletes call it being "in the zone." Chess players, surgeons, dancers, programmers, and others also experience flow when they're completely focused on doing the thing they love.

Though everybody's experience is a little different, there are certain things many people report, including:

- Distortions in the experience of time - You realize that you've been writing for three hours when it felt like one.
- Euphoria
- A feeling of calm competence or enhanced creativity
- A "softening in the boundaries of the self," or a sense of wholeness or spiritual unity
- Another mystical experience of some kind (basketball players, for example, will sometimes say that the hoop seems bigger when they're in flow)

## Finding "the Zone"

Csikszentmihalyi describes flow as that perfect balance between challenge (task difficulty) and ability (personal skills).

This means that if a task is significantly beyond your ability, you will feel anxiety. For example, let's say you're computer illiterate and you need to install a new PC card (circuit board) in your computer. A friend is talking you through the process on the phone, but since you've never even seen the inside of a computer before, you're afraid you're either going to electrocute yourself or fry an expensive piece of equipment. You're probably very anxious.

If the task is well within your ability but presents little challenge, by contrast, you're bored. Washing the dishes is tedious because it's so easy and repetitive that you could probably do it with your eyes closed if you had to.

If the task is a challenge to your skills and you're interested in conquering that challenge, you are on the right path to achieving flow.

### **Ok, Great... Now How do I Achieve Flow?**

First, the bad news.

According to Csikszentmihalyi, "You can't make flow happen. All you can do is learn to remove obstacles in its way."

If you're a good typist and can type without looking at the keyboard, you know that as long as you don't think about what your fingers are doing, you're fine. As soon as you start thinking about how fast you're hitting the keys, you start to make mistakes. The same thing happens to athletes who are asked to explain how they do something so well: if they try to demonstrate immediately afterward, they have more trouble than usual because now they're analyzing their movements rather than just doing them.

The good news: Once you know what flow is and what it feels like, you can start to pay attention to how you got there and increase your ability to do it on purpose.

### **The Right-Brain/Left-Brain Myth**

Neurologist Alice Flaherty argues that creativity is due to a balance of frontal and temporal lobe activity. In other words the trick is not, in fact, to get out of your "left brain" and into your right, but to increase activity in the right hemisphere (or reduce activity in the left) so it matches the activity on the other side.

Most people don't realize that if you really got all the way out of your left brain, you wouldn't be able to write<sup>¶</sup> the left brain produces language, and in many people the right brain is completely nonverbal. (That is, if we severed that single connection between your right and left hemispheres, the corpus callosum [pronounced KOR-pus KA-lo-sum], and asked the hand controlled by the nonverbal side of your brain to write words, it either wouldn't be able to, or it could only write extremely simple, extremely familiar words, like your name.)

#### *Brain Lateralization*

Both sides of your brain work together at all times, but as your brain developed when you were a child, it lateralized functions. In other words, it placed the control centers for some functions on the right side, and the control centers for others on the left. People's brains are organized in similar ways, so we can point to a diagram like the one to the right and say with relative certainty that your brain is organized this way, too.

Musicians use the left lobe to listen to music, and non-musicians use the right— that's a good example of how experience can change brain organization. Musicians can hear and identify the logical parts to music; others usually just listen for enjoyment.

Broca's (pronounced BROKE-ah) area is a specialized part of the brain in the left frontal lobe responsible for language and speech production. Sometimes, after a stroke, patients cannot speak until they've worked with a speech therapist. That's because Broca's area was affected by the stroke.

Wernicke's (pronounced WER-| -nik-ee) area is a specialized part of the brain in the left temporal (side) lobe responsible for language comprehension.

### **The Critic and the Muse Don't Get Along**

Unfortunately, the left frontal part of the brain is also responsible for that little voice that's trying to edit while you write, and creative drive is actually much more strongly correlated with good creative output than skill.

In other words, if your brain functions normally (i.e. you don't have a tumor), you have the desire to write creatively, and you can shut up that little critical voice, you've got all you need to achieve flow and produce good stuff. (You can get the critic back out when you actually edit, but wait till then!)

So ignore that critical voice until later, because while you may not produce bad work while it's around, you can't write good stuff, either, if you're not writing at all.

### **Increasing the Flow in Your Life**

The parts of the brain that are affected by the flow experience are also active during meditation and, for many, religious experiences. But you don't have to take up yoga to be more creative. What you need to do is pay attention any time you realize you have been in a flow state. Different things work for different people, but here are some approaches you can try.

1. If there's a TV show, movie, or book that you love so much that the rest of the world disappears for you while you're involved with it, think about what it is about the show that intrigues you so much. Write about the characters, themes, or ideas that keep you riveted. Try to incorporate some of them into your own writing, because they activate that part of the brain you want involved--they're the kinds of things that will bring flow to your writing.
2. Write what you think is garbage. Seriously. Write the worst stuff you can come up with. In fact, set a goal to write things you've never let yourself write before. Write the most self-important Mary Sue story every to hit the internet (you don't have to post it!) Write that love scene that's so embarrassingly titillating that you'd have to leave town if anyone you know ever saw it. Write about what you'd do if you could say anything you wanted to to your coworkers, boss, or clients. If you don't feel comfortable writing or keeping these things in your home, get a safe deposit box at the bank and keep them there. Safe deposit boxes are surprisingly affordable, often only \$20 or \$30 a year for small boxes. You could also get a Post Office box and mail yourself your finished pieces. Don't destroy them, though. Some of the best stuff you'll ever write is the stuff that disturbs you the most.

3. Set aside time that won't be interrupted by distractions. You can't achieve flow when the phone keeps ringing, or your partner keeps asking when you're going to fix dinner, or you're worrying about whether that work project is done yet. Make that time sacred. Some people advocate sitting in front of the screen or writing tablet throughout that time, even if you don't write a word, but if you find that tortuous, you won't do it. So keep other things around you will enjoy doing if you're not overcome by inspiration.

Think silly, because flow is a playful kind of state, and grimness isn't going to get you anywhere. Don't bring in work, or bills, or try to catch up on your emails. Many people find flow in quiet, repetitive tasks they enjoy: knitting, beading, drawing (even if you're *really* bad at it), or playing the piano, or even organizing things--photographs, for example.

If you can't or don't want to do any of those things, think about what you enjoyed doing before you had so many responsibilities. Buy a few of those comic books you never buy anymore & do they help you get into the flow state? Download some pictures to color from the internet and borrow some of your child's Crayolas. (Better yet, get some for yourself. A big box with lots of colors!) Play Dominos. Plant flowers. Do something that's a guilty pleasure, something you deprive yourself of far too often. These are the things that will help you find flow most easily.

4. Every time you find yourself in flow, spend a few minutes thinking about how it feels, and how you got there. And then, whatever it was, do it again. Soon.

**About the Author:**

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