



## Ride the Flow

Have you ever been so immersed in a task that it seems joyful and almost effortless? Have your fingers flown over the keys, words seeming to course directly from your brain onto the screen? You're not thinking about lunch. You're not checking email or cataloging the rest of your to-do list in your head. You're not pausing every half-hour to surf the Internet in the interest of "research."

If you've been in this state, you've experienced what psychologists call *flow* (or *being in the zone*). First given the name *flow* by Hungarian psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, this state of intense, seemingly effortless concentration seems to contribute significantly to productivity and overall happiness.

**Flow resides at the intersection of challenge and peak ability. Challenge yourself.**

People generally experience flow while doing something they enjoy. It's that feeling of becoming so immersed in a task that you lose track of time, looking up hours later and being surprised at both the length of time that has passed and how much you've accomplished. In this state, you experience not just intense focus but also intense satisfaction. In flow, the activity is its own reward.

Flow—and the sense of satisfaction that comes along with it—generally does not occur when we are doing something passive, like watching television. It requires effort, engagement, and a level of difficulty. Csíkszentmihályi and others observe that flow resides at the intersection of challenge and peak ability. The task must be difficult enough to require effort, but it must be within your capacity to accomplish.

As a result, it's no real surprise that studies show that people experience flow more often at work than in their leisure time. Work requires effort. It often has clear objectives. If you're lucky—and lawyers, in general, are lucky in this respect—your job is a good match for your skills.

So how do you achieve flow in your law practice, and, in particular, in your legal writing?

### Eliminate Distractions

Research psychologists tell us that the human mind can only attend to a certain amount of information at any given time (in his 2004 TED talk, Csíkszentmihályi says that the precise amount is 110 bits of information per second. For reference, just listening to one person speak consumes 60 bits.) The more that you can eliminate distractions during a challenging task, the more likely it is that you can nudge yourself toward a flow experience.

Before you start work on a writing project, close all non-essential windows on your computer, including all email and social media. Mute your office phone, and, if you can, forward your number to an assistant with instructions not to interrupt you absent a true emergency. Silence your mobile phone (turn off your ringer and any notifications for text or Facebook).

Close your door. Make sure that you have everything you need right in front of you: books, printouts of key cases or other sources, and water. If you're at all like me, a looming lunchtime is a distraction, so make sure that you've eaten enough to stave off hunger until it's time for a scheduled break.


You also can increase your capacity for concentration through practice. Some research suggests that meditation and mindfulness techniques can help us learn to achieve flow. I find "being in the moment" challenging. I worry about what happened in the past or what comes next. Forcing myself to focus only on my breathing for 20 slow, deep breaths—deliberately chasing away all distractions—does seem to build my ability to concentrate on later tasks.

### Find Meaning

Research shows that we achieve flow when we find meaning in the work we do, when we feel that our work makes a difference. For many lawyers, this can be true on a daily basis: Our work affects lives, liberties, and livelihoods. Even if you find yourself working on a project for a client whose objectives are less inspiring, you can see value in writing an effective motion or in crafting a masterful cross-examination. Spend a few moments at the beginning of the project reflecting on audience and purpose, including the larger purpose of the litigation or the matter. Think about how you can add value to the project. Can you draft the most accurate, brief, clear motion possible? Can you employ a particular rhetorical technique or apt analogy? Is there a narrative that makes the result you urge seem most compelling?

### Challenge Yourself

Generally, we do not achieve flow in plodding through rote tasks. Rather, flow comes from a match between task and peak skill. Challenge yourself. Set high standards. Volunteer for projects that test your abilities.

Flow is not just about productivity. Flow is about finding satisfaction in your career. Find flow more often and be a happier lawyer? Try it, and let me know. 



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