

1-1-1995

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### Recommended Citation

Leahy, Richard (1995) "When the Going is Good: Implications of "Flow" and "Liking" for Writers and Tutors," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 2, Article 6.  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1291>

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# When the Going is Good: Implications of “Flow” and “Liking” for Writers and Tutors

*Richard Leahy*

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After years of writing, teaching, and overseeing a writing center, I have become more and more convinced of the importance of paying attention to how writers feel about their writing—the affective dimension—as well as what they think about it. Textbooks deal with writers’ feelings pretty incidentally, if at all. The call to study the affective dimension has been made before (McLeod), and it has been studied (see, for instance, Brand), but nearly all the attention has gone to negative feelings. Not much has been written about positive feelings, about times when writers feel good about their writing—and what that has to do with the final product. In this essay I will consider what possibilities there might be for identifying and making use of positive feelings, especially in the writing center.

Two things I have read recently have helped direct my thinking. One is *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. The other is “Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking: Sorting Out Three Forms of Judgment” by Peter Elbow. The more I have thought about the concepts of “flow” and “liking,” the more they appear to complement each other. Flow is about the writer’s feelings during writing; liking is about the writer’s feelings about what has been written. Together they do a lot to fuel the writing and revising processes.

## **Flow**

Writer’s flow might be thought of as the opposite of writer’s block. It is based on the psychological phenomenon called “flow.” (Here we must set

*The Writing Center Journal*, Volume 15, Number 2, Spring 1995

aside the vague use of “flow” that floats around in peer response groups, where students tell each other their drafts “really flowed.” It has nothing to do with that. Almost nothing.)

A simple definition of flow might be: *a heightened sense of awareness and enjoyment in an activity we do well.* Flow can be experienced in any number of different activities, from playing chess to climbing rocks to reading. Writing is certainly among them, though Csikszentmihalyi does not single it out. Csikszentmihalyi and his co-researchers collected thousands of interviews on the phenomenon of flow over a period of about twenty-five years. Respondents recounted their experiences in a wide variety of work and leisure activities. From the responses emerged a list of eight elements of flow (48-67). I will summarize them here very briefly and attempt to show how some of them apply to writing (all of them do, in truth).

*Engagement in a challenging activity that requires skill.* Skill is required because there must be an element of challenge, something to push against (49-50). Even so-called unskilled writers have enough skill to experience flow, as I will discuss a bit later.

*The merging of action and awareness.* All of one’s psychic energy is absorbed in the task at hand (53). Paradoxically, performance of the task, though challenging, seems effortless. According to one rock climber, “Climbing is . . . recognizing that you are a flow. The purpose of the flow is to keep on flowing, not looking for a peak or utopia but staying in the flow. . . . You move up to keep the flow going” (54). When we “lose ourselves” in the act of reading or writing, get absorbed in what we are doing, that is the experience of action and awareness coming together.

*Sense of clear goals.* One has either a vision of the ultimate goal—say, of the finished poem or essay—or at least a sense that the work is on the right track (54). If the writer trusts the flow, the writing will get there.

*Immediate feedback.* Feedback, as Csikszentmihalyi uses the term, is nearly inseparable from the sense of clear goals. One feels a sense of rightness (56-57). A writer will sense that the writing is “going well” while it is going on. With writing, as well as other creative activities, I would add *surprise* as an important aspect of feedback. The act of writing calls up new insights and connections to enrich the written product and energize the writer (Murray 3, 5, 7). Is there a tension between surprise and the sense of clear goals? I imagine there might be. Surprise—awareness of a new idea or complication—could change the goal or make the writer confused and cause the flow to crash (Murray 3). More likely, though, surprise will just enrich the journey to the goal and further energize the sense of flow.

*Concentration on the task at hand.* The demands of the activity, the “rules” or “structure” of what must be done, shut out all distractions or personal problems (Csikszentmihalyi 58-59).

*Sense of control.* Reported one chess player in Csikszentmihalyi’s study,

“I have a general feeling of well-being, and that I am in complete control of my world” (60). One feels no fear of losing control, even when the activity is risky like climbing rocks—or trying to capture an elusive idea or description in writing.

*Loss of self-consciousness.* Even when taking risks, one feels no fear of looking foolish if the effort fails. The writer does not wonder, “Does this all sound like nonsense?” or “Is this all going to sound silly?”—not, at least, at the time of writing. “[I]n flow there is no room for self-scrutiny” (63).

*Altered sense of duration of time.* Sense of time may be the element of flow one is most aware of, packaged in the cliché, “Time flies when you’re having fun.” Time seems to pass differently, usually faster but sometimes slower than actual clock time.

I have surveyed some of my classes and Writing Center staff members about their optimal writing experiences. The questionnaire avoided the term “flow”; instead, it asked writers to describe “a moment when you had an especially good time writing something, or when the writing went especially well.” The key question, after some preliminaries, was: “During this period of writing, how did you know you were having a good time? Try to describe what you noticed about the experience.” The replies seem to jibe with the elements of flow. Some responses from Writing Center staff members:

Ideas come freely. Transitions seem natural. I didn’t struggle over word choice, descriptions.

It was like the pieces of a jigsaw suddenly fell into place. I saw connections I’d never noticed. I almost couldn’t type fast enough to get all my thoughts down before I lost them. I was excited.

It felt like I was playing a good piece of music on the piano. The words were like notes of music that I could hear in my head. I felt very happy and full of energy.

Some responses from a technical communication class:

I knew I was having a good time when an hour had gone by, I had filled up four pages and still wanted to write.

I knew I was having a good time because the words flowed easily. [There’s that word; others used it, too. But note that it describes a writing experience, not a reading experience.] The description seemed to have a mind and structure of its own. It felt a little like taking dictation from the clear pictures in my mind.

I have a good time when the last sentence of my paragraph leads me smoothly into my next paragraph. I feel confident that only minor revision will need to be done. . . . The time goes by quickly.

A difference I notice between the sets of responses is that the technical students tended to respond more literally, the writing assistants (who are mostly English majors) more metaphorically. Also, the technical students echoed the language of the question, whereas the English majors leaped directly to what they wanted to say. That difference, however, is in temperament and training, or in the contexts in which the writers responded to my questions (writing center vs. technical writing class). Essentially, both groups gave similar responses, especially when they remarked on the easy flow of ideas, sense of sustained energy, and unawareness of the passage of time.

Whatever goal we may be after in the writing, the act of writing becomes a goal in itself, an autotelic (“self-goal”) experience. Csikszentmihalyi, again quoting the rock climber, who also happens to be a poet: “The justification of climbing is climbing, like the justification of poetry is writing; you don’t conquer anything except things in yourself. . . . The act of writing justifies poetry” (54). The autotelic experience can take place even if, at first, one is reluctant to begin. Csikszentmihalyi notes, “Most enjoyable activities are not natural; they demand an effort that initially one is reluctant to make. But once the interaction starts to provide feedback to the person’s skills, it usually begins to be intrinsically rewarding” (68). (It should be noted at this point that flow is not to be confused with freewriting. Flow *can* happen during freewriting—I’ve felt it myself—but freewriting can be as forced and lacking in enjoyment as any other writing activity.)

One might be tempted to question whether the first element (“engagement in a challenging activity that requires skill”) applies to all writers. Writing teachers talk and write among themselves about skilled and unskilled writers, an example of labeling that is handy but also unfortunate. Really, almost every writer is skilled in some ways, even a basic writing student. A person may be skilled at writing essays and personal letters but not fiction, skilled at poetry and technical reports but not journalism. My experience teaching basic writing is limited, but of the basic writers I have seen, even the weakest, when they are really trying, have moments of eloquence. Asking writers about their flow experiences might help them discover they have skills they never thought about—strengths to build on. Asking them where, in a draft, they felt good about what they were doing, or found the writing easy, or were surprised by a new turn of thought or a way the words illuminated experience for a moment, might help them identify strong places in the writing. These are often starting places for rewriting and revision; they can lead to rewrites that come out superior to the original draft.

In our Writing Center we keep looking for ways to use writers’ flow experiences. For instance, if a writing assistant and a writer are discussing a draft, the WA can ask, “What did you enjoy about writing this draft? Was there a place where the writing seemed about to take off or where the piece began almost to write itself?” With questions like these, the two of them can

often home in on the real source of energy in the draft, the “center of gravity” (Elbow and Belanoff 8-9, 19-22). Often the source of energy is one sentence buried somewhere in the middle or at the end, one the writer assumed was just a maverick thought and might even have wanted to get rid of because it messed up the smooth seamlessness of the rest.

Sometimes the real source of energy lurks somewhere around the edge of the draft, unwritten. WA’s report exciting sessions where the writer, having brought in a lifeless draft, suddenly gets excited talking about the topic and finds a whole new way to approach it, one that will bring the writing to life. Or the writer relates an excellent example that he rejected while writing the draft, for a number of reasons, none necessarily legitimate: it was “personal” and seemed inappropriate, or it would have made the paper “too wordy.” Or the writer has suppressed an interesting complication or possible objection to the thesis, because it would be “too hard to write.” Challenge, as we have seen, is a necessary element of flow. Writers who take the easy way out diminish their chances of experiencing it. Part of the WA’s job is to get writers to talk about these complex, messy ideas—dig them out early, rather than at the end of the session (as so often happens) when it’s too late to work with them. By talking the ideas through, writers usually feel encouraged to go ahead and write about them. It is not unusual for the WA to witness the writer experiencing a sense of flow while talking about an interesting, complex idea. (Obviously, flow can happen during a writing conference; all of us who tutor or confer with our students can probably recall such experiences.)

## Liking

All of us are aware whether we like or dislike something we have written, but we might never have thought about the implications of these feelings. I had not, until I read Peter Elbow’s article, “Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking: Sorting Out Three Forms of Judgment.” Elbow introduces the concept of liking with the following narrative:

I was in a workshop and we were going around the circle with everyone telling a piece of good news about their writing in the last six months. It got to Wendy Bishop . . . and she said, “In the last six months, I’ve learned to *like* everything I write.” Our jaws dropped; we were startled—in a way scandalized. . . . [H]er words . . . have led me into a retelling of the story of how people learn to write better.

The old story goes like this: We write something. We read it over and we say, “This is terrible. I *hate* it. I’ve got to work on it and improve it.” And we do and it gets better, and this happens again and again, and before long we have become a wonderful writer. But that’s not really what happens. Yes, we vow to work on it—but we

don't. And next time we have the impulse to write, we're just a bit less likely to start.

What really happens when people learn to write better is more like this: We write something. We read it over and we say, "This is terrible. . . . But I *like* it. Damn it, I'm going to get it good enough so that others will like it too." And this time . . . we actually work hard on it. (199)

Such a simple idea, but it hit me like a revelation. Of *course* I have to like a draft, if I'm going to feel committed enough to it to make it good. And, as Elbow says, I look for other people who will like it—not just to get suggestions from them, but to get support and encouragement for working on it some more. It was a revelation because, all these years, I had neglected to consider that how my students felt about their writing was important. If, in a conference, a student groaned as we started reading the draft together, I pointedly ignored this clear signal and plowed right ahead. The paper, after all, had to get done and handed in, however the writer felt about it. But after seeing many conferences come to nothing, no change in the revised paper, I have learned to slow down and acknowledge the student's feelings about the draft.

In my writing classes, I take time to establish the rule that everyone will be totally honest about how they feel about their writing. So when conferring with my students, I can ask, "Do you like this draft? What do you like about it? Why?" And they know that it's standard operating procedure to give an honest answer. In fact, they get so used to it they will often start off by telling me, unasked, how they feel. And we discuss why they do or do not like their drafts. Such discussion will often guide the agenda for the whole conference. In peer groups, too, my students learn to be up front with their feelings about what they have written.

In the Writing Center, we ask writers the same questions about their drafts. The results are very often rewarding. If the writer is working on an open-ended assignment, then probing for what the writer likes about the draft can help uncover what the paper really "wants" to be about, or what the writer really wants to say. Just as when we ask about flow experiences, we discover when we ask about liking that the most promising aspects of a draft may be hidden from the writer, who has gotten lost in a thicket of words and conflicting ideas. Asking about liking can lever change and improvement.

It can, that is, some of the time. I can imagine it working better in writing centers where each writer meets with the same WA for several consecutive sessions. The two of them have time to build trust and frankness. In our writing center, which serves a large urban university with a heavily nontraditional, commuter population, conditions are more difficult. Writers do not necessarily make return visits, and the chance of seeing the same WA

twice is small. Working with unfamiliar WAs, writers may not always be frank about liking or not liking their drafts. WAs don't have time to establish the same sort of understanding that can be established in a classroom or a repeating tutoring situation. We have to be especially sensitive, therefore, to subtle indications of how writers feel about their drafts.

When I first introduced Elbow's ideas on liking to my WAs, I asked them to include liking among their questioning strategies. After they tried it for a while, we discussed our experiences in a staff meeting. Generally they found that asking about liking made many sessions go better. But they identified three less satisfactory scenarios that sometimes occurred.

*Scenario 1.* The writer likes the draft but says she doesn't, or has no feeling one way or the other, because she doesn't want to lose face if the draft is found faulty. In this case, the WA may waste time and energy trying to bolster the writer's confidence in the writing when the writer doesn't need it. Or the WA may try to steer the writer into major changes the draft doesn't need.

*Scenario 2.* The writer does not like the draft but says she does, or has no feeling one way or the other, because she thinks this is the answer the WA wants to hear. In such a case, if the WA has failed to pick up clues that the writer does not like the draft and is not letting on, they may work at cross purposes the whole time. The WA may get through the entire session talking about re-seeing and revising the draft, while the writer leaves with no intention of doing any of the revising they have discussed.

In either of these first two scenarios, lack of frankness sets up a barrier to a productive tutoring session. My staff and I discussed these possible scenarios and arrived at some strategies, which we have since put into practice. We concluded that if the writer seems to like the draft, and if the writer seems open and willing to talk frankly, it's all right to go ahead and ask. The term "seems" implies that the WA must be sensitive to clues in the writer's speech and body language. We also concluded that, if the WA can sense that asking the question straight out will get a dishonest, or at least a guarded, response, the WA may wait until the session has warmed up before asking for the writer's feelings about the draft as a whole. Or the WA may ask in a piecemeal fashion—"How do you feel about this section [or paragraph or sentence]?"—until the writer seems ready to talk about her feelings about the whole piece.

*Scenario 3.* The WA asks a writer what he likes and he says, "I like the whole thing," and the WA sits there in dismay because it seems a very weak or wrong-headed draft, yet it's clear the writer really does like it.

Aside from suppressing the response, "Well, I don't like it," what can the WA do? She can nod, lean forward, and say, "Tell me what you like about it." Usually, it turns out, what the writer likes is the subject or experience or idea he's writing about. Having written it down is enough. The writer has



done what many inexperienced writers do: failed to make any distinction between the idea or knowledge in his head and the writing as a means of rendering that experience for other people. It might be said he likes the writing too soon, though it would be more precise to say he is *satisfied* with it too soon. He also confuses satisfaction with liking. The WA's job is to affirm the value of the experience or idea, and get the writer to see that more needs to be done before the writing really does something for the reader.

The WA will try to get the writer talking about the draft, how he went about writing it, why what he's saying is important to him, what parts of the draft say best what he's trying to say. Using these strategies, and exercising a measure of patience, the WA can often arrive at an understanding of what *potential* the draft has and why it hasn't yet reached that potential, and in what direction revision needs to go. If the session is successful, the writer goes away still liking the draft but knowing that with some work, he will like it a lot better. And knowing that at least one reader, the WA, likes *some* of it, or likes what it *can* be.

As an important part of a productive session, the WA and writer identify *parts* of the writing that do, or begin to do, what the whole piece needs to be doing. The same can be said of most successful tutoring sessions using a purely cognitive approach, but Elbow hints at the importance of feelings, the affective dimension, in identifying strengths. We can't, he points out, get people to have a skill simply by telling them they don't have it: "It's disorganized. Organize it!" "It's unclear. Make it clear!" (202). Instead, he suggests, we should look for hints of organization or clarity in the writing and say something like this (I have added the italics):

"Look here at this little organizational move you made in this sentence. Read it out loud and try to *feel* how it pulls together this stuff here and distinguishes it from that stuff there. Try to remember *what it felt like* writing that sentence—creating that piece of organization. Do it some more." (202-203)

The strategy engages not only the writer's thinking but also the writer's feelings of competence in order to discover strengths in the writing and then build on them.

Elbow implies that the teacher is the one who identifies the strong parts. In a writing center, of course, the goal is to get the writer to do the identifying. And in our experience, given enough encouragement, writers are capable of it. The WA and writer, working together, can discuss what it felt like to write these passages, what makes them work for the reader, and how to make other parts of the draft work better.

### **Do Flow and Liking Always Apply?**

Besides discovering what can be achieved with writers by applying the concepts of flow and liking, we have to consider the limits of these concepts,

the times when they may mean little and need to be set aside, the times when they seem to fall into gray areas.

First, flow and liking don't always seem to be connected. I have written pieces during which I've felt nothing like flow during the writing, but I find I like them when they are done. And vice versa: I have felt flow while composing the first draft, but after that I revise and revise out of sheer doggedness, to the point where I can no longer say whether I like what I've written or not. Too much work on a piece can flatten all feelings. On the other hand, I have sometimes experienced flow not during the planning and drafting stages but during revision, when I suddenly realize what the piece is about, or discover what I really want it to say.

Second, to avoid negative feelings is not always desirable. All of us at times get frustrated and angry with our writing. It happens when we fear we'll never get the words to say what we mean—or even *know* what we really mean. It happens when someone doesn't like our writing. At times like these frustration can be a powerful motivator; it can keep us working. I remember as a college junior getting a D on a paper in an American literature course. That D got me angry enough to learn how to write about literature. In a poetry workshop a couple of years ago, I couldn't seem to write anything the rest of the group liked. Finally, in anger I pulled out an old unfinished poem and wildly, radically changed it (it was not an angry poem), muttering to myself, *I'll get those bastards this time*. It turned out to be the best thing I wrote during that whole workshop. And they liked it. Maybe we shouldn't always want pain to go away. It depends, for one thing, on whether the writer can turn it to productive use.

Third, flow may seem less likely to occur when the writing must conform to strictly defined assignments. Many writers—I'm thinking particularly of writing-emphasis majors at my university—feel “stifled” when they are “told what to write.” It seems unlikely that they will feel flow while writing or will like what they have written when they are done. I run into comments, at conferences and in WCENTER postings, to the effect that with restricted assignments, the teacher “owns” the writing, not the students.

I don't disagree that writers have less “ownership” when the assignment is more restricted. But I don't believe a restricted assignment in itself will prevent students from enjoying the work or liking the finished product. A writer can take pleasure in writing to an assignment well. Technical writers perhaps know this best. Often their task is to take messy reality and shape it into a form that will be instantly accessible to a reader. Sometimes they hear that satisfying click when they finally find a way to make it fit, and when they finish the writing, it has a rightness about it. I have been to gatherings of technical writers and witnessed the pleasure and pride they often take in their work.

Fourth, there are writers who are puzzled when asked, “Do you like this

draft?” because for them the question is meaningless. A paper is written; there is nothing to like. When asked, “What parts of this did you particularly enjoy writing?” they respond with a blank look. Something communicated to them somewhere in their education has caused them to believe that writing is not a thing to be enjoyed.

But these writers, too, can change. Think of the students who say, “This is the first time I ever enjoyed writing anything.” It gives us, teachers or tutors, mixed feelings. We are gratified, but disturbed: what kind of writing instruction have they been getting all these years? And what has caused the change of heart? Sometimes it’s the work of an inspiring teacher or tutor, or the right assignment—in other words, a lucky accident. Sometimes it can be an ordinary, not necessarily inspiring, writing assistant who understands the important role enjoyment plays in the writing process and who asks the right questions.

“Flow” and “liking” sound like marshmallowy terms, I know. But they are concepts that all writers can understand. They are also powerful tools for helping writers discover strength and build on it.

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