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Finding Flow: 5 Steps to Get in the Zone and Be More Productive



Jory MacKay / August 29, 2017

Ever had a moment—perhaps while writing, designing, or working through a complex problem—where you're so focused on a task that the world around you disappears and you're perfectly focused? It feels like you're on autopilot. Nothing can go wrong. Work comes naturally with no friction. No effort.

Athletes call it "being in the zone." Artists call it "the muse." Psychologists today have given it an official name: [Flow](#).

First proposed by positive psychologist [Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi](#) in the 70s, flow is the mental state where we are "so immersed in a feeling of energized focus,

full involvement, and enjoyment in the sense of space and time." Or as Steve [Superman](#), flow is where "every action seamlessly to the next. It's high-speed by the river of ultimate performance

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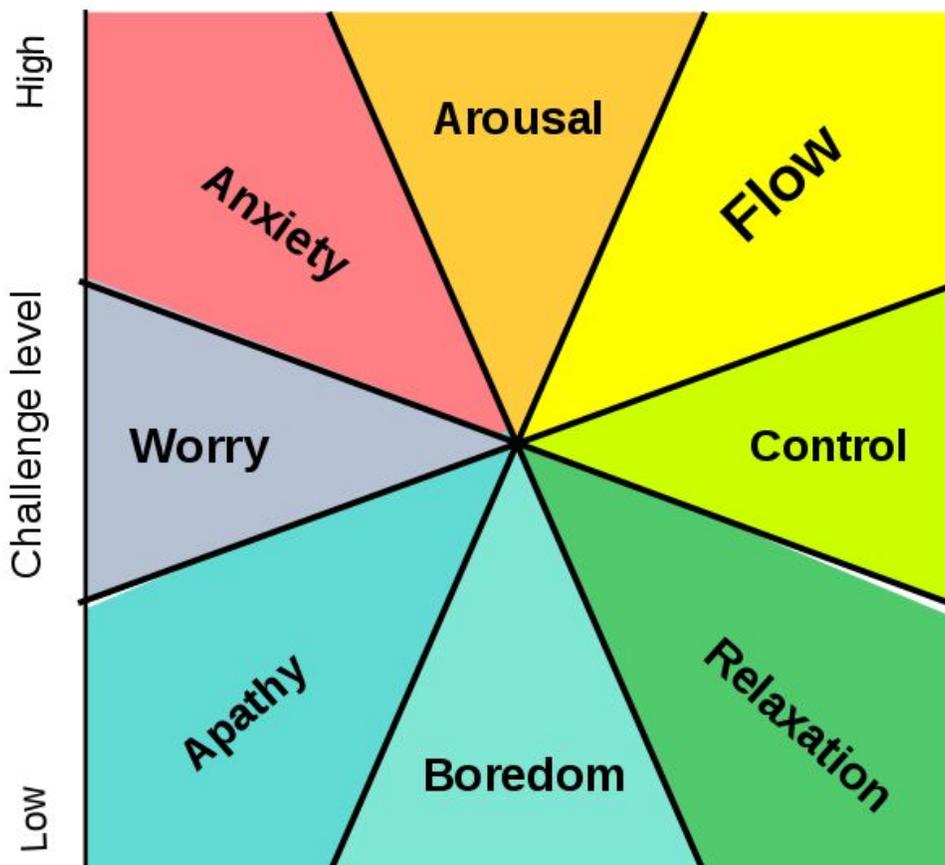
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Sounds like a dream. But like any revolution

flow, its blissful sensation begins to dissolve and the world, complete with its distractions, comes rushing back into our heads.

We all could do with a little more flow. So what if we could dissect just what pushes us into this state and then just jump into flow easily?

What's Really Happening When we Enter Flow?



LOW

Skill level

High

Doing something challenging to
chance

You're working, and then you're in flow
it. But as Csíkszentmihályi [explains](#) in
criteria that must be met for you to e

1. You must have clear goals and progress
2. Your task must provide clear and immediate feedback
3. You must be at the balance between the perceived
at hand and your own perceived skills

In other words, you must know what you're doing, be
not you're doing it well, and be pushing yourself outside
This last point is especially important for finding flow—
with challenge that brings flow.

Csíkszentmihályi first developed the idea of flow from speaking with
professionals across a variety of fields, from artists and athletes to scientists
and academics. Each described entering a state of flow at a moment where
their skills were being put to the test, but not enough so to feel overwhelmed
by the task at hand.

Too much challenge and we get overcome with anxiety. Not enough, and our
brain loses focus and looks for other stimuli.

Csíkszentmihályi best describes flow as [the moves of a professional skier](#)
taking on a difficult run:

Skill level
High
×

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"Imagine that you are skiing down a slope. You are aware of the movements of your body, the position of your face, and the snow-shrouded trees in the distance. You have a sense of awareness for conflicts or contradictions. The emotion might get you buried face down in the snow if you want it to last forever."

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The 5 Elements of Flow—And How to Bring Them Into Your Work

You might not be a professional skier, but the idea of being so perfectly focused and in control of a task that you complete it without effort is appealing to all of us (and that's another term for flow—entrepreneur [Tim Ferriss](#) calls flow "Effortless output"). Yet while clear goals, feedback, and challenge are the building blocks of flow, there's more to it than just those three factors.

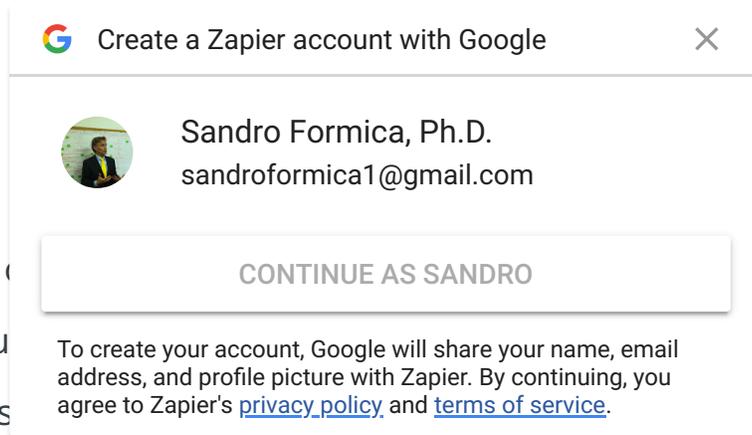
To help us find flow in more of our lives, we need to bring all five pieces of the flow puzzle together: Self control. Environment. Skills. Task. Reward.

Self Control: Focus on Willpower to Trigger a State of Flow

"In the flow-like state, we exercise control over the contents of our consciousness rather than allowing ourselves to be passively determined by external

forces."

forces.



We all love shortcuts—and the idea of self-control is especially appealing as it means you can still take willpower, discipline, and self-control.

In fact, [self control is a key element of Flow](#).

"In the flow-like state, we exercise control over the contents of our consciousness rather than allowing ourselves to be passively determined by external forces," explained Csíkszentmihályi in his original book [Flow](#).

To help us get into a state of flow more often, we need to be able to master this level of control of our consciousness. Which isn't an easy task in today's distracted world.

Psychology professor [Nathan DeWall](#), who leveraged the science of self-control to go from sedentary academic to 100+ mile marathon runner, explains that we can all develop our willpower and self-control by focusing on 3 steps.

1. **Find your standards.** Your standards are the reference points you'll use to determine whether any action you're going to take is desirable towards getting into a state of flow—so, whether you're going to check your email (again) or hit your 1000 word count for the day.
2. **Set up means for monitoring.** Flow depends on immediate feedback and so does self control. Whatever your task, find ways to constantly monitor your performance and adjust as you continue

your performance and adjust as you continue.

3. **Be wary of your energy.** Our m
 throughout the day (which is w
[work schedule around your en](#)
 energy will help you stay in con
 entering a state of flow.

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Environment: Find a Novel and Exciting Space

Routine is the cornerstone of productivity. But you'll rarely enter a state of flow just by doing the same thing you did yesterday.

Instead, find an environment that challenges you on a daily basis and pushes you outside of your comfort zone (a bit). Think of the surfer who's forced to adapt to every individual wave they catch. According to Kotler in Rise of the Superman, it's this novelty, unpredictability, and complexity that will set off your state of flow.

Unfortunately, few of us take our work with us to the beach. Instead, Kotler says [there are a few environmental qualities](#) we can look for to help trigger flow:

- **High consequences:** Find environments and activities where your actions have real consequences to you. While an athlete might pick a harder course or opponent, for you, this could be as simple as speaking up during a meeting if you're shy or publishing a post you've written on Medium if you're afraid of comments and public feedback.
- **Rich environment:** Find environments that require more of your attention and for you to react quickly to changes. Kotler [gives the example of the](#)

[Pixar offices](#), which feature a central hub for places frequented by all different employees regardless of

"Steve Jobs artificially created the environment that supported the amount of novelty, unpredictability, and chaos in the environment because people across the company were running into each other and having conversations. As a result, flow, innovation, and creativity went up."

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Skills: Practice Deliberately to Bring on More Flow

In an interview with [Wired Magazine](#), Csíkszentmihályi described flow as "being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost."

Because flow is dependent on finding that sweet spot between your skills and the challenge at hand, it's no surprise that we need to have a certain level of mastery before we reach flow state. This doesn't mean you won't hit flow until you're an absolute master at your skill—but it does mean you need to know how much skill you have and how to use it to the utmost.

One way to achieve this is to engage in what psychology professor Anders Ericsson calls **Deliberate practice**. Rather than just going through the motions of an activity, deliberate practice is where every session has a specific goal that can be measured, analyzed, and optimized for to increase your overall performance. As Ericsson [explains](#) "living in a cave does not make you a geologist."

In this way, deliberate practice includes

- Clear goals and outcomes
- Immediate feedback
- Pushing your skills to their limit

One way to look at deliberate practice is as pieces of a puzzle. Take a target

task and break it down into smaller, individual pieces, focusing intently on each one until you master it. As you progress through practice sessions, you're effectively **layering your mastery** until the task is finished or the skill is mastered.

Not only that, but by breaking down your focus in this way, you are placing yourself squarely in a zone where your skills match the challenge at hand—the same mental spot where flow occurs.

Task: Connect To a Clear Purpose

"If a subject excites us, if it stirs our deepest curiosity, or if we have to learn because the stakes are high, we pay much more attention."

- Robert Greene

While so far we've looked at ways that can help push you into a state of flow,

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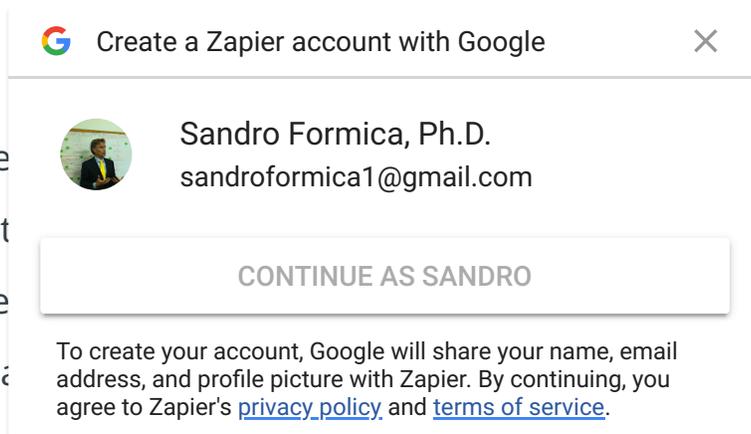
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one absolute requirement is a clear sense of purpose behind what you're doing.

You need to feel an authentic and real connection to yourself to fulfilling it in the moment. It's not put in hours and hours of deliberate practice and mentally, if they don't actually connect.



One way to make sure that your task is tied to your purpose is to create a personal mission statement. Purpose comes from tying your values and skills to how you can make a real change in the world. Author [William Arruda](#) suggests starting by asking a few simple questions.

- *What am I passionate about? *
- *What are my values? *
- What makes me great?

Once you feel good about your answers, you can put them into this template: The value you create + who you're creating it for + the expected outcome.

For example, a writer might say I use my skill in crafting stories to help entrepreneurs and creatives create authentic and meaningful connections with their audience. If they're not telling stories or being authentic in their work, they know they're missing the passion mark.

Not only will having a personal mission statement help insure that you're on the right path towards flow, but it will help push you beyond your comfort zone, as author [Robert Greene](#) explains when talking about mastery:

"We all know how much more deeply we learn when we are motivated. If a subject excites us, if it stirs our deepest curiosity, or if we have to learn

subject excites us, if it stirs our deepest curiosity, or if we have to learn

because the stakes are high, we pay



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Reward: Don't Look for Ex

"Experience the activity as intrinsically rewarding."

- Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi

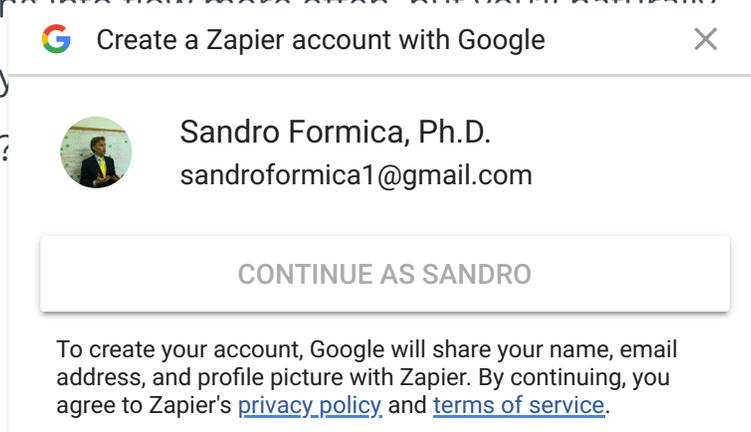
Just like flow comes more often when we follow our passions, we also need to be doing work we are **intrinsically motivated to complete**. This means work and tasks that we feel real meaning behind and enjoy doing for the sake of doing.

Money. Awards. Praise. These can be byproducts of the flow work you do, but they cannot be the core motivation behind what you're doing.

In fact, one of the 6 core factors a Csíkszentmihályi-style flow experience is to "experience... the activity as intrinsically rewarding." He even goes further, saying the feeling should be "such that often the end goal is just an excuse for the process."

Just like in meditation or mindfulness training, there's no winning at flow. So before you start getting upset at yourself for not entering a flow state during your work, ask why you're really doing it. Is it because you feel good about the work itself? Or because you feel good about what completing the work will do for you?

Not only will you find yourself slipping into flow more often, but you'll naturally shift towards doing work that is truly meaningful and you'll be feeling good about the work you do?



Find Your Own Flow

"Contrary to what we usually believe, moments like these, the best moments of our lives, are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times," Csíkszentmihályi wrote in *Flow*.

"The best moments occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile ... in the long run optimal experiences add up to a sense of mastery — or perhaps better, a sense of participation in determining the content of life — that comes as close to what is usually meant by happiness as anything else we can conceivably imagine."

The irony of the effortless nature of flow is that it comes when we are working our hardest. We slip past the anxiety and stress and get to a place of serene ability. Flow is the stuff not only of great work, but of a meaningful life.

Continue Your Pursuit of Flow:

Learn more from the experts about how to make your workflow flow and get more done with less stress with these resources:

- Watch Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi's 2004 TED Talk [Flow, The Secret to](#)

Happiness, then read his [Flow](#) book

- Read Zen master Takuan Soho's of the mind without mind.
- Flow takes focused work with just something you can learn about n

[Work vs. Messy: How to Balance Pr](#)

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Header photo by [Julie Macey](#) via [Unsplash](#); Flow diagram via [Wikimedia Commons](#).



About the Author

Jory MacKay is an award-winning freelance writer and editor obsessed with the ways technology is changing our future. He once had an essay narrowly beat out for Medium's top monthly read by Leonardo DiCaprio.

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