

# Writing Tips from Ellen Cassedy

[www.ellencassedy.com](http://www.ellencassedy.com)

## Finding Flow



Garry Trudeau, the originator of the Doonesbury cartoon, is a brilliant creative force. But when I read what he had to say about “flow,” I was surprised.

“I had more flow as a designer,” Trudeau told an interviewer. “I could just drop down into the zone and stay there for hours. With cartooning, I’m constantly coming up for air, procrastinating, looking for reasons not to be doing it.”

I have those words taped up on the wall above my desk. They help me when I find it hard to get into the zone. Let me explain.

It was the psychologist [Mihály Csíkszentmihályi](#) who popularized the concept of flow. According to Csikszentmihalyi, flow is the experience of feeling total immersed in what you're doing – a sensation of deep focus that is deeply satisfying.

“When we choose a goal and invest ourselves in it to the limits of concentration,” Csikszentmihalyi says, “whatever we do will be enjoyable. And once we have tasted this joy, we will redouble our efforts to taste it again.”

It doesn't always happen for me, though, and usually not right away. That's where the Trudeau quote comes in. Reading Trudeau's words on the wall above my desk, I note that he seems *undeterred* by the fact that he needs to come up for air again and again. He could be doing something else that comes more easily, but that's okay with him. It's okay – and a gift to us all – that he chose the less “flow-ful” path.

Along with the Trudeau quote is a little trick I invented that helps me make my way into “the zone.”

When I come to the desk, I record my start time – say, 10:01 a.m – on a piece of scrap paper at my elbow. Every time I feel the urge to procrastinate, to do something else, I reach for that scrap of paper and record the time again. Maybe it's 10:03, or 10:05. As I make my way into my work, the little column of recorded times comes with me. It's a log – a neutral log – of my lack of flow. It says – non-judgmentally, compassionately – that, yup, here I am, coming up for air.

Glancing at that little column, I note that I'm antsy and distracted. But I also note that I'm still there, still on the job. Flow or no flow, the work is going forward.

Most of the time, little by little, the time between jottings increases. Having used the little log to “push off,” I stop needing it, at least for that work session.

Why? Because I've become caught up in the task at hand.

In Csikszentmihalyi's words: “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.”

What's that called? Flow.

---

Ellen Cassedy is the author of *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust* (Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2012). To see all her Writing Tips, visit her website at [www.ellencassedy.com](http://www.ellencassedy.com).