# Chapter One

## *What Is Felt Sense?*

The body-mind connection.

Rhythm.

Creativity.

Deep intuitive knowledge.

Before the words come.

Being centered.

Flow.

The body's wisdom before it's articulated in words.

*F*elt sense is a bodily experience—endlessly describable. Felt sense is also a term, an idea, a phrase—that refers to this bodily knowing.

Felt sense points us to an aspect of our experience that often accompanies us when we are involved in a creative act. Felt sense is there, inside us, if we know how to turn our attention to it and listen to what it is suggesting. But *it's* really not an "*it.*" It is, rather, a felt experience we can access and learn from, an aspect of being human, available to all.

Experiencing felt sense takes practice in developing a certain kind of attention. Once you know how to notice it, you may conclude that the process is simple, that felt sense has always been there, available to you; you just never had a name for it.

Eugene Gendlin, the philosopher and psychologist who coined the term, describes it this way:

> A felt sense is not a mental experience but a physical one. *Physical.* A bodily awareness of a situation or person or event. An internal aura that encompasses everything you feel and know about the given subject at a given time—encompasses it and communicates it to you all at once rather than detail by detail. Think of it as a taste, if you like, or a great musical chord that makes you feel a powerful impact, a big round unclear feeling.
>
> A felt sense doesn't come to you in the form of thoughts or words or other separate units, but as a single (though often puzzling and very complex) bodily feeling. (1981, 32–33)

He continues,

> A felt sense is usually not just there. It must form. You have to know how to let it form by attending inside your body. When it comes, it is at first *unclear*, fuzzy. By certain steps it can come into focus and also change. A felt sense is the body's sense of a particular . . . situation. . . . It is a body-sense of meaning. (1981, 10)

Notice that Gendlin uses the verbs *come* and *form* when he describes felt sense. Felt sense is not just sitting within us waiting for us to find it. Rather, felt sense comes to us as other bodily processes come—the way sleep comes, or emotions come, or tears come—as we make room for the body to express itself or by allowing the rhythm of bodily processes to take over, by making room for whatever is there to happen.

We know, for example, that we cannot force ourselves to go to sleep. But if we relax and allow sleep to come, it usually will. So, too, with felt sense: We can't force it to come into focus. But if we relax and allow it to form by attending to ourselves in a particular way, a felt sense can make its presence felt. Once it does, we can pay attention and allow it to speak, to suggest images or ideas, to point us to what





is going on within us or to what lies beneath the words or to what lies at the edge of our thoughts. And once this happens, we can discover an endlessly rich, intricate, and open realm that leads to insight and understanding.

Picture this, for example: You are trying to write something and you know you want a specific word—you can almost feel the word on the tip of your tongue—but it hasn't yet emerged. You feel uncomfortable. Uneasy. Maybe you squirm in your chair. Or you write down a word that is close to what you want but you know, inside yourself, that this word is not right. It doesn't capture what you are groping for. You read over what you have written and you feel dissatisfied. Maybe you tear up the paper in frustration. Or you plod along, feeling increasingly disheartened. This is not an experience you enjoy. In fact, it is so unsettling, you conclude that you can't write.

Or picture this: You are drafting a paper. After an initial struggle, trying this, trying that, jotting down a few sentences and then rereading them, you hit your stride. The words are coming quickly. Everything about the composition starts to feel right. Maybe your body tingles. You lean over your paper or closer to the computer screen. Maybe you jiggle your leg or tap on the table. You love what is happening and wish there were some way to hold on to this experience, to enter this free-flowing realm whenever you want. You are afraid to say much about what is going on because you don't want to jinx the creative process.

Both of these examples describe experiences with felt sense. Notice that in each there is a connection to the body—and that the bodily connection is related to words. When the words that are emerging *feel* right, we often feel excited or at least pleased; we experience a kind of flow. Physically and mentally, we are aligned. In this instance, felt sense is a guide that lets us know we are on the right track. And as words emerge, the felt sense itself can shift and change, leading us to write and think in unexpected ways, leading, often, to discovery and to surprise. But for

most of us this process often seems mysterious; it's not anything we count on or know how to cultivate.

When the emerging words do not *feel* right, we squirm. We feel uncomfortable. The alignment between our thoughts and our bodies hasn't yet happened; in this instance we often become frustrated, jotting down any old thing or something close but not quite right, just to escape from the discomfort. But notice, even here, we know the words aren't right. We know this because our bodies tell us so. If we learn how to pause here and wait, to attend to the wordless discomfort, often the right words can and do come.

Felt sense, then, is the physical place where we locate what the body knows. This knowing becomes clearer as words come. But more often than not, this knowing is present even *before* we have the words, before what we sense is expressed in language. The point here is that once we realize that we have access to this knowing in our bodies, we can learn to cultivate it. We can practice directing our attention to it. We can develop a way of attending to ourselves that can guide us during acts of creativity. Even though the initial experience often comes as a discomfiting one, we can learn how to welcome and cultivate it rather than avoid it, how to use our body as a touchstone, a guide, that can inform us if the work we are creating makes sense in the ways we want it to. Relying on the body's wisdom, we can set up a creative rhythm and find our stride.

At this point, I wish to pause and summarize:

- Felt sense occurs—is located—in our bodies.
- It is not automatic; it must be given room to form.
- When it does form, it may at first feel murky or unclear.
- We may, at first, experience this murkiness as discomfort.
- The discomfort is often so unsettling that to dispel it, we often say or write any old word rather than wait for the "right" word to emerge.





- If we attend—or pay attention gently and directly—to the physical sensation of discomfort, our felt sense can become clearer and words can come that will help us express precisely what we are beginning to sense physically.
- Once words come in this connected way, we often experience relief, excitement, surprise, even pleasure. We know that we are on the right track because our bodies tell us so.
- Felt sense is connected to meaning. It establishes a link between what we think (our minds) and what we feel (our bodies). Or between what we know implicitly (before words come) and what we ultimately write or say (with words) explicitly.
- There are certain steps we can take that will help us work with felt sense.

## *Felt Sense, Composition Research, and the Guidelines for Composing*

I became interested in felt sense after I observed college students struggle with writing. This research grew out of a movement in the 1970s when teachers of writing became interested in studying composing processes. As a group, we were curious about a range of questions:

- What happens when students write?
- What helps them move forward?
- What gets in the way?

To find out the answers to these questions, we set up situations in which we could observe students as they engaged in the writing process. This research spanned all grade levels and examined writers of different abilities. Janet Emig, the first to initiate this kind of study, observed high school seniors; Don Graves, who followed her, worked with children in second grade; Nancy

Sommers examined the process of revision by observing college writers and professional writers; Mike Rose looked at college students with writer's block; Mimi Schwartz observed a published poet and a middle school boy.

Many others in the growing field of composition and rhetoric also became intrigued with observing and then describing composing processes. This work was so well received, in fact, that Maxine Hairston (1982), a professor at the University of Texas at Austin, claimed that we had initiated a "paradigm shift," making the process, rather than the written product, the subject of new inquiries.

My own work focused on the writing processes of college students at the City University of New York, those for whom writing was, admittedly, a struggle. I wanted to know if these students had anything resembling a composing process. Since their written products were often so filled with errors, or were, in the evocative language of Mina Shaughnessy (1970), so "stunningly unskilled," I, like many others, reasonably wondered if these students knew how to write at all.

As part of this study, I taped my students as they thought out loud while they were writing. Based on the tapes, I constructed a coding system which then allowed me to detect and document repeated patterns. I was able to show that the students I was working with did have stable composing processes. They engaged in similar composing behaviors on a variety of tasks and were remarkably consistent in their approaches and procedures. The tapes revealed that they wrote only a few words before they began to edit, and they began to edit long before they actually had a sense of what they wanted or needed to say. I was able to show how such premature editing interfered with the rhythm they needed to establish during composing and frequently just wore them out (Perl 1979).

The tapes and the coding led me to draw conclusions which shed new light on unskilled writers. They revealed





that these students had stable composing processes; as a result, their teachers could now identify which composing behaviors were productive and which were counterproductive. Teachers could now provide students with a way of understanding the tangles in their composing processes. We could, for example, begin to teach them to separate drafting from editing. We no longer needed to blame them for the errors that appeared and reappeared in their work. These errors did not stem from a lack of care or attention to their texts, but to confusion regarding when, where, and how to use the rules and dicta their teachers taught them.

But what turned out to be even more fascinating was what my coding scheme could not elucidate. Often I would notice the following phenomenon: Students would pause in their composing, would sit silently for thirty seconds or a minute, and then would have a burst of composing energy that often led to the creation of a new idea. Something was happening in the silence. I didn't know what it was. But it made me curious. And I suspected it might be even more important than the behaviors, like premature editing, that I could more easily pinpoint.

It was at this point that I discovered the work of Eugene Gendlin. I found that his thinking helped me grasp what was likely occurring for my students as they composed. I suspected that during those quiet moments, they were noticing and listening to their felt sense. In the midst of the rule confusion and the tremendous effort the students put into editing, they were, for a few seconds, paying attention to what they felt they needed to say. For frequently, after those moments of silence, a new idea would come—and it was often an important one.

I wrote about this phenomenon in an article called "Understanding Composing" (Perl 1980). At this point, the idea of felt sense entered the field of composition and rhetoric. It has remained, for the most part, a theoretical notion, not something easily translated into classroom practice. It seems

that it is one thing to know about felt sense and even to call on it when we are not aware of doing so, as my students had presumably done, and another to make it a conscious part of composing and of classroom practice.

I wondered if this imbalance could be addressed, if there might be a way to teach students how to access and work with felt sense. I knew that Gendlin had created steps to teach adults how to work with felt sense in solving personal problems (1981). I wondered if Gendlin's focusing questions could be adapted to help writers solve writing problems; if they could help them discover topics for writing or help them establish a connection between their thinking and an assigned topic. If so, I imagined that such questions could help writers create a visceral connection between what they were thinking and writing, a connection that was physical, based in the body. With Gendlin's encouragement, I began experimenting, looking to adapt his focusing questions for use in writing classrooms. Through this work, I discovered that it was possible to create a set of questions, to teach students how to use them, and most important, to help them establish a vibrant connection between the body and the mind. This discovery led me to invent the Guidelines for Composing.

The Guidelines are not a set of rules to follow, but rather a set of questions that help writers cultivate a felt sense and then write with this felt sense as a guide. In essence, the Guidelines are a set of questions that writers ask themselves silently and then answer in writing. The Guidelines begin by asking writers to slow down, to pay attention to their bodies, to relax. As they progress, from simple list making to more complex imaging, writers are directed to listen attentively to what is at the edge of their thoughts, to what isn't yet in words. But how do you listen to what is not yet in words? What are you listening to and for? The Guidelines don't so much tell you as invite you to begin. And then, question by question, step by step, they accompany you through your own unique composing process.





In some ways, the Guidelines are based on a paradox. They don't start with words but with what is prior to words, with what is unsaid, not yet said, or not yet articulated but felt in the body nonetheless. It is within this realm that we might say thought is prior to words if by thought we mean a whole incipient sense of meaning that is (almost always) present within people.

But it is also fair to say that once the words come, once we speak them or write them, we understand better what we mean. In this way, thought is articulated, developed, and made visible through our use of language. Seen in this light, it is easy to conclude that thought follows language or is, at least partially, dependent on it as in the famous E.M. Forster quote, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?"

Felt sense helps us clarify the dynamic relationship between language and thought. In fact, with felt sense we can see that language and thought are inextricably linked in the body. Felt sense exists prior to our language-ing it; it exists alongside the words that come; and it exists as a bodily physical referent after words come. By directing attention to our felt sense, we establish a living connection between what we sense and what we know or between what we sense implicitly and what we state explicitly.

The connection to words is, in other words, visceral. Bob Lazaroff, a doctoral student at the CUNY Graduate Center, describes the bodily connection this way:

> When felt sense is flowing, I am tapped into disparate parts of my being. The process feels very organic, and my physical/writing response is as if the kid inside is taunting me through the adult skin. Felt sense explores much more than writing; it's all the things we can't express in words. And maybe that's why I get physical when I write. When the words are coming out, the other parts of my body want to get in on the act. The physical aspect of writing doesn't just flow neatly between my brain and my hands. My feet get into the process, my elbows, my shoulders, my palms. I get up, I pace, I sit down. I go back

> and forth between writing, banging out rhythms on the desk, and singing and rhyming: *Good Golly Miss Molly, Tutti Fruitti O Rootie,* (write . . . write . . . ) *Jump Back Jack, See ya later alligator* (write . . . write . . . ). In these moments of creation, the whole nervous system wants in on the creative action.

Bob's description emphasizes the rhythmic way in which language can live in our bodies. While the tapping and pacing he describes may not fit the way most of us write, Bob does capture one of the many powerful connections between expression and bodies, between language and felt sense, between feeling and form. And no matter how it emerges in us, it is important to emphasize that felt sense comes from our bodies and that the term refers to this bodily process of knowing.

There are many ways in which to access felt sense. We can tune into it by breathing slowly, quieting down, waiting for it to form, and then allowing it to lead us to this incipient sense of meaning. We can also tune into it as the words are coming and as we are listening to ourselves write by paying attention to what we sense physically as we express our ideas on paper. And we can stay in touch with our bodily sense of knowing while we are reading our written work and attempting to assess whether we have fully or adequately captured what we are trying to say. These are moves that occur physically and mentally in our bodies and in our minds. It is this back and forth movement, in both sensing and wording, that is built explicitly into the Guidelines.

## *Using Felt Sense in the Classroom*

What happens when you bring the Guidelines for Composing into the classroom? In most instances, students start to write. They calm down, sit quietly, and slowly begin to pick up their pens and compose. In this section, then, I present descriptions, comments, and reflections on felt sense and on the Guidelines for Composing written by students and colleagues who have used them. Some are from my students; others are from students I have never met. But each response will give you some idea of what comes into play when writers of different ages and experience engage with the ideas I am presenting here.





In 2002, Susan Sermoneta, a colleague, played the composing guidelines CD in her writing classroom at the Fashion Institute of Technology, a unit of the State University of New York. When asked to reflect on the process, three of these students, all beginning writers for whom English is a second language, wrote the following:

> The Guidelines were helpful. They take you step by step through the entire process of private writing. I thought I would not have anything to write—as it turns out I had way too much on my mind. I'm glad I did this today. It's like a weight has been partially lifted off my shoulders.

> The process for me was very new and different. I never thought that writing should connect with the body. I thought writing only have [sic] to connect with the mind. Now I understand that if you don't feel your body, then your writing won't be connected. . . . The process was like an unfolding for me.

> At first it was hard to get the ball rolling but once I picked up a rhythm I was able to write continuously. One thought flowed right after the other. Numerous thoughts flooded onto the page. I was writing furiously.

Another colleague, M. Elizabeth Sargent from the University of Alberta, Canada, also played the CD for her students. Here is what Betsy reported:

> Just got back from my computer lab writing class—three Japanese students, one Kenyan, one Hispanic, and the rest students who have been told for years that their writing is substandard. Using your Guidelines, they composed at the computer steadily for the whole class—fifty minutes—and most stayed another five to ten minutes to finish up. Most of them have never written

nonstop for fifty minutes in their lives. And I certainly needed that hour. As usual, under the composing guidelines I ended up writing about something I needed to write about but had no idea I would pursue before class began.

I, too, use the Guidelines with my students in both undergraduate and graduate courses. In recent years, some of my doctoral students who teach composition at various units of the City University of New York have also introduced the Guidelines to their students. The following three excerpts are from an online conversation that took place in the spring of 2001 when these graduate students were reflecting on felt sense in their own writing and teaching:

I've done the Guidelines about half a dozen times by now, and I'm still amazed at how powerful they are. I wonder if it's due to the creation of a safe, empty space, one where concentrated silence is encouraged (so rare in this culture), where writing is treasured. I've used them in my own English classes many times, and it always warms my heart to see students scribbling away, or pausing and staring into space, their brows furrowed, clearly in tune with themselves and the alchemy of memory and imagination. . . . It's taken me a long time to learn to let go when writing, to trust my body, my skill, my thoughts, my experiences. When I write poems or memoirs or other things just for myself, I'm giving myself more and more permission to let go, to let the garbage flow with the nuggets of gold—painful stuff for a perfectionist. But this hasn't transferred to my academic writing. Here I struggle. There are days when I feel like exploding from tension or breaking down crying from frustration at the computer. . . . Felt sense seems to work best when we have the leisure to play around with form and content. Unfortunately, our scholarly lives often don't give us nearly as much leeway in terms of what we can do. I'm very curious about how people have experienced and harnessed felt sense when it comes to term papers. How do you write when the form and the length have already been significantly predetermined? How do you use felt sense when you have to write a





twenty-page critical paper that leans a lot on research and citation? Felt sense seems to me to be a great way to write personal essays, poems, stories, etc., but would be a lot less useful when writing term papers.

—Irwin Leopando

Research involves selection. Maybe at some level we've been using felt sense to pick and choose research topics as well as secondary sources. Maybe awareness of felt sense can help us to pick better topics and choose better citations. Further, as we revise our term papers, how do we decide if the paper contains good, sound ideas? Bodily sensations as well as ideas in our heads may offer clues to how we know what we know.

—Frank Gaughan

I fully empathize with Irwin's questions on felt sense and the writing of the "scholarly paper." All I can say is that ever since I've come to understand felt sense, I have a feeling of connectedness to my dissertation that I had lost. It does have to do with what I now include and exclude as I write, but it also has to do with whose words I privilege in my own text. I had gotten to a point in my academic work in which I just tried to amass as much of other people's theories as possible because I didn't feel as if I myself had anything important to say about "my author." This, even though I am one of about five people who really knows this author's work! I had been so indoctrinated with the idea that my work needed to reflect everyone else's that I no longer had a voice. . . . Writing the diss is still hard for me, but for the first time in years I am writing from a sense of centrality, my own. Everyone else's theory and criticism are fine, and they actually support a lot of what I want to say, but I now find myself locating my message in my own sense—my felt sense—of what my author said, meant, implied, left out, etc. My experience of felt sense is more identifiable in personal and creative writing, yes, but I am using that experience to free my academic writing and make it what I hope is more creative and truer.

—Cathy Fagan

What students and colleagues have written to me about the Guidelines no longer surprises me. I have been using them in my writing classes since 1980. I have seen, first-hand, how useful they are, especially when writers are faced with the daunting task of finding a topic. I've seen how they help writers face the blank page and how they lead writers to establish surprising and often powerful connections to topics they thought they had little or no connection to. I've seen them work successfully for writers of different ages and widely varying abilities. I use them in just about all of my writing classes: in freshman composition classes and doctoral seminars, with peer tutors and with creative writers, with novices and professionals, with people in school and out. Teachers who work with me frequently bring them back to their own classrooms and use them in their middle school, high school, or college classrooms. Most also use them at home, when they are drafting their own work. But over the past twenty years, students and colleagues have often commented to me that they wish they had a tape of my voice; that no matter how thoroughly they have internalized the process, they sometimes wish they could invite me home with them and have me ask the questions as they are composing.

With technology, I can now respond to this request. With the CD included with this book, you—and your students—can now listen to the Guidelines and write along with them.



# Chapter Two

## The Guidelines for Composing

This chapter takes you inside the Guidelines for Composing. I describe what you will find on the CD and provide suggestions for where you might begin and what to expect once you do. After a general overview, I include, in standard typeface, a transcript of the CD. If, after becoming familiar with the process, you want to take students through the Guidelines on your own, you can read directly from the transcript or you can modify the questions and the language to suit your students' needs. I also annotate various sections of the transcript. This additional information, presented in boldface, provides explanations about what to look for when you write with the Guidelines or when you lead students through the process.

The Guidelines are so named because I think of them as precisely that: as guides. There are three different versions on the CD: a short version, a long version, and a version designed for individual use. The purpose of each version is the same: to help writers locate a felt sense and to guide them in selecting, exploring, and developing topics that interest them.

I originally designed the Guidelines for students who, when asked to write, drew a blank, had no idea where to begin, and therefore needed guidance in discovering topics of interest. Over the years, however, I have created alternative forms to help students discover connections to topics they have been assigned. The branching options for these different paths are explained later in the chapter.