Talking and Writing

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In her very important book *Errors and Expectations*,[1] Mina Shaughnessy lists three explanations for the inexperienced writer's frequent mismanagement of syntactic complexity: "One explanation focuses on what the student has not internalized in the way of *language patterns* characteristic of written English, another on his unfamiliarity with the *composing process*, and another on his *attitude* toward himself within an academic setting." Each of these explanations, Shaughnessy goes on to say, suggests a pedagogy: the first, with a focus on grammar — on forms of written English not learned through everyday conversation; the second, with a focus on process — on the behaviors, conscious and unconscious, of successful writers as they write; the third, with a focus on the student — on his or her feelings in an attempt to build confidence in the use of writing. "A teacher should not have to choose from among these pedagogics," Shaughnessy concludes, "for each addresses but one part of the problem."

For my seminars in **Workshop I**, however, I will have to choose. My focus will be on patterns of written prose and patterns in speaking — in conversation, in oral monologue — that are clearly contrastive. My assumption is that most students talk easily and effectively and, if they are inexperienced in the uses of writing, incorporate into their papers — quite naturally — the patterns they habitually use in everyday conversation. My aim in the seminars will be to develop pedagogical strategies for moving students from their (usually) comfortable ease in talking to a comparable facility in writing.

To learn to write is to learn to find one's "voice": that is what we often — and rightly — tell our students. But in telling them, we do not always remember that "voice," so used, is a metaphor: to "find one's voice" is to develop a sense of self, to discover a personal stance. Having done so, one can find language to express self and stance. But if the result is talk, one kind of language is used; if writing, another. To find one's voice in writing is not necessarily to use the language that comes most readily to hand; it is never to write as one talks — as if one could. Most of us have had the experience of seeing a transcript of something we have said, and we know the intense itch to take pen in hand to make the transcript look more like something that *should* be written.

Shaughnessy suggests a focus on grammar as an appropriate pedagogy for dealing with writing that is too much like talk. Such writing usually does exhibit sentence and lower-level grammatical problems, but there are other sorts as well. As, for example, in this brief paper written by a student in a community college developmental English course:

1. *My worst fault is not trusting in my own*
2. *judgement. In college it is a very easy task to*
3. *get mix up about answers on an objective test.*
4. *I study hard and most times I know the answer,*
5. *but another word might sound better than the*
6. *word that I know is right and I will put it*
7. *instead. I have many faults. This one is about*
8. *on the same level as all my other faults. Sometimes*
9. *I have very little confidence in myself; like*
10. *tonight I was really falling apart when I*
11. *realize that I was the only one left in the*
12. *room working on my pretest. I know I have*
13. *not said much but I want you to know I*
14. *have no one fault that sticks out over my*
15. *other faults.*

One can point to the missing *-ed* on *mix* (l. 3) and *-d* on *realize* (l. 11) that are reflections of the writer's pronunciation. One can also point to the colloquial character of the clause beginning with *like* (ls. 9-10), or of some of the diction. But this paragraph is least like prose — or at least formal prose — in its organization and the direct address to teacher-as-reader in the last sentence, which distorts focus; in the use of the largely meaningless but grammatically impeccable sentence of ls. 7-8 — used as a filler, much as we might use an empty expression in speech, to allow time to discover what to say next. Clearly the conventions of written prose extend beyond the sentence level, such conventions are all too rarely noted or taught.

Effective talk is structured and conventional. Talkers learn structures and conventions through everyday converse with other talkers. Effective writing is structured and conventional, but its structures and conventions are learned through converse with books and through instructions by teachers. In our work together, we will explore some differences between talk and writing and ways to provide instruction in the organizational and grammatical patterns "characteristic of written English."

[1]Mina P. Shaushnessy. *Errors and Expectations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 73.