

THE REVISER'S VOICES

THEORY

By now it is one of the truisms of our process-conscious times that writing is rewriting. But what if we should ask from where, and out of what, come our originals? Ultimately the answer must be voices, inner and outer voices, in the ways those voices name our perceptions, retrieve our memories, and organize what we often are pleased to call our logical thinking. The only alternative is paraphrase, citation, or interpretation of already-written texts. These uses of prior readings, of course, often play important roles in writing and revision processes, but as we shall see, inner voices intervene even here. To begin with, the revoicing of texts is integral to reading them, let alone to approving others' writings sufficiently to echo or assimilate them into one's own work.¹

Despite the powerful and irreducible bonds between voice and page, we also know that the relation between the two modes is anything but straightforward. In consequence, the problematic joinings of utterances and texts are, first of all, central to linguistic description and literary criticism, and second, crucial pedagogically. And as to pedagogy, if anything is clear from the evidence in their writings, it is that for many of today's undergraduates, and for basic writers especially, confusion

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¹For the importance of prior writings as new writings' sources, see Roland Barthes' prototypical statement, in *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Farrar Straus, 1977), p. 146, which characteristically defines any text as a "multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash." For a recent overview of the metacritical dispute between "epi-readers" (revoicers of texts) and "graphi-readers" (those who view all texts as text-derivative), see Denis Donoghue, *Ferocious Alphabets* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1981), which surveys structuralist and post-structuralist hermeneutics in order to group the major figures into these two categories.

concerning speech and print both deface the surface features and distort, stigmatize, and cripple their writings' contents.²

To begin with, basic writers display an imperfect ability to turn speech sounds into conventional written signs, and that literally spells trouble—not only in spelling, but in all the rest of the surface feature errors with which they struggle often and long: with faulty mechanics, homonyms, and word confusions; with failures to note the conventional grammatical inflections; with inaccurate word divisions, and all the rest.

More fundamental the inability to invent written *substance*—and that too, stems even from the basic writing students' over-exclusive oral allegiances. It is from oral discourse that many characteristics of their writing derive: their paratactic, disjunct progressions; their overgeneralized and overpersonalized declarations; their roughly-hinged, isolated declamations, and their nonconciliatory, absolute moral announcements. All are as characteristic of speech as they are out of place in academic written discourse.

It is not my thesis here, however, that our students are lost in an oral world or that they are absent from the written one that we, their teachers, inhabit. Rather, we and they all share, to a greater or lesser degree, in the same writer's situation. Oral states are essential and integral to everybody's writing and revision processes, however rudimentary or professional. Speech and text mutually enrich each other, intermingle and revise one another in all writing, and in copy-editing too. For in writing ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, and by this I do not mean the biography of any given writer's progress to maturity, but something far more frequent and replicative, the movement from primary orality to written text as a virtually universal revision process for nearly every piece of writing that we do.³

As researchers from Vygotsky to Flower have at least in part suggested, inner and outer speech are our real first drafts.⁴ It is through these language modes, not writing, that we nearly always first cast percept, image, sensation and sense-memory into language; it is through inner and

²An extensive if rather unselective bibliography addressing the pedagogical issues accompanies *Exploring Speaking-Writing Relationships: Connections and Contrasts* (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1981), pp. 215-33.

³For primary and secondary orality, see Walter Ong, "Literacy and Orality in Our Times," *ADE Bulletin*, 58 (1978).

⁴Lev S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1962), p. 144, and Linda Flower, "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing," *College English*, 41 (1979) 19-37.

outer speech that we not only name house as house, horse as horse, but also, by the abstraction and transfer of qualities, find our way to describing feeling sad as being blue.⁵

Essentially then, the ability to revise language from the flow of inner and outer voices to the written page, while seemingly a narrow focus, actually embraces not just the art of revision but the entire process of writing—not to mention many of the cognitive acts that lie behind writing. Moreover, a clear awareness of the differences, equivalences and overlaps between spoken and written language clears the way to the written communication of ideas and feelings that are passionately metaphorical, authentic and expressive, lucid and persuasive, or literal and exact, as the writer wishes, and in a very wide range of situations, occasions and forms. Each kind of writing draws its powers from a different plane of consciousness in the progress from inner voice to final “text,” metaphor and simile from the deeper substrates where meanings first form themselves, literal and exact texts from the more fixed, habitual and reasoning levels of consciousness, and so on.

Still, the theoretical basis for all that follows is simple enough. It is founded on a perception of the manifold differences between the semiotics of our spoken and written codes. I see those distinctions as so fundamental as virtually to determine, by the existence of their variant cue systems, the divergent conventions and contents that characterize speaking, on the one hand, and writing, on the other. Cultural differences have less to do with these matters, and adjustments to match this semiotic shift have more, than we consciously realize today. In consequence, the overriding considerations for writing and for those who teach writing are not so much Walter Ong’s primary and secondary oralities, Hayes’ and Flower’s writer-vs.-reader-based prose, or Basil Bernstein’s restricted and elaborated codes. It is revoicings, to repeat, that always provide writing’s materials—and, equally important, those voices must always be recast—revised—to create coherent texts.

To specify a little about spoken-written divergencies: the signifiers of the speaking voice are greater in number, have a wider and more expressive set of registers, and are more frequently redundant in function

⁵For an explanation of the metaphoric and metonymic poles that this passage illustrates, see Roman Jakobson & Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), pp. 67-96. To summarize, Jakobson believes that a) *metaphor*, in which a transfer of qualities is made from one word or phrase to another (feeling sad/being blue), and b) *metonymy*, in which a part stands for the whole (as in word for thing, or, in rhetoric, sail for ship), together create the “two-fold character” that underlies all language’s cognitive operations.

than their written equivalents. On the page, the grammar of utterances can only be very partially and schematically rendered, and in consequence, and much like musical scores, written texts present schema merely, notational systems that must not only be revoiced but, in the act of revoicing, interpreted; writing must be *performed* inwardly or publicly in order to be “read.”

This is so in part because the cue system in writing is so spare. Concerning language in print, meanings are derived from just three elements: words, syntax and the mechanics of capitalization and punctuation. These three interlocking patterns must somehow provide equivalents for all the semiosis of the human voice, yet voice affords a 700-1 range of volume intensities in normal conversation, and these levels sound all our variants and combinations of breath, pitch, pause, intonation, stress, rate, tone color, timbre, regional accent, and so on. It is by means of voice’s rich and overlapping cue clusters that we often instantly recognize mere acquaintances, singling that one voice from thousands, frequently by a simple “hello” on the telephone. The voice contours of strangers, too, almost simultaneously convey many kinds of information: the age, sex, and identity of the speaker; the social class, educational level, and region to which the speaker belongs; the degree of emphasis with which information is being communicated; the speaker’s underlying mood. To communicate virtually *any* of this information, writing must do one of the following: deviate more or less obviously from standard usage, make explicit statements, or rely on contexts. Unlike speech, all those methods normally require conscious effort—“revision.”

In consequence, relations between speakers and their audiences, and writers and their readers, must differ profoundly. For the shift from voice to text moves us from a scene where there is a comparatively effortless and amiably-shared responsibility for coherence and communicability—the operative norm for speakers, wherein any listener becomes a remarkably efficient, albeit unconscious editor/revisor—to the harsher world where writers are. There, any variation in writing’s stricter and sparser code threatens to plunge the reader through the ice-thin surface features of the text, to leave him floundering after meanings in the contexts beneath. Unless the contexts supply with their elaborations whatever is absent, readers ordinarily do not respond kindly.

In sum then, the writer’s labors—and the basic writer’s troubles—begin when we try to transform speech contours into the abstract notation we call writing, try to trap in writing’s abstracted, attenuated web of signifiers what voice so often is so effortlessly and organically able to express. That is why in discursive writing especially (poetry and fiction ordinarily are more explicitly “orchestrated”), we need to focus on exact word choice,

more regular syntaxes, and more organized rhetorical progressions. And written communication's contents also must differ, if only in compensation for what has been lost, by extending spoken discourse's abilities to establish writing's coolly-etched positions, those elaborate panoplies of comparison and illustration and documentation that are our culture's taxonomies and hierarchies and systems, more or less dispassionate-seeming, of kind, order and quality.

What I hope to draw out here is an Ariadne's thread—voice—as it retrieves, often from the frontiers of thought, the materials that become our written work. I have also suggested a few of the ways voice can lead us to shape and reshape all writing. As to the advantages of teaching voices in texts, this is a method that

- allows students to move from language practices they know well to those they fear but need to learn;
- offers a window on internal cognitive processes as they are cast into language;
- externalizes and renders visible revision and editing procedures otherwise inaccessible;
- provides an inclusive rationale for what otherwise might appear arbitrary in the writer's work: the radical pruning, the painstaking reshaping, and the equally extensive elaborations of writing.

DEMONSTRATION

If speech is the source of writing, and if at the same time speech written down is unacceptable as writing, we need to see what written speech looks like. For our pedagogical purposes here, that means raw tape transcriptions.

My first example is randomly chosen, but typical enough of the tape transcriptions I have done over the past several years—Studs Terkel being interviewed. I have followed my invariable transcribing rules with Terkel, choosing the first audible spoken passage of reasonable length on my tape, and transcribing as faithfully as conventional orthography permits and my ear can manage.⁶

⁶That is, these transcriptions attempt to match the word formation, pause length, and intonational shifts in the individual speaker's delivery. I should emphasize that the punctuation of these passages is not arbitrary: when the speaker fails to use the length of pause and intonation contours that usually mark sentences at what might be grammatically analyzed as sentence boundaries, I attempt to match standard mechanics to *spoken* contours. A comma represents the briefest speech pause, a dash or semi-colon stands for a somewhat longer pause depending on intonation, and a period denotes either a long pause or a steeply falling intonation or a combination of the two. Enjambment, too, mirrors the sounds as produced, as do other similar elisions and all non-lingual noise ("uh/duh").

In this excerpt Terkel has just been asked how he “went off the straight and narrow, and started on this life of crime, talking to people” in order to create books. His response:

It's not a criminal law it could be criminal, I avoid one thing, trespassing on what might be called the private domain. I like t'ask people about their life, b'the people I talk to mostly, through my other ventures, are the non-celebrated people, the so-called ordinary people y'nnotice I say so-called, because, every person's different, fact there's an extraordinary quality in every person, it comes out in the language. But that other, party, as Runyon would say the other party, has to recognize that you are interested, not someone from Mount Olympus, you're not someone shoving a mike in front of em asking, are you for or against busing? And the answer is meaningless, unless you know that person's conditions thoughts life, is this detergent that detergent whiter than white same meaning, unless you talk to the person and he opens up, he-she opens up.

Immediately apparent in Terkel's speech—aside from some of the word deformations embedded in his characteristically rapid-fire delivery—is the inescapably associative development of his ideas, which pay scant respect either to sentence syntax, sentence boundaries, or any rhetorical progression known to discursive writing. Indeed, Terkel's speechstream irresistibly brings to mind Vygotsky's discrimination between thought complexes—mere chains of association—and genuine concepts, for as Vygotsky explains this distinction, “complex thinking begins the unification of scattered impressions. . . by organizing discrete elements of experience into groups. . . [as] a basis for later generalizations,” while true concepts require us “to abstract, to single out elements, and to view the abstracted elements apart from the totality of the concrete experience in which they are embedded.” In short, the “very essence” of complex thinking is “over-production of connections, and weakness in abstraction.”⁷ That description, I believe, is not at all unfair to Terkel's speech.

I know from my collected transcriptions, by now grown rather extensive, that Terkel's tape is typical speech. New readers of raw tapes such as this one, however, are often not so easily convinced. So let's try another speaker of standard English, this time a figure publicly and militantly dedicated to the beauty of the American plain style—Edwin Newman. In this tape Newman is at the beginning of a discussion with Dick Cavett, to which Agnes de Mille was also a contributor, on the

⁷Vygotsky, p. 76.

subject of good and bad American English. Because I will make several uses of the oral-written contrasts embedded in this sample, I quote Newman at greater length:

If you wanta know where the [clears throat], shall we call it the corruption? of the language begins and the decline of the language sets in I think it it's the uh principle culprits, are in the academic world. [de Mille: Oh no.] you will have your turn, surely, [laughter, simultaneous voices] I think they're in the academic world, uh and their influence spreads into government, into civil service principally, or what may be called a bureaucracy let me give you an example [Cavett: Good]. This was sent to me, by a professor, uh, writing from San Francisco eh he forwarded an extract, from the agenda of the board of trustees the California State, University and Colleges.

[reading]

In the environmental impact report on the renovation of the stadium of San Jose State University (one reads), traffic congestion will result from vehicular trip generation associated with stadium usage. [laughter] Uh expansion of the stadium will exacerbate neighborhood nuisance impacts by pushing onstreet parking further into a residential area.

[end reading]

Which he translates as, when there are games there will be cars. [laughter] Now this language as I say comes from the academic world and comes from, comes from the government, and those are the principal sources I know that Agnes de Mille does not agree.

Newman's discussion—the development of the argument and his run-on syntax—provides a specimen guide to the different standards that apply in spoken and written persuasion. To specify, his original thesis is both bluntly unqualified and highly unlikely, for it assigns one cause—academe—to a complex phenomenon, the decline of the language, even though there must be many causes. Moreover, although this thesis is almost sure to be resisted unless it is very strongly and variously supported, Newman does not offer such support. Instead, again in a characteristically oral mode, when challenged he repeats his thesis in unmodified terms: whatever is *said* twice lays a double truth-claim on listeners. He also brings out a single anecdote as illustration—the stadium usage impact memorandum. Finally, he offers motives for inflated prose—the need to protect position and pretensions to expertise—that, by their very nature work against his own thesis, since in this society those motives can scarcely be confined to academics.

Indeed, when Newman for the third time presents his thesis at the close, there is a significant concession: the sources of circumlocution may after

all be more complex than had before been allowed, for government bureaucrats have apparently assumed their role as co-villains: "Now this language as I say comes from the academic world and comes from, comes from the government, and those are the principle sources." In short, Newman's speech is characteristic of oral argument, where points often are not so much marshalled in order as mirrored in the process of their emergence in the stream of consciousness.

APPLICATIONS TO BASIC WRITING

For basic writers, the issue is narrower and more special. So it may be useful to remind ourselves of basic writing as it often is:

Yes I agree that television has an effect on young people. Take this example when superman flow out the windows. Alot of kids, tide a rag around there neck and Jumped out the window. But it didn't work. This I readed in the newspaper many years ago. Another thing is that when I was a kid, and I saw T.V. like monster movies or ferry tales. I believed in it. When I grew up I was Let down that none of the things I saw on T.V. were real. I say that television should not be taken away from America. But that it should be more real. Or by Parents being there to answer there kids questions. Television has a lot of ups and downs like new programs that have come out or are going to. Example: Wonder women, The Six Million dollar man. Some of these programs we learn from, But some are just a waste, Example did wonder women come from space! you and I know she didn't but kids do'nt. I say that television should have more learning programs for kids, grewups, and younger people. I would say that we learn from game shows.

A year or two ago this text was used by test scorers of the CUNY proficiency exam in writing as an example of what a typical failure on that exam might look like. In none of what follows do I mean to imply that it is not exactly that. Of more than passing interest, therefore, is the fact that nearly all the errors that distort the surface and stigmatize the contents of this text would, in all likelihood, remain unstigmatized—indeed, remain undetected—in the speech stream, a fact the reader may demonstrate to himself by reading the text as he imagines a student would speak it in a conversation.

Variations, a characteristic of standard speech, are well known to linguists. As Roman Jakobson and Linda Waugh's recent book, *The Sound Shape of Language* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University, 1979), points out, elliptic phonations as condensed as *ten min sem* (ten minutes to seven) and *jijcet* (did you eat yet) in speech are both commonplace and immediately intelligible, while many homonyms (gone,

going, put him, put them), are hallmarks of rapidly-delivered American English.

In the perspective of allowable *speech* variances, then, we can see how trivial the surface feature errors in the basic *writing* sample might appear to its orally-oriented author. Take the first fourteen of these mistakes as representative: flow/flew, alot/a lot, tide/tied, there/their, neck/necks, Jumped/jumped, did'nt/didn't, readed/read, Like/like, ferry/fairy, belived/believed, Let/let, America./America, Parents/parents. Note that nine of these written faults are indistinguishable in speech (alot/a lot, tide/tied, and so on), while three more (neck/necks, ferry/fairy, and belived/believed) are homonyms far closer in sound and, as much to the point, also closer to their correct written counterparts than are either "ten min sem" or "jjcjet." Finally, observe that the source of two of the more stigmatizing variants of the basic writing passage—flow/flown and readed/read—are written hypercorrections for irregular verb conjugations, hypercorrections devised by a writer probably so uneasy about written verb endings generally that he may feel compelled, when really unsure, to do something *very* different with them than what he might normally say.

Put another way, basic writing is often more sensitive to, and sometimes transcribes more accurately, English as it actually is spoken, including some prestige speech variances that surface only in nonstandard texts—for example, "I use to." But the vitality of voice over print obtains for everyone, obtruding even where the printed text is already present and complete, ready for inspection—and even when that inspection is by professionals.

In print it is easy to find such homonym confusions, each of which represents a triumph of sound over sense, for they all too often escape both professional writers and their proofreaders. *The New York Times* internally-distributed stylesheet, *Winners & Sinners*, even prints batches of these mistakes, culled from *The Times'* own published columns, including: "the tone of the piece waivers [wavers] between utter seriousness and outright slapstick;" "In an effort to diffuse [defuse] the truth in testing movement;" "I honestly don't think that Joan Kennedy has to be put through the ringer [wringer];" "The protesters disbursed [dispersed]."⁸

⁸"disbursed/dispersed" and "ringer, wringer" *Winners & Sinners* # 39, Jan 18, 1980. p. 2; "waivers/wavers" and "diffuse defuse": *Winners & Sinners* #40, Sept. 5, 1980. p. 2.

It is from such evidence that I once suggested that Mina Shaughnessy's observation, that "the beginning writer. . . tends to see what he means rather than what he writes," be amended to "hear what he means"—and that this phenomenon is true for professionals as well as beginners.⁹ What has happened—and plainly happens not only in *The Times* but everywhere in writing—is that even a trained eye has been momentarily over-ridden by the more compelling flow of the reader's inner voice; for if sound plays no role, why *homonym* confusion?

Comparatively limited in effect, mistakes such as these remain large in implication. For from such lapses we can graphically observe that error's endless train in part stems from a universal semiotic conflict: the writer's inability to switch off the inner voice that originally dictated, and that upon rereading revoices, written texts. Indeed, our system of transcription almost inevitably reinforces such voicings, for as Jakobson and Waugh observe: "an alphabetic system necessarily prompts its user to associate it, to a high degree, with speech and to transpose the script into an oral performance." (*Sound Shape*, p. 71) That, of course, is why experienced writers often put their freshly-composed work aside for awhile, and only reread it after the inner, dictating voice has had a chance to fade a little; it is then that they can see the writing. The reader's equivalent is the well-known page-proofer's tactic: scanning text backwards so as to effectively cancel revoicing and give the eye its chance to scrutinize written marks undistracted.

Practices such as these, which cope with confusions at the level of the spoken-written sign rather than what is signified, point to both how powerful revoicings are and, at the same time, how unperceived. Thus, students of writing, and basic writing students especially, should be taught how universal their own oral-written dilemmas and confusions are. Knowing about the pervasiveness of ear-to-eye conflicts in reading might help speed the transfer to basic writing of grammatical conventions learned in the abstract, through drill, but inconsistently applied to texts.

PEDAGOGY

Given these conclusions about the pervasiveness of voice in writings, what basic writing students first of all need is:

- to understand that their own inner voices will provide many if not most of the raw materials for writing;

⁹Mina Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* (N.Y.: Oxford, 1977), p. 48.

- to learn the ways these voices must undergo changes, both at the level of the sign and in content, to become acceptable written texts;
- to experience in reading, as all writers do, standard written English passing through their inner oral/aural selves, so that those writerly voices also can chime and echo in consciousness, as alternatives for the more variant social and inner speech. Otherwise spontaneous speech is the sole source for writing, and it is “wrong”—an impossible, paralyzing situation.

Several strategies address these needs directly. Thomas Farrell and Joseph Collignon have each delineated one important path to basic writing sound-to-written-sign competences: having students read aloud. Collignon reports results that appear highly promising; they lend some support to his hypothesis that the “ability to read aloud means that [basic writing students] then have the power to produce their own ‘sound’ on paper.”¹⁰ This seems a little far-reaching as a conclusion, although an ability to read aloud with fluency must surely narrow the gap between voice and page, if only because the audible passage of written English forms through the oral/aural self eventually provides a repertory of such structures for future writing.

To complement, extend and reinforce Collignon’s methods, and to move students closer to actual writing, I also wish to recommend practicing with the oral dictation of written texts. In foreign language study it is a venerable technique, and just as Collignon discovered that reading aloud has its precedent in Osgood and McGuffey, my antecedent is Rollo Walter Brown’s *How the French Boy Learns to Write*, which NCTE reprinted in 1965 from Brown’s 1915 original.

In that work Brown compared the transcribing abilities of American and French students. When he did so he noted that eleven and twelve year old French schoolboys could transcribe English dictation with far fewer errors in spelling and mechanics than American schoolboys or even American college students writing their own language. Specifically, in “200 pages of exercises written in English by French boys ranging in age from nine to twelve years” Brown discovered “seven misspelled words” (61). Yet from a 500-student sample of American schoolboys, he got only

¹⁰Joseph Collignon, “Why Leroy Can’t Write,” *College English*, 39 (1978), 852-859; see also his “Did You Say *Spuriously*? No, I Said *Furiously*,” *College English*, 42 (1980), 18-24. Thomas Farrell’s recommendation is in “Developing Literacy: Walter J. Ong & Basic Writing,” *The Journal of Basic Writing*, 2 (1978), 37.

eleven perfect papers—2.2 percent. And when Brown dictated an anecdote in English to 500 American college freshmen, he got in return just forty-seven perfect transcriptions—under 10 percent.

Brown attributes this French writing competence almost entirely to dictation, “the chief means of its early development” (62). And certainly reading aloud and taking dictation both address directly, and in context rather than isolation, the basic writer’s failure to permute in conventional ways from voice to text. Better still, both methods are far less mechanical and fragmenting than many of the drills they might replace, with their vocabulary and spelling lists, their sets of prefixes and suffixes, their sets of rules that subsume other often bewildering lists of exceptions to those same rules.

Brown himself makes the point, noting that in France, “I saw no spelling whatever of isolated lists of words such as we have in our spelling books. Instead. . .the pupils write the words from dictation in a normal context, and afterwards discuss any difficulties” (62).

There are other advantages to reading aloud and taking dictation. Both retrace with written forms the oral/aural paths through which the language is originally learned, and therefore are in a line of progression that is natural to us—from the familiar modes of speaking and listening to the more abstracted ones, reading and writing. At least as important, these activities allow mimesis to work its powers so that as teachers we need no longer rely solely on analysis and memory, as we too often do. For it is through mimesis, not analysis, that every good writer I ever heard of established his own prose voice.

But reading aloud and taking dictation are rote work compared to the actual writing. Students must progress from these activities to the ones that show how writing, by permuting voices, most often is invented, as well as merely revised, edited, or transcribed. And while a certain fraction of what follows may seem advanced study for basic writers—it is frequently drawn from classes in freshman English with better-prepared students—it is offered here because it points out paths across terrain all writers must cross.

The teaching format is simple enough. Present the class with the transcription of a raw tape, such as the Edwin Newman transcription, and ask what the class thinks of that tape as writing. When someone says how terrible it is (and they do), I say, “Fix it.”

On occasion even my regular freshman writing classes find it difficult to revise raw tapes; they hear too clearly the voices behind them. But it is not hard to find ways to mediate their difficulties. By pairing orally-oriented written materials—say, *Huckleberry Finn*—with raw voice tapes, one

fictional speaker paired with one actual tape, the facts of speech performance in all their accidental, fragmentary incoherences may be contrasted with the fiction-writer's invariably more orderly, artful representations.

In addition, television stations will often furnish the public with transcripts for a dollar or two: MacNeill-Lehrer, Buckley, Cavett and others. The transcripts already are edited into some semblance of coherence by their distributors, so these renderings can be compared with segments of the actual raw tape typed up for the class. Students then can confer over the two versions and try to produce from them a more truly finished and written text.

Usually, however, my freshmen go rather cheerfully about their tasks of deleting, adding, substituting, and correcting, for they take pleasure in editing the famous, in all their sinful variances, at least as much as editing me, or their classmates, or themselves. I confine myself to a single activity: categorizing, in an *ad hoc* way, the kinds of revisions the class makes, and recording these categories on the blackboard ("Oh you mean the sentence is unclear because the syntax is scrambled?") Here is one such list, inductively assembled by my freshmen in their first pass at revising the first few lines of Edwin Newman's tape:

- correcting oral to standard written verb form
- cutting deadwood
- establishing sentence boundaries (correcting run-ons, fragments)
- unscrambling sentence syntax
- dividing words
- adding or deleting commas
- inserting or correcting transitions to indicate discourse relation and direction
- substituting noun for pronoun (vague reference)
- reorganizing discourse into better sequence

Below is Newman's first (and thesis-bearing) sentence as originally spoken:

If you wanta know where the shall we call it the corruption of the language begins, the decline of the language sets in I think it it's the uh principle culprits are in the academic world.

Here are two successive revisions by the class:

If you want to know where the corruption of the language begins, it is in the academic world.

And then, after some discussion about the legitimacy of “If you want to know” in a written text:

The decline and fall of the language begins in the academic world.

Revisions like these may appear simpler than they are, even to freshmen. In fact the operations required are complex. To achieve an acceptable written version of that one sentence, the class created the first six of the nine categories on my revision list, even though in this exercise they merely were trying to regularize the syntax and grammar and clarify the existing sense of Newman’s statement. Even about this small exemplum two further points need to be made. The first is minor: “decline and fall” was first inadvertently substituted for “decline and corruption” via a slip of the tongue during class discussion, and then deliberately inserted in our version of Newman for the stronger connotative echo: it thus provided a small but living illustration of one way orally-assimilated *writing* can legitimately resound in later compositions.

The second point is more general, and central. Revising voices nearly always entails heavy cutting. A word count therefore always follows my classroom revision sessions, for there is no better way to demonstrate how to eliminate deadwood. Here, Newman’s original thirty-five words were trimmed to twelve, even though Newman, a trained journalist and speaker, in this same passage was expressing his admiration for the succinct.

Students learn a great deal just from “fix it” sessions, much of it inductively, and some, indeed, without any kind of explicit instruction at all. For these sessions develop concrete revision strategies and editing techniques that the students can begin to apply to their own inner voices as they revise their own first drafts. In consequence, the blackboard notes I write out become student revising and editing checklists.

Students do, however, need several further kinds of guidance here. For one thing, early written drafts vary in their fidelity to inner voice. Some writers—even some student writers—revise those voices so smoothly as they set down a first draft that very few of voice’s vagaries appear; what emerges is close to final text. And some go too far in the same direction; they present a text altogether devoid of voice, a re-creation not of voice but of the kind of academic-bureaucratic diction Newman offered up for ridicule in the tape just cited, wherein “traffic congestion will result from vehicular trip generation associated with stadium usage.” Students need to recognize that such prose represents another extreme of bad writing—not an overly-oral text but a literally overwritten one, a prose entirely

divorced from speech because it is exclusively confined to terms and structures no one would ever utter. So, along with the Newman tape, we also discuss other written specimens of deliberately depersonalized and disfigured bureaucratic circumlocution and bloat. The class rewrites the passages, and as they do so, some students learn for the first time and in a new way that it is apt written analogues for voice, not the obliteration of voice, that they are seeking to establish in their text.

The next step is to play back the tapes of the transcriptions the class has been struggling to clarify as writing, so the students can hear for themselves the same tapes' lucidity as speech. That lucidity now startles them, and they then can compare directly voice's ways of meaning to writing's smaller, more schematic repertory of signs, and inquire why the class was compelled to do what it did in its revisions to restore the coherence of voice to prose text. That is, they learn that if print strips voice of much of its signifying melody, then in compensation writing's syntax had better be regularized, its words made more exact, its ideas more explicit.

In such contexts I also find that for my students much else now lies open in the realm of print. For one thing, they can read and interpret other writers far more easily—especially writers whose voice is manifestly important—by deriving from texts the intonations that now are perceived to echo in them. As one illustration, I often lead off with that long and famous sentence from Martin Luther King's "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," that makes clear why Blacks "find it difficult to wait" for equal treatment. King's sentence begins "when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim," and goes on for a dozen parallel clauses that fill three-quarters of a printed page to establish his claim. In those prose cadences students can hear as well as see the unmistakable passion of a writer matching his people's wounding history to his own private griefs in order to create a set of written structures that work cumulatively. Examining them, students can discern how a writer's syntactic patterns establish his compelling voice in the reader's consciousness.

Writing is then seen for what, to repeat, I believe it chiefly is: an orchestration of voice. Naturally enough, my classes therefore look at poetry along with prose—poems being so much more obviously patterned for revoicing. They read stories shaped by a strong narrator's accent (for example Frank O'Connor's "Judas," Alice Walker's "Everyday Use"); or stories that deliver the speech of their characters clearly (Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants"); or journals and letters that speak directly in the writer's accents; or speeches and sermons designed to be spoken

formally; and, finally, strongly-argued essays, such as King's "Letter."

We move on to writings in which voice is not so readily apparent. It is important to view, from the perspective offered here, documents like technical manuals and business reports too. Strongly-sequenced and clearly-patterned, these now reveal themselves in their implacably directive, declarative tones.

There is a deeper general advantage to all this. Somewhere along the line, some students cease to conceive of writing as a prisonhouse of rules and come instead to view it a little more as Robert Frost viewed metrics—a kind of real-life game that is all the more interesting because, as in all games, there are inherent constraints to elicit the player's ingenuity and skill.

Of the preceding, despite all implications, it still might be said: it is mostly stylistics. But movement direct to revision of speech content is easy too, and should be encouraged. To do so, one might try the following:

- offer transcriptions of tapes of classroom sessions, and work on those. The question before the class is: "What was the speaker trying to say?"
- present any transcription and ask: "What is the main idea behind this? What are its supports? Evaluate each, make an outline or written list, and rewrite the tape. Include new ideas where needed."

When working with class transcriptions, have the original speakers of the tapes attend class so that the class interpretations of the content and the speaker's actual intent may be compared—an opportunity not to be missed, since both congruences and divergences are highly instructive. To have this happen the original speakers must remain silent until the class has arrived at its own view of the meaning, however much they are bursting to explain what the tape "really meant to say." (That opportunity, of course, must always be provided eventually.)

In its discussion, the class must move beyond attributions to motive—the student equivalent of how virtuous and democratic Terkel transparently wants to appear, and so on. These are matters about which students often prove ruthlessly discerning, and their insights are all to the good, of course, but the discussion must proceed to the subject matter itself, and the smoothest path from speaker to subject often is to conceive point-of-view in senses other than emotional bent—that is, to judge how inclusively a subject is described, to list and evaluate the detail, to conceive what should be deleted, what added.

To perform these operations is to begin to abstract, to infer concepts

from an oral performance that often is made up merely of what Vygotsky saw as chains of associations. Thereby students find for themselves how writers work: first, gathering and grouping materials associatively, then organizing and reorganizing them by developing hierarchies that occupy many more rungs on the ladder of abstraction than utterances customarily do.

Before such revision can begin, however, the class needs to confront another phenomenon common and expressive enough in speech, but disallowed in writing—the “saturated word” of inner speech, a single word so soaked with multiple meanings that, as Vygotsky comments, “many words would be required to explain it in external speech.” Such saturation of course also occurs in external speech; it is, in fact, another evidence of the powers of speech melody that we learn so much more than conversation’s strikingly limited vocabularies alone could convey. “Those *stupid* conferences,” a student complains in Shaughnessy’s *Errors*; “those *boring* chemistry classes,” my freshmen say. When I ask them just what “stupid” means, the possibilities flow for some time: uncomfortable, mechanical, without content, emotionally cold, threatening, repetitive, irrelevant. “Boring” is a blur word of even greater depth and density, called upon as it is to dismiss matters that are no challenge because they are overfamiliar or too easy (“we did it a million boring times”); that are too hard and therefore threatening (“what a boring lecture; I couldn’t understand a word”); for occasions that otherwise frustrate or diminish the accuser’s self-esteem (“those boring cliques on the senate committee”); finally, for situations that coerce, overtly or covertly (“Those boring sermons about reforming my work habits”).

Writing, as we can then see, is a mode of learning in good part because it explicates these saturated words of speech, teasing often unsuspected ideas out of the distinctions imbued in our commonplace spoken blurts. In writing we separate and elaborate, construing those blurry terms to display their manifold meanings, meanings that in both senses often become more telling than the original utterance, however vehement. Similarly, after we cut the unneeded verbiage of individual sentences we then discover that speech often must be greatly *amplified* to meet writing’s need for increased explicitness—for thesis statement, for context-setting and topic limitation, for reasoned qualification, for teasing out implications, for proofs, for the acknowledgment of the complexity of issues.¹¹

¹¹Vygotsky, p. 144. Flower’s “Writer-Based Prose” also notes the prevalence of saturated words in much student writing.

It is important that taped transcriptions be kept of these classroom revision sessions too, and that the class on occasion consult written excerpts from them. For from these records students can confirm yet again the markedly different effects of spoken and written forms of argument—more specifically, how the positive impact of some kinds of *spoken* persuasion (reiteration, confrontational tactics, approximate analogies, epithets, homilies, personal appeals, outright intimidation) may work in face-to-face exchanges to win disputes but, more frequently than not, are disqualified when offered as *written* discourse.

Thus begins the creation, as a joint class enterprise, of the writer's persona—that reasoned, cool-headed, fair-minded, meticulous, considerate, informed figure who stands behind written persuasion. Helping to incarnate him must be the group ego of the class as audience, in part shaped by the teacher's guidance, into the ideal reader the class will first role-play and then really become: a reader who is comparatively unprejudiced, willing to be informed if appealed to with logic or proofs, and always patient enough to read a presentation through—if, that is, there is a clear design to follow, preferably foreshadowed early in the text—and if the subject is elaborated or supported by a reliable and equally fair-minded presenter.

Some of this evolution to writer and reader's persona is spontaneous; students often strive to be even-handed. And as long as they are, the teacher's role may remain passive; he may confine his activity to writing up additional lists for revision strategies. Those lists are not editing codes this time, but methods by which to buttress oral arguments as they turn into written positions: ways to define, limit and qualify; to note logical fallacies as they appear; to discuss both the weaknesses and the powers of written comparisons and analogies; to offer guidelines for allowable inferences, causes, and effects; to single out appeals to prejudice, stereotypical thinking, conventional wisdom and so on. Essayists are made that way, in the living presences, and through the sounds of contributory voices, from revising (and audibly self-revising) peers and mentors.