


2010

# 0 Table of Contents and Introduction

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Elbow, Peter, "0 Table of Contents and Introduction" (2010). *Emeritus Faculty Author Gallery*. 27.  
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## **BOOK TITLE: Vernacular Eloquence: Enlisting Speech for Writing**

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## INTRODUCTION

We seem to have two worlds of writing. There’s a newish world where lots of people are busy all hours of the day and night emailing, tweeting, and blogging on the internet. Students startle their professors by sending chatty emails in the slang they use with buddies on Facebook. Much writing in this new world is a kind of “speaking onto the screen,” indeed plenty of people, especially “literate people,” don’t consider this writing to *be* writing. “*Email? That’s not writing!*” But in fact, people have been writing in everyday vernacular spoken language for centuries in diaries, informal personal letters, grocery lists, and exploratory musings to figure out thoughts or feelings. (The central terms here, “speech” and “writing,” are slippery. I’ll do some careful defining in the Introductions to Parts One and Two.)

But writing on line and in diaries does not destroy a second world of “literate” writing—*real* writing--the serious writing that people have to do for school, college, workplace, the larger world of literacy: all kinds of essays, articles, reports, studies, and memos. Think of job application letters. Most magazine and book writing is supposed to be literate--along with most newspaper writing and even letters to the editor. I’m trying to write literate or correct writing in this book--more or less.

“Literate” implies Edited Written English (EWE)--where “edited” means “correct”--which means standardized English (“standard” or prestige English), and “no mistakes.” Students are constantly warned not to confuse their everyday speech with “serious” writing. EWE or standardized written English is a dialect or language that differs in grammar and register from everyday speech. The distance between everyday speech and literate writing is most obvious in the case of speech that people often call “bad”: nonprestige versions of English like Black or Latino English. But even I, growing up white, comfortable middle class, middle Atlantic--growing into a version of English called “standard” and even “good”--even I am not supposed to use my everyday unmonitored talk-language for serious writing. In short, “*correct writing*” is *no one’s mother tongue*.

So we have two worlds of writing. In one, people feel free to speak onto the screen or page; in the other people feel pressured to avoid speech on the page. I won’t join the chorus of people who lament all the bad writing in the first world of email and web. I see problems with both worlds. I’d say that *most* writing is not very good, whether it’s literate writing or “e-writing,” and whether it comes from students, amateurs, well educated people, or learned scholars. Considering all that’s written and

published, not so much is really smart, interesting, and worth reading--not so much gives “delight and instruction” (to use Horace’s formulation). My goal in this book is to show how to improve *careful literate* writing, though what I say will help people write better casual emails and tweets.

It’s a *third* relationship to speech that I am suggesting: not simply using or reproducing careless speech, as with so much everyday internet writing; yet not running away from speech either, as correct writing so often does. This approach welcomes careless speech for the rich *resources* it has--yet insists equally on conscious *care* to decide what is valuable in careless speech and what needs changing. I’ll be describing a way of relating to speech that many genuinely good writers have been using all along. What I offer can help more people write better and more teachers teach better.

Instead of focusing on email and twitter, I’ll try to show how high stakes writing--serious, formal and “literate”--can be even more careful and better, paradoxically enough, if it enlists the various resources of careless speech. We can find these resources in the kind of speech we don’t have to think about or monitor, the kind of language that we blurt. Much of this book is an extended analysis of the many unnoticed features of everyday speaking and spoken language that are sorely needed for good careful writing. You might say that this book represents my love affair with speech—along with my conviction that (despite this metaphor) I can bring her home to live with me and my long true love, writing.

The obsession that has kept me energized for the many years of writing this book takes the form of both anger and excitement. I’ve long been angry at how our present culture of “proper literacy” tells us that we are supposed to do our serious writing in EWE--the prestige, correct, edited version of standardized English or what I will sometimes call “correct writing.” This helps explain a lot that we see about serious writing in the world. Many people say smart, eloquent, interesting things in speaking but don’t feel that writing is an option for them because they feel excluded by it. Many other people have learned to *manage* or *handle* “correct English,” but in doing so, they tangle up their writing into language that’s far less clear and interesting than they could have used in talking. And finally, even those who *can* write competently or even well—even they are often reluctant to write, and they are continually distracted as they write by questions of correctness or propriety.

I can’t change our culture’s more or less single standard for the language of serious literate writing (though I’ll discuss in the last two chapters a radical change that’s coming faster than most of us realize). But I can show how speakers of all the many versions of English can not only *use* their most comfortable home language or mother tongue in the process of serious writing, but in fact *improve* their serious writing by doing so.

My excitement is newer than my anger. For most of my career, I’ve known how useful it is to invite *wrong* writing on the way to right writing--as when we use freewriting. What’s new is the realization that freewriting calls on *speech* and that even though it’s wrong for most serious writing, it’s full of linguistic and rhetorical virtues that most people can’t find when they are engaged in serious writing.

So I’ll be suggesting two major practical ways to enlist speech for writing: by talking onto the page at the early stages of writing and by reading aloud to revise at the late stages. These two uses of the tongue can help people write better and with more enjoyment--both those who already write and the many who don’t.

But I need to make clear that I am not dealing with the entire process of writing in this book. I mostly ignore the central activity of *revising* in its earlier substantive stages—the careful conscious process of trying to get our thinking and organization straight. I don’t see much role for speech in this important weighty work--except for the obvious value of talking things over with others.

If practical advice were my *only* goal, however, this book would be much shorter. My larger project here is to invite readers to *rethink* the very nature of speech and writing and how they relate to each other. Above all, I want to rethink what our culture means by *literacy*.

I might as well state here my underlying claim in all its nakedness: Every person who has some version of English as a native language *already* knows enough to produce excellent writing in English and good enough punctuation--even if they speak a nonprestige version of English and don't read much. This claim needs some qualification of detail:

- Careful substantive revising requires careful thinking. Not everyone can do that, but it doesn't take new knowledge, it takes practice.
- Much serious writing requires a final draft in "correct English." To produce this without help--to get rid of everything commonly seen as mistakes or bad or wrong English--requires specialized knowledge that we don't get for free with our native spoken language.
- When people want to write in certain genres about substantive topics--for example about politics or climate change or God--they can't usually produce excellent writing without some of the substantive information and vocabulary that goes with those topics. Still, in certain genres like personal essays, creative nonfiction, or poetry, it *is* possible to write excellently about politics, climate change, or God without any special knowledge.

I'm not claiming that good writing is easy. Just because we know enough to do something well doesn't make it easy. Good writing almost always takes struggle and hard work. As John Dewey insisted, the mere *possession* of knowledge or experience is not enough; we have to *reflect* on it--work with it and exploit it in ways that I explore in the book. In Part Three, for example, I emphasize the need to stop and listen to and reflect on the spoken language we get for free with our native speech.

Still, I stand by the naked claim as a useful summary of the book: everyone with a native language has what it takes to write well and punctuate adequately.

Much of what I suggest here is a call for more work with the mouth and ear. Our knowledge of our native language is mostly tacit. It's as though it's in the body--almost kinesthetic. We don't have to think consciously to use our spoken vernacular in all its complexity. When the linguist Tom Roeper looks at how humans (especially children) speak with mastery of their native language, he notes that "The body is just an extension of the mind" (20). (See too, Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*.) But in order to use the tacit knowledge in our mouths and ears for good writing, we will need to engage in plenty of conscious reflection and thinking.

Nor do I run away from putting my argument in its negative form: that our culture of literacy functions as though it were a plot against the spoken voice, the body, vernacular language, and the unentitled. That is, our pervasive cultural assumptions about speech, writing, and literacy--especially as they are communicated through schooling--seem as though they were designed to make it harder than necessary for people to become comfortably and powerfully literate. The seeds of this book have lain dormant in my first book about writing, *Writing Without Teachers*. I will argue that it is possible to learn to write well without formal instruction. In fact, such instruction sometimes gets in the way. But of course I am trying to provide instruction of a sort in this book.

In the last section, I'll try to show that we are moving with surprising speed toward a different culture of literacy--"vernacular literacy"--in which all spoken vernaculars of English will be considered valid for serious writing. Writing will no longer be judged against *two* standards as it is now: quality and correctness. The only standard for both writers and readers will be the primal one: is the writing any good?

For this development, Dante provides a model. In a small book, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, he argued that the vernacular language of children and nursemaids was in fact *nobler* than Latin—and this in the fourteenth century when Latin was the only language considered acceptable for serious writing. I'm not claiming that the various vernacular versions of everyday spoken English are in themselves nobler than edited written English--merely that they contain a rich store of eloquent linguistic resources that are badly needed *even* for our most careful and formal written English. (I started out borrowing Dante's title, "Vulgar Eloquence," for mine, but *vulgari* in Latin doesn't mean "vulgar" in English; it means "ordinary" and "of the people." I loved the way this mistranslation or etymological pun suggested my theme: a word that used to mean *ordinary* and *of the people* has slid into meaning *coarse*, *dirty*, or *obscene*. But I finally decided that the combination of words, "Vulgar Eloquence: Enlisting Speech" made it sound like I was trying to celebrate profanity. I'm not, I'm trying to celebrate the vernacular speech of all people.

### **What Kind of Book Is This?**

*Is this a practical book about how to write or a book of theory?* It's certainly not a step-by-step manual or practical handbook. My main goal is to change how everyone *thinks* about writing and literacy. I seek to change the widespread tendency to stress the differences between speech and writing, and encourage us instead to see all kinds of useful similarities, overlaps, and hybrids. That makes the book theoretical; yet the theory is practical because I describe two concrete practical activities that will help people write better and with more satisfaction.

*Is this a book for a broad audience or for teachers and scholars?* When I wrote *Writing Without Teachers* in 1973, I didn't worry about teachers and scholars. I was trying to stand on a hilltop and shout to everyone who wants to write. But teachers and scholars eventually read my book and it affected the way many of them thought about writing and taught it. This time I'm making my job harder by trying for a more diverse audience: not just writers and potential writers and teachers, but also scholars and researchers—and also people in the general intellectual community who think about writing and literacy but don't care about the scholarship. I can't pretend I've mastered the frightening array of scholarly fields that this book bears on. But I have explored in some of them and I will occasionally refer to at least some of the important scholarship and research.

How can I speak to scholars without clogging up the text for more general readers? I won't use footnotes, but I have put bits of scholarly or background discussion into shaded boxes, using a different and smaller font--right at the spot on the page where they pertain. My main text will march along, wrapping around these boxes. Readers can simply glance at the boxes and decide on the spot whether to skip, skim, or read. They won't have to turn to the end of the chapter or book or even to the bottom of the page. I love the information, ideas, and complications in these boxes and deep down wish everyone would read every one, but I recognize that they will slow down many readers who simply want to follow my main line of thinking. [*In this unpublished draft MS, I've put my boxes into smaller print in the same font—not bothering to make the main text wrap around them.*] The material in the boxes is not usually very technical, however, and will often interest general readers who care about writing.

*How does this book differ from two of my earlier books, Writing Without Teachers and Writing With Power?* In this book I'm working out a theory, whereas in those books I was trying to be mostly practical. In this book I'm implying same writing *process* that I explicitly advised in those books: a dialectical alternation between easy freewriting and drafting on the one hand, and careful conscious revising and editing on the other. But conceptually, those books were framed entirely in terms of *writing*. This one is framed in terms of *speech*: till now, I didn't understand the role of speech and spoken language in writing--even in freewriting.

## Overview of Sections

*Part One: What's Best in Speaking and Writing?* I explore here the various advantages in each way of using language. We cannot hope to have writing with *all* the best features of both speaking and writing, but it's feasible and helpful to try to get as close as possible to that ideal.

*Part Two. A Role for the Tongue During the Early Stages of Writing—Treating Speech as Writing.* It turns out that there are many virtues in unplanned careless spoken language--virtues that we seldom notice because such language is usually unsatisfactory for serious careful good writing. We can enlist many of these virtues during the early exploratory and drafting stages of writing by "speaking onto the page"--letting our fingers be guided by the mental process we use effortlessly in everyday speaking. Freewriting is the easiest and most obvious way to learn this process. When we revise with care, we can *retain* those virtues of easy speech--even for writing that ends up "correct" and far from speech--and get rid of what's not suitable.

*Part Three: A Role for the Tongue During the Late Stages of Writing—Reading Aloud and Treating Writing as Speech.* Careful reading aloud is far different from careless speaking, but it's another powerful way to use the untutored tongue for writing. After we have done substantive revising to get our thinking and organization as strong as we can manage, we can harness this process of careful reading out loud for the late stage of revising. If we read our words aloud carefully with full investment--and if we then fiddle and adjust our words till they feel right in the mouth and sound right in the ear--the resulting language will be strong and clear. It may not be correct for standardized English, and the register might be too colloquial for the genre we are using, but it will have what's most precious and hard to get in writing: clarity and strength. Problems in correctness and register can be fixed during final revising. Reading aloud is not just for sentences. It will also help us improve weaknesses in longer passages and in organization.

In contrast to easy speaking onto the page--a generative process that invites unplanned careless language--careful reading aloud is an editing or testing process that involves critical, self-conscious scrutiny. Where speaking onto the page accepts everything that comes to mouth, reading aloud rejects and reshapes what is unclear and awkward and shapeless. Yet both processes rely entirely on the untutored tongue, indeed on the body--on the linguistic knowledge that we have somehow internalized and made tacit since toddlerhood.

*Part Four: Vernacular Literacy.* Our present culture of proper literacy involves a more or less single grammatical standard for serious literate writing--that is, for Edited Written English. I don't defend this standard, but I assume that it will be with us for the time being. It makes writing harder because it differs from everyone's native spoken language. Few students or professionals can prosper unless they produce writing that is "correct." So for most of the book, I am addressing a short-term pragmatic goal: how to use our untutored tongues--our various spoken vernaculars--to make it easier to write pieces that will end up meeting that single standard of prestige nonspeaking language.

But in this final section, first I look more closely at the difficulties caused by our single standard; then I look forward to a new culture of literacy in which the various versions of spoken English will finally be accepted as appropriate and valid for serious important writing. This development may sound implausible, but I explore many reasons why our present culture of literacy is bringing it to birth. It took four or five hundred years for Dante's Florentine spoken vernacular to become the accepted standard for serious writing in Italy, but it's only a matter of decades before we see our new culture of vernacular literacy.

It may scare people to contemplate this new culture of vernacular literacy. It will introduce an anarchy we are not used to in literacy. But writing on the world wide web is changing fast what many people expect and are willing to accept and enjoy. I explore how our culture will begin to take it in

stride and how in fact it will *advance* literacy in the true sense: more people learning to write better in more ways, and more people finding excellent things to read. We'll no longer have the present situation in which potential writers get the following message:

*First show that you can write correctly. Then we'll see whether you can write anything good.*

In the new culture of vernacular literacy, the only standard for both writers and readers will be the primal one: is the writing any good? Readers will learn better what they are already starting to learn: if they want good writing, they need to look for it in spoken versions of English--even in versions different from their own.

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## EXPANDED TABLE OF CONTENTS

With this Expanded Table of Contents, I'm trying to give a clear map of my extended line of argument. There's probably no point in reading it before you start reading the book, but it may prove useful after you've put the book down for a few days.

**Introduction.** Goals and purposes.

### **PART ONE. Can We Get The Best Of Speaking And Writing?**

**Introduction.** Three definitions of speech and writing: speaking by mouth versus writing by fingers; audible words in time versus visible words in space; language that comes from the mouth versus language that comes from the fingers.

**1. Speaking and Writing as They Are Used in Culture.** Speech and writing are used differently in different cultures. For example, in our modern Western culture, writing tends to be felt as more weighty and serious than speaking; in some cultures it's the other way around. In our culture casual speech is widely accepted even on some serious occasions; in others, it is frowned upon.

**2. What's Good About Writing?** An exploration of potentialities of the medium itself--apart from whether any given culture exploits those potentialities. For example, writing is especially good for communicating at a distance in time and space; and for exploring our thinking, looking back over it, revising it, getting responses from trusted allies, and revising further. It's also good for private language use.

**3. Speaking as a Process: What Can It Offer Writing?** An exploration of the advantages of speaking as a process--potentialities. For example, speaking is a fast easy way to produce language and thinking. It's especially good for connecting with an audience.

**4. Speech as a Product: Nine Virtues in Careless Spoken Language that Careful Writing Needs.** For example, typical spoken language tends to promote flexible, lively and complex syntax and to avoid too much abstraction and nominalization. It tends to show a gift for nutshelling or "gisting" complex arguments, and it is often actually more coherent than typical writing in some surprising ways.

**5. Intonation: A Virtue for Writing Found at the Root of Everyday Speech.** In all languages, humans tend to break their everyday speaking into intonation units or tone phrases that are musically or architecturally shaped by features like pitch, rhythm, and stress. They are usually no more than two seconds long and separated by discernible pauses. Good writing is



also shaped by intonation units, in fact good writing often leads readers actually to hear some intonational architecture in their mind's ear.

**6. Can We Really Have the Best of Both Worlds?** No. It's not possible to have a medium and process of writing that brings in everything good about speaking and gets rid of everything bad about writing. But progress toward unattainable goals is possible. Also, I explore four common kinds of writing that suggest ways to enlist speech.

## **PART TWO. A Role for the Tongue in the Early Stages of Writing: Treating Speech as Writing.**

**Introduction.** One more definition of speech and writing: mental speaking versus mental writing. Mental speaking produces unplanned unmonitored language--whether from mouth or fingers. Mental writing produces planned or careful or monitored language--whether from mouth or fingers.

**7. Freewriting: An Obvious and Easy Way to Learn to Speak onto the Page.** It's a simple exercise that teaches people to use mental speaking for physical writing and harness many of the virtues of speech.

**8. Where Else Do We See Easy Speaking onto the Page?** When we look at a text, we cannot tell what process produced it unless we were there to watch. Still, it helps to notice that "mental speaking onto the page" is common, for example in emails, blogs, diaries, and casual personal letters.

**9. Objections to Speaking onto the Page--And Responses.** Objections are understandable and worth looking at.

**10. The Need for Care: Unplanned Speaking onto the Page is Never Enough.** We can't get sustained pieces of excellent writing without careful, deliberative, decision making--"mental writing." Yet care is not enough. Care has led to lots of bad writing. For careful decisions that lead to *good* writing, we need what we learn from easy speaking.

## **PART THREE. A Role for the Tongue in Late Revising: Reading Aloud--Treating Writing as Speech.**

**Introduction.** More defining: What do people mean by "standard written" and "standard spoken" language?

**11. Revising by Reading Aloud: What the Mouth and the Ear Know.** If we read our sentences aloud with care and investment and then fiddle with the language till it feels right in the mouth and sounds right in the ear, those sentences will be strong and clear. But they still may not be right for the appropriate register, genre, or for "correct" edited written English.

**12. How Does Reading Aloud Improve Writing?** Revising by reading aloud leads to language with well shaped intonation units. When intonation is well shaped, the syntax fits well with the meaning and that meaning comes across to readers more clearly. The process calls the untutored tongue but in a way that is completely different from unplanned speaking.

**13. Punctuation: Living with Two Traditions.** Some history. Our present day conventions for correct punctuation are caught between two traditions: a rhetorical or elocutionary tradition and a grammar-based tradition.

**14. Good Enough Punctuation by Careful Reading Aloud and Listening.** I explore why this surprising method works. It requires thoughtful practice and training. I provide a

collection of specific examples to show where this process leads to punctuation that fits present day conventions of correctness and where it doesn't.

**15. How Speech Can Improve Organization in Writing: Form as Energy.** We can see a page of writing laid out in space, but we can read it only one sentence at a time in the realm of time. Readers of text--like listeners of music--are trapped in time. This fact has important implications for the organization of writing. Well organized writing is not so much like a set of well structured objects in space; it's more like a coherent sequence of events in the realm of time. I give some specific suggestions for better organization of writing.

**16. The Benefits of Speaking onto the Page and Reading Aloud.** I explore how the practices described in Parts Two and Three can help three groups: toddlers and other newcomers to literacy; more or less competent mainstream writers; and speakers of nonstandardized and stigmatized languages.

## **PART FOUR. Vernacular Literacy**

**Introduction:** Dante and Vernacular Eloquence

**17. How Our Culture of Proper Literacy tries to Exclude Speech.** Our pervasive cultural assumptions about speech, writing, and literacy function as though they were designed to make it harder than necessary for people to become comfortably and powerfully literate--as though there were a plot against vernacular language, against the spoken voice, against the body, and against the unentitled.

**18. A New Culture of Vernacular Literacy on the Horizon.** We are moving with surprising speed toward a new culture of vernacular literacy in which all versions of English will be valid for serious writing. Writing will no longer be judged against two standards, correctness and quality. The only question for both writers and readers will be the primal one: is it any good?

## **LITERACY STORIES**

Between most chapters there are short interludes: interesting moments in the history or development of literacy. They will serve as interesting examples of how the standards of literacy and the nature of the grapholect are produced by cultural and political forces and are thus often surprising and contingent--anything but inevitable. Examples. How Charlemagne brought Alcuin from England to impose old Roman Latin ("book Latin") on writing--thereby disempowering the different spoken Latins all around Europe. How Fowler and his brother made up the rule about the distinction between "that" and "which"--and then changed their minds and took it back--leaving the rule in place for Americans but not the British. How a seventeenth century king of Korea reformed the writing system to make literacy much more available to more of his subjects—and how Chairman Mao came close to doing the same thing in China (by introducing the Western alphabet), and then changed his mind.

## **Some Works Cited**

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