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12. How Does Reading Aloud Improve Writing

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DRAFT**Chapter 12****How Does Reading Aloud Improve Writing?**

“I feel weak places at once when I read aloud where I thought, as long as I read to myself only, that the passage was all right.” Samuel Butler’s simple words are all the explanation we need for the practical job of revising. But for this book, I’d like to delve deeper into how and why the process works.

Reading aloud intensifies our own experience of our own words by increasing our bodily experience them: we get to feel them with our mouths and hear them in our ears and indeed experience them in our bodies--not just see with the eye and understand with the mind. Multiple channels of perception give us a much richer and stronger experience of language. When we revise, we come at our words from the outside, but reading aloud takes that *outside* perspective and puts it *inside* us.

Why do we so commonly glance in a mirror as we pass one? More often than not, we want a glimpse of how others see us. Reading aloud gives us a glimpse of how readers hear us. When we hear ourselves speak the words we’ve written, it’s almost as though we’ve magically brought another person into the room. Reading aloud vastly increases audience awareness.

Spoken Intonational Sound Carries Meaning

It’s the role of *intonation* (the topic of Chapter 5) that is most rich and interesting to explore here. When humans talk, they invariably chunk their language into intonation units or prosodic phrases. “[S]poken language . . . is typically produced in brief spurts, each showing a coherent pitch contour and usually followed by a pause” (Chafe, “Good Punctuation” 6). The pauses between these units reflect limitations on human attention: both speakers and listeners can focus their full attention on only small bits of incipient meaning at a time. The speaker needs time for thinking and the listener needs time for processing. Imagine how hard it would be to understand speakers if they put out a continuous stream of speech with no breaks. Chafe shows that these intonation units in speech typically last only two seconds, and so of course they are too short and fragmented for good writing. Usually. Speech is often fragmented and interrupted in ways we don’t want in our writing--but not always.

Let me illustrate again the power of intonation to help convey meaning as I begin to turn our attention to writing. Remember that frustratingly tangled passage I quoted in the last chapter about election results--as a sample for a revising workshop? You must have noticed how hard you had to work as *reader* to extract the meaning. But I can make your work much easier by “reading it outloud” for you. Of course I can’t actually do that, but I can use crude visual symbols that will help you hear it as though I were reading it well out loud. I’ll represent intonational pauses by using a new line for each intonation unit; I’ll use bold for emphasis; I’ll use *small italics* for a lowered voice (a “*parenthetical*” *aside*); and I’ll indicate the length of pauses by how many “#”s I use;

My own **research # shows ##**

that in a model #
 simultaneously accounting for both **House** and **Presidential** on-year voting #
 in terms of voters' issue preferences, #
 partisanship, #
 economic evaluations, #
 assessments of the presidential candidates' personal qualities, #
 and demographic characteristics, ####
 the electoral value of being an incumbent #
 rather than an open-seat candidate #
fell to 16 percent
 on average, #
 from 1980-88 to 1992-2000. #####
An analogous model of midterm voting, ##
 necessarily absent the presidential voting equation #
 and the presidential candidate variables, ##
reveals a comparable decline in the **power of incumbency** from 1978-86 to
 1990-98.

My musically “notated” version can help create sounds in your head, and this helps convey meaning—even badly articulated meaning. When I used artificial, visual intonation as a way of “pretending to speak on paper,” I did a good deal of the work of getting the meanings into your head. When you tried in the last chapter to read it with no help from intonation, it’s as though you had to do the entire job of extracting meaning.

It’s worth trying to be more precise in telling the story of who does the work when we communicate with words. The story is paradoxical and unfair. That is, both senders and receivers seem to have to do the whole job of making words work. On the one hand *speakers* and *writers* have the whole job of “putting the right meanings into the words.” That is, they have to choose the right words that have the exact meanings they intend. They can’t be sure that listeners and readers will take out what they put in, but they can improve their odds if they speak with natural and appropriate intonation.

For on the other hand, it’s *listeners* and *readers* who must do the entire job of “finding” meaning in words. For there are no meanings *in* words; meanings are only in people. The only meanings that readers or listeners find in words are the meanings they themselves have to put in. Consider the written word *chat*. We talk as though the word “contains” idea of a cozy conversation; but French readers think that it “contains” the idea of “cat.” *Our* meaning is only in there because we put it in; French readers put in something else. (And listeners also have to “supply” the right intonational patterns. If a listener thinks that a rising tone of voice at the end of a sentence *always* means a question, she’ll misunderstand the Australian or Canadian guy who ends his declarative sentence with an upswing.)

Bakhtin underlines the central force of intonation. He opens an essay with a picture of two speakers sitting in a room in Russia when one notices snow flakes starting to fall outside the window--in May! “Well, . . .” says one of the speakers. Bakhtin meditates on the rich complex shared meanings that are communicated by that single allegedly meaningless syllable.

[Spoken] words are impregnated with assumed and unarticulated qualities Intonation lies on the border between life and the verbal aspect of the utterance; . . . [intonation] pumps energy from a life situation into the verbal discourse, . . . [intonation] endows everything linguistically stable with living historical momentum and uniqueness. (“Discourse in Life” 106)

(He’s interested in how intonation carries wider cultural meanings; My focus here is only on how it carries simple literal meaning.)

Bakhtin doesn't just explore how intonation carries meaning. He stresses something else important about vocal intonation: the need for what he calls "choral support." That is, the intonational wind usually goes out of our voice if we feel that others will criticize us or think we're stupid or make us feel unsafe in some other way. That's why so many committee meetings and faculty meetings are dominated by gravelly monotone speech--and why students often mumble their speech in class. No one feels safe. However, Bakhtin fails to note an important exception: When people are in the grip of passionate feelings they sometimes speak with powerfully musical intonation even if they are at risk or in great danger--i.e., when there is *no* "choral support."

But How Can *Silent Words* Make Readers Hear?

Compared with speech, writing has radically fewer ways to carry meaning. To write well, we have to do a lot with less. A harpsichord can't make shadings of volume and tone the way a piano can, but harpsichordists use subtle cues of rhythm and timing to communicate the kind of thing that pianos communicate with volume and tone. Mozart had fewer harmonic resources than Brahms, but he did rather well.

The good news is that we *can* get a lot of the resources of spoken language onto the page--even without necessarily violating conservative standards of literacy--and even if we're not Mozart. Before trying to explain why this works and how to do it, let me just illustrate that it does happen. Compare these two passages by Stephen Booth in the same book:

Any reader committed to reading and paying attention to the book that follows can profitably skip this introduction. Everything I want the introduction to do is done in the essays it introduces. I am writing an introduction only because experience has taught me that people who read academic criticism--usually authors of academic criticism--do not so much read critical studies as "check them out." (*Precious Nonsense* 1)

The difficulty in dealing with the relation of *shall not perish from the earth* and the Bible is that the specificity of the evidence can overwhelm its presenter and lead him to posit an audience as finely tuned to biblical echoes as his research has recently and temporarily made him. (32)

Surely most readers have to work harder at the second one. Traditional stylistic analysis would locate the difficulty in certain grammatical problems. Its sentence is much too long; its subject is a big lumpy clause; its object is a bigger lumpier clause that's launched by a flimsy "that"; and the main verb--poor little "is"--struggles to contain these two verbal masses into a single piece of felt meaning. Traditional analysis leads to traditional advice for writers: "Don't let your sentences be too long, and don't use large compound clauses for subjects and objects, and use active verbs instead of the verb *to be*." Yes--sort of. But I'd say it's more fruitful for writers to notice how the first passage is more "uttered" and the second one more "constructed." That is, the first one calls on features of speaking that we can get fairly easily without calling on any grammatical analysis. If Booth had forced himself to read that second passage aloud, it would almost certainly have forced him to revise it into something more *uttered* and thus easier to process.

Of course written words can't *make* sounds; sounds are not in the ink or on the page--not even in the words. Strictly speaking, there are no sounds in *any* writing till a reader puts them there. Furthermore, readers can decide to *put* sounds into any words, no matter how ungainly or difficult to say or comprehend (just as readers can decide to read *any* passage outloud). But the fact is that certain passages of written language are more likely to lead more people to *hear* the

sound of the words in their minds ear--even without trying. Robert Frost makes this a kind of manifesto:

All that can save [sentences] is the speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination (Preface).

He doesn't bother to analyze where the "speaking tone of voice" comes from. He settles for the easy answer, but it's the most practical answer, and it's the one I'm peddling in this book: use your spoken voice. But for the sake of my argument in this book and because of my fascination with this matter, I will indulge in some analysis. I'll suggest three reasons why silent words can make sounds:

(a) *Punctuation and other "extra" visual cues.* I am not tempted to burden our writing system with all those extra "punctuation marks" I just used. (See --- for someone who wants to go in that direction.) But conventional punctuation does a lot to bring out some of the sound that helps carry meaning. It highlights some useful intonational phrasing. Underlining, italics, and bold type helps us hear emphasis and a louder voice. Parentheses help us hear a lower voice for insertions or interruptions. (*In the next chapter I'll explore punctuation in more detail.*) Poets use line breaks to help build sound into the ears of silent readers. Handwriting can bring in other visual cues--sometimes even betraying the writer's mood. Kids in school famously use double and triple underlines, circles, shiny stars, wiggly lines, and bigger or smaller letters. The web has brought us emoticons. [insert smiley face] (A student, Joe Berenguel, has created a new one, :}) "mustache man," to mark sarcasm.) And people now sometimes vary their fonts and use other kinds of formatting with semiotic intent, for example using Comic Sans for informal language and Times New Roman to emphasize formality.

But "proper literacy" tells us not to exploit too many visual features to convey the audible resources of spoken language. Indeed the current conventions for punctuation tell us to cut way back on commas compared to fifty or one hundred years ago. Copy editors keep removing some of the italics I like to use for emphasis. In short, our culture of literacy tends to frown on efforts to enlist the eye for the sake of the ear. (It took thousands of years before scribes started putting spaces between words; see pp for more on this).

(b) *Aural memories.* We hear intonation most obviously when written words awaken actual memories in our ears:

I coulda been a contender.

The truth? You couldn't handle the truth.

You know how to whistle, don't you Steve? You put your lips together and just blow.

These distinctive pieces of intonational music are already in our ears--ready to be triggered by silent letters on the page because we've heard the words so many times (at least if we're of a certain age). Aural memories can be aroused even if the intonational music is positively clunky: *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.* It's hard to say and the intonational architecture is ungainly, yet people who have said these words over and over will hear them even when they are silent on the page.

(c) *Intonational architecture.* But as writers, we want to be able to write words that are new to readers, not just words that already ring in their ears. Can we make readers hear unfamiliar sequences? Yes. Musicians speak of certain passages of notes being easier to play because the notes "lie under the fingers." In sight-reading these passages, musicians' fingers fall easily and naturally into the patterns or sequences that the notes call for. So too, words and phrases that

we've never heard before can "lie under the fingers" and invite sounds in our minds' ears. If the intonational patterns are comfortable and familiar to our mouths and ears, then the syntactic relationships are familiar and hence easy to process--and the meaning is easier to understand. Thus the elegance we saw in Hass's poem: he created comfortable and familiar intonational and syntactic patterns, while nevertheless choosing idiosyncratic creative words: *dipped in sunset, twitchy shiver, less wind than river, and the emptiness that hums a little in you now.*

It's intonational architecture that helps us hear and understand the first passage from Booth. Look at the comfortably jointed intonational chunking there, and note the strong syntactic glue holding each phrase together:

Any reader committed to reading and paying attention to the book that follows can profitably skip this introduction. Everything I want the introduction to do is done in the essays it introduces. I am writing an introduction only because experience has taught me that people who read academic criticism--usually authors of academic criticism--do not so much read critical studies as "check them out."

The second passage is more technical and less conversational, but the main problem is that there are too few comfortable intonational phrases and too little pausing for syntactic breath between them. Admittedly, academics who've heard lots of conference papers read out loud may hear phrases like "The difficulty in dealing with the relation of" and "an audience as finely tuned to biblical echoes" and "as his research has recently and temporarily made him." Still the syntactic glue is not so strong in those phrases and there is a lack of comfortable pausing. It may be *harder* to give good intonational architecture to technical writing, but that doesn't mean it's *hard*. My argument in this and the previous chapter is that it's relatively easy if we call on our mouths and ears.

What's nice about the intonational approach to writing is that you don't have to think in grammatical terms (for example, whether a clause is functioning as a subject or object of a verb). The advice is simply to honor your mouth and ear. Try to use the kind of natural phrasing that comes to your comfortable speaking voice--and when you revise, make sure those phrases are comfortably and naturally linked. Besides, the traditional advice is actually wrong. You *can* produce excellent writing with long sentences, with large clause-subjects and clause-objects, and with the verb *to be*--if the intonational phrasing sounds right. Think Hume, Geertz, and James.

The point here, is that a sequence of silent written words can "activate" a sense of audible intonational phrasing in us, if those words somehow fit or link well with intonational habits in our mouths and ears. When readers have the corresponding habits, they tend to hear intonational phrases and pauses in their mind's ear. Of course different people will have different intonational habits. Grace Paley's subtle New York Yiddish intonation units will not ring in the ears of readers who've heard only Southern speech. Speakers who come to English as a second language may be slow to develop the intonational habits of native speakers. But despite differences, there is a huge overlap in intonational habits among English speakers from countries as distinct as the U.S., Canada, England, Australia, and South Africa. So I'd argue that most of those underlined phrases in the first passage from Booth fit the intonational habits of lots of literate English speakers of the last century or so.

When prose is strikingly memorable and strong, it's almost always a matter of strong intonational phrases well arranged. Consider this passage where George Orwell remembers the culture at his English prep school for very small boys:

Life was hierarchical and whatever happened was right. There were the strong, who deserved to win and always did win, and there were the weak, who deserved to lose and always did lose, everlastingly. (“Such, Such Were the Joys”)

How Does Reading Aloud Help Us Get Sound on the Page?

So I return to the chapter’s main question: If writing has so many fewer semiotic resources than speaking, how can reading aloud bring to silent writing some of the benefits of intonational music with its magical conveyance of meaning?

It’s a bit of a mystery, really, but it will help to start by simply noting some obvious and encouraging news: it can be done. Consider the two passages from Booth. Look again at the passage from David Hume that I quoted in the previous chapter (p X). To many people today, Hume’s elegant style may seem too “old fashioned.” We are heirs of a process that could be said to have started with the Royal Society’s celebration of “plain prose” in the eighteenth century. Slowly there developed a tradition that assumed good writing should make a more restrained intonational music--but a music nevertheless that can give grace and add intonational meaning. George Orwell is often taught as an icon for strong but unfancy modern prose. Here is a more business-like passage than the rich one I just quoted. But even here, he gets a sound onto the page with a style that calls less attention to itself than in the previous quotation:

Now, it is clear that the decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes: it is not due simply to the bad influence of this or that individual writer. But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely. A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English Language. (From the second paragraph of his iconic “Politics and the English Language”)

Adam Gopnik gives an idiosyncratic but useful Mars’ eye view of what he sees as two distinct transitions in English prose:

There are two great tectonic shifts in English writing. One occurs in the early eighteenth century, when Addison and Steele begin *The Spectator* and the stop-and-start Elizabethan-Stuart prose becomes the smooth, Latinate, elegantly wrought ironic style that dominated English writing for two centuries. Gibbon made it sly and ornate; Johnson give it sinew and muscle; Dickens mocked it at elaborate comic length. But the style--formal address, long windups, balance sought for and achieved--was still a sort of default, the voice in which leader pages more or less wrote themselves.

The second big shift occurred just after the First World War, when, under American and Irish pressure, and thanks to the French (Flaubert doing his work through early Joyce and Hemingway), a new form of aerodynamic prose came into being. The new style could be as limpid as Waugh or as blunt as Orwell or as funny as White and Benchley, but it dethroned the old orotundity as surely as Addison had killed off the old asymmetry. . . . The new style prized understatement, to be filled in by the reader. What had seemed charming and obviously theatrical twenty years before now could sound like puff and noise. (58)

We can’t all write music as elegant as Hume’s or as crisp as Orwell’s, but my claim is that if we read aloud to revise, we’ll create clear strong sentences where sound is doing an important part of the job. The sound comes from well formed intonational units or phrases. As we know, the intonational phrases we so easily create in speaking are often random and don’t make for clear writing. We pause only because we’re suddenly confused or we’ve run out of short term

attention--or even out of breath. We stop and find the next word or thought or how to finish the sentence. (Remember that tangled spoken language from a linguist that I quoted in the last chapter: *Yeah. I think that the function is open and, to talk about general function, I think the function in general is to direct, so that--a pointing function--to direct a hearer back . . .*)

When we revise our writing by reading aloud, we create better shaped and less random intonational phrases. We take passages that sound clunky or problematic and fiddle with them till we find language that sounds clear in the ear and feels more natural in the mouth. In doing this, we are building intonation units that feel natural or pleasing or strong--even for the eye and the mind. The process makes us create intonational phrases that have enough natural pauses to be speakable, even when the actual grammatical sentences are long and complex. When we do this, the pauses, emphases, and all the other musical elements work together to convey the meaning we have in mind. Some of those audible cues come through to readers in silence.

Note one tiny example of a change I made with the help of my mouth and ear:

Original: "My own research shows that in a model simultaneously accounting for both House and Presidential on-year voting . . ."

Revision: "In my research, I used a model that accounts for both House and Presidential on-year voting."

As I searched for words that would better *fit* my tongue and ear, I came up with an intonational shape that is more likely to be heard in the mind's ear--and more likely to help readers hear the meaning.

Let me summarize this crucial train of thought. Even though writing is silent, readers seem to project intonation or sound onto what they read. So if the intonational architecture is good--i.e., if the intonational units fit the mouth and ear and also fit well with the syntax and the meaning--then the writing is easier to read and understand; if not, the writing is harder to read and understand. When we revise to the demands of mouth and ear, we create intonational architecture that fuses meaning and syntax.

The Role of the Body

When we speak, we put language not just into sound but into our bodies and those of our listeners. When people read words aloud, fully entering into the language, they don't just hear sounds in their ear and feel syntactic shapes in their mouth. They *experience meaning*.

But what does that really mean? I can illustrate the answer with the kind of problem sentences that linguists use for illustrating syntactic embedding. A junior high schooler might naturally use embedded syntax like this--and spoken intonation will make it perfectly clear: *John knows that Sam knows that Mary likes him. Or even, John knows that Susan knows that Sam knows that Mary likes him.* (Even "him" is not ambiguous in speech. If it's unstressed it's normal or "unmarked" and points to "John" as "given" information. If it's stressed, that's "marked," and thus points to "Sam" as "new" information.) But if we encounter such sentences on paper--without visible marks of emphasis--we have to work a bit to experience the meaning. Linguists like to play with the outer limits as with this sample: *John while Charles had had had had had which pleased the teacher more.* Even this sentence is relatively clear if well spoken. I'll try to "speak" it on paper here: *John--while Charles had "had"--had "had had"--which pleased the teacher more.* Felt experience is the key. You can't speak this sentence meaningfully unless you *experience* the meaning.

So the leverage in revising by reading aloud comes from the way it makes us fully experience our meaning. When we write silently--and especially when we make complicated revisions using only our thoughts and not our mouths--we often don't palpably *feel* clearly and completely the *full meaning* of what we're trying to say. That's why we sometimes can't even give a good answer when someone asks us, "But what were you trying to say in that paragraph?" Reading aloud for revising forces us to do whatever it takes to experience our meaning--and this is exactly the process that would show us that we didn't really understand the very words we wrote down.

As we read sentences aloud and try to embody the meaning, we can feel when there is not such a good fit between the words and the meaning: we can hear some static between our bodies-and-minds and the meaning--static that comes from sounds that sort of flap around and slightly muffle the meaning. Our own physical experience tells that those words will also make readers work harder to get the meaning than they should have to do. As we try out different wordings on our tongues and ears, we are looking for a better fit between the intonational music and the meaning. (Footnote "felt sense".)

Debbie Rowe is doing interesting research on how students can revise better by getting computers to read their writing aloud--something that computers are now doing better and better. It's clear that this is helpful: the computer reads it more clearly and coherently than many people will do without practice and courage; and the computer makes you *hear* tiny mistakes that you often don't see even when you read aloud and make tiny unconscious corrections. But she argues that there is an important loss when we bypass the crucial process of getting the language and meaning into our *bodies*.

Let me summarize this section about the role of the body: Meaning inheres in spoken sound; speaking puts meaning in the body. Intonational or prosodic chunking is about the *embodiment of meaning*.

It's worth noting the relevance of this process to the literature classroom. Our deepest experience of linguistic meaning involves bodily felt experience, not just cognitive understanding. I harness this principle when I want to teach rich literary texts--for example, sonnets by Shakespeare or Donne or lyrics by Emily Dickinson. I used to give the traditional homework task:

Please read and study the words of the poem very carefully till you really understand them. Then we can discuss those words.

I've learned that most students understand the poem far better when I set a different task for homework:

Practice reading the poem aloud over and over till you can make it *work* for a listener who can't see the text. When we gather in class, everyone will have to perform it--in a small group or for all of us. Your goal is to *say* those words in such a way that you *give* the meaning to a listener who can't look at the words.

Students get closer to the poem this way; class goes better than before. Besides, this approach helps students do something they often can't do in regular "literary" discussions: restate the literal meaning. After the readings we discuss why some people like one performance while others prefer a different one. This discussion takes us not just to clarification of meaning, denotative and connotative, also to most of the literary and theoretical issues that are central to literary analysis: tone, irony, the narrator's voice, reliable narrator, and so on. What every literature teacher wants is for students to *experience* the meaning--and also experience the sensory effects of the words in their connotations and music. This aloud approach is simple and

it gets me further than I've been able to get with more traditional approaches. (*Traditional? What could be more traditional than asking students to read or act out or perform texts?*)

I love the way that frequent reading aloud helps make people into better readers. Not only do they notice more; they are more likely to get *pleasure* from reading. Among the various reasons why lots of people don't read so much, one is often overlooked. Despite a bit of subvocal hearing, too few people hear the drama of voices and the music of intonation when they read.

How Does Reading Aloud Relate to Thinking and Deliberation?

I am pleased and intrigued by the central role of the body in the process of revising by reading aloud. The moral seems to be, *No need for cognitive deliberation*. But no. There is a central role for cognitive deliberation near the beginning and again near the end of the process.

At the beginning, after we've come upon a sentence or passage that doesn't please the mouth and ear, we have to find some alternative wordings. Suppose we've written something about *an increase in the rate of survival of patients with radical burns*. The mouth and ear will feel the problem (or at least they will if you've done some of the exercises I've just described), but I know from experience that we can feel hypnotized or trapped by a locution that finally manages to say what we are trying to say. We feel unable to figure out a workable substitute. This is especially a problem for experienced academic or formal writers who are habituated to this kind of language.

How do we fight our way out of this locution that is accurate but unpleasing? How can we *find* something that pleases the mouth and ear? Sometimes we shake ourself by the shoulders and lasso the tongue and demand, *How could I say this to friend during a walk in the woods?* This might lead us directly to something about how *more patients will survive radical burns*. But plenty of times, I'm not this lucky. Sometimes I have to treat it more like solving an intellectual puzzle: *How could these words be re-arranged and still say what I want to say?* I have to start fiddling with the words in a brute random way. *What if I started with the final phrase? Also, what different words could I use?* I often need to use conscious thinking and reasoning--sometimes even trial and error. These are forms of cognitive deliberation.

Then at the end of the process, the mouth and ear sometimes don't give us a single obvious best choice. Sometimes we're left with two or even three pretty good versions--perhaps not ideal, but we haven't got all day. We're not sure which is best so we say-and-listen to both versions--sometimes back and forth--and have to decide which one best pleases the mouth and ear. Here's an example of two pretty good locutions where I had trouble deciding:

If we read aloud a transcript of our everyday speech,

If we read a transcript of our everyday speech aloud,

Neither quite satisfied me, but I'd gotten tired of trying and these were both good enough. I now prefer the first because I like the sound of ending with "everyday speech." All my evidence came from mouth and ear rather than reasons and arguments. Nevertheless the *process of choosing* involved deliberation and pondering.

And then there's that final act of editing for grammar and spelling and deciding on the appropriate level of formality. I think it's better to put this off till the whole piece is finished, but it's important to note that it often involves conscious thinking--sometimes even looking something up in a book or on line. The best answer that we get from the mouth and tongue may

not fit the grammar of “edited written English” and it may be too colloquial or even slangy. There is always a need for a final stage of editing for surface features and for register.

My point here is that this process of revising by mouth and ear--though it’s wonderfully simple in practice--is cognitively complex if we look closely. It’s not *mere* unreflective instinct.

Objections and Qualifications to my Argument

There are various objections that readers might make, and some of them are valid. Revising by reading aloud will sometimes fail.

(1) *My students just can’t read aloud. They stumble or just go through the motions, so the process doesn’t help their writing.* Yes. Revising by reading aloud won’t improve writing unless people read aloud with investment and care. Many students have had painful school experiences when reading aloud was used as a test, and many adults are shy to “make a spectacle” of their own words. When I have students trapped in a required class, I have to be very supportive as I coach and cajole and badger them to really *respect* their words as they read them: *Louder. Slower. You’re trashing your own words. Read with reverence and care.* Most of all, they need this crucial mantra from John Schultz in his extensive and useful work on “Story Workshop”: “*Give your words.*”

There’s a recent cultural development that helps here. More and more essays, stories, and poems are being read aloud on the radio--and in public readings and poetry slams. (Andrea Lunsford has been teaching “Writing for Radio” at Stanford.) A friend had an essay accepted for reading on NPR and the editors stressed that it had to work aloud. Before long he was clarifying his structure, giving better signposts, breaking up sentences, and making shorter paragraphs. We can even hear paragraphs if they are well made. (Sophisticated handbooks acknowledge that the paragraph cannot really be defined. I see only two trustworthy criteria: A paragraph should sound like a coherent unit; paragraph breaks should come when readers need a break and a deep breath.

But the very fact that so many people are scared to read their words with conviction leads to one of the main *benefits* of revising by reading aloud. That is, if people want the power of this approach and push themselves to read lovingly with energy and feeling (or if teachers supportively push them), this very work improves their writing. When people get braver about giving their words with their mouths, they get braver about giving their words with their *minds* or *wills*. They stop *mentally* mumbling. In a literal sense, this process makes people *put their body where their words are*.

A few more reflections about the courage to speak. What made it possible for me to write my first book on writing in 1973 was being tired of not being heard. A good teacher I know, Jenifer Auger has a simple powerful technique for the writing classroom. When her students have blah voiceless writing, she makes them speak the following words to her outloud: “*Listen to me, I have something to tell you.*” (personal letter 1/06). She sometimes asks students to write essays in the form of a letter to someone they care about. In the next chapter, I’ll describe some outloud punctuation exercises that are particularly good for getting students braver about putting their bodies into written words.

It clears the mind to think about writers who need *real* courage to write:

The threat of martyrdom hangs over all the early Protestant writings, and concentrates them; writers who could die for their theology, or even for translating the Bible, “meant what they said” . . . [E.g., William Tyndale was executed and Thomas Cranmer burned.] (Madsen 71)

(2) *Reading aloud can disguise weak or unclear writing.* Yes. A sentence that's bad for readers can work well for listeners if it's read well. Here's a striking example from a published essay: *Divine predetermination of what shall be imposed constraints on both thought and behavior.* No doubt the writer was *hearing* his own sentence with a necessary pause after *what shall be*, and that made the sentence just fine. He overlooked the booby trap for readers who see *what shall be imposed* as a unit. Here's a more striking example: *The fat people eat accumulates.* Because I love intonation so much, I'm actually fond of this sentence--how it creates its meaning with only a tiny intonational rise on "eat" and a tiny pause after it. But of course it's a disaster in writing. (Note the common punctuational problem here: readers need a slight pause before the verb when the subject is long--but commas are illegal between the subject and the verb.)

A good reading and even everyday conversation also hides what are serious pronoun problems in writing. Look at this example from the Old Testament. Of course it's not the kind of prose most of us write, but I love how it illustrates the way intonation carries meaning--and illustrates also that early writers simply assumed that we'd hear their texts outloud:

All who see me laugh me to scorn; They curl their lips and wag their heads, saying, He trusted in the Lord; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, if he delights in him. (Psalm 22)

Every "ambiguous him" is clear when we get the words the way the writer assumed we'd get them, that is, outloud and read with meaning. That is, a good reader stresses the first "him"--breaking out of the normal "unmarked" pattern of intonational stress: *let him deliver him; let him rescue him.* Readers can *hear* that these *hims* refer to the Lord.)

So reading aloud won't fix everything. My very efforts to get students to put themselves enthusiastically *into* a bodily reading of their own words can sometimes blind them to a problem for silent readers. But I'm undaunted. Invested reading aloud improves ten bad sentences for every one it protects. Besides, when we read aloud to revise, we're not confused about the goal. We're not trying to compensate for bad writing, we're trying to improve it. We're not trying to perform an unchangeable text so it works best (as when we read a difficult Shakespeare passage aloud), we're trying to *change* the text to make it better. We're using our mouths and ears to try to feel obstruction or friction between the meaning and the words--to feel where the verbal clothing is not a good fit with what we feel as the inner intention.

(3) *Revising by reading aloud plays into a weakness for elegant or slick language--overblown or shallow.* It can. It can tempt writers to neglect careful close thinking and be seduced by a clever, facile, or even elegant sound. Much second rate professional writing falls into this trap. "Airline magazine prose," I call it, and it can sound pretty good. So advertisers, political speech writers, and spin meisters don't need my arguments. They always already revise by reading aloud. What "sounds good" can lull us into not thinking hard about meaning. Plato wasn't scared of airline magazine prose, but he banned poetry from his republic for fear of what musical language can do.

Like most teachers, I've seen a certain number of students with a knack for "catchy prose" who think this knack is enough for good writing. Their writing has sometimes been unreservedly praised by teachers who feel beaten down by years of awkward clunky prose. But let's think carefully about this alleged problem. There is nothing wrong with the "mere" ability to make prose that sounds good; it's precious. The problem comes from thinking that this is *enough*. As teachers and readers, we can demand hard clear thinking *in addition* to great sounding syntax. Writers of advertising copy are paid better for producing what's catchy than most teachers and other writers are paid. We can condemn how they use their skill if we wish--but not the skill itself.

In fact I want to fight back a bit on this issue. Yes, people can sometimes be seduced by word music. But I answer by reiterating the main point of this chapter: a good invested reading aloud will more often expose empty or shoddy thinking than hide it. Sound and intonation are meaning--embodied. And reading aloud can also help us hear larger meanings as we read aloud longer passages or whole essays--hear the *logic* and the *organization* of a text.

(4) *Look at horrible grammar that comes out of everyone's mouth these days!* But the goal of revising by mouth and ear is not "correct grammar," it's clarity and strength. The process is about meaning, not propriety. *Ain't nobody don't use double negatives.* This is a strong clear sentence--and true. Appalachian and Black dialect will sound strong and fine to many. Slang and vulgarity can be strong and clear. (In many dialects in England, especially in the north, people still use pronouns like in ways that "our grammar" calls reversed, e.g., "They gave it to I.") *The prime minister would of declared war if he'd of had the support:* this will sound fine to many. Reading aloud may also yield the "wrong register" or level of formality for any given situation. Many sentence fragments and split infinitives will sound just fine to most people. Whatever is strong and clear will pass this test.

After all, there's another step that comes after revising by mouth and ear: editing for the surface features like grammar. There's no escape from having to know the rules for what counts as right grammar if you want to reach certain audiences--like most teachers and most employers. But the job of making language correct for conservative readers is much easier for most people after they have gotten their language strong and clear in meaning. That is, the process of revising by mouth and ear will often cure many of the grammar mistakes that come from carelessness or struggling with meaning. Lots of the incorrect grammar produced by inexperienced writers and speakers of stigmatized versions of English comes from stretching for "proper" language and being uncomfortable. Hyper corrections like "the person to whom I gave it to" are often cured by the mouth and ear.

 During a classroom workshop, it can be useful when someone's tongue leads them to language that edited written English rejects as wrong. We get to talk about the difference between "strong" and "correct"--and between two meanings of the word *grammar*. As *grammar* is used by most linguists, it points to rules that native speakers already know and follow unconsciously; as the word is used by most teachers, textbooks, and lay people, it points to rules that most people *don't* know and have to learn consciously. Linguists are mostly annoyed that teachers and others have hijacked the term *grammar* to stand for "correct usage." It's also important to mention that the rules in "grammar books" are usually rules for writing--but people are led to believe that they pertain also to speaking.

 (5) *This process relies entirely on the mouth and ear. What about people who have a tin ear and can't tell a clear strong sentence from an awkward, ungainly one?* It's true that some people have better ears than others. Still, the prospects for this technique are not so bad. Here are some reasons for putting a little more trust in the ears around us.

- People have *listened* to language all their lives. They've noticed when they had trouble understanding the meaning (thus developing *clarity* as a criterion; and when the words made them tune out (thus developing *strong* as a criterion). Revising by reading aloud doesn't require them to be expert at *creating* elegant sentences. They need only notice when sentences don't feel strong and clear--and then try out alternative versions, even randomly by trial and error--and then notice when they hit upon improvements.
- Unplanned speech is not a good picture of the aesthetic standards that people use when they revise by careful speaking aloud. Students--like everyone else--put out lots of ungainly speech,

but when they engage the slow deliberative process of revising by reading aloud, they usually end up with better sentences than they could produce even with careful writing.

- Most people can call on a strongly felt sense of rhythm and music. Think how much music people listen to--especially young people.
- Language that one person calls ungainly and awkward can be clear and strong to other good readers. It's not proof of a tin ear. Rhythm and music can be strong even if they are not to our taste--and so too with writing. Many people hate rap, but it can be strong and clear. I can't get myself to like grand opera or what I hear as the merely shimmering pulseless music by Debussy and Ravel (of course not all their music is that way). But people with excellent taste love both.
- A little training does a lot of good. Plenty of people completely neglect their mouths and ears when they write. They often write timidly and badly because the "principles" and guidelines for good sentences often let them down. Such people often try to play it safe, for example by simply avoiding long complex sentences and passive verbs. The result is often a lack of energy or grace. Some training with the mouth and ear can help them have fun writing--even some very long sentences that actually work well.

When students in a peer sharing group argue about two versions of a sentence on the basis of rules, guidelines, or grammar. I find it scary: the winning sentence is often very sad. I love hearing them argue about which sentence *sounds* better. The winning sentence is not always the one I would have chosen, but it's usually strong and clear and the conversation is very *writerly*. It helps them grow as stylists.

- When it comes to producing tin-eared language, the culprit is more often schooling than lack of schooling. When people earn membership in a professional group they are sometimes tempted to use language as a *badge* of their membership--language that functions to exclude nonmembers. I'm thinking particularly of some academics who seem to *prefer* the sound and feel of what's unclear and weak. Consider this sentence from an essay in *The Publications of the Modern Language Association* (a sentence that turns out to be saying something I consider useful!):

The discourse of common sense becomes available for appropriation and for the transformative rearticulation of the egalitarian imaginary by historically marginalized subjects (e.g. women and members of racial, religious sexual, and class minorities) not comprehended practically in its original enabling fiction (Slaughter, 154). [PMLA--citation in freewriting essay]

I guess it's possible to prefer this "music": for the way it sounds *special* and how it echoes the "music" of fashionable theorists. In graduate school, you can learn to love this flavor. The eminent sociologist, Howard Becker, wrote terrific book on writing in the social sciences. He describes a graduate seminar where they worked on a sentence from someone's paper and finally got it strong and clear. At this point a grad student blurts, "Gee, Howie, when you say it this way, it looks like something anybody could say." Becker's comment: "You bet" (7).

If you fear that too many people have tin ears, remember this is not an either/or matter. We don't have to abandon our other methods for creating strong clear sentences in order to try out reading aloud in addition. If you try to train students to use reading aloud along with other methods for making good sentences, I suspect you'll end up with more trust in their ears and mouths.

I don't deny that some people have better ears than others. My viola teacher hears a subtle difference between how I play two phrases and I can't hear it. And then with her help I can. Catherine Madsen (in a remarkably interesting book about better and worse liturgical language) hears a difference that I couldn't hear--and then I could:

The opening collect of the Anglican communion service was treated in this way. The old form--

Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid--
built both grammatically and emotionally toward a state of humility and receptiveness:

Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy Name.

In the revision it is only slightly altered:

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name.

The changes are few and simple -- you can miss them if you read quickly with the eye -- but to the voice and the ear they are fatally inane. The tension of the old version's subordinate clauses, which peel the heart like the layers of an onion, is flattened into a plain set of descriptors; God cleanses the thoughts of our hearts more or less automatically, because it's his job, not in response to our plea. (14)

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