

# Research on Speech and Writing and the Composition Class

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In my position as Assistant Director of Composition at Wayne State University, I observe many instructors teach, and I often hear what they say to students in conference. Too frequently I hear things like this in the classroom: "The problem with most of your writing is that you write like you speak. Because you don't read very much, you don't know how writing differs from speech." or I hear things like this when teachers diagnose student problems in conference: "You know what your problem is? You don't say the 'ed' when you speak. That's why you never remember it when you write." Clearly, research on speaking and writing has finally touched the composition class, but not with invariably happy results.

Descriptive studies of observable differences in the form and function of speech and writing have been "raided" by eager teachers looking for ways to label error or to defend teaching methods. Many of these studies were not designed to explain how speech and writing are produced, how skills we employ naturally as speakers in different contexts translate to writing, or how language works as effective communication. Yet teachers have adopted their conclusions wholesale, making them "maxims" for the teaching of composition.

In this essay I will examine three "maxims," embraced by composition instructors, that have grown out of research on speech and writing.

- (1) **Speech and writing require different kinds of thinking;**
- (2) **Speech and writing are structured differently;**
- (3) **Speech and writing require access to different language codes.**

I believe that, though grounded in research, these maxims have limited relevance for the teaching of writing. They exaggerate distinctions that suggest the interference of speech in writing, and thus they ignore the very important ways in which our skills as speakers enhance our writing.

## **Maxim one: Speech and writing require different kinds of thinking**

Maxim one is derived from (the observation) that speech is concrete, proverbial and lost once it is uttered, while writing, in contrast, is abstract, inductive and heuristic.

Because speech is concrete and writing is abstract, theorists tell us, thinking in writing is more difficult. Handling ideas in written language, Vygotsky claims, is complex not only because written language is often used to express relationships

between abstract concepts, but also because written words themselves are more abstract than spoken words. Written language is one more step removed from the concepts it symbolizes because it lacks the "sensory aspect of speech" (p. 98). Paralleling Vygotsky's claims, Foucault notes that Western writing systems involve an even greater degree of abstraction than Oriental writing systems because of the use of the alphabet to create words instead of ideograms:

*(T)he ideogram . . . directly represents the signified, independently from a phonetic system which is another mode of representation. . . . (S)ince writing refers not to a thing but to speech, a work of language only advances more deeply into the intangible density of the mirror, calls for the double of this already doubled writing . . . (p. 56).*

Writing not only must represent our ideas, but also must serve as a permanent record of speech. This puts a dual burden on writers — to know what needs to be said as well as how to make it "sound" right to a reading audience.

The notion that speech is proverbial while writing is inductive has its origins in studies of the differences between pre-literate and literate communication. In observing the language of literate and preliterate adults and children, Olson drew these conclusions:

1. *Speech is coded for action, premises are proverbial — they are generalizations that reaffirm cultural assumptions for behavior, not generalizations based on inductive study of particulars; and*
2. *Writing talks about the principle behind action — it generalizes particulars in such a way that true statements can follow from an inductive assessment of what is said. In speech, the values behind the words constitute their argument — the speaker who has the last word, whatever it may be, wins, whereas in writing, words are assessed inductively — the winner of the argument is he who can draw the best conclusions from what was previously stated (pp. 13-16).*

That writing is heuristic and speech is not is a popular concept extrapolated from Emig's "Writing as a Mode of Learning." Here Emig suggests that reviewing what one writes helps the writer transform literal representations into "symbolic" representations. When writers read the written record of their thinking, they experience a "revision" of what they thought they knew. Because speech is ephemeral, here one moment and gone the next, it does not permit this

opportunity for learning from thoughtful review of an artifact (p. 125).

None of this research “proves” that writing involves a different kind of thinking than speech. In fact, using this research to tell students that writing involves a different kind of speaking than speech can lead teachers to some awkward “moments of truth” in the composition classroom.

Can we, for instance, really claim that writing is abstract, and if we do, will students believe that it must be profound, full of ideas and themes, never concerned with people and things — the everyday stuff of life we talk about to those we care about? Is it not the lack of the concrete, of the here-and-now, that makes some of our students’ writing so terrible? Certainly some of our best literature, our most informative newscasts, our most handy reference works record everyday concrete things.

Can we claim that writing is inductive and never proverbial, analytic rather than supportive of cultural attitudes? This conclusion is proven false even when we examine scientific reporting. The development of argument in scientific discourse is often not inductive at all, but is made to look so through the use of discourse performatives, language features which signal the development of a factual argument, something we *should* believe (Gremmo, pp. 5, 27).

Furthermore, can we really say that writing is heuristic and that speech is not? After all, what is the process of revision that Emig described but an attempt to create a dialogue between self and paper, in the act of retrospectively structuring one’s discourse to match what’s in one’s head, or a dialogue between self and a probable audience in the act of projecting an effective rhetorical structure? (Perl and Egen-dorf, pp. 125-26). What can encourage this kind of dialogue better than talk — talk in the classroom, talk about writing, about ideas, about talk itself?

Our efforts to express both concrete and abstract ideas, analogic and analytic arguments, explicative and exploratory thinking can be realized in both speech and writing. Students who do not have experience communicating in writing do not need to be taught how to “think” differently, nor do they need to be taught new language functions. They do need, however, to become consciously aware of what makes their speech work as communication so that they can more readily learn what will make their writing work too. More on this later.

### **Maxim two: Oral language and written language are structured differently**

Some methods of teaching composition have been vindicated by research on speech and writing, primarily research which concludes that oral language is spontaneously developed, lacks embedding, and is dependent on context for coherence, while writing is planned, contains multiple em-

beddings, and is dependent on structural devices for coherence.

Sentence-combining practice, for instance, is justified by observations about typical grammatical differences in speech and writing. Speech, as Stalker notes, reflects the consistent use of “‘clausal’ rather than sentence syntax” and in speech “sentences that are completed are usually independent clauses (matrix sentences) with little or no subordination (embedding)” (pp. 276, 274). Mature writing, as Hunt has told us, includes more subordinated clauses and fewer independent clauses or clauses connected by coordinators (p. 307). Thus sentence-combining, which increases students’ facility with subordinating structures (Mellon, pp. 51-52), can help them write “less oral” and “more mature” discourse.

The advice to “make more connections” or to “use more transitions,” which teachers often write on student papers, is also supported by research on the structure of speech and writing. Speech, Crystal and Davy tell us, creates overt inter-sentence linkage through ellipsis, personal pronouns, articles, and determiners which cross-reference items previously stated (p. 112). Writing, however, involves more complex structuring, Emig tells us, establishing “systematic connections and relationships” through text features that signal the nature of “conceptual relationships” (p. 126).

We must remember, however, that most comparisons of the structure of speech and writing have examined spontaneous conversation and planned written composition. Gross differences are bound to be apparent. The function of spontaneous conversation is to explore, to find out what is going on, to explain what is happening moment to moment; its structure must be loose to allow for new possibilities. The function of written composition, on the other hand, is to communicate a planned message, to tell what one knows rather than to initiate dialogue. It is not surprising, thus, that linguists have found conversation to cover subject matter at random, to have no overall theme, to consist of utterances that are often incomplete and contradictory. It is also not surprising that linguists characterize writing as directed to one topic and composed of fluent and complete sentences (Crystal and Davy, pp. 95-121). Both teachers and students are aware that readers expect organization, standard English and minimal error in written texts.

Planning composition instruction based on research that directly opposes typical structures in each mode really doesn’t get us very far. For one thing, such instruction ignores the fact that we structure our language, both speech and writing, to respond to specific situations. Written expression will often closely approximate functions and structures “typical” of speech. When we ignore this, we overlook some very important kinds of writing. What’s more, we imply that “typical” features are effective in every instance.

To insist, for example, that speech is “random” while writing is “planned” is to discount the developmental kind of writing that Elbow, Macrorie, and others advocate. Teachers underrate the importance of evolutionary writing as a step to finished composition when they ask to see only finished products instead of drafts. They deny that much writing is not “planned” but rather “planning.” The first draft is an opportunity for dialogue between students or between teacher and student about that “planning” that could insure a more meaningful final product.

To assert that embedding and subordination are more desirable than coordination in writing is to ignore how language structure reflects purpose. Newspaper writing, some of our most readable prose, makes use of simple sentences connected by coordinators, rather than subordinators. This style, Crystal and Davy note, gives newspaper writing a sense of urgency and immediacy which maintains reader interest (pp. 184-95). The prose runs forward, rather than traces backwards or spirals inwards. Christensen claims that the most frequent sentence type in published prose of all kinds is not the complex sentence, but the cumulative sentence which presents an idea and then elaborates it with a series of free modifiers, explanations that are merely “added on” to the base loosely, as detail is added to a point in conversation (p. 156).

To urge students to “make more connections” is I believe, to urge them to use subordinators and coordinators with abandon. Students following this advice form prose “habits” that are hard to break. I found it very difficult, for instance, to convince a good freshman writer that the following paragraph contained dysfunctional connecting words:

*To find the exact cause of rising costs is not quite clear; however, big city critics are putting the blame on unstringent government aid and on insurance policies which finance expensive treatments and elaborate facilities with a blank check. This means that physicians will probably be reimbursed for just about any amount they charge. . . . So, as you can see, it is very difficult to beat a system which favors the physician. Hence, a stringent health insurance policy must be put into law in order to take this fee control from the doctor.*

This student passage suffers from “connection” overload. It also reflects the writer’s perception that subordinators and coordinators are things you insert between written sentences to *make* them connect.

An argument could be made that students misuse connectors, transitions, or structural markers in writing because speech requires no such features. Yet, features do exist in conversation which anticipate function. Paired sequences, for instance, can indicate intention to clarify, continue, or terminate discourse. Likewise conventional strategies exist for introducing a topic so that it will be accepted by a listener or for suspending the “turn-taking” system so that one speaker may insert a story (Coulthard, pp. 69-92). As

with any tool that has become so handy that we forget its importance to completing a task, the devices we use to structure conversation are so familiar, so directly functional, we do not easily recognize them without deliberate study.

Why, then, do comparable devices in writing, devices which direct the illocutionary force of discourse, pose such problems for our students? Could it be because most student writing is non-functional? In school, Britton tells us, students almost always write to teachers — an audience who will regard little they say as informative or engaging (pp. 63-64). It’s perhaps not surprising that student writers fail to use features that clearly direct readers to functional intent.

Students will write well not merely because they can manipulate structures peculiar to writing, but because they can aptly relate structure to function. Discourse should be planned if the purpose is to inform rather than to explore; sentences should be short and coordinated if the purpose is to narrate with urgency; connecting devices should be used when they truly and correctly mark the intent of the statements which follow. Teachers who assert that language in a composition is inappropriate because it is structured like speech have made a simplistic assessment of the choices involved in writing effective prose.

### **Maxim three: Speech and writing require access to different language codes**

Code, as defined by Gregory and Carroll, embodies the range of linguistic behavior to which an individual has access when communicating: “Code therefore determines which options will be selected as appropriate to a given situation” (p. 80). Codes that will dictate appropriate options in speech and writing are, of course, different. Yet there is great variety in the range of “correct” options in either speech or writing for a given situation.

Composition pedagogy often assumes that the only “codes” students must control in writing well are “standard English” and the conventions of a loosely defined, authoritative yet personal style called the writer’s “voice.” In teaching standard English, teachers must fight the influence of local dialects, and in developing “voice” they must wage a war on clichés and aphorisms borrowed from speech.

I find it troublesome that some composition instructors feel that class time should be spent teaching students standard English. In emphasizing skills that students don’t have, this instruction does not build on those they do have. I find it more troublesome, however, that teachers urge student writers to develop a single “voice.” Asking students to write with a single voice, Schor notes, is to condemn them to failure:

*How many beginning writers have one ‘voice?’ A nineteen-year-old who cannot decide on a major, who cannot see a job out there in his or her future, whose*

*handwriting slants in a different direction in every paragraph, sometimes in every line? (p. 76).*

When teachers tell students to write honestly, to find their own “voices,” they ask students to do something that many of them are not mature enough to do. What’s worse is that they ask students to do something most adults never do.

Adult speakers and writers change their language depending upon whom they’re addressing, where, and when. The “codes” they bring to bear are those that work within the constraints of a particular situation. In many cases these codes are so definite that they constitute a “register” of language specific to a given context, such as the register of “CB radio talk” or “legal writing.”

Teachers trying to get students to write with conviction would be more successful if they required them to write to a specific audience for a specific purpose rather than to search for their own voices. Yet in giving students different situations to address as writers, the problem how to teach them the range of appropriate responses remains. We know that speakers depend to a large extent, on immediate audiences to monitor their expression, and studies have suggested that good writers rely on an internal “monitor,” checking their writing against rules and conventions for specific writing situations (Kroll, pp. 87-88).

We could conclude that the job of teaching writing then boils down to “programming” students’ writing “monitors” so that they can serve for all writing situations. What a hopeless task! We can’t possibly teach what is appropriate for all situations. Fortunately for us, in real-life as opposed to classroom writing, few writers depend solely on their own judgments.

In business and industry, documents summarizing progress of a project, proposing a bid, or describing a procedure are often the work of a team of writers or are the end products

of a series of rewrites that have passed from worker to co-worker to supervisor. In the real-world, writers know when to adjust their writing to meet the needs of their audiences because their audiences are often right there telling them to do so.

I think teachers disregard the value of consultation in writing. Instead of showing students ways to gain expertise through talking with others, they burden them with the responsibility of being expert without any resources. Furthermore, by insisting that students work alone as writers, they encourage behavior that does not prepare them for writing tasks in corporate environments where team work and team writing may be essential.

Teachers cannot continue to view speech simply as language conforming to codes which potentially interfere with good writing. If they do, they will miss the very significant fact that what we do as speakers to ensure that our words affect others is very similar to what we must do as writers. That is to keep talking — with other students, with instructors, with potential audiences — to get a feel for what they want to hear and read, and how they want to hear and read it.

How then should composition teachers regard the research that compares speech and writing? We need to think more carefully about how such research should influence teaching. It is important to know how writing differs from talk, but more important to know how writing works like talk. When we urge students to think inductively, to develop new syntactic patterns, to discover a personal style — in short, to make their writing different from their speech — we stigmatize facility in speech as a liability. We must look at research on speech and writing in hope of ascertaining what speakers do that is similar to what writers do. Writing instruction will then focus on not making student language “more literate” and “less oral,” but on the mastery of operations that ensure effective expression.