

Reading Out Loud: The Uses of Voice and Ear for Writing and Reading

Peter Elbow

My claim is this: If we read out loud each sentence we've written and keep revising or fiddling with it till it sounds right--till every part fits comfortably in the mouth and sounds right in the ear--the meaning will be clear and often forceful. (Two qualifications: (a) The writing must be read aloud with caring attention, not mumbled and stumbled. (b) The *grammar* may not be "correct," but that's different from clarity.) When the writing "sounds right," then the author's meaning is *alive* and *in the sound*. The felt meaning is in the writer's body, and the writer is checking that the felt meaning is also in the sound.

However carefully we produce early drafts, we almost always have to revise, and this often means adjusting some phrasing, changing some thoughts, qualifying some points, cutting many words and longer passages, and also developing and expanding what we wrote. This process often leads to tangled or unclear language. Therefore, towards the end of revising, we need a final stage in which we force ourselves to read everything aloud and notice where it *doesn't* fit the mouth and ear--and keep fiddling until it does.

Here's an interesting example of an intelligent and literate person creating problem prose by carefully *constructing* his language. He was careful to avoid all *error*, but he lost all touch with his mouth and ear.

We fund-raise with and for Amherst homeowners who abut empty lots, as the developer (with finance and political allies) is more than a gentle, humble, nonprofit agency. Could the financial investors' tax credits exceed their largesse? Wealthy developers play hardball with MGL 40B, hitting any vacant lot abutter. While, we're told, it's fortunate, the generous developer is restrained, "not 60 units" on a lot zoned for a single house, the litigation continues. Expenses show, MGL 40B injures. Our will is steeled!" Actually, only the first sentence is unspeakable. The others are perfectly sayable, but because the writer *did not listen to the sequence of meanings* the sentences are disconnected and the meanings difficult to follow. [Letter, Amherst Bulletin 9/26/03, p 4.]

Organization and thinking Reading aloud doesn't just help sentences; it also helps thinking and organization. If you read longer passages lovingly out loud, you can *hear* when thinking or organization is "off." If you then revise how sentences and ideas link with each other till these links also sound right, the larger meanings will also be clear.

Informal and formal language. Using the voice and ear for writing doesn't invite only casual, colloquial language. It also invites high and even formal language. Good oratory fits comfortably in the mouth and sounds good in the ear. We can help our silent writing if we borrow some of the strengths of oratory--even formal oratory--as Martin Luther King, Jr did in his famous letter:

Just as the prophets of the eighth century B. C. left their villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. . . .

Throughout Alabama all sorts of devious methods are used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters, and there are some counties in which, even though Negroes constitute a majority of the population, not a single Negro is registered.

Interruptions. Interruptions can be speakable. Some of the most complexly interruptive sentences in Henry James are lovely in the mouth and ear. But academic and student writers often construct interruptions that undermine reading by destroying speakability--especially with parentheses. Example:

Original. NAEP reported that students who read the most fluently (rated 4 on a 4-point scale) scored much higher on standardized tests of reading proficiency than students who read less fluently (rated 1 on a 4-point scale).

Revised for speakability: NAEP reported that students who read most fluently scored much higher on standardized tests of reading proficiency than students who read less fluently. (The score improved from 4 to 1 on a 4-point scale.)

Sample passage to revise for clarity using the tongue and the ear:

But a close reading of these scholars, especially Goody (1968) and Goody and Watt (1963), leaves some room for questioning the picture we just saw of consistent and universal processes or products--individual or societal--of literacy. Goody pointed out that in any traditional society, factors such as secrecy, religious ideology, limited social mobility, lack of access to writing materials and alphabetic scripts could lead to restricted literacy. . . .

Using the voice to help teach reading and literature

Student problems in reading often come from not hearing (and feeling) the words on the page. Now I'm not so quick to ask students to *study* a text with their *minds and intelligences*, I prefer to ask them to *prepare* themselves so they can *give* it to us with their mouths and voices. Thus the only task is to work on it so that it *sounds the way they think it wants to sound*--or so that a reader can *get it by listening*. This forces them to work out the complexities of syntax. But it also creates a literary interpretation: an implied speaker and a speaker's attitude. I use class time for listening to three or four renderings and then discussing which ones or sections work better. This gets the literal meaning *completely clear*. Then we can discuss the merits of different *interpretations* that we've heard. An example:

Holy Sonnet 7

John Donne

At the round earth's imagined corners, blow
 Your trumpets, angels; and arise, arise
 From death, you numberless infinities
 Of souls, and to your scattered bodies goe;
 All whom the flood did, and fire shall, o'erthrow,
 All whom war, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies,
 Despair, law, chance hath slain, and you whose eyes
 Shall behold God, and never taste death's woe.
 But let them sleep, Lord, and me mourn a space;
 For, if above all these, my sins abound,
 'Tis late to ask abundance of Thy grace
 When we are there. Here on this lowly ground,
 Teach me how to repent; for that's as good
 As if Thou hadst sealed my pardon with Thy blood.

[My rewriting of the sample using voice and ear:

But if we read these scholars closely (especially Goody [1968] and Goody and Watt [1963]), we'll have some questions about the picture we just saw. We'll question whether the processes or products of literacy were so universal--whether in whole societies or individuals. Goody pointed out many factors what might serve to restrict literacy in traditional societies--factors like secrecy, religious ideology, limited social mobility, lack of access to writing materials and alphabetic scripts.