

## The Democratization of Writing and the Role of Cheating

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This is an exciting 50 year anniversary for our field's oldest independent peer-reviewed journal. I'm grateful that I have been able to write for its pages previously, and I give deep thanks to the editors, Matt Davis and Kara Taczak, for inviting me to write as part of this birthday party.

The occasion prompts rumination about names. (Ruminate. Ruminants. I've always wished I could chew my cud like a couple of graceful Nubian goats we had during some childhood summers—beautiful and playful with long ears hanging down. When you watch ruminants like goats and cows, you can't help wondering what they are thinking.) This journal's first name was Freshman English News, but it was later rechristened *Composition Studies*. Does that matter? The change went along with a deeper change: under its new name, the journal was notable for being more inclusive and multiracial in a field that had been white-centered, white-focused, and white-oriented.

And, much as we like to think we've outgrown magical thinking, we can still detect a trace of it in everyday language. Skinner may have been discredited by Saussure and Chomsky, but his behavioral model of language helps us understand why names often seem to function magically. That is, Skinner insists that our response to a word carries a tiny trace of our response to the thing it names. Mostly we don't notice this behavioral dimension of language, but think of when you are in a formal meeting or living room and someone says "shit." Notice carefully and you'll see how some people will betray a tiny marginal trace of their response to the thing itself.

We've been fighting magical thinking for a long time. Socrates led the attack, but even he, with his theory of forms, remarked that tall people possess more tallness or participate in "Tallness" (Phaedo 102). In the twentieth century, Saussure seemed to have finished off the idea that names carry real traces of things. Yet still, when we read descriptions of torture—mere words—most of us cringe. In short, neither Socrates nor Saussure were capable of wielding words that

could free us completely from the primitive tendency to feel a marginal link between words and the things they name. A name change—from Freshman English News to Composition Studies, say—reflects an actual change in the field itself.

I'm old enough to remember when the name of our field was up for grabs. "Freshman English" felt too local and ad hoc. I argued for "writing" as the most natural and obvious choice, but those with more scholarly clout carried the day with a fancier name: composition. I remember a walk in the woods with a doctor friend. I smelled dog poop, but he sniffed and said, "fecal matter." He was a professional and used a professional term. In those fecund years, the 1960s, there was just a small group of us interested in the process of writing and who were—it later turned out—starting a new academic field: composition. As for the name, I guess there was a hunger for some professionalism and legitimacy. I liked plain "writing" for our name, but composition seemed to carry more prestige with the big kids in the other disciplines. Still, I saw it as a bad omen to run away from the common everyday name for our field: writing. Why avoid the vernacular?

### **Democratization as Cheating**

If we had used the everyday word "writing" for our field, we would have been highlighting a goal I had in mind with the titles of my two early books: *Writing Without Teachers* (1973) and *Everyone Can Write* (1981). I wanted to show that the activity of writing could be easy. But professionals and literate people seemed to resist. It's understandable that if they suffered in learning to write, they didn't want to make it too easy for others. I can claim that I suffered, too (see "Illiteracy and Oxford and Harvard"). But my goal was to make things easy.

There's something deeply human about the impulse to exclude or preserve privilege—whether you were born to it or had to struggle to earn it. Literacy has tended to function as a way to exclude. Christians don't highlight Jesus as an excluder, but he sometimes was, and he didn't mince words when he was asked why he used parables:

*It has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and*

*bearing they hear not, neither do they understand. (New King James Bible, Matthew 13:11-12)*

The poor will stay poor while the rich get richer.

From the earliest times, people who could write had palpable power and prestige. And as late as the Renaissance, you needed Latin if you wanted to write. Women and children and folks in the street had only the vernacular (meaning “close to the earth”). Yet Dante in writing the *Divine Comedy* insisted on using this language of the street—this language of the people that had never been used for serious noble purposes. By using it, he gave birth to the language we now call Italian.

In an earlier small book, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Dante argued that eloquence could just as well be found in “the vulgar,” that is, the language of the street, of women and nursemaids. But he felt he needed to use Latin to make this argument that Latin wasn’t necessary. I paid homage to Dante in the title of my last book, *Vernacular Eloquence: What Speech Can Bring to Writing* (vernacular being the exact translation of his word “vulgar.”)

My whole career has been a battle against literacy as an exclusionary force. (When I see “No Trespassing” and a fence, I find I want to go there. Perhaps there are good blueberries in that field. I don’t want to be kept out, and writing was trying to keep me out.) If something is difficult, I always look for an easier way. I had to quit graduate school in my second semester when I first set out for a PhD at Harvard. I couldn’t write any more—or rather I couldn’t write clear organized prose anymore because of the psychological tangle the effort put me into. In truth, I wrote reams and reams—but it was all personal private freewriting about my fear and frustration at being unable to write. Luckily, I’ve been able to build a career exploring the implications of my inability to write (see my “Illiteracy at Oxford and Harvard”).

To conclude this introduction, I’d like to explore three difficulties in writing—and how I used cheating to get around them.

*Writing is hard but we can cheat by speaking onto the page.*

Because I was a good student and always tried to write properly, I ground to a halt when I could no longer manage this feat. It took me

a long time to learn to shift into a completely different mental and linguistic gear and use speech for writing—or as I like to phrase it, “to speak onto the page.” That is, I learned to freewrite—and that’s what I needed in order to learn to write garbage. That is, to write whatever words came to my mouth when I was tangled in a knot or trying to find words for what I mean. I published this idea in the appendix to *Writing Without Teachers*, before there was dictation software, indeed before anyone had ever imagined such a thing as software. (I didn’t invent freewriting; Ken Macrorie did. He is massively underappreciated.)

When I followed my lazy shortcut, I found that freewriting is not just easier; it leads to linguistic and cognitive improvements that are hard to get any other way. That is, when we use our mouths and write by speaking onto the page, those words on the page are experienced by readers as alive, and voiced; they resonate with more of the writer’s self.

We can understand how this mysterious improvement happens by peering under the hood. What we find are not carburetors or distributors but rather intonation units. That is, if we speak normally or unselfconsciously, our words come out in spurts that linguists call intonation units. (For example, look at the naturally conversational phrases or spurts that I just used: “when we speak,” “in normal unselfconscious speech,” “the words come out.” In normal speech, there are places where we pause and places where we don’t pause. If you want to be technical, you can find that intonation units correlate with aspects of grammar [see Part Three in my *Vernacular Eloquence*].) When we cheat by speaking onto the page and produce these intonation units, readers tend to hear the sound of these words—audibly but in their heads. And when this happens, readers often hear a person on the page, and the words are often more easily understood and more resonant and memorable.

There’s something almost magical about intonation units—those unpausing words that spurt from our mouths. They embody a process I call easy-out, easy-in. Because the words come out of the mind so easily (thanks to the mouth), they go into the mind easily. The mouth has the ability to shape words characteristic of natural speech; and probably because we evolved as speaking animals, the mind comprehends those intonation units easily. This explains why so much

writing, especially by academics, is ungratifying to read. When we write slowly, haltingly, and deliberately—stopping every third word to make conscious choices—we tend to create much less fluent prose. Often enough it is downright stiff, stilted, or even tangled. We fail to create intonation units.

Let me note two false conclusions you might draw from what I've said. I am not saying that our goal should necessarily be simple conversational language, a la Hemingway. No. Look at the prose of Henry James: it is also very much built out of intonation units. Even from that sometimes stilted writer, we also tend to hear those spurted intonation units—but James' units are longer and more intricate and sometimes more fragily connected.

A brief note about spelling. I like to imply that speaking onto the page is the answer to all your questions. (My wife, after hearing me too often speak about these matters, once remarked, "Peter, whatever the question is, the answer is always freewriting.") And, of course, I benefitted from a standard education, so I am lucky enough: I don't worry so much about spelling. But to write a word, we have to spell it. I remember interviewing a guy who lived mostly on the street, and he was more eloquent than most highly educated people. But he couldn't write and once, tragically said, "I have no words." Our culture had tricked him into thinking that if he couldn't spell a word, he didn't have that word.

I'm sure all my readers know about the amazing breakthroughs in teaching writing to children that come from ignoring spelling. There's been a big movement in teaching toddlers to "speak onto the page"—with whatever spelling results. With this approach, children learn to write before they learn to read: they can write any word or sentence they can say—whereas they have trouble reading words they're unacquainted with. And, of course, people in our culture didn't used to care so much about spelling. For instance, Meriwether Lewis wrote eloquently in the Lewis and Clark Journal, and he was typical in not worrying about idiosyncratic and inconsistent spelling. He was appointed Secretary to the President by Thomas Jefferson. Interestingly, in both Finland and in Korea, taking different routes, they grasped the nettle and radically transformed their national spelling

to make it conform better to pronunciation. In the case of Korea, this was a decision from the top—by the king in the seventeenth century!

*Organizing is hard, but we can cheat by using the form of collage.*

When we are working on a draft or revising, it's sometimes hard to know what order to put things in. Indeed, sometimes we are still struggling to decide what the main point is. But we can cheat our way around this difficulty by using the structure of collage. That is, we can write as much as possible about the topic; then choose the best bits and clean them up; then decide on an order that is random but somehow pleasing.

*Collaborating is hard, but the solution is so easy that it doesn't feel like cheating.*

When people have to agree, there are always tiresome arguments about everything—words, ideas, organization. By invoking the collage principle, we can divvy up the ideas or sections according to preference or temperament then settle for a random order. But it's probably worth agreeing about which bits to start and end with.

When Pat Belanoff and I wrote a textbook together, *A Community of Writers* (short edition, *Being a Writer*), we divvied up the sections according to preference, and then each wrote very, very rough drafts—drafts that sometimes just fell into rough notes and phrases; then we traded and each took over the other person's almost-draft and gave it a first rough revision; then we traded again and revised again. We did that at least two more times till we finally couldn't remember whose fingerprints were on the first version. \*\*\*

Language may be the realm of life more democratic than any other. People are in charge. What comes out of peoples' mouths is what ends up in dictionaries—as long as there are enough mouths. Dictionaries can do nothing but record decisions made by speakers—who like to take shortcuts and cheat.

### **My previous publications in this journal:**

Elbow, Peter. "Using Collage for Collaborative Writing." *Composition Studies* vol. 27 no. 1, 1999, pp.7-14.

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Trimbur, John, Keil, Charles, and Peter Elbow. "Making Choices about Voices." *Composition Studies* vol. 30, no. 1, 2002, pp. 61-65. (My bit was just a tiny, almost mystical reflection.)

Bean, Janet, Eddy, Robert, Grego, Rhonda, Irvine, Patricia, Kutz, Ellie, Matsuda, Paul Kei, Cucchiara, Maryann, Elbow, Peter, Haswell, Richard, Kennedy, Eileen, and Al Lehner. "Should We Ask Students to Write in Home Language? Complicating a Yes/No Debate." *Composition Studies*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2003, pp. 25-42.

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