## Write it like you'd say it

## UMass professor Peter Elbow challenges the idea that written language is "better"

## By Erin McKean

When we consider speech and writing, it's clear which we think of as the lesser art. Talk is cheap, chatter idle; "get it in writing," we say. But in his new book from Oxford University Press, "Vernacular Eloquence," Peter Elbow (the author of the classic writing books "Writing without Teachers" and "Writing with Power," and professor emeritus of English at the University of Massachusetts Amherst) successfully challenges the assumption that writing is always better than speech. In fact, Elbow argues that the best way to free our pens is to unleash our tongues.

According to Elbow, our spoken language, through much practice (even prodigies start speaking well before they start writing, after all), effortlessly embodies virtues that we struggle to achieve in writing. For most people, unless you're another Dickens or Trollope, the daily ratio of speaking to writing is skewed wildly in the direction of speech — so why not bring the strength of our experience in one mode to bear on the other? Our spoken language tends to be more direct, with fewer convoluted constructions and subordinate clauses and yet more naturally varied and interesting sentences. Speech gets to the point faster, and connects better with the audience. The intonation and phrasing of our speech elegantly map the patterns of meaning we want to convey, in ways that we may not be able to achieve on the page.

Elbow points out that research shows that speech, surprisingly, is often not only more coherent than written language — in terms of the flow of ideas from what's known to what's new — but that writers often introduce incoherence into their writing through revision. (In other words, we often revise the sense and flow out of our writing, rather than into it.) Our speech is full of what Elbow calls "valuable linguistic resources" that we not only can but should mine to create even the most formal writing. For instance, in writing we often remove ourselves, depersonalizing our message, but we don't take ourselves out of our speech (contrast "The last chapter focused on . . ." with "In the last chapter I focused on . . ."), even though research shows that abstract, personless sentences are harder to understand. We also don't tend to start spoken sentences with the kinds of dependent clauses (such as "Having made that argument, the author turned to . . . ") that so often turn into dangling modifiers.

Elbow is not advocating a careless, spit-anything-out, "blurt it down" approach; in fact, a full third of the book is dedicated to ways to take "speaking onto the page" from freewheeling blurts to educated written English, without losing the directness, music, logic, and power of the voice. One tactic is as simple as reading what we've written aloud — "the test of the mouth," as

Flaubert called it — which can tip us off to an overused or missing word, an unhappy collision of subject and verb, or the wrong preposition.

In fact, Elbow points out, plenty of extremely writerly writers, including Henry James, Mark Twain, Bertrand Russell, and Dostoevsky, dictated their work, rather than wielding the pen themselves. Elbow admits that most of us can't simply transcribe what we say and be done with it: Our conventions of standard written English are different from those of spoken English, and if we want our writing to be successful, we must acknowledge those different conventions.

We've probably never been better positioned than we are now to merge the strengths of speaking and writing: Elbow points to e-mail, blogs, and newspaper columnists (even such noted language conservatives as the late William Safire) as examples of the new acceptability of "talky" writing. We see this trend in the new "friendly" copy on websites such as Mint or MailChimp, where marketingese has been replaced by more straightforward, conversational English, and of course in our Facebook status updates, text messages, and tweets, where we often use a blend of writerly and spoken modes.

Books on writing should be readable above all else, and as a writer, Elbow is his own best argument for speaking onto the page: His voice is both authoritative and affable, conversational and professorial. "Vernacular Eloquence" introduces such words as dashtard (the combination of a comma and a dash, advocated by Nicholson Baker) and grapholect (a word for the "dialect" of written English, used by E.D. Hirsch of Cultural Literacy fame). Elbow also provides an array of surprising facts, noting for example that Queen Isabella of Spain is credited with the invention of the metaphorical use of "good taste." Quoting widely from linguists, historians, and other language teachers, Elbow comes across throughout "Vernacular Eloquence" as a partner in exploring how speech can improve writing, not as a dictator insisting on it.

In the conversational introduction to "Vernacular Eloquence," Elbow tells us that the goal of his book is to take all the virtues of speech and combine them with all the virtues of writing — a goal he admits is a utopian one. But by advocating that we begin our writing by "speaking onto the page," Elbow shows us a better, more balanced world, where we're free to use our strong and flexible spoken language to kick-start our writing process . . . and are still responsible for making sure that we are creating writing that is good, effective, appropriate, and above all, a pleasure to read.

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