

From Informal Talk to Academic Prose: What Lies Between:

By
Anne-Aronson

There is often a cultural and dialectal gap between teachers and students in the composition classroom. Students bring to class a culture based almost exclusively on oral language, while we as teachers are firmly embedded in an academic culture based on essayist prose. If this gap does indeed exist, then we should see evidence of it in the writing students do for class. Before exploring this oral influence on student writing, it's important to point out that this powerful oral culture may be a particularly American phenomenon. One of our colleagues in the composition program at the University of Minnesota is here from Britain, and she tells the story about her first bus ride to campus. When she entered the bus she was immediately astounded by how much noise students were making socializing in a public place. In England, apparently, the students just don't talk that much. The real pressure in our society to be extroverted may not exist in many other cultures. We must try to look at this extroversion as a rich resource for students who are learning to expand on their uses of language.

In the past few years, composition researchers and theorists have studied how children and adolescents negotiate the transition from speaking to writing. Barry Kroll (1981) has proposed a 4-stage scheme that traces the writer's development from the first scribbles to professional writing.

1) The first stage is the Preparation stage. At this time the child learns the mechanics of writing. Writing is closely associated with drawing, not with speaking. Speech may surround the writing activity, but the child is not directly writing down what is said.

2) In the Consolidation stage, the child realizes that writing encodes speech. This is the stage in which you see children uttering the words that they're writing down.

3) The third stage, which brings us up to high school and college writers, is the differentiation stage. At this point the student learns that speaking and writing are different. I would prefer to modify this somewhat and say that the student learns that speaking and writing can be different. In fact, speaking and writing *can* be very similar, depending on the speaking or writing task. A personal journal, for example, resembles a loosely structured

internal monologue, while these talks that we're giving now are spoken but do not fit the mold of a stereotypically oral style. It is only possible to talk intelligently about the differentiation stage if we limit the discussion to the difference between casual talk and formal, essayist writing.

4) The final stage is the Integration stage. In this stage, oral and written strategies are interwoven. The writer makes a choice as to when a colloquialism will create the right effect. When we reach the integration stage we become adept at style-shifting. We know, for example, when a polysyllabic Latinate word will stimulate the thinking of our students and when it will put them to sleep (more likely the latter).

The extroverted, orally competent freshman who has limited experience of reading or writing is probably finding her way through the differentiation stage when we meet her in our composition classes. She often experiences a period of liberation when, during the first week of class, we spend lots of time on free writing, a form which allows her to draw deeply on her oral linguistic resources. She may even begin to think she's going to like the academic scene. The honeymoon is over, or at least seriously threatened, however, when we ask her to write expository prose or what James Britton (1975) calls transactional writing. Here the differentiation problem comes into play. The student simply does not want to give up those wonderful oral strategies that have kept her alive and connected to other people for more than 15 years.

We see evidence of this powerful oral culture in student writing to greater and lesser degrees. Some students, in an attempt to assimilate to the academic culture, will hypercorrect—they'll drop the first person entirely from their writing, or they'll saturate their texts with nominalizations and complex but inefficient syntactic structures. Others will rely heavily on oral strategies. The attached paper (which constitutes the three paragraphs of a completed assignment) is by a student who falls into this group. This assignment was for a "researched argument" paper. We'll see that the student wholeheartedly took on the difficult task of negotiating the gap between oral and academic cultures.

Five features of this text in particular show the strong influence of oral culture:

1) The influence of speech is apparent in certain writing problems we call errors. The second sentence, for example, is a fragment: "Especially doing something you like." Mina Shaughnessy (1977) suggests that sentence boundary errors are due to the fact that students are accustomed to the complex cues of speech—pauses, gestures, intonation—which indicate the shape of an utterance. The writer of this text probably hears sentences 1 and 2 as two separate units of meaning: the separateness of the two ideas is captured in visual form by the question followed by a fragment. It's not easy to do an essayist rewrite of these opening sentences; the following is at least an attempt: "Earning 7 million dollars over five years doing any job at all would certainly be gratifying for any of us, but earning that much doing a job we enjoyed would be remarkable." It took me 32 awkward, imprecise words to say what

the student said in 17 words. The freshman's version may be flawed by academic standards, but it is considerably more concise.

2) The second paragraph opens with a reference to "they" where we would expect a more explicit reference to first-year U.S.F.L. players. According to the rules of academic prose, this pronoun reference is inappropriate because it might lead to confusion; it demands that the reader do a little inference work to figure out whether "they" is the football players, or the league, or some as yet unmentioned entities. In speech, however, this reference to "they" would not cause a problem. Conversational cues like loudness, intonation, and gesture might preclude the possibility of a misunderstanding by making it clear that the football players are the most salient characters in the argument. Or, alternatively, it might simply be that listeners expect to do that kind of split-second inference work while readers of formal prose expect a more explicit text. Whichever is the case, writers and readers of essayist prose agree to a contract which states that pronominal reference should always be absolutely clear in the text. Speakers and listeners, on the other hand, agree to a different contract which allows for a greater degree of inexplicitness in the utterances themselves.

3) The writer occasionally repeats himself. Notice in the third paragraph: "But if the owner pays all that money for a multi-year contract and the player can't perform, then he just lost a lot of money" and then one sentence later, "If Flutie can't perform like the owner expected then that owner just lost a lot of money." Speech is by nature repetitive. We usually can't remember that we said the same thing in the same way a minute ago (much less that we told the same story to the same person last week). In writing, however, and this is true for any kind of writing, not just formal prose, we can go back to our texts and eliminate the repetition.

4) A fourth characteristic of this text that reflects oral influence is that it digresses. The second paragraph is an example. The writer starts out discussing the fact that football players earn more than what's in their contract, but ends up in the middle of the paragraph writing about the injustice of the system in light of world poverty. The phrase "it makes you think" suggests that the writer is reacting spontaneously to the preceding statement, as he would if he were talking. This digressiveness isn't a sign that the student is a disorganized thinker. The following paragraph is more tightly constructed, has a main point, and incorporates supporting evidence (the quotation from Flutie, for example, is very appropriate). The second paragraph is digressive because it relies on oral strategies for communication. Life would certainly be dull if all our conversations dealt with only one topic at a time.

5) The final example is the argument that nobody should get paid 7 million dollars for doing something fun. This is not the kind of logic we look for when we read argument papers. It is a heavily emotional appeal, and the writer states it boldly in the first paragraph without supporting it anywhere else in the paper. This kind of appeal, however, would be highly

appropriate in a conversation. When I read these sentences, I can hear the intonational patterns behind it. "I don't think *anybody* should get paid that much money for doing something they *liked* to do as a kid." The writer is asking the reader to identify with his outrage. A rough draft of this paper was discussed by three of the student's peers and myself in a conference group meeting. One student challenged the writer on the "why should you get paid to do something fun" argument, countering that there's nothing wrong with making a lot of money doing something you like. I also challenged this argument in a second draft that the student showed me the following week. He still included it, though, right up at the front of the paper. Why did he do this? The student is obviously writing from anger. There is a powerful emotional force behind this essay, and a great deal of commitment to the argument. Unlike much academic writing, there is little hedging or mitigation in this paper. This kind of visceral argument is not simply oral, but it reaches for the qualities of oratory. The writer attempts to persuade by aiming for the nerve endings of the reader. In doing so, it fails to be dispassionate, a quality which I think is expected of most transactional prose. The commitment in this paper, the "heat" as one researcher, William Smith, puts it, results from the fact that the topic emerges from the writer's own culture. The writer's love for football was apparent in the journal he kept for class where he would describe at length euphoric afternoons playing touch football with friends. In writing about this topic for an expository assignment, he takes a risk, because the language and feeling which surround football for him are embedded in an oral culture. (I should add that he also takes a risk because his teacher knows nothing about football and doesn't like it). The commitment which gives this writing purpose, direction, and voice is what seems to prevent the essay from being cool, logical—academic.

I'd like to draw three conclusions from this examination of the oral influence on one student's writing. The first is that the oral influence on student writing consists of real strategies that have worked well for the student in speaking situations. The speech-like qualities of undifferentiated writing derive from a different, not an inferior communicative system from the one we're accustomed to in our academic culture. The medieval romance was a genre in which extensive digression was expected rather than prohibited, because the romance was rooted in the oral culture of the period. Writers of Middle Ages were not disorganized thinkers because they wrote this way.

The second conclusion derives from my point above about the commitment factor in the paper we've been looking at. The essay on the U.S.F.L. may be overly emotional for transactional writing, but it also has a strong, distinctive voice. In attempting to negotiate the gap between oral and academic cultures, the writer has not given up his own linguistic rhythms. Although these are oral rhythms, they give the paper a richness it would not have if it were written obediently according to the conventions of academic writing. The writer may have failed to differentiate between formal prose and

informal speech, but that does not mean that his writing isn't effective.

I think this example shows that, as teachers, we need to value the oral quality in our students' writing and encourage them not to abandon it as they proceed in their development. This is especially important when students draw directly on their oral culture for topics that really matter to them. Our task is to show them that the oral style is not the only one, and that they will become more powerful writers when they are in a position to choose from among more than one style.

A third conclusion is that, as teachers, we must give students the opportunity to write expressively—that is, in a fashion that is close to speaking—and we must give them credit for doing so. We tend to think of expressive writing as a warm up exercise, a way to get them ready for the real stuff. Maybe we need to give more weight to this kind of writing and show students that it too can be improved—journals, for example, can get better. We need to convince our students that they own many voices and that the joy of language is in playing with those voices, exploring them, and testing them out on a variety of readers.

REFERENCES

- Britton, J., et al. (1975) *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)*. London: Macmillan Education.
- Kroll, B. M. (1981) "Developmental Relationships Between Speaking and Writing," In B. M. Kroll and R. J. Vann (Eds.), *Exploring Speaking-Writing Relationships: Connections and Contrasts*. Urbana: NCTE.
- Shaughnessy, M. (1977) *Errors and Expectations*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Appendix—Student-Written Sample

Wouldn't it be nice to earn seven million dollars over five years? Especially doing something you like. Well that's how much Doug Flutie will be earning in his first year in the U.S.F.L. I don't think anybody should get paid that much money for doing something they liked to do as a kid. First year players in the U.S.F.L. are payed too much money. The league should put a range on how much each team can spend on its players.

The money that they earn in a contract is not all that they get. The money they make from commercials and investments has to be taken into account too. According to Bob Woolf, Flutie's attorney, Doug is on top of football, money wise. "I believe his contract is the highest in professional sports for any rookie and that he's the highest paid professional football player (Mihoce c1): It makes you think of all the poor and deprived people in the world when they can go make that much money doing something they like. Why should one person live a life of luxury when his career is playing a game like he did when he was a kid. A lot of these players do charity work on T.V. and other things but they still gain money from the publicity. This publicity brings in the crowds to games which helps the owners. No matter what they do on the side they always end up helping themselves anyway.

The publicity the player got during college is the main reason the owner picked him for his team, such as Flutie who won the Heisman trophy. But a football player should have to prove how good he is before they pay him that much money. I know he had to be pretty good in college to get that publicity but what's great in college isn't always good in the pro's (Wulf 22). What they should do is pay the player a little the first year and pay him more as he proves himself. Who knows how he's going to perform when you put him on a different team then he was on in college. Flutie felt the same way after he found that they traded the other quarterback so he could be the starter. "My initial reaction was that I was shocked, I didn't anticipate it. I would have like to have earned the position and have to beat someone out (Mihoce c2):. If they can't prove themselves then the owner doesn't lose any money. But if the owner pays all that money for a multi-year contract and the player can't perform then he just lost a lot of money. For example, the contract for Doug Flutie, of the New Jersey Generals, is worth seven million dollars over five years, whether he does good or bad. If Flutie can't perform like the owner expected then that owner just lost a lot of money.