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Voice in Writing Again: Embracing Contraries

Peter Elbow

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The Voice Story

Voice used to be a hot critical term in the pages of the journals, but our current scholarly conversation has gone rather quiet. I think there's something to be gained if we reawaken the discussion.

Starting around the 1960s, there was a surge of enthusiasm for getting voice into writing. Those of us who were in that surge were not all saying the same thing, but we were all promoting voice in one sense or another: *Voice is an important dimension of texts and we should pay lots of attention to it. Everyone has a real voice and can write with power. Writing with a strong voice is good writing. Sincere writing is good writing. My voice is my true self and my rhetorical power. The goal of teaching writing is to develop the self.*

But then came skeptics. They weren't all saying the same thing either, but they were all being critical in one sense or another: *Let's not pay so much attention to the voice in texts. Voice is a misleading metaphor. We don't write with a "voice" that is ours. We do not write, we are written by our culture. We are socially constructed, and what we mistake for a self is a subject position that changes as we are differentially interpellated from one social context of our life to another. Sincerity is not a useful goal for writing.*

Interestingly, the enthusiasts and the critics tended to share the same anti-elitist political desire for a fairer and less oppressive society—a desire to give more power to students in the classroom and citizens at large. So, when the skeptical line of thought seemed to go so far as to deprive individual persons of any agency to make a difference in the world (*we cannot write, we can only reproduce larger more powerful forces around us*), there were various and continuing attempts to rescue agency. Paul Smith and Randall Freisinger gave some early and sophisticated versions. *We may be constructed by culture, but if we learn to analyze carefully enough how this happens, then we can actually work toward a fairer world.*

This conflict about voice in our field echoes a much older conflict about the self in language. The Greek sophists offered, in effect, to help craft any voice for any speech to help win any argument or law case—no matter what kind of self. Plato, in reaction, argued that the power of language derived, to some real extent, from the nature of the rhetor's self: only a good rhetor can create really good words. To learn to speak or write better, we need also to work on *being* better persons.

Aristotle refused this either/or conflict. He wrote that “We believe good men more fully and more readily than others” (*Rhetoric* 1356a), but then he went on to acknowledge that speakers can fool listeners and persuade them with a consciously constructed voice. He talks about the ability to “make ourselves *thought to be* sensible and morally good. [. . .]” (1378a, my emphasis)—noting that this is a matter of skill, not character:

We can now see that a writer must disguise his art and give the impression of speaking naturally and not artificially. Naturalness is persuasive, artificiality is the contrary; for our hearers are prejudiced and think we have some design against them. (1404b)

I hear Aristotle giving a kind of pragmatic, common sense affirmation of both positions: *It helps to be trustworthy; but, if you're skilled, you can fake it*. These are crux passages and certainly not unambiguous. Some readers hear him saying that craft and disguise are the only things that matter. Nan Johnson's scholarship and stature convince me to see Aristotle affirming both sides: not just that we can fool readers, but also that good men *do* have an advantage and that genuine naturalness *is* persuasive (more about this later) .

I'm intrigued by a more recent avoidance of either/or thinking about voice in writing. It started as a local culture, spread, and then had a nontrivial influence on composition studies at large. It was spawned by a noteworthy first-year English course at Amherst College that was inaugurated and directed by Theodore Baird from 1938 to 1966 (see Robin Varum on this course). Walker Gibson, Roger Sale, and William Coles were deeply influenced by teaching in it; David Bartholomae was strongly influenced through Coles, and Joseph Harris through Bartholomae and Coles. Harris wrote admiringly about Coles in these pages (see his "Plural Text"). A list of others who also taught or were influenced is striking: Reuben Brower, Neil Hertz, Richard Poirier, Gordon Pradl, and William Pritchard. Lurking significantly in the background at Amherst College was Robert Frost, with his own strong preoccupation with a voice in written language.

Baird and the others developed a rich and sophisticated attitude toward voice. On the one hand, participants spent a great deal of time scorning sincerity and skewering students and colleagues who were naive or foolhardy enough to defend it. They insisted that a text gives no window at all on the actual self of the writer. Yet, on the other hand, they were deeply preoccupied with the voice in a text and tended (more than most New Critics) to see voice as perhaps the central and operative dimension of a text. They developed some of the best ears around for the nuances of voice. They engaged in what Pritchard called "ear training" in his perceptive essay of that title. They were interested in the self in a text but insisted that this self was continually made and re-made by language—not a reflection of the historical self or author. In their fascination with voice, they sometimes seemed to want a voice that was true or right *in itself*, fitting the writer or speaker—not just a voice that is appropriate to the audience or genre.¹

The Current Situation

So there's been lots of interesting thinking about voice over the centuries and the topic is far from settled, but now we don't see much scholarly critical writing about it. (For a notable exception, see the 2001 special issue of the *Journal of Second Language Writing*, guest edited by Belcher and Hirvela.) The concept of voice in writing seems to have been successfully discredited in our journals and books: who can find a writer arguing for voice (much less "true self" or "real self") in any enthusiastic, nonironic or noncritical sense in the pages of *College Composition and Communication* or *College English* for the last ten or fifteen years? Yet the concept of voice (without quotation marks) keeps not going away. Darsie Bowden herself makes this very case:

A longtime critic of voice, I rail against its use in my courses. Despite this, the term invariably emerges, often sheepishly from one of my students and, more frequently than I'd like to admit, from me as I stumble over my own inability to describe what I mean. ("Voice" 285)

So voice is alive in our classrooms. Students at all levels instinctively talk and think about voice, or their voice in their writing, and tend to believe they have a real or true self—despite the

best efforts of some of their teachers. [Jane Danielewicz quotes a comment by one of her students: “I turned down your suggestion for revising just because I thought it took away some of my personal voice in some places” (personal conversation)]. If Bowden herself falls into using the term, think of how many other teachers use it in some of their responses to student papers. It seems intuitive in our culture to speak, for example, about a “hesitant, uncertain voice” at this point in a paper, or an “intolerant voice,” or a “confusing change in voice in the second section.” And when teachers work with a student for fourteen weeks, it’s often hard not to slip into a comment that links the voice in the paper to the student’s character or personality. (“You’re usually so forthright when you make points in class. Why do you use such a hesitant voice in this written argument?”)

Voice is also alive in politics. George Bush was probably elected because his voice was more persuasive and believable to more voters. We’re left with a widespread perplexity about whether that down-home “nuclear” voice is *him* or a clever ruse. It would be nice if our next election were decided entirely on the basis of substantive issues, but—unless we have more culturewide discussions about the complexities of voice, the relations between voice and the actual character—voter feelings about self-in-voice will surely carry the day again. Political advertising tends to be based on research about perceptions of self-in-voice.

Voice is alive on the Internet and via email. It used to be that most writing occurred in school or at work (although we shouldn’t underestimate how many people wrote mostly privately in other settings; see D. Barton and R. Ivanic). Much or most writing used to be addressed to a judging authority who knew more about writing or the topic than the writer did. What a huge change the Internet has brought to the experience of writing: so many more writers; so much more writing in the world; so much writing for *strangers*! Instead of writers only wondering about what teachers will find right and wrong in their words, more and more writers wonder less defensively what kind of person readers will think they are. (As the *New Yorker* cartoon dog says to his friend: “Online, they don’t know you’re a dog.”) On blogs and websites such as MySpace, lots of people eagerly use written words to reveal “who they really are,” while just as many use the same websites to “construct” a self. Among the latter group, some want to disguise what they feel are their “real selves,” some want to give voices to what they experience as multiple selves, and some don’t feel they have actual selves at all until they create them with language.

So, as I look at our journals, our classrooms, and the larger world, I see a kind of stalemate about voice in writing. The concept is alive and well, yet no one comes forward any more in our field to argue for it or even to explore very seriously why it’s so alive. Critics get tired of criticizing something that no one defends, tired of not reaching people who don’t listen to them. Thus, critical commentary goes on to other topics, such as digital media, public writing, service learning. (The growing discussion of World Englishes and nonmainstream versions of English cries out for more attention to voice.) We’re left with an unresolved contrary that strikes me as unhealthy and unproductive: many critiques seem valid, yet voice stays alive, even in the most “naive” forms that have been most powerfully critiqued. My goal here is to wake up this slumbering contradiction.

Either/Or Battle

How do people respond when they are party to a contradiction? The most common response is to try to win—to engage in an either/or, zero-sum attempt to discredit the other view. I want to illustrate the dangers of this impulse by looking at how Joseph Harris makes his argument about

voice. His chapter on it in *A Teaching Subject* is a classic compare/contrast essay between an approach he approves of and one he criticizes. “Picture two writing classrooms” (23), he starts off, and, when he gets to the heart of his argument, he writes: “These contrasting views of what ought to go on in a writing classroom stem from deep and conflicting intuitions about how language and the self are related” (42). As his chapter unfolds, his either/or analysis of two approaches to voice becomes a larger analysis of two approaches to the teaching of writing. He launches his analysis by quoting me as follows:

“The underlying metaphor,” writes Peter Elbow, “. . . is that we all have a chest cavity unique in size and shape so that each of us naturally resonates to one pitch alone” (Harris *Subject* 24; *Power* 281-82).

He uses my metaphor not just as an example, but as an icon to stand for the kind of writing classroom he disapproves of. Thus, toward the end of his argument, he sums up the good approach as one that avoids this idea of voice issuing from “a chest cavity unique in size and shape” (34). And he keeps referring back to this metaphor to characterize my position.

What’s striking to me, however, is that he quotes only half of my metaphorical treatment of voice (and ignores my nonmetaphorical analysis). He fails to note that I go on immediately to argue that such a simple notion is wrong. Here’s what he doesn’t quote from me:

In this metaphorical world, then, even if we figure out the system, we are stuck. If we want to be heard we are limited to our single note. If we want to sing other notes, we will not be heard.

And yet, if we are brave and persistent enough to sing our note at length—to develop our capacity for resonance—gradually we will be able to “sing ourselves in”: to get resonance first into one or two more frequencies and then more. Finally, we will be able to sing whatever note we want to sing, even to sing whatever note others want to hear, and to make every note resound with rich power. But we only manage this flowering if we are willing to start off singing our own single tiresome pitch for a long time and in that way gradually teach the stiff cells of our bodies to vibrate and be flexible. (*Power* 282)

Working in an adversarial zero-sum model where one side must be wrong for the other to be right, Harris couldn’t seem even to *register* this second idea. It *had* to be that, if I said we only had one note, I couldn’t possibly be going on to say the contrary. So he also couldn’t notice the previous paragraph, where I’d set up my both/and metaphor with an explicit analogy of a “clunky violin” that needs to be “played in” before it can resonate to a wider range of pitches.

This either/or mental framework dominates again when Harris says that I equate voice in writing with “a certain type of prose” (34). Yet I repeatedly argue in the chapter he was analyzing that voice correlates with no kind of writing:

There are no outward linguistic characteristics to point to in writing with real voice. [. . .] Real voice is not necessarily personal or sincere. Writing about your personal concerns is only one way and not necessarily the best. Such writing can lead to gushy or analytical words about how angry you are today: useful to write, an expression of strong feelings, a possible source of future powerful writing, but not resonant or powerful for readers as it stands. (*Power* 312-13)²

Because I have been so often cited as representing a whole “school” in composition studies, I think that this kind of misreading somehow got ingrained and that it has affected how many people understand the landscape of composition studies—tending to see it as a site for either/or, zero-sum conflict between positions. The representation of my work has often been based on an inability to imagine myself carving out a both/and analysis and making arguments that embrace contraries. For example, when I argue strongly for unplanned, uncensored freewriting, people often ignore my stated commitments to careful, planned, skeptical revising. When I argue for the believing game, I’m not heard insisting on the need for the skeptical, logical, critical thinking of the doubting game. When I argue for private personal individual writing, people have trouble seeing me affirm the social dimension of language and writing.³

Compromise

Compromise is surely a healthier way to deal with conflict or contradiction. *If we’re going to avoid war, you can’t have your position and I can’t have mine. They are mutually incompatible. We both have to give in a bit—back down some—and work out a middle position of some sort.*

I don’t know whether the Amherst College group thought of themselves as compromising between previous extreme positions about voice (Baird was explicitly influenced by Korzybski and his theory of general semantics). But their position on voice invites itself to be seen as a compromise. On the one hand, they affirm a main principle of the *enthusiasts* for voice: that we should look at texts in terms of the voices there—and that this kind of textual voice is interesting, central, and powerful. On the other hand, they loudly affirm a main principle of the *critics* of voice: a textual voice gives no window at all onto the real character of the author. Also, Thomas Newkirk’s book *The Performance of Self in Student Writing* takes what strikes me as a more or less compromise position. But his book was strikingly criticized in the pages of *College Composition and Communication* and *College English*, perhaps because partisan ideological lines had already been drawn.

Even though compromise is a precious skill that life continually asks us to learn, I want to point to the *limitations* of compromise as a way of dealing with contradiction. Normal compromise doesn’t free us from the conflict-based framework of either/or, black/white thinking. It’s a method for letting each side lose as little as possible. For a true win/win outcome, we need a way to *break out* of this either/or frame of reference.

Aristotle’s position on voice (as I understand it) illustrates what’s involved in going beyond compromise and breaking out of the either/or thinking. He’s not saying that rhetors should find a halfway position where they are *a little bit* good and natural and *a little bit* clever at disguising. Being only somewhat good and somewhat clever is a formula for mediocrity. My both/and reading of the crux passage is consistent with the kind of thinking that Aristotle uses in various places in his work. He often deals with tricky issues by saying, “in one sense, X; but, in another sense, Y.” That is, he often implies that we can understand a complex topic well only if we can look at it first through one lens and then through a contrary lens. So I read him to be saying, “Analyzed through one frame of reference, good ethos requires good character; but, analyzed through another frame of reference, good ethos is available to skill alone.”

In *Writing Without Teachers*, I emphasized the limitations of compromise in the writing process (and summarized the point as follows in my essay on “binary thinking”):

The path to really good writing, then, is seldom the path of compromise or the golden mean. If we are only sort of generative and sort of critical, we write mediocre stuff: we don't have enough to choose from, and we don't reject ideas and words we ought to reject. We need extremity in both directions. Instead of finding one point on the continuum between two extremes, we need as it were to occupy two points near both ends. (54)

Handling the Stalemate by Embracing Contraries

If a stalemate is strong and ingrained, the competing positions themselves are probably valuable and necessary. In such a situation, we need the benefit of the competing positions in all of their strength—and, for that, we need both/and thinking or embracing contraries. So, with the voice stalemate, we need to stop trying to find out which of the competing positions is right—or trying to work out some watered down middle position.

In this essay, I show that we can affirm the validity of both conflicting positions—even in their contradiction—and benefit from them. I start with a theoretical overview. (By the way, although I used a *kind* of both/and thinking in the chapter that Harris quotes, I wasn't using it to embrace contraries; I was using it to argue for voice.)

We have a choice about how to think about written language: through the lens of *text* or that of *voice*. There is no problem with either. The only a problem is when people try to outlaw one as wrong. They see a debate between right and wrong when it's really a choice between two lenses or “terministic screens” (to use Burke's term). We need both because each shows us something about language that the other obscures.

In their root literal senses, “text” stands for words on a page and “voice” for the spoken medium of language. Thus, the text lens highlights the visual and spatial features of language as print (etymologically, “text” comes from weaving—note “textile”); the voice lens highlights language as sounded, heard, and existing in time. The text lens foregrounds language as an abstract system (Saussure's *langue*) in which words have the same meaning whoever utters them in whatever context—words as interchangeable and not attached to persons; the voice lens highlights how language issues from individual persons and physical bodies and how the same words differ, depending on who says them and how. Two people's use of the word “cat” is the same as text, but the words sound very different as spoken or voiced. (Handwriting is more personal and body-connected than typing, so handwritten words are often experienced as more “voiced” than typed or printed words. With the resources of word processing, people sometimes try to create or bring out a voice by using certain fonts.)

Insofar as we consider language purely through the text lens, it is disembodied language; no one is speaking to anyone. The paradigm cases are mathematics and logic. Mathematics is a language, in certain ways the best one that we have. The symbols do nothing but proclaim a relationship: that something is the case or means something or equals something. If we look at written or spoken language through this narrow text lens—stripping away the people, the historical drama, the body, and the actual person trying to do something to someone else—we can analyze better the bare root meaning, logic, and patterns that voice and rhetorical drama can obscure, thus highlighting the value of putting an argument into symbolic logic.

In contrast, insofar as we consider discourse as voiced utterance, it is *rhetorical*: this lens brings back into focus the historical and material and social context. This rhetorical lens has been

usefully celebrated in our era, and it has helped us fight free of any temptation to see language only as grammar books and handbooks see it—as pure text or naked meaning (“The cat is on the mat”).

But no one is tempted any more to take this narrow, nonhistorical or nonrhetorical view as the only lens for language. (It’s become a cliché to accuse the New Critics of taking a completely ahistorical stance toward literary texts, but Clara Claiborne Park has written an important and fascinating essay showing that it’s not so simple. And before falling into clichéd condescension, let’s remember that we have a legacy from the New Critics of close reading of words and the intricate relations among them in a text—a kind of careful reading that was comparatively rare in scholarship until they came along.)

Currently, however, there is some temptation to see the rhetorical lens as the only right one for language: *All discourse is always already rhetorical*. But the telltale “always already” shows that the claim is a *lens* claim. As such, it cannot refute another lens claim. That is, a rhetorical lens shows us a rhetorical dimension in *all* discourse. But, by the same token, a pure text lens shows us a naked meaning dimension that is “always already” in all discourse.

Even a piece of mathematical discourse that consists mostly of equations can helpfully be viewed through both lenses. It may look as though it’s just sitting there as a piece of text or semiosis laying out a semantic relationship; but the equations can also be seen as someone’s response to someone else’s equations.⁴

In short, we benefit from both metaphors or lenses and we lose out if either is outlawed. In what follows, I lay out concrete opposing reasons why, in our teaching and our own discourse, we need to engage in two contrary activities: paying lots of attention to voice and pushing away considerations of voice. My premise is that, if we acknowledge the realm of time—seeing how it can trump logic—we don’t have to choose only one approach or create a watery compromise, but rather can easily follow contradictory advice.

Reasons for Attending to Voice in Texts

When readers hear a voice in a piece of writing, they are often more drawn to read it—and that audible voice often makes the words easier to understand. Robert Frost put this in oracular terms:

A dramatic necessity goes deep into the nature of the sentence. . . . All that can save [written language] is the speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination.

This is helpful knowledge for writers. With practice, people can learn to write prose that “has a voice” or “sounds like a person,” and, interestingly, when they do, their words are more effective at *carrying meaning*. For when we hear naturally spoken language—or when we hear a difficult text read aloud well—we don’t have to work so hard to understand the meaning. Intonation or prosody *enacts* some of the meanings so that we can “hear” them. (Here are some of the audible elements in spoken language that carry meaning: variations in pitch, accent, volume, speed, timbre, rhythm. I like to illustrate this in a mini-workshop where each person tries to say a single word, such as *hello*, in such a way as to carry a different meaning.) Of course written words are literally silent, but it is possible to learn to write language that readers actually *hear in their minds* (or, if you prefer, that readers have the illusion of hearing). Readers usually experience “audible” voiced writing as clearer than writing they don’t hear.

But what makes writing audible? This is a theoretical mystery (that I've enjoyed pursuing), yet there's a simple technique that helps students produce it. When students have the repeated experience of reading their writing aloud, they are more likely to *listen* to their words and write sentences that are inviting and comfortable to speak, which, in turn, makes the sentences better for readers reading in silence. For centuries, writers and rhetoricians have advised reading aloud (more on this in my "Three Mysteries").

Attention to voice helps rhetorical effectiveness. Merely getting a voice into one's writing is not enough. If the voice is wrong, it backfires. Throughout the centuries of rhetorical tradition, teachers have urged speakers and writers to think about the audience and find the most appropriate voice (or *ethos* or implied author or persona). By analyzing the voice in lots of texts and by reading drafts aloud—and trying out different readings to manipulate the voice in various ways—we can learn to hear better the voice that readers are most likely to hear. It's particularly important to learn to hear the voice or voices that readers *won't consciously* hear but that may well affect their reaction. (Is there a subliminal arrogance or timidity that turns off readers who aren't already sympathetic to the argument?) This kind of "ear training" was one of the main goals of the Amherst College group. (Walker Gibson has what are probably the most elegant and useful books that help with ear training: *Tough, Sweet, and Stuff*, and *Persona*).

Aristotle famously observed that *ethos* often trumps *logos* or *pathos* in persuading an audience. Most writing, especially student writing, is a mixture of weaknesses and strengths. When we find ourselves noticing weaknesses more, it's often because of a problematic voice. A winning, believable, and attractive voice probably makes us notice virtues more. It's surely appropriate that voice is a prominent rubric in many statewide writing exams.

The metaphor of "voice" helps students improve their writing. Many of the textual features that people describe in terms of voice can also be described as matters of style. And there's a huge and sophisticated scholarly literature about style in writing. But the voice metaphor often works better for students and others who are not sophisticated about language. Compare these two phrasings:

You have too many passives and nominative constructions here.

You sound kind of distant, uninvolved, or bureaucratic to me here.

Of course, the style formulation is more accurate and trustworthy. Passives and nominative constructions are "true facts." The voice formulation is a personal subjective projection—and it implies a subjective guess about how others will react and even about the mind and feelings of the writer. Nevertheless, the voice formulation has advantages. Few students are sophisticated about the grammatical and other technical linguistic features needed for style analysis—whatever the merits. Yet, ever since they were toddlers, they have been getting more sophisticated about the effects of different voices on listeners. ("Don't you use that tone with me, young man!") And they've had to work at psyching out various voice games—for example, in the realm of dating.

Even the subjectivity of voice judgments has an advantage. Style-based comments may be more authoritative, but they often imply a misleadingly technical or impersonal stance toward language. "Too many passive verbs" invokes an impersonal universal standard, when the real truth is unavoidably subjective: how many passive verbs are right for these particular readers in this rhetorical context? When style comments imply objective verdicts from an impersonal judge (or a high-stakes testing agency), they sometimes lead students to forget that writing is a transaction between humans (language as "dramatism" in Burke's term).

In addition, voice-based responses are sometimes better for helping students make large-scale and pervasive revisions. When writers change their felt relationship to their readers (“Maybe I could let readers hear how much I care about my ideas”; “Maybe I shouldn’t imply that only an idiot could disagree with me”), they usually instinctively come up with better wording—and even more effective thinking.

Thinking in terms of voice can help people enjoy writing more. When people are helped to treat writing as a process of “just using your own regular voice,” they usually become less intimidated by writing—often finding words and ideas more easily and even coming to enjoy writing. Admittedly, in many cases one’s own comfortable voice is inappropriate. It’s often too casual for lots of school and business tasks. (But let’s not forget that some of the most ineffective and even tangled student writing comes from trying too hard to avoid a “regular voice.”) And the voice that comes easily and “feels like how I want to say this” may carry some problematic features—for example, some anger, resentment, or fear about the topic. Small or large adjustments in voice may be necessary in revising. But this very process—noticing what voice turns up naturally, thinking about how readers might react to it, and learning to make necessary revisions—is exactly the kind of rhetorical training that makes better writers.

Attention to voice can help with reading. Many students have trouble understanding and enjoying the kinds of texts we teach and, especially, feeling a connection to them. Teachers commonly enlist voices when they play a good recording of a complex poem or show a video of a Shakespearean play. But this leaves students in a passive role. I prefer to enlist the students’ own voices. In teaching a hard text, I used to say, “Your homework is to read this very carefully until you understand it very well.” Now I say, “Your homework is to prepare yourself to read this text aloud so that listeners without a text will really understand it.” This “simple task” actually forces students to work out the meanings in remarkable detail and actually *feel* those meanings in their bodies. (This also works well for nonfiction or even scholarly essays. If the text is long, I specify a crux passage for reading aloud.)

When we hear and discuss the readings in class (everyone in pairs and then some volunteers reading for all of us), I like to press for conflicting readings, even ones that go against the grain. Every out loud reading is an interpretation, and, by comparing and discussing them, we bring out different interpretations and also highlight various critical concepts such as implied author, unreliable narrator, irony, and tone.

It’s a question of voice and self. I’ve argued in this essay for creating an audible voice that helps reach readers and carry meaning and for crafting a voice that fits the audience. But can I argue that writers should try to make their writing reflect their actual selves? I do, in a sense, but given the electricity around this issue, I will tiptoe carefully as I try to describe two kinds of voice linked to the self of the writer.

(1) *Sincerity.* Sincerity isn’t the same as good writing; it can be awful and tinny. But sincerity is one style or voice, and it is useful for some occasions, if it’s believable. The need for sincerity (or the illusion of it) is most obvious in letters of apology or proposal. The fact is that *some* effective writing seems to get its power from convincing readers that the writer is not calculating the right stance or voice but is allowing his or her sincere self to show. Sometimes this voice is odd or “wrong” or dangerous in some way, but it wins readers over nevertheless by seeming so genuine. For many readers, one of the pleasures in reading is a sense of making contact with the writer.⁵

(2) *Resonance.* When I am reading a text of some length, I sometimes sense bits of what I want to call “resonance”: I experience them as pieces of added weight, richness, or presence—

even if they are bits of irony, play, metaphor, or even silliness. Sometimes, these are little changes of tone, eruptions, asides, or digressions, even lapses of a sort. Resonance is not at all the same as sincerity nor does it give an accurate picture of what the writer is like. My hypothesis here is completely speculative, but I sense that these are places where the writer has gotten a bit more of his or her self *in* or *behind* or *underneath* the words—often a bit of the unconscious self. Some important dimension of perception or thinking or feeling formerly kept out of the writing is now allowed in. (Good musicians often get a bit more of themselves *into* or *under* the notes—notes which do not show a picture of the player.)

I'm not calling these places "good writing." They may even be places where the writing breaks down. Resonant passages are often holes or cracks in the structure or voice that the writer was trying to use. Often, the piece is going to have to get worse before it can realize the potential resonance that is trying to get in. But I think I've noticed myself and other writers benefiting from having these passages pointed out. Often the writer can say, "Yes, I have a proprioceptive sense that something different was going on for me as I was writing those passages." I suspect it helps if someone is good at noticing such passages and then says, "Try for more of that." Although the advice often doesn't help in revising the piece (especially if the deadline is near), I sense that it helps one's long-term growth as a writer.⁶

Reasons for Not Attending to Voice in Texts

Thus, I'm arguing that we should put lots of attention on voice in all of the ways I've just described. But now I'll argue that we should *not* pay attention to voice—in all the following ways.

Ignoring voice is necessary for good reading. Students improve their ability to see and analyze the semantic, intellectual content of what they read if we help them learn not just to ignore voice, but to push aside forcibly any effects of the "voice" (or illusion of voice) that is "saying" these things. Since speaking and listening were people's first experiences with words—and continue as primary language experiences—most readers tend to hear a voice in written words if the language halfway allows it. (When the language is tangled, clogged, and unsayable—or when people are speed-reading at a furious clip—it's harder to hear a text.) New readers often mouth written words, and it's not uncommon even for experienced readers to move their lips. The auditory nerves of most readers probably show electrical activity, perhaps even the throat nerves.

Not only do most readers hear voices in texts as they read, they tend to hear people in the texts. Written words may be silent semiotic signs, but, when humans read (and write), they usually infer a person behind the words and build themselves a relationship of some sort with that person. I needn't make this argument at length since it's made so well by Deborah Brandt in *Literacy as Involvement*.

It's this powerful default tendency in so many human readers that shows the importance of learning to *push away* the effects of voice. If students are going to learn how to read critically, they need to understand that voice will often mislead them. A textual voice often functions like a persuasive courtroom lawyer; it can distract readers from the details of the cognitive, logical, semantic meaning itself. Small children (and animals) often decide whether to trust a spoken message on the basis of who the speaker is and what tone of voice is used. One could describe the goal of schooling and literacy as learning *not* to listen and read that way.

Because scholars are not immune to the effects of prestige, the APA citation system suppresses gender and first names. Critical reading and critical thinking involve (among other

things) using the doubting game to cut through the “rhetoric” so as to see flaws in thinking. Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* is a book for rhetors; he’s saying, in effect, “If you want to persuade, you can override *logos* with *ethos* and *pathos*.” If he’d written book for listeners and readers, he’d have said, “Beware of *ethos* and *pathos*—zero in on *logos*.” In various books, Roy Harris has developed a powerful argument why writing is essentially different from speech and why we get a distorted and misleading understanding of writing if we think of it as a record of spoken language.

In recent years, people in our field have enjoyed emphasizing the lens of rhetoric and criticizing Plato and Ramus for valuing dialectic more than rhetoric. But there is a dialectic dimension to *all* discourse—purely logical, semantic, analytic, cognitive—no matter how small that dimension is: all discourse can be helpfully viewed through the lens of dialectic. So, we need to train students to use this lens—to push away the rhetorical lens and test out the pure reasoning. When they do that, they’ll find many flaws they didn’t see before. This helps explain why logicians make use of artificial symbolic languages. Students won’t get good at disciplined thinking if we emphasize *only* voice and rhetoric.

Ignoring voice is necessary for teaching writing. As with reading, we need to teach students how to reduce their drafts to unvoiced outlines and diagrams—pure message and logic—even in the case of personally persuasive or “merely ceremonial” writing tasks. Of course, they write better if they call on the considerable voice skills they have learned from the rhetoric of conversational argument, but, if that’s their only resource, they’ll fall into all kinds of weak reasoning. Those who cannot both read and write while tuning out voice, tone, and feelings—who cannot concentrate on strict meaning and logic alone—are literally “nonliterate”: their perception of *visual letters* is clouded by *sounded voice*.

So I. Hashimoto was right in his complaint: if writing teachers emphasize only voice or emphasize it too much, they tend to mislead students into thinking that good writing requires only voice (especially “your own” voice). “The problem, of course, is that writing is an intellectual endeavor” (76) and requires learned skills and conscious techniques. (In making this valid argument, Hashimoto unfortunately uses exaggerated straw-man pictures of figures he charges, including me. Like Harris, he portrays me as saying that writing with voice is the same as good writing—an assertion I explicitly deny [Power 313, quoted earlier].)

If we can empty a text of voice, we enlarge possibilities for meaning and interpretation; whereas, when we hear written language as voiced (or when we hear actual speech), meaning and interpretation are restricted. One of the main goals of schooling and literacy is to help students work out multiple meanings. We succeed best by pushing away interpretative pressure that comes from a strong voice. The restrictive effect of voice is clearest in the case of actual performance. For example, a Shakespearean play (unless it’s incoherently performed) necessarily settles on one interpretation and tends to block others in the minds of the audience. The effect is insidious. Even when we read a text after hearing a strong performance of it (or read a book after seeing the movie), the words on the page often seem permanently infected by that interpretation. This effect is particularly strong when we are not aware that we are being influenced by voice. The problem is worst with unskilled readers. In contrast, Shakespeare’s silent texts invite many interpretations, and, over the years, they have successfully *permitted* wider interpretations that seemed contrary to the spirit of the text.

But to get this benefit, we have to train students not to rely on voice or projected voice when they read. We need to teach them to separate language and thinking from the author (especially if it’s a famous or respected author) and to see multiple and even contrary

interpretations of a text, even when a strong-voiced text tries to seduce them into a particular reading. As often as not, “reading against the grain” means reading against the voice. Just as we train children not to read by moving their lips, we should train adolescents not to read by using their ears too much.

Avoidance of voice is a powerful tool for a writer. In various writing situations, writers understandably *don’t* want readers to feel their presence; they want readers to encounter only the message—the data or ideas or thinking. A felt voice in a text often distorts how readers perceive a message. Scientists, for example, often write their research and scholarly arguments in a way that seeks to be impersonal. Of course, good scientists know that pure impersonality (like pure objectivity) is not attainable. Nevertheless, the impersonal conventions of scientific publications (e.g., blind reviews and APA citations that omit first names) testify to the recognition that unobtainable goals such as objectivity and impersonality are sometimes worth aiming *toward*. That is, for scholarly work, we don’t want reviewers and readers judging validity on the basis of the reputation or even the gender of the writer—nor on the basis of the blandishments of “human” rhetoric. It’s understandable that impersonality conventions such as those in APA are widely used in the natural sciences, the social sciences, and even education.⁷

Through the ages, writers, especially members of underestimated or stigmatized groups, have used anonymous or pseudonymous publication to keep readers from being distracted by knowing whose words these are. Women have traditionally used anonymous publication to prevent their words from being read as “female.” Even when anonymous or pseudonymous writing has a strong voice, the technique still avoids that single most vexed dimension of voice—the link between the words on the page and the person of the actual author.

“Voice” is too vague a metaphor to be useful. It means so many things to so many people that it leads to confusion and undermines clear thinking about texts. In any given usage, it’s seldom clear what the term is actually pointing to. For example, “voice” is commonly used to point to a feature that’s only found in some writing—yet it’s also commonly used to point to a feature found in all writing. (The voice can be blah, impersonal, bureaucratic, or even computer-speak, but there’s always a voice.) I tried to deal with ambiguities in “voice” by carefully distinguishing five distinct senses (audible voice, dramatic voice, recognizable or distinctive voice, voice with authority, and resonant voice; see “Introduction”). I believe my analysis was helpful, yet I clearly failed to get people to use those distinctions. We already have a number of helpful terms that are less metaphorical, ambiguous, and fraught: *style*, *ethos*, *implied author*, and *persona*. The last two are particularly helpful when voice is problematic: distinguishing between character in the text and character in the author. Bowden suggests metaphors from a different realm: “Web” and “network” (*Mythology* 194).

The notion of “voice in writing” does harm in our culture. Even though the term has no stable meaning—or means wildly different things to different people—it turns out to have implications that are resonantly potent for many people in our culture. Indeed, its peculiar resonance comes from the way it reinforces some pervasively harmful mythic assumptions.

That is, the concept of voice tricks many students and would-be writers into believing that, if they can achieve “their own unique voice,” they will, by definition, be good writers. (Shakespeare is a prime counterexample: he was radically deficient with respect to “his own voice.”) And the “voice” concept harms the way many people think about the nature of identity and self. It reinforces a powerful cultural assumption that we have single, unique, unchanging selves; that we are not “written” or need not be written by the culture around us; that our goal in life is to learn

to be the unique individuals that we inherently are. The mystique about finding and uncovering or recovering our “own unique voice” tends to foreground personal power in a way that reinforces the pervasive cultural assumption that everyone’s goal is to learn to grab the microphone and stand out as a star in the world—a world that’s modeled as a zero-sum competitive arena. Organizations of awesome wealth and power do their amazing best to persuade people that, if they buy the right clothes or perfume or car, they can express and be their true selves. We also suffer from the notion that sincerity overcomes all shortcomings. This argument against cultural and ideological implications is the one most frequently made against voice. (Bowden argues at length that the term crystallizes the widespread but misleading idea that writing issues from one person and obscures the importance of culture and intertextuality in the production of all writing.)

Do all these arguments against voice contradict the earlier arguments for it? Yes. Do they cancel or diminish them? I insist not. The conflicting positions are incompatible in logic—even the informal logic of common experience: we cannot both pay attention and not pay attention to something. But there is no strain on logic or experience once we introduce the dimension of time. It’s easy to pay attention and also not pay attention—at two different points in time. We don’t have to read or write the same way all of the time.

Conclusion: Meta-Issues

I have two goals for this essay. First, I’m trying to help us learn to adopt contrary stances toward voice—reading texts through the lens of voice and also reading them through the lens of “text” or not-voice. We need the different and complementary insights we get from each kind of reading. In a recent book, Richard Lanham argues for a practice he calls *oscillatio*: he says we read best when we attend alternately to substance and to style and when we are conscious of the alternation. Lyn Brown and Carol Gilligan, in listening to tapes of girls and women, found that they could understand and learn best if they listened more than once to the same tapes of interviews with young women—each time listening in the language for a different dimension of development and psychology. Denis Donoghue praises Ricoeur for this idea about voice and reading:

Paul Ricoeur [. . .] proposes, in effect, that we read the text twice; once for print, once for the voice. He would let the ideology of writing have its day first and then give the reader the freedom of another destiny by recourse to voice:

We can, as readers, remain in the suspense of the text, treating it as a worldless and authorless object; in this case, we explain the text in terms of its internal relations, its structure. On the other hand, we can lift the suspense and fulfill the text in speech, restoring it to living communication; in this case, we interpret the text. These two possibilities both belong to reading, and reading is the dialectic of these two attitudes. (Donoghue 120)

But I have another wider meta-goal for this essay. I’m asking us to learn to be wiser in our scholarly thinking and writing. Especially if an issue is vexed and disputed, we can learn to step outside of either/or thinking (usually adversarial) and work out a both/and approach that embraces contraries. Such thinking can often release us from dead-end critical arguments that are framed by the unexamined assumption that, if two positions seem incompatible, only one can be valid. (Dewey was tireless in warning of the traps that come from inappropriate either/or thinking).

Finally, I need to add a meta-meta note. I’m not arguing *against* either/or thinking; I’m arguing only for *the addition* of both/and thinking to our methodology. That is, I’m taking a both/and stance

toward both/and thinking. I've always acknowledged the necessity of either/or thinking for one of our intellectual modes: critical thinking or the doubting game. This mode rests on a foundation of logic, which, in turn, depends on either/or thinking. Logic and either/or thinking are our best tools for uncovering hidden flaws in thinking that *sounds* right or in ideas that we are drawn to believe because "our crowd" believes them.

But, by the same token, we need to learn *in addition* to set aside critical thinking and either/or thinking and use the contrasting intellectual mode of the believing game, which can involve embracing contraries that are logically contradictory. We need this mode because it can show us good ideas or virtues in discredited ideas that we remain blind to if we use only critical thinking or the doubting game. Just as we can see more about texts if we learn to look at them through two lenses in succession—the lens of voice and the not-voice—so, too, in our thinking we need to learn use both intellectual modes: the doubting and believing games.⁸

Notes

¹ We see this particularly clearly in Coles's treatment of Holden Caulfield. Coles is entertainingly furious at Salinger for *Catcher in the Rye*, but most livid of all at generations of readers (especially young readers) who *like* the voice there. A cool rhetorical analysis would grant that Salinger brilliantly crafted *exactly* the voice required for his audience, genre, and exigence. Coles has no beef there. "The amateurish sounding voice of the passage, for example, is actually a very slick professional achievement; there is no question of Salinger's skill to manipulate dead language to produce the illusion of a sensitive and knowing creature." But Coles nevertheless calls that created voice a "fraud" and a "lie" because it doesn't match any real character behind it. Indeed, Coles charges that no human person could fit that voice. It's the voice of the "myth of the Natural Sophisticate"—the myth "that the capacity for appreciation and the ability to discriminate *can* exist in total independence of the understanding, that in fact one *may* live on a level other than the languages he knows" (164–5). There is an empirical question here: I would disagree with Coles, because I think that humans commonly do know and express more than they can understand with conscious language, but that's not the point. What's at stake for this exploration of voice in writing is Coles's complaint that a written voice is bad if it doesn't match a real human character. (For more about the centuries-long historical conversation about voice and self, see my *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing* and my long introduction to it.)

² Harris supports his claim that I link voice to a certain type of prose by quoting from an entirely different essay of mine where I am talking not about voice, but about personal writing—which naturally I do define as a type of discourse ("Foreword"). Harris likes to call attention to the importance of careful quoting. In evaluating student writing, we must "look at how this writing responds to other texts The power and meaning of a text is seen to stem largely from the stance it takes toward other texts." The student's job "is one of finding her way into a written world, of gaining control over a set of textual conventions" (*Subject* 24)

³ In particular, because I celebrate private writing and the benefits of ignoring the audience while exploring and drafting, I am often read as uninterested in the social dimension of writing. In fact, my *Writing Without Teachers* in 1973 was probably the main influence that brought peer feedback to the profession. In my theoretical appendix essay, I ground peer response in a social theory of language itself: not just that the effectiveness of a text is determined by a community of readers (rather than a single teacher!), but indeed that the very *meaning* of any word or discourse is determined by the tug of war between various communities of readers. (See especially 151ff.) For my emphasis on embracing contraries in general, see my 1986 book of that title, my 1975 *Oppositions in Chaucer*, and my 1993 essay "The Uses of Binary Thinking."

⁴ Sharp-eyed readers will have noticed that I've snuck in the word "rhetorical" and linked it to the voice lens. Obviously, I'm using the words "voice" and "text" in a more schematic and dichotomous way than they are often used in general. "Text" in particular has expanded its range of meaning—especially as "voice" has fallen out of favor—until it's sometimes used for all language. Given the way linguists use "text" for any stretch of language, written or spoken, and given the "linguistic turn" that has occurred in the humanities and social sciences in the twentieth century, I sense that scholars have come to feel the word "text" as a more scholarly and impressive word for language. And also—in

reaction to the heyday of New Criticism—we’ve also had a “rhetorical turn” in our field—emphasizing language always taking place in time with speakers and writers trying to have an effect on others in a particular context. And so, as scholars have fallen into using the word “text” for all language, they have used it even in arguing for this rhetorical, human-interaction dimension of language.

But I’m insisting here—in a theoretical vein—on noting how the concept of “voice,” tied as it is to the material body existing in time, is the appropriate lens or metaphor for language as material and historical—language as the stuff with which humans try to reach and affect other humans. Of course, this violates much current word-usage, but I would point to Bakhtin who gave so much emphasis to the word “voice” for highlighting the social, rhetorical, and interactional dimension of language: language as issuing from historically situated persons. Yet as a linguist, he acknowledges that discourse can *also* be analyzed as disembodied language. Here’s a useful passage:

Where linguistic analysis sees only words and the interrelations of their abstract factors (phonetic, morphological, syntactic, and so on), there, for living artistic perception and for concrete sociological analysis, relations among people stand revealed, relations merely reflected and fixed in verbal material. Verbal discourse is the skeleton that takes on living flesh only in the process of creative perception—consequently, only in the process of living social communication. (“Discourse” 109)

Finally, I’d insist that both words, “text” and “voice,” have come, in fact, to be metaphors. “Text” *sounds* more literal—especially when applied to writing—but it morphs into metaphor once it’s been widely applied to spoken language too. It’s very much a “metaphor we live by” (in Lakoff and Johnson’s terms): a way of seeing even written language that foregrounds certain dimensions and obscures others. (For some of this section of the essay, I’ve drawn on my Introduction to *Landmark Essays*, especially xii–xiv.)

⁵ Coles thought Holden Caulfield’s voice was fraudulently sincere, but it convinced many readers. While *Catcher in the Rye* didn’t pretend to be autobiography, *The Education of Little Tree* presented itself as the authentic product of an authentic Native American—and convinced many good readers. But it turned out to be written by a white member of the Ku Klux Klan. Sincerity mattered in a nontrivial way during the Vietnam War. Young people who wanted conscientious objector status had to convince their draft boards in writing that their objection was based on a “sincere” religious belief. The content of the belief didn’t matter; only the sincerity. I failed this writing test and would have had to go to Canada or jail—or into the army!—if I hadn’t gotten too old before they called me up. It must be admitted that written sincerity helps with not a few teachers of writing.

⁶ I think Auden is describing resonance in his poem, “The Truest Poetry Is the Most Feigning.” It tells of a poet who writes a love poem about his decidedly not-beautiful beloved—but describes her as the most beautiful creature that ever lived; then a dictator takes power in a coup and the poet resexes the pronouns to create a hymn of praise to *Il Duce*; so the poet dies in bed rather than in prison—wealthy and successful. In later years, readers of the ode to the dictator say, “Ah, how fair she must have been.” I hear Auden saying that there is a precious kind of resonance or presence or authenticity that good writers can create and good readers can appreciate—but that it comes not at all from telling the truth. In fact, he’s using the title from Shakespeare to imply that trying for truth can get in the way

Resonance seems to me what gives Bill Clinton much of his rhetorical success. One can never trust that he is telling the truth, and yet, in or underneath or behind much of his discourse, there’s a notable power over listeners or readers—a power that seems to come from something deeper than mere clever voice-crafting. I think this hypothesis about resonance also explains the success of the *Little Tree* hoax. Resonance seems a useful and paradoxical model for textual voice linked to the writer’s actual self. *Resonance* seems a more helpful word than *authenticity* and *presence* because they are so controversial. (But see George Steiner’s *Real Presences* for a remarkably sophisticated and learned argument for presence in texts.)

⁷ Admittedly, the conventions of scientific impersonal writing and the APA guidelines are sometimes used to justify bad writing, but writing can be impersonal and still clear and strong. Note, by the way, that the APA Handbook has long *recommended* use of the first person for certain appropriate situations. First person voice (in the grammatical sense) does not necessarily produce a strong or personal voice. So, in trying to teach students to write well, we can teach them the ability—for certain writing situations—to write clear, strong prose that nevertheless prevents readers from feeling their presence, mood, or attitude.

⁸ I’ve written a succession of essays about the believing game, starting with the 1973 appendix to *Writing Without Teachers*. I cite the two most recent essays in the works cited here—essays where I make most pointedly the argument

that I cannot develop here: that, even though the goal of critical thinking or the doubting game is to uncover hidden flaws, it often fails significantly in helping people find flaws in *their own* thinking or point of view. For that task, the believing game works better.

I've been working on the present essay for a long time. (The germ was a talk I gave at Stony Brook in the fall of 2002.) I've gotten significant help from more people than I can remember or thank here. But I'm particularly grateful to Don Jones, Irene Papoulis, John Schilb, and the *College English* reviewers.

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