

holds people back in writing; feeling helpless or powerless. If a reader doesn't seem to tell you how she reacted to your piece or wastes a lot of time saying almost nothing, or if everyone seems to neglect the aspect of your piece you are most curious about, you might at first feel awkward about pushing them a bit. But you will learn fairly quickly to ask for what you need. And it turns out that people will give it more easily when *you* ask for it than when some "chairman" asks for it.

But even though each writer should *take charge* of her own time it also helps to have someone else (say, the person to the left of the writer) be a kind of *monitor* of certain simple but crucial procedural matters. The group will hold together better and each writer will find it easier to get the feedback she needs if the monitor performs these functions:

- keeps time;
- prevents anyone from talking more than her share of the time;
- stops arguments;
- points out to the writer if she is disagreeing or making excuses instead of just listening.

For the first couple of meetings use very limited feedback if any: just summaries, telling things you liked, and pointing to passages that had resonance. And let readers toss out their feedback in bits and pieces as it occurs to them. People get more comfortable and confident in giving feedback because the spotlight isn't so much on them.

But after a few weeks move to fuller feedback for those who want it and put the spotlight on each reader in turn so she can give as much feedback as possible before the next reader speaks. This is important because you are trying to find out what it is like inside the skin of individual readers, not arrive at some kind of average reaction or consensus opinion. Your message to each reader should be "I need to know what it was like being *you* as you read my words." Don't be satisfied till you get that. After a while you will.

After all the readers have given feedback, they may have more reactions that occur to them on the basis of having heard the others. If there is time and inclination you can have a discussion at this point instead of just individual statements. And the writer can now at last respond and say some things of her own instead of just listening and drawing out readers. For example she might want to

talk about the audience and purpose she has in mind for this writing or tell what she was trying to get across or answer some questions that readers asked earlier as part of their feedback.

Put the emphasis on reader-based feedback: finding out what happened in real readers. That doesn't mean you shouldn't sometimes ask for extensive criterion-based feedback (for instance when you are working on something you are about to revise), but make sure to get the reader-based reactions that lie beneath any piece of criterion-based feedback.

No arguments. When people start to argue you know something is wrong because there is nothing to argue about. There is no right answer to defend, no wrong answer to defeat. The only goal is to learn what happened in each reader. Afterward the writer may want to decide for herself which of two conflicting reactions is most likely to occur in her target audience, but right now her job is to learn those reactions and if possible even to experience them. Arguments will interfere with her doing so.

It's worth taking the last five minutes of each session for everyone briefly to tell one thing she liked and one thing she felt could have gone better in the meeting. It's not a time to discuss these things or try to solve problems. But with just these brief comments, most problems about how the group functions will in fact solve themselves.

Summary of Advice for Writing Support Groups

- Insist on a commitment to come and to bring writing.
- Have some sharing in each meeting.
- Give equal time to each writer.
- Let the writer be in charge of her feedback time.
- Use a monitor.
- No arguments.
- No negative feedback for the first few weeks.
- Get each reader to give summary, pointing, and some positive feedback to each piece.
- Get reader-based reactions for all criterion-based feedback.
- Take five minutes at the end for brief positive and negative comments on the meeting itself.

There may be many good reasons why you will depart from these rather strict rules. But if you find your group lagging or get-

ting unpleasant in tone or beginning to fall apart, go back to following these rules. They are designed to maximize trust, support, and honesty. I believe these are the essential ingredients for a successful writing support group.*

*See Chapters 4 and 5 of *Writing Without Teachers* for more about feedback workshops. I would be grateful, by the way, to hear from readers of this book about their experiences in feedback groups that function on a peer basis—i.e., without being run by a teacher or writing authority:

- What helps your group function well?
- What impedes it?
- Describe some memorable moments, perplexing episodes, critical incidents.

VI

POWER IN WRITING

INTRODUCTION

A reader has two pieces of writing before her, one by you and one by your friend. Yours is better writing by most standards. It has a clearer and more graceful style, a more logical and coherent organization. It also has more original and better thinking. In addition, your topic interests the reader more than your friend's topic. The reader picks up both pieces to look them over, starts reading yours and notes that she likes it, but starts to look over your friend's piece just to see what it is like. Once she starts reading your friend's piece, however, she keeps on going and never returns to yours. She has been captured and cannot put it down. She is affected deeply by it even though it is not so well written as yours and not what she had wanted to read about.

If this hasn't happened to you, you've probably seen it happen. Some writing has great power over readers even though it is not as "good" by most conventional measures. In this section I seek to know what this deeper power consists of and how to get it.

The most plausible answer is that for words to have power they must fit the reader. You must give readers either the style or the content they want, preferably both. But I'm not satisfied with the answer that says power comes from making your words fit the reader. Is it really power if you just give them what they want? If you write a novel, don't you really want to reach more readers than those who already resonate to your style or who already see things the way you do? Are you willing to talk of the evils of

nuclear power only at anti-nuclear rallies to people who already agree with you? Power means the power to make a difference, to make a dent. When people call a piece of writing excellent, sometimes what they really mean is that it made no dent at all: it merely confirmed them in their prior thoughts and feelings.

I assume in this section that of course you will often try to fit your words to your readers. (In Section IV, Audience, I suggest some ways to do so.) Nevertheless when you want power in your words—especially when you want the power of the Ancient Mariner to transfix readers and make them hear what they don't want to hear or give them an experience they didn't set out to have—you must be seeking something other than how to fit words to readers.

The analogy of the Ancient Mariner is appropriate because I think true power in words is a mystery. In the chapters that follow I explore different hypotheses to get closer to this mystery. In Chapters 25 and 26 about voice, I suggest that power comes from the words somehow fitting the *writer* (not necessarily the reader). That good fit between the writer and her words makes for resonance: the words bore through to readers no matter what their disposition. In Chapters 27 and 28 about breathing experience into writing, I suggest that power comes from the words somehow fitting *what they are about*. The words so well *embody* what they express that when readers encounter the words they feel they are encountering the objects or ideas themselves, not words: readers get experiences, nothing is lost in translation. In Chapter 29, "Writing and Magic," I explore the notion that perhaps the writer's job is really to put a hex on words or on readers.

This section is more speculative than the others in the book. I am exploring what can only be called risky hypotheses. But though I am letting myself wax theoretical, I am also deriving a good deal of concrete practical advice from these hypotheses. I believe that if you actually try out the advice you will find the hypotheses themselves more compelling. (The whole section applies to both creative and expository writing except for Chapter 28 which applies especially to expository writing.)

Writing and Voice

A dramatic necessity goes deep into the nature of the sentence. Sentences are not different enough to hold the attention unless they are dramatic. No ingenuity of varying structure will do. All that can save them is the speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination. That is all that can save poetry from sing-song, all that can save prose from itself.

ROBERT FROST, Introduction, *A Way Out*

I am writing here about resonance. I think of a fancy men's room stall with highly polished black marble walls running all the way from floor to ceiling. "They really believe in privacy here," I thought to myself, but as I was humming under my breath without thinking about it, I began to notice that some of the notes seemed too loud. Gradually I figured out—trying different tunes and finally a chromatic scale—that I was sitting in a box that resonated perfectly to one frequency.

That polished black box is the perfect analogy for a clunky violin: a box that resonates to one note and muffles all the rest. The perfect violin, of course, would resonate to all notes richly and equally. But, in fact, no matter how good a violin is, it needs to be "played in"—played long and vigorously—before it resonates well to all its frequencies. It takes weeks or months. And the clunkiest violin can in fact be played in and made to expand its repertoire of resonances. So maybe if I'd sat in that marble stall and sung loudly for days and weeks I could have gotten it to give richness to one or two more notes.

The underlying metaphor for this chapter is that we all have a

chest cavity unique in size and shape so that each of us naturally resonates to one pitch alone. Someone is 440 vibrations per second (Concert A), you may be 375, I am perhaps 947. Most of us try to sing the note we like best or the note we've been told to sing, but the sound is usually muffled or inaudible because it's not our note. We are never heard. A few people, it is true, sing with ringing power, but no one seems to understand how they manage this, not even they. 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 own 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.

How I Got Interested in Voice

For a long time I had a sense there was something you could call “voice” which was important in writing, but in the last few years I've been impelled to try to think the matter out more fully. What started this round of thinking was teaching a course in autobiography in which I required students to write 15 pages a week. It didn't have to be any particular kind of writing, it could be freewriting, babbling, incoherent. I didn't enforce any definition of autobiographical writing. I didn't grade it. I didn't even think that I would read it: 15 pages a week from 20 students was too much. I had set up the students in pairs where they were supposed to read each other's writing in full each week and then give me only a few pages to read. But these pairs broke down and that left me getting a student's notebook every other week and trying to read 30 pages in it. I found myself reading quickly and intermittently. My standards for reading became fairly selfish: if I was enjoying the words, I kept on; if not, I tended to start skipping. (Students weren't

required, by the way, to show me everything—they could signify sections they wanted to keep private.)

But gradually, a new and mysterious standard began to emerge. That writing was most fun and rewarding to read that somehow felt most “real.” It had what I am now calling voice. At the time I said things like, “It felt real, it had a kind of resonance, it somehow rang true.”

Sometimes these passages were short—a phrase or a sentence in length—a kind of parenthetical aside or a digression in the middle of something else. Sometimes the passages were much longer. Sometimes it was a particular thought that had greater conviction, sometimes it was a particular feeling—an angry, happy, sarcastic, or even self-pitying observation—that somehow rang truer than its surroundings. Sometimes these passages with voice seemed good by other standards, sometimes they were not good writing at all. Sometimes they were bursts of sincerity, but not always. Sometimes I couldn’t identify *anything* special about these passages in style or content. It was just that they seemed to jump out at me as though suddenly the writer had switched to a fresh typewriter ribbon.

On some days these passages jumped out at me very clearly: it’s as though I could hear a gear being engaged and disengaged. On other days I had no sense of where there was voice and where not: it all seemed alike. I could use all my other standards for writing, but as for realness or resonance or voice I couldn’t tell one passage from another.

I began to mark these passages with a line in the margin, and I simply told students that these passages seemed to me to have strength, resonance, power. I said I liked reading them and that something special seemed to be going on. I usually asked whether they also felt something special. Often the students recognized that these passages represented a particular *kind* of writing for them—they could remember a particular feeling or sensation they had as they wrote them. Sometimes not. Often students were surprised at my choices since these passages didn’t always feel to them like their best writing. I didn’t give any reactions to passages that seemed to lack voice. For the most part I gave only positive feedback. Criticism would have worked against my goals for this course: to get students to write a great deal, to have confidence in their ability to produce writing at will, and to produce in

one term such a large pile of autobiographical writing that they wouldn't be able to keep themselves from coming back sometime later to work on it.

A few students seemed to know exactly what I was talking about and value the feedback and want more. A few, at the other end, were very bothered and seemed to use my feedback to prevent themselves from ever doing this kind of writing again. It's as though I'd found a leak and they promptly plugged it.

For most students, however, it was as though I'd planted a seed. They didn't necessarily accept these passages as good writing. I didn't ask them to. I pressed them simply to accept the fact that such passages really did have power for me as one reader. As a result, students seemed to mull the matter over in their minds. They wondered about it as they wrote. They wondered what passages I would pick out next time. Some of them began to get a feel for when they were doing it and when not. They developed a sense of internal cues.

In this process I feel I am giving students permission—indeed an invitation—to move in a direction they've never been invited to move in before. To the extent that they do—that is, to the extent that they begin to listen to my feedback and try to produce some more of what I praise—I think I see a lot of things begin to happen in their writing. Students begin to like writing more, to write about things that are more important to them, and thus to feel a greater connection between their writing and themselves. I think this process leads not just to learning, but to growth or development. Searching for more voice starts them on a journey—a path toward new thoughts, feelings, memories and new modes of seeing and writing. But it is not clear either to the student or to me where the path will lead.

Here are some of the things that seem to happen when students accept even tentatively the invitation to work on voice. First of all, the process affects subject matter. For some students it means writing more about the incidents or observations that were in the marked passages. For others it means exploring those same feelings: perhaps angry feelings, perhaps depressed feelings, perhaps a particular area of their lives. For others it means exploring certain trains of thought. When I give this same kind of feedback in courses that emphasize expository writing, the process often leads students to writing that is autobiographical or self-exploratory—

though not always. But as they explore these areas, characteristically the students come upon more memories, more feelings, more thoughts—often *new* ones. It is not infrequent for a student to say “I’ve started writing about a part of my life I haven’t thought about in years. I’m remembering new things.”

My invitation also tends to lead to experimentation: swings of style and mood and mode. It sometimes feels to the student as though I have simply invited *bad* writing since—for some students especially—I find resonance in passages where the writing stops being careful and starts coming apart. Subsequent experiments by the students, then, sometimes lead to writing in which I find neither quality nor voice—merely excessive, dramatized, even hysterical words with no power at all. But I have an intuition that these experiments are appropriate and useful no matter what the results and so I don’t find it hard to refrain from giving negative feedback. I just keep looking for passages that have power. When a student says “What about this?” and points to a passage that obviously reflects deep feeling and great excitement at the time of writing but seems completely lacking in power or voice to me, I say I didn’t feel power or resonance in it, perhaps even that I didn’t like it, but emphasize again that this seems to be a mysterious and subjective business. In a given case I may *feel* certain that the passage lacks quality or power, but on principle I don’t believe that any one person’s judgment about voice is trustworthy.

My feedback on voice often has yet another effect. Students often come to feel a need to withdraw from writing for an audience. That is, some of the students are quite skilled already and like to write stories, essays, or poems for an audience. But as they explore power in these often new areas of writing, they sometimes don’t want to share their writing with anyone—often not even with me. What made these writers skilled was their superior control: the ability to produce just the effect they wanted upon readers. Now they need privacy for experimenting with what is, in effect, an invitation to relinquish control.

Though some of the new memories may be painful, my invitation usually leads to more pleasure in writing. It’s as though the person has a sense of simply making more *noise* in putting a pencil to paper. It reminds me of a child who gets a loud new toy and just delights in the din. Also of my own sensations when, as I worked on viola bowing exercises, there were brief, round, fat, resonant

sounds; brief sheddings of tension in the muscles of my arm and shoulder. I would immediately try to recapture the sound and fail, but over the weeks these interludes of resonance would come more frequently and finally I could usually do it at will and make the instrument and my body resonate together. Then there was a great pleasure just in bowing and bowing—even if it was just one or two notes—to make the roundest, loudest, most ringing sound possible. Similarly, there is a yoga “sound-box” exercise in which you chant a vowel and try to achieve a ringing sound by learning to let the head and chest area resonate.

At first, students can only get this power or voice in the kinds of passages where it first appeared: certain moods, certain memories, certain trains of thought. But, gradually, over weeks and months, if they experiment and try to let this power declare itself and see where it might lead them, it transfers to or becomes available in other areas of writing. For example, perhaps there was a peculiar resonance in passages that were angry or self-pitying—or in descriptions of certain kinds of places. But then, gradually, as the writer does more and more of this particular kind of writing, she gets better at feeling and using this power, and so very slowly the resonance comes to characterize a few more kinds of writing. If at first students could only do it with passages of autobiographical writing that explored certain kinds of incidents, then gradually they could get it in other kinds of incidents, and gradually even in expository writing. For some students, voice came first in certain kinds of expository writing.

It is this experience in the last few years that has impelled me to try to work out a fuller theory of voice. For the power I am seeking, some people use words like *authenticity* or *authority*. Many people call it *sincerity*, but I think that’s misleading because this power can be present when the writing is not really sincere and absent when the writing is sincere. I like to call this power *juice*. The metaphor comes to me again and again, I suppose, because I’m trying to get at something mysterious and hard to define. “Juice” combines the qualities of *magic potion*, *mother’s milk*, and *electricity*. Sometimes I fear I will never be clear about what I mean by voice. Certainly I have waxed incoherent on many occasions. One teacher I admire, Ellen Nold, heard me struggling unsuccessfully to explain myself to a meeting of writing teachers at Stanford University. She wrote me:

The voice phenomenon cannot well be discussed in rationalistic terms; every time you tried to define the conditions of it arising, you failed hopelessly. Why not just give up? Why not confront Voice for what it is?

What is It? That's the question Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism are built around. The very question is a Zen koan. We all know, as Persig in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* points out, that Quality exists, and we can agree pretty well what writing has Quality and what does not. Quality is the same as Voice is the same as Tao is the same as Self is the same as Atman-Brahman is the same as . . . When I speak with Voice, It's loud because It speaks directly to your Ear, not just to your ear, which is constantly distracted by other voices. . . . You teach writing by pointing out to students when your Ear hears and asking them to do more of That. The rationalists tear their hair out. Can that be teaching? Where is the content? The technique? What is this Voice? Where can I buy an Ear? How do I know that my Ear is like your Ear?

Most teachers have ears, but their Ears are covered. Because they have never thought that Voice is the province of the public school, even if they valued It, they wouldn't ask for It. You ask for It. You tell others that It's there to be sensed and asked for. . . . Don't try to explain it to rationalistic people in rationalistic terms! It is something that ultimately cannot be explained to anyone who hasn't heard. And those who have heard will forgive you for the inadequacy of your words.

But I cannot resist trying to work this thing out more fully and rationally. For one thing I want to be able to explain it to more people—even to people who haven't heard it. Besides, I needed to figure out if voice was the right word. Voice, in writing, implies words that capture the sound of an individual on the page. But though that seems central to what I'm fishing for, sometimes I found passages with this sound—yes, these words had been breathed into—yet the words somehow lacked the deeper power and resonance that had gradually become the object of my quest.

Voice and No Voice

Writing with no voice is dead, mechanical, faceless. It lacks any sound. Writing with no voice *may* by saying something true, important, or new; it may be logically organized; it may even be a work of genius. But it is as though the words came through some

kind of mixer rather than being uttered by a person. Extreme lack of voice is characteristic of bureaucratic memos, technical engineering writing, much sociology, many textbooks:

Tests should reflect changes in learned behavior; the normal utilization of reliability estimates must be revised since it is assumed that we are not measuring a trait or innate mental capacity but rather an acquired skill or concept which can be measured incrementally. Thus scores should reflect changes from one administration to the next. [From an essay about education.]

Nobody is at home here. In its extreme form, no voice is the army-manual style. But the sad truth is that the careful writing of most people lacks voice.

Voice, in contrast, is what most people have in their speech but lack in their writing—namely, a sound or texture—the sound of “them.” We recognize most of our friends on the phone before they say who they are. A few people get their voice into their writing. When you read a letter or something else they’ve written, it has the sound of them. It feels as though writing with voice has life in it. It’s almost as though the breath makes the words themselves do some of the work of getting up off the page into our head as we read. We need only pass our eyes, like phonograph needles, along the grooves and magically sounds and meanings will form in our head.

Here is a piece of expository writing in which I find voice.

The scheme of thought I have outlined in this third lecture explains the balance of faculties that should be cultivated in scientific research. Imaginativeness and a critical temper are both necessary at all times, but neither is sufficient. The most imaginative scientists are by no means the most effective; at their worst, uncensored, they are cranks. Nor are the most critically minded. The man notorious for his dismissive criticisms, strenuous in the pursuit of error, is often unproductive, as if he had scared himself out of his own wits—unless indeed his critical cast of mind was the consequence rather than the cause of his infertility.*

Notice how that jargony piece of educational writing (and perhaps also the final clause in the Medawar excerpt) suffers from the writing process itself. That educational psychologist would never

**Induction and Intuition in Scientific Thought*, Sir Peter Medawar (Philadelphia, 1968), p. 58.

talk so. She must have had a sense of intended meaning and then *constructed* words to express it. The words lack breath or presence. If she had been talking rather than writing, that same intended meaning would have produced words which were more alive (however lacking in precision or conciseness). It would take her an extra step of revising—and revising consciously for the sake of voice—to change her written words so as to break out of that *language-construction* into a *saying-of-words* on paper.

But just as often it works the other way. You have voice in your first draft and you revise it away. As you clarify your thinking or correct your language you dissipate the breath. We can see that happening in the two paragraphs below. The first one is an early draft in which I find voice. But I think the writer lost that voice when she revised her paragraph in an effort to make it assert one opinion more definitely.

In the United States there is supposed to be freedom of expression, and yet there are laws against obscenity. No one can say what obscenity really is. And is obscene material really harmful? Maybe some forms of censorship are necessary, but this is just another instance of our country being called free when it is not.

We should admit that freedom of expression is not truly realized in the United States, since the censoring of materials which are considered obscene constitute a definite limitation of this freedom.

In giving a more focused emphasis to the paragraph she lost all the voice, breath, and rhythm that had given life to the first version.

It's not surprising that most people don't get voice into their writing. Writing is so much slower and more troublesome than speaking. So many more decisions have to be made. You must form each word, one letter at a time and figure out the spelling. Writing needs punctuation; it has stricter and less familiar standards of grammar and usage. And in addition to all the extra rules involved in writing, we feel we'll be more harshly judged if we write something foolish or mistaken than if we just say it: "It's down in black and white."

On those speaking occasions when we feel especially judged—for example during a job interview or when we meet a new person we want to impress but fear we won't—even our speech is likely to lose voice: we are likely to speak carefully and even haltingly, choosing our words guardedly, thinking all the while about

whether our words are clear, correct, and intelligent. If we heard a recording of our speech in that situation we would probably say that it doesn't sound like us or that it sounds as if we are trying to be someone else or that it doesn't sound like a real person at all.

Imagine if all our speaking were done on occasions like that. Or worse yet, if we were graded and judged and told all our smallest mistakes every time we opened our mouths. We'd get painfully awkward and unnatural in speech. For most people, that is how writing is. They've never written unless required to do so in school, and every mistake on every piece of writing they've ever done was circled in red. No wonder most people's writing doesn't have voice—doesn't sound lively and “like them” the way their speaking usually does.

There are some people, of course, who lack voice even in their speech. They have developed a habit of speaking in a careful or guarded way so that you cannot hear any real rhythm and texture. Their speech sounds wooden, dead, fake. Some people who have sold their soul to a bureaucracy come to talk this way. Some people speak without voice who have immersed themselves in a life-long effort to think logically or scientifically—who have built up the habit of considering the validity of every word before they utter it. Some people lack voice in their speech who are simply very frightened: they experience all of life as a job interview for a job they doubt they'll get.

It's easy to use this distinction between voice and no voice. We may disagree about borderline cases, but we can probably agree that it's valid and even useful to distinguish writing by whether the author breathed a sound and a human rhythm into it. It's easy to hear voice in this excerpt from *Falconer* by John Cheever (the main character is writing a letter) and lack of voice in the business card message that follows it:

I can remember coming back to the Danieli on the Lido after a great day on the beach when we had both been solicited by practically everybody. It was at that hour when the terrible, the uniquely terrible band began to play terrible, terrible tangos and the beauties of the evening, the girls and boys in their handmade clothes, had begun to emerge. I can remember this but I don't choose to. The landscapes that come to mind are unpleasantly close to what one finds on greeting cards—the snowbound farmhouse is recurrent—but I would like to settle for something inconclusive. It is late in the day. We have

spent the day on a beach. I can tell because we are burned from the sun and there is sand in my shoes. A taxi—some hired livery—has brought us to a provincial railroad station, an isolated place, and left us there. The station is locked and there is no town, no farmhouse, no sign of life around the place excepting a stray dog. When I look at the timetable nailed to the station house I realize that we are in Italy although I don't know where. I've chosen this memory because there are few specifics. We have either missed the train or there is no train or the train is late. I don't remember. I can't even remember laughter or a kiss or putting my arm around your shoulder as we sat on a hard bench in an empty provincial railroad station in some country where English was not spoken. The light was going, but going as it so often does, with a fanfare. All I really remember is a sense of your company and a sense of physical contentment.

Jon's Taxi Service

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The voice/no voice distinction throws light on the odd case of Gertrude Stein. She doesn't just get voice into her writing. She heightens the effect by breaking rules in just such a way that we can't even understand her meaning unless we actually *say* her words. She invents a trick to force us to hear her words, not just read them visually:

And what does a comma do, a comma does nothing but make easy a thing that if you like it enough is easy enough without the comma. A long complicated sentence should force itself upon you, make you know yourself knowing it and the comma, well at the most a comma is a poor period that it lets you stop and take a breath you ought to know yourself that you want to take a breath. It is not like stopping altogether which is what a period does stopping altogether has something to do with going on, but taking a breath well you are always taking a breath and why emphasize one breath rather than another breath. Anyway that is the way I felt about it and I felt that about it very very strongly. And so I almost never used a comma.

GERTRUDE STEIN, "Poetry and Grammar," from *Lectures in America* (New York, 1935).

Real Voice

Why must I complicate the simple distinction between voice and no voice by introducing a third category, real voice? It's because I

think there are some pieces of writing with the liveliness and energy of voice—and in this respect they have a great advantage over writing without voice—yet they lack the power and resonance of the Medawar and the Cheever. The following excerpt is an example (written by a student):

It always kills me when I see somebody who can take an old toothbrush, a used toilet roll, and a ball of twine, and in ten minutes can whip up a sculpture to rival the beauty of any Da Vinci. Personally I am about as creative as Richard Nixon's joke writer. Something as simple as "Three Dozen Ways with Nylon Net" just flies right over my head. I mean, what would I use nylon net for anyway? To catch praying mantises in my dorm room? Line a shirt with it and wear it when I feel masochistic?

Maybe I'm just frustrated. I just got back from my community kitchen, where my next-door neighbor, Alice Artistic, was cutting partridge-shaped seals from foil Sucrets wrappers to put on the back of her homemade envelopes in which she plans to mail her homemade Christmas cards. My Christmas cards consist of eight-cent postcards with "Noel" written on them in red Bic pen.

I knew I had no artistic talent when my fourth-grade class made maps of Washington out of oatmeal and plywood. I colored mine with pink food coloring, spelled out "Wash" in the middle of it in silver cake-decorating balls and brought it home. My dog ate it for dinner.

This writing has the lively sound of speech. It has good timing. The words seem to issue naturally from a stance and personality. But what strikes me is how little I can feel the reality of any person in these words. I experience this as a lack of any deeper resonance. These words don't give off a solid thump that I can trust.

Consider the speech of certain hyped-up radio or television announcers or slick salesmen or over-earnest preachers: speech that is fluent and without hesitation, full of liveliness and energy, "full of expression" as we say—and yet its voice is blatantly fake. These people are doing some kind of imitation or unconscious parody of how an "expression-filled" voice is supposed to sound.

The speech of such announcers, salesmen, and preachers is merely an extreme example of voice-but-not-real-voice. It serves to illustrate blatantly what everyone sometimes does: adopt a voice in order to face an audience. Since their whole vocation consists of trying to sway an audience with their vocal chords, they are more likely to get trapped in some of these voices: the stakes are higher

for them and they are more likely to try too hard and then gradually begin to stop hearing the fakeness. Actors, too, occasionally end up without a solid authenticity in their speech when they are off-stage, though they are usually more subtle than the heavy-handed salesman. They have spent so much time trying to control their voice that they no longer have the knack of just leaving it alone to be itself. But we all adopt less than authentic voices quite often, especially when the demands of a situation are great or our resources seem insufficient. If nervousness doesn't deaden and remove all voice it may make us giddy, talkative, or silly (such as at a party), or we may start sounding solemn and pompous (such as at a job interview). These nervous ways of speaking may have voice: fluency, energy, even individuality. They are gears: we don't have to stop and choose words consciously and pause for decisions. But we can easily see that these nervous voices are not real by a simple observation: if we finally become comfortable at that party or job interview, we stop sounding so giddy or pompous and start sounding like our real self.

Real self. Real voice. I am on slippery ground here. There are layers and layers. For example, if I am teaching a class and feel very insecure or shaky, I am liable to compensate without even thinking about it and adopt a very confident and assured tone of voice. A student who knows me well might sense something fishy in my voice. And if, perhaps, things go so badly that I finally decide to stop in the middle of something I am trying to explain or some activity I am trying to make happen—I explain that I can't really concentrate on what I'm doing and say that I am just going to sit on the sidelines of the discussion—that student might say, "Oh, I see now why he sounded fake, now he sounds more like Peter Elbow." But if I kept up that voice or stance or role for very long—class after class—a student who knew me well personally would be able to say, and correctly too, "Oh, Peter's fallen into his helpless, stuck gear again; that's not him, that's a tiresome habit. He's not daring to be as opinionated and stubborn and pushy as he really is."

Most people make use of various voices as they go through life to deal with particular audiences and situations. Many people speak with artificial sweetness to little children. Many teachers, administrators, doctors and judges adopt a confident, fatherly, competent tone of voice to express their authority or responsi-

bility. If we only know them at work we might say, "That's just what John sounds like," but if he started talking that way at home his wife might say, "Come off it, John, you're not at work now; don't talk to me like I'm one of your clients."

But can I really say that some voices are more "real" than others? What if that really does sound like John. That is, perhaps he *used* to sound different at home and at the office, but gradually over the years his professional tone of voice came to take over all his home talk, too. Or perhaps John was one of those children who talked like a college professor in kindergarten.

Certainly some sociologists interested in role theory would simply insist that we all have a variety of roles at our disposal and that's that. If some "sound realer" than others, it's just that we're better at using those—we have practiced and learned them better. This sophisticated relativist approach may fit the whole range of intermediate voices we use moderately well in our living—the gears or roles we have easily available. But because I'm interested in the extreme cases—the obviously fake voice and especially the rare powerful voice that is somehow deeply authentic or resonant—I cannot stop thinking in terms of real voice. I'm not content to say a real voice is nothing but a well-learned role because when I see people starting to use their real voice I see it is usually *not* well learned. Often it is rusty and halting and they use it badly. And I see that when people start using their real voice, it tends to start them on a train of growth and empowerment in their way of using words—empowerment even in relating to people.

Our less than real voices usually help us to deal with pressures we feel from some audiences and situations, and protect the deeper layers of self. It's no accident that the greatest number of fake-sounding people are in professions where they must constantly meet and impress an audience: salesmen, announcers, politicians, preachers. (Teachers, too.) The pressure of an audience increases our need for privacy. Gears and roles permit us to achieve privacy in public, on the job.

I'm not saying people are wicked if they keep their real voice a secret, but they are neglecting a great source of power. Most of us, even though we don't sound as false as slick salesmen and hyped-up announcers, neglect this power of real voice. Our speech may be lively and fluent and sound just like us; we don't lack voice (not in our speaking, anyway, though we probably lack it badly in our

writing). But we seldom use the power of our real voice, and we know it because of the surprising difference we feel on the few occasions when we do—when we get power into our words.

Sometimes it takes a kind of crisis situation for us to take the wraps off our power: perhaps we are backed into a corner and have to speak out to save our self-respect; perhaps it is an important letter; often the words come out late at night or under some other circumstance when the inhibitions of "normal reality" carry less weight. We notice the surprising impact of our words on the listener or reader. For once our words *work*. Often it is startling or even frightening when other people actually feel the full weight of our words: it so seldom happens. Sometimes they are frightened, too. They look at us wide-eyed with surprise and a look that says, "I like you better the regular, ineffectual way."

It may sound as though I'm describing a case where someone finally screams or has a tantrum. Perhaps. But sometimes that frightening power comes when a habitual screamer adopts a quiet whisper. Sometimes, that is, a scream is the sound of someone coming out from hiding, but often words from the center are quiet. Their power comes from inner resonance.

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Some examples. I find real voice in the Medawar and Cheever pieces, above. Here is another piece of fiction—a passage from Section I, "The Window," of Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*:

The room (she looked round it) was very shabby. There was no beauty anywhere. She forebore to look at Mr. Tansley. Nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her. Again she felt, as a fact without hostility, the sterility of men, for if she did not do it nobody would do it, and so, giving herself the little shake that one gives a watch that has stopped, the old familiar pulse began beating, as the watch begins ticking—one, two, three, one, two, three. And so on and so on, she repeated, listening to it, sheltering and fostering the still feeble pulse as one might guard a weak flame with a newspaper. And so then, she concluded, addressing herself by bending silently in his direction to William Bankes—poor man! who had no wife, and no children and dined alone in lodgings except for tonight; and in pity for him, life being now strong enough to bear her on again, she began all this business, as a sailor not without weariness sees the wind fill his sail and yet hardly wants to be off again and

thinks how, had the ship sunk he would have whirled round and round and found rest on the floor of the sea.

"Did you find your letters? I told them to put them in the hall for you," she said to William Bankes.

Here are four other pieces of writing I have chosen to illustrate real voice.

To Be Carved on a Tower at Thoor Ballylee

I the poet William Yeats
 With old mill boards and sea-green slates
 And smithy work from the Gort forge
 Restored this tower for my wife George.
 And may these characters remain
 When all is ruin once again.

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

This poem illustrates how words can have real voice without being at all talky or personal. One feels him saying something deeply felt, but it is rather a public, on-stage voice. He is writing, in a sense, through a megaphone.

I went on the job. My father took me. People was very nice. I like them, they like me. I work for a long long time. I used to cook. Lady didn't tell me but I want to leárn. So she let me. I cook like I want, eat like I want, and cook for all. There was two other children older than the baby. I was doing fine until my boss' mother came to visit. Then she try to take over. I would cook or help cook and my boss' mother fix my breakfast, my lunch and my dinner on a plate with two biscuit. I took that for a day or so, then I had my clothes packed. Say to my madam that I was leaving. She want to know why. I say my father have plenty food home and I can eat and drink all I want. I say that lady fix my plate. I am used to fixing my own plate. Nobody know my stomach and how much I can eat. My madam say she didn't know that was what she was doing. "I will tell her to stop it." So the lady stop fixing my plate. Then I stay.

ESTELLE JONES, part of
 unpublished autobiography

I choose this excerpt to illustrate that I sometimes hear real voice in language that violates some of the patterns of speech. One feels lots of "speech" in it, yet it does not exactly resemble the author's actual speech or anyone else's.

Roses

One day I woke up
 and looked out my window
 And there were roses all around,
 Pink ones and red ones,
 I went out and feeled them and feeled them,
 And they were nice and soft
 Like my sister's velvet dress,
 And they smelled like a birthday cake
 And like I would be in the woods
 When I am walking.
 [I have lost the citation for this poem,
 by a child, which appeared in a teachers' magazine.]

I sometimes hear real voice even in words that are themselves vague and trite (for example "and they were nice and soft") when those words somehow manage to be in the right relationship to the writer. I'm not saying, "Isn't it clever considering a child wrote it." And I'm not saying, "Isn't he sincere." The poem is not particularly distinguished on either of those counts. I'm saying, "Look how he could let tired, overused words issue from the center and thereby give them power."

The Perfectibility of Man! Ah heaven, what a dreary theme! The perfectibility of the Ford car! Which of them are you going to perfect? I am not a mechanical contrivance.

Education! Which of the various me's do you propose to educate, and which do you propose to suppress?

Anyhow I defy you. I defy you, oh society, to educate me or to suppress me, according to your dummy standards.

The ideal man! And which is he, if you please? Benjamin Franklin or Abraham Lincoln? The ideal man! Roosevelt or Porfirio Diaz?

There are other men in me, besides this patient ass who sits here in a tweed jacket. What am I doing, playing the patient ass in a tweed jacket? Who am I talking to? Who are you, at the other end of this patience?

Who are you? How many selves have you? And which of these selves do you want to be?

Is Yale College going to educate the self that is in the dark of you, or Harvard College?

The ideal self! Oh, but I have a strange and fugitive self shut out and howling like a wolf or a coyote under the ideal windows. See his red eyes in the dark? This is the self who is coming into his own.

The perfectibility of man, dear God! When every man as long as he remains alive is in himself a multitude of conflicting men. Which of these do you choose to perfect, at the expense of every other?

Old Daddy Franklin will tell you. He'll rig him up for you, the pattern American. Oh, Franklin was the first downright American. He knew what he was about, the sharp little man. He set up the first dummy American.

D. H. LAWRENCE, *Studies in Classic American Literature*

I sometimes hear real voice in words that are not fully sincere. Lawrence is being kooky and mannered more than earnest and "authentic." Or rather he's turning up the "this-is-really-important" dial so far that it's a bit silly and he knows it. He's fooling around and having fun doing cartwheels and letting on that he knows that we know he looks a bit silly puffing out his chest so far and being so intense. I hear resonance, that is, even in a faint irony which boils down to a certain *absence* of self in the literal meaning. Thus, even in this borderline, tricky case, I would point to the central characteristic of real voice: the words somehow issue from the writer's center—even if in a slippery way—and produce resonance which gets the words more powerfully to a reader's center.

The distinction between voice and real voice helps us understand the tricky relationship between verbal fluency and verbal power. Sometimes they go together but sometimes they are opposed. That is, on the one hand, sometimes fluency is a sign of power: a truly good speaker is never at a loss for words because she has found the door to her best insights and her convictions. But sometimes, on the other hand, we distrust fluent people and call them glib: they speak with lively fluency but they are somehow too smooth. "She spoke so expressively and well but you know I didn't really *believe* her." Such people are good at finding a gear and generating words that fit the situation and the audience; they are never at a loss for words. But somehow all these words—however lively and fluent—don't give us any sense of making contact with the speaker or any sense of knowing her real feelings, attitudes or point of view.

Yet some of those other people who often are at a loss for words—those Billy Budd characters who are tongue-tied and halting in speech, who are always stopping and changing their minds in mid-sentence or breaking off speech as they question what they

are engaged in saying—often these very people on certain occasions reveal a gift for speaking with the deepest sort of power and honesty. On the occasions when they actually speak out, they seem to achieve a deeper resonance and authenticity than fluent speakers. Some fluent speakers even find it hard to *know* their real convictions. In some oral cultures, such as some Native American tribes, copiousness itself is distrusted when it comes to speech. There is a sense that authenticity somehow gets dissipated through too many words. Power in speech is rooted in the silence from which it grows.

To summarize, writing *without voice* is wooden or dead because it lacks sound, rhythm, energy, and individuality. Most people's writing lacks voice because they stop so often in mid-sentence and ponder, worry, or change their minds about which word to use or which direction to go in. A few people even speak without voice.

Writing *with voice* is writing into which someone has breathed. It has that fluency, rhythm, and liveliness that exist naturally in the speech of most people when they are enjoying a conversation. Some people who write frequently, copiously, and with confidence manage to get voice into their writing.

Writing with *real voice* has the power to make you pay attention and understand—the words go deep. I don't know the objective characteristics that distinguish writing with real voice from writing with mere voice. For me it is a matter of hearing resonance rather than being able to point to things on the page. I want to say that it has *nothing* to do with the words on the page, only with the relationship of the words to the writer—and therefore that the same words could have real voice when written by one person and lack it when written by someone else. That highlights the mystery, but presumably it is going too far. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that words contain not just an explicit message ("the sun glints down a pathway of ripples"), but also some kind of implicit message about the condition of the writer (e.g., "I'm curious about that sight" or "I have other things on my mind" or "The sun on the water terrifies me" or "There's no part of me that doesn't see those glints, even the part of me that hates light"). Perhaps when the implicit message reinforces the explicit one in some right way, we get resonance or power. When the implicit message contradicts the main one we get no resonance. But I don't know how to point to these implicit messages on the page and therefore I find it easier to

talk about whether the voice “sounds real” or whether the words come in some sense or other “from the center.”

I believe, then, that any *kind* of writing can have real voice or lack it—any style, tone, mood, or syntax. The only way we can locate or identify the presence of real voice is through the sensibility of good readers. Since there are no objective criteria, there is no way to verify the judgment of any particular reader. Some people will be better than others at identifying real voice, but in any given instance they may be wrong, no matter how certain they feel. They will hear resonance, but it will be resonance between the words and themselves, not between the words and the writer; or they will hear no resonance, but the interference will come from themselves, not from the writer.

It seems to be no easier to attain real voice in speaking than in writing. In fact some people get real voice in their writing who seldom get it in their speech: powerful writers who talk without power. It is often easier to invest ourselves more deeply and accurately in our words when we are alone with a piece of paper than we can when face to face with an audience.

Real Voice and Bad Writing

As I've been trying to work and rework my thoughts about voice these last four years, I have been nervous about the charge that what I am calling “real voice” is just writing that happens to tickle my feelings or my unconscious concerns and has nothing to do with the words' relationship to the writer. The charge is plausible: if I experience resonance, surely it's more likely to reflect a good fit between the words and *my* self than a good fit between the words and the writer's self; after all, my self is right here, in contact with the words on the page, while the writer's self is nowhere to be found.

Needless to say, I cannot disprove the charge. But I'm not trying to prove that I am right, only to persuade you to adopt a hypothesis—to see if it clarifies your experience of reading and helps you strengthen your writing.

But the charge also made me nervous because I wondered if it showed that my taste is peculiar and defective. The passages I instinctively picked out in a piece of writing were seldom the most skilled or competent writing there; sometimes they were down-

right terrible. Yet they did in truth appeal to me. And I often get people to do freewriting or I give people exercises in which they turn out careless, excessive, or self-indulgent writing, and I occasionally enjoy reading some of it. And it's true I hate writing that is merely competent. Could it be that I have a peculiar itch for badness?

My theory of voice helps me trust my own taste and deal with the accusation that I don't care about quality. I now see that caring about quality has two different meanings and springs from two different temperamental approaches to writing. On the one hand caring about quality implies a hunger to stamp out terrible writing. A hunger to destroy defects, failure, excess, and ugliness. I don't have this hunger. I am content to let people write much that is bad. I try to let myself write badly too. On the other hand, caring about quality implies hungering for excellence, wanting the real thing, not settling for mere adequacy. That's me. I want the moon. I insist it is attainable: writing that someone would actually want to read by choice, not just for pay or for a favor.

The reason I don't mind badness is that I sense how necessary it is if you want to get beyond mere inoffensive writing to something actually worth a reader's time. I believe it is helpful to develop a taste for real voice because it will not only support your hunger for good writing—your secret feeling that of course you and everyone else can write with power—but it will also help you to be more accepting of the terrible writing it is usually necessary to produce if you want that power.

For the point is that even though real voice brings excellent writing when it is fully developed and under control, it often leads to terrible writing when it is only just emerging and not yet under control. Your most fluent and skillful voice is usually your *acceptable voice*—the voice you develop as you work out an acceptable self. To get it, you probably had to push away feelings, experiences, and tones of voice that felt unacceptable. But these unacceptable elements have energy and power tied up in them that you need to tap if you want to deepen the resonance of your voice. Yet, of course, you are likely to *hate* these sounds: you have trained yourself to shove them away, you use considerable energy in doing so, they are part of your *anti-self*. When, then, you allow yourself to start using some of these feelings, experiences, and tones of voice in your writing, there is little chance you will be

able to use them in a controlled and effective way. Bad writing is almost inevitable.

I am implying, in effect, a roughly Freudian or depth psychology model of a murky unconscious pool full of powerful, threatening energy. But there is also a less lurid model that underlines what I'm saying about voice—roughly Piagetian: that the attainment of real voice is a matter of growth and development rather than mere learning. In attaining a new stage of development, you move from one mode of functioning to a more complex, sophisticated mode. In the process, skills can fall apart. There are lots of things you did well with that old mode which you now bungle.* A genuine restructuring requires a destructuring. I think I see this happening in writing: many students don't seem to get past certain levels of adequate writing without going through a stage with lots of deteriorated writing.

In short, fear of badness is probably what holds people back most from developing power in writing. Some of that fear is natural in the struggle to develop an acceptable self. But some of it results from teachers who care more about getting rid of badness than about looking for potential excellence. If you care too much about avoiding bad writing, you will be too cautious, too afraid to relinquish control. This may lead to the worst fate that can befall a writer—feedback like this: "It seems pretty good; I liked it fairly well; I can't see anything the matter." What they are really telling you is that they were absolutely unaffected by your words.

If, on the other hand, you really seek excellence, if you seek to write things that others might actually *want* to read, you need to stop playing it safe: go for it, take the plunge, jump over the edge. You won't know where you are going. You will write much that is terrible. It will feel like a much longer path to tread than if you just want to get rid of badness. But you will get rewards. You will get lots of feedback and it will be interesting. People will hate some of what you write and love other parts; some people will love what others hate. If you can put up with all these things, especially the inevitable flops, you will have the satisfaction of knowing that

*For example, although children can increase their skill at calculating on their fingers without making new mistakes (a case of plain learning), they will tend to make lots of new mistakes when they start calculating in their head or using abstract unvisualized symbols (a case of development or growth).

something is happening in your writing and that you are on your way to more than mere non-offensiveness.

And in the end it won't be a longer path. Getting rid of badness is an infinite and impossible task. There will always be bits of badness in your writing, lurking here and there for some sharp-eyed reader to find, no matter how hard you try to remove them. Whereas if you go all out for excellence and don't worry about that bad writing that comes with it, before long you will be able to produce some writing that people will really want to read—even to buy.

How To Get Power through Voice

What if this hypothesis about voice is correct? One thing follows from it that's more important than anything else: everyone, however inexperienced or unskilled, has real voice available; everyone can write with power. Even though it may take some people a long time before they can write well about certain complicated topics or write in certain formal styles, and even though it will take some people a long time before they can write without mistakes in spelling and usage, nevertheless, nothing stops anyone from writing words that will make readers listen and be affected. Nothing stops you from writing right now, today, words that people will want to read and even want to publish. Nothing stops you, that is, but your fear or unwillingness or lack of familiarity with what I am calling your real voice.

But this clarion call—for that's what I intend it to be despite my careful qualifiers—immediately raises a simple question: Why doesn't everyone use power if it is sitting there available and why does most writing lack power? There are lots of good reasons. In this section I will give advice about how to get real voice into your writing, but I will present it in terms of an analysis of why people so seldom use that power.

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People often lack any voice at all in their writing, even fake voice, because they stop so often in the act of writing a sentence and worry and change their minds about which words to use. They have none of the natural breath in their writing that they have in

speaking because the conditions for writing are so different from the conditions for speaking. The list of conditions is awesome: we have so little practice in writing, but so much more time to stop and fiddle as we write each sentence; we have additional rules of spelling and usage to follow in writing that we don't have in speaking; we feel more culpable for our written foolishness than for what we say; we have been so fully graded, corrected, and given feedback on our mistakes in writing; and we are usually trying to get our words to conform to some (ill-understood) model of "good writing" as we write.

Frequent and regular freewriting exercises are the best way to overcome these conditions of writing and get voice into your words. These exercises should perhaps be called compulsory writing exercises since they are really a way to *compel* yourself to keep putting words down on paper no matter how lost or frustrated you feel. To get voice into your words you need to learn to get each word chosen, as it were, not by you but by the preceding word. Freewriting exercises help you learn to stand out of the way.

In addition to actual exercises in nonstop writing—since it's hard to keep writing *no matter what* for more than fifteen minutes—force yourself simply to write enormous quantities. Try to make up for all the writing you haven't done. Use writing for as many different tasks as you can. Keep a notebook or journal, explore thoughts for yourself, write to yourself when you feel frustrated or want to figure something out. (See Chapter 10 for more ways to use writing.)

Practice revising for voice. A powerful exercise is to write short pieces of prose or poetry that work without any punctuation at all. Get the words so well ordered that punctuation is never missed. The reader must never stumble or have to reread a phrase, not even on first reading—and all without benefit of punctuation. This is really an exercise in adjusting the breath in the words till it guides the reader's voice naturally to each pause and full stop.

Read out loud. This is a good way to exercise the muscle involved in voice and even in real voice. Good reading out loud is not necessarily dramatic. I'm struck with how some good poets or readers get real voice into a monotone or chant. They are trying to let the words' inner resonance come through, not trying to "perform" the words. (Dylan Thomas reads so splendidly that we may make the mistake of calling his technique "dramatic." Really it is a

kind of chant or incantation he uses.) But there is no right way. It's a question of steering a path between being too timid and being falsely dramatic. The presence of listeners can sharpen your ear and help you hear when you chicken out or overdramatize.

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Real voice. People often avoid it and drift into fake voices because of the need to face an audience. I have to go to work, I have to make a presentation, I have to teach, I have to go to a party, I have to have dinner with friends. Perhaps I feel lost, uncertain, baffled—or else angry—or else uncaring—or else hysterical. I can't sound that way with all these people. They won't understand, they won't know how to deal with me, and I won't accomplish what I need to accomplish. Besides, perhaps I don't even know *how* to sound the way I feel. (When we were little we had no difficulty sounding the way we felt; thus most little children speak and write with real voice.) Therefore I will use some of the voices I have at my disposal that will serve the audience and the situation—voices I've learned by imitation or made up out of desperation or out of my sense of humor. I might as well. By now, those people think those voices are me. If I used my real voice, they might think I was crazy.

For real voice, write a lot without an audience. Do freewritings and throw them away. Remove yourself from the expectations of an audience, the demands of a particular task, the needs of a particular interaction. As you do this, try out many different ways of speaking.

But a certain *kind* of audience can help you toward real voice even though it was probably the pressures of audience that led you to unreal voices in the first place. Find an audience of people also committed to getting power in their writing. Find times when you can write in each other's presence, each working on your own work. Your shared presence and commitment to helping each other will make you more powerful in what you write. Then read your rough writing to each other. No feedback: just welcoming each other to try out anything.

Because you often don't even know what your power or your inner self sounds like, you have to try many different tones and voices. Fool around, jump from one mood or voice to another, mimic, play-act, dramatize and exaggerate. Let your writing be

outrageous. Practice relinquishing control. It can help to write in settings where you never write (on the bus? in the bathtub?) or in modes you never use. And if, as sometimes happens, you know you are angry but somehow cannot really feel or inhabit that feeling, play-act and exaggerate it. Write artificially. Sometimes "going through the motions" is the quickest way to "the real thing."

Realize that in the short run there is probably a conflict between developing real voice and producing successful pragmatic writing—polished pieces that work for specific audiences and situations. Keeping an appropriate stance or tone for an audience may prevent you from getting real voice into that piece of writing. Deep personal outrage, for example, may be the only authentic tone of voice you can use in writing to a particular person, yet that voice is neither appropriate nor useful for the actual document you have to write—perhaps an official agency memo or a report to that person about his child. Feedback on whether something works as a finished piece of writing for an audience is often not good feedback on real voice. It is probably important to work on both goals. Work on polishing things and making sure they have the right tone or stance for that audience. Or at least not the wrong one: you may well have to play it safe. But make sure you also work on writing that *doesn't* have to work and doesn't have to be revised and polished for an audience.

And yet you needn't give up on power just because a particular writing situation is very tricky for you. Perhaps you must write an essay for a teacher who never seems to understand you; or a report for a supervisor who never seems able to see things the way you do; or a research report on a topic that has always scared and confused you. If you try to write in the most useful voice for this situation—perhaps cheerful politeness or down-to-business impersonality—the anger will probably show through anyway. It might not show clearly, readers might be unaware of it, yet they will turn out to have the kind of responses they have to angry writing. That is, they will become annoyed with many of the ideas you present, or continually think of arguments against you (which they wouldn't have done to a different voice), or they will turn off, or they will react condescendingly.

To the degree that you keep your anger hidden, you are likely to write words especially lacking in voice—especially dead, fishy,

fake-feeling. Or the process of trying to write in a non-angry, down-to-business, impersonal way is so deadening to you that you simply get bored and sleepy and devoid of energy. Your mind shuts off. You cannot think of anything to say.

In a situation like this it helps to take a roundabout approach. First do lots of freewriting where you are angry and tell your reader all your feelings in whatever voices come. Then get back to the real topic. Do lots of freewriting and raw writing and exploration of the topic—writing still in whatever style comes out. Put all your effort into finding the best ideas and arguments you can, and don't worry about your tone. After you express the feelings and voices swirling around in you, and after you get all the insights you can while not having to worry about the audience and the tone, then you will find it relatively easy to revise and rewrite something powerful and effective for that reader. That is, you can get past the anger and confusion, but keep the good ideas and the energy. As you rewrite for the real audience, you can generally use large chunks of what you have already written with only minor cosmetic changes. (You don't necessarily have to write out *all* the anger you have. It may be that you have three hundred pages of angry words you need to say to someone, but if you can get *one* page that really opens the door all the way, that can be enough. But if this is something new to you, you may find you cannot do it in one page—you need to rant and rave for five or ten pages. It may seem like a waste of time, but it isn't. Gradually you will get more economical.)

By taking this roundabout path, you will find more energy and better thinking. And through the process of starting with the voices that just happen and seeing where they lead, often you will come to a *new* voice which is appropriate to this reader but also rings deeply. You won't have to choose between something self-defeatingly angry that will simply turn off the reader or something pussy-footing, polite, and full of fog—and boring for you to write.

A long and messy path is common and beneficial, but you can get some of the benefits quicker if you are in a hurry. Just set yourself strict time limits for the early writing and force yourself to write without stopping throughout the early stages. When I have to write an evaluation of a student I am annoyed at, I force myself to write a quick freewriting letter to the student telling him everything on my mind. I make this uncensored, extreme, exaggerated,

sometimes even deliberately unfair—but very short. And it's for the wastepaper basket. Having done this, I can turn to my official evaluation and find it much easier to write something fair in a suitable tone of voice (for a document that becomes part of the student's transcript). I finish these two pieces of writing much more quickly than if I just tried to write the official document and pick my way gingerly through my feelings.

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Another reason people don't use real voice is that it makes them feel exposed and vulnerable. I don't so much mind if someone dislikes my writing when I am merely using an acceptable voice, but if I use my real voice and they don't like it—which of course is very possible—that hurts. The more criticism people get on their writing, the more they tend to use fake voices. To use real voice feels like bringing yourself into contact with the reader. It's the same kind of phenomenon that happens when there is real eye contact and each person experiences the presence of the other; or when two or more people stop talking and wait in silence while something in the air gets itself clear. Writing of almost any kind is exhibitionistic; writing with real voice is more so. Many professional writers feel a special need for privacy. It will help you, then, to get together with one or more others who are interested in recovering their power. Feeling vulnerable or exposed with them is not so difficult.

Another reason people don't use their real voice is that it means having feelings and memories they would rather not have. When you write in your real voice, it often brings tears or shaking—though laughter too. Using real voice may even mean finding you *believe* things you don't wish to believe. For all these reasons, you need to write for no audience and to write for an audience that's safe. And you need faith in yourself that you will gradually sort things out and that it doesn't matter if it takes time.

Most children have real voice but then lose it. It is often just plain loud: like screeching or banging a drum. It can be annoying or wearing for others. "Shhh" is the response we often get to the power of our real voice. But, in addition, much of what we say with real voice is difficult for those around us to deal with: anger, grief, self-pity, even love for the wrong people. When we are hushed up from those expressions, we lose real voice.

In addition, we lose real voice when we are persuaded to give up some of our natural responses to inauthenticity and injustice. Almost any child can feel inauthenticity in the voices of many TV figures or politicians. Many grown-ups can't hear it so well—or drown out their distrust. It is difficult to get along in the world if you hear all the inauthenticity: it makes you feel alone, depressed, hopeless. We need to belong, and society offers us membership if we stop hearing inauthenticity.

Children can usually feel when things are unfair, but they are often persuaded to go along because they need to belong and to be loved. To get back to those feelings in later life leads to rage, grief, aloneness and—since one has gone along—guilt. Real voice is often buried in all of that. If you want to recover it, you do well to build in special support from people you can trust so you don't feel so alone or threatened by all these feelings.

Another reason people don't use real voice is that they run away from their power. There's something scary about being as strong as you are, about wielding the force you actually have. It means taking a lot more responsibility and credit than you are used to. If you write with real voice, people will say "You did this to me" and try to make you feel responsible for some of their actions. Besides, the effect of your power is liable to be different from what you intended. Especially at first. You cause explosions when you thought you were just asking for the salt or saying hello. In effect I'm saying, "Why don't you shoot that gun you have? Oh yes, by the way, I can't tell you how to aim it." The standard approach in writing is to say you mustn't pull the trigger until you can aim it well. But how can you learn to aim well till you start pulling the trigger? If you start letting your writing lead you to real voice, you'll discover some thoughts and feelings you didn't know you had.

Therefore, practice shooting the gun off in safe places. First with no one around. Then with people you know and trust deeply. Find people who are willing to be in the same room with you while you pull the trigger. Try using the power in ways where the results don't matter. Write letters to people that don't matter to you. You'll discover that the gun doesn't kill but that you have more power than you are comfortable with.

Of course you may accept your power but still want to disguise it. That is, you may find it convenient, if you are in a large organization, to be able to write about an event in a fuzzy, passive "It has

come to our attention that . . .” kind of language, so you disguise not only the fact that it was an action performed by a human being with a free will but indeed that *you did it*. But it would be incorrect to conclude, as some people do, that all bureaucratic, organizational, and governmental writing needs to lack the resonance of real voice. Most often it could do its work perfectly well even if it were strong and clear. It is the *personal, individualistic, or personality-filled* voice that is inappropriate in much organizational writing, but you can write with power in the impersonal, public, and corporate voice. You can avoid “I” and its flavor, and talk entirely in terms of “we” and “they” and even “it,” and still achieve the resonance of real voice. Real voice is not the sound of an *individual personality* redolent with vibes, it is the sound of a *meaning* resonating because the individual consciousness of the writer is somehow fully behind or in tune with or in participation with that meaning.

I have stressed the importance of sharing writing without any feedback at all. What about asking people to give you feedback specifically on real voice? I think that such feedback can be useful, but I am leery of it. It's so hard to know whether someone's perception of real voice is accurate. If you want this feedback, don't get it early in your writing development, make sure you get it from very different kinds of people, and make sure not to put too much trust in it. The safest method is to get them to read a piece and then ask them a week later what they remember. Passages they *dislike* often have the most real voice.

But here is a specific exercise for getting feedback on real voice. It grows out of one of the first experiences that made me think consciously about this matter. As an applicant for conscientious objector status, and then later as a draft counselor, I discovered that the writing task set by Selective Service was very interesting and perplexing. An applicant had to write why he was opposed to fighting in wars, but there was no right or wrong answer. The draft board would accept any reasons (within certain broad limits); they would accept any style, any level of skill. Their only criterion was whether *they* believed that the *writer* believed his own words. (I am describing how it worked when board members were in good faith.)

Applicants, especially college students, often started with writing that didn't work. I could infer from all the arguments and com-

motion and from conversations with them that they were sincere but as they wrote they got so preoccupied with theories, argument, and reasoning that in the end there was no conviction on paper. When I gave someone this feedback and he was willing to try and try again till at last the words began to ring true, all of a sudden the writing got powerful and even skillful in other ways.

The exercise I suggest to anybody, then, is simply to write about some belief you have—or even some experience or perception—but to get readers to give you this limited, peculiar, draft-board-like feedback: where do they really believe that you believe it, and where do they have doubts? The useful thing about this exercise is discovering how often words that ring true are not especially full of feeling, not heavy with conviction. Too much “sincerity” and quivering often sounds fake and makes readers doubt that you really believe what you are saying. I stress this because I fear I have made real voice sound as though it is always full of loud emotion. It is often quiet.

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In the end, what may be as important as these specific exercises is adopting the right frame of mind.

Look for real voice and realize it is there in everyone waiting to be used. Yet remember, too, that you are looking for something mysterious and hidden. There are no outward linguistic characteristics to point to in writing with real voice. Resonance or impact on readers is all there is. But you can't count on readers to notice it or to agree about whether it is there because of all the other criteria they use in evaluating writing (e.g., polished style, correct reasoning, good insights, truth-to-life, deep feelings), and because of the negative qualities that sometimes accompany real voice as it is emerging. And you, as writer, may be wrong about the presence or absence of real voice in your writing—at least until you finally develop a trustworthy sense of it. You have to be willing to work in the dark, not be in a hurry, and have faith. The best clue I know is that as you begin to develop real voice, your writing will probably cause more comment from readers than before (though not necessarily more favorable comment).

If you seek real voice you should realize that you probably face a dilemma. You probably have only one real voice—at first anyway—and it is likely to feel childish or distasteful or ugly to

you. But you are stuck. You can either use voices you like or you can be heard. For a while, you can't have it both ways.

But if you do have the courage to use and inhabit that real voice, you will get the knack of resonance, you will learn to expand its range and eventually make more voices real. This of course is the skill of great literary artists: the ability to give resonance to many voices.

It's important to stress, at the end, this fact of many voices. Partly to reassure you that you are not ultimately stuck with just one voice forever. But also because it highlights the mystery. Real voice is not necessarily personal or sincere. Writing about your own 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. Real voice is whatever yields resonance, whatever makes the words bore through. Some writers get real voice through pure fantasy, lies, imitation of utterly different writers, or trance-writing. It may be possible to get real voice by merging in your mind with another personality, pretending to be someone else. *Shedding* the self's concerns and point of view can be a good way to get real voice—thus writing fiction and playing roles are powerful tools. Many good literary artists sound least convincing when they speak for themselves. The important thing is simply to know that power is available and to figure out through experimentation the best way for you to attain it.

Breathing Experience into Words

Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine, or to the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo. And in doing so, you must leave your subjective preoccupation with yourself. Otherwise you impose yourself on the object and do not learn. Your poetry issues of its own accord when you and the object have become one. . . .*

"Leave your subjective preoccupation with yourself." I've been talking so much about *self, self, self* in the chapters on voice. What if that's all wrong: incorrect; immoral. I don't think it is, but since what I am seeking in this section of the book is a central mystery—life or power or magic in words—there is probably more than one path to it. I pursue now another approach, another line of attack, a different set of terms.

Reading and Really Reading

Writing is hard, mysterious work. Of course. That's what this book is all about. But if we stop shaking our finger at the writer for a moment and stress instead what a hard and mysterious job the reader has, we will end up learning something important about writing.

To get meaning out of a set of words, a reader must build mean-

*From *Basho. The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Sketches*, Nobuyuki Yuasa, ed. (New York, 1966), p. 33. Quoted by John Balaban in his "South of Pompeii the Helmsman Balked," *College English*, vol. 39, no. 4, December 1977.

ing in. When you come to a word you don't know in your reading, you may have to look it up in the dictionary and then try out the different definitions to see which one is intended here. This is much more work than you usually have to do when you read, but it serves to illustrate a basic fact about reading: for everything you read, you must *bring* meanings to the words, not take meanings from them. Meanings are in readers, not in words. When the page says *chat*, English readers bring thoughts of a cozy conversation; French readers bring thoughts about cats. Readers build meanings; words just sit there.

Think what this means for you as a writer. You have these thoughts you want to communicate, but you can't just give them to readers, you must get readers to construct them. You must walk up to readers and say, "Let's go for a ride. You pedal, I'll steer." You are saying, "Here's a beautiful sculpture for you," but it is just a pile of limp balloons intricately arranged on a rack. In order to see the sculpture, readers first must blow them up—and blow them up right, too. They must provide *pneuma*—breath-spirit. "Here's a lovely painting," you say, but it's just lines and numbers and readers must paint in the colors. You don't even supply the key which tells which color is designated by which number. Readers must bring that knowledge: that's what it means to know how to read.

You can't give readers a finished product no matter how much you want to—any more than a playwright can actually send a live play through the mail. She can only send the script—a set of directions for producing a play. The best you can do is make sure you have overhauled the bicycle so that the pedalling isn't harder than necessary. You can promise not to go up unnecessary hills. You can make sure there aren't any holes in the balloons or misprints in the paint-by-numbers picture that would make the tree come out purple—unless you want it purple. But no matter how good a job you do of *preparing* the piece of writing, still the reader has to do all the work of pedalling, blowing, or painting-by-numbers.

If that makes reading sound like a lot of work, there's worse to come. For I've only been talking about getting *meaning* out of words. But the real topic here is power in language. That means we must talk about readers getting an *experience* out of words, not just a meaning.

I remember the occasion when I first realized that the reader

has this second layer of work to do if the words are going to have power. I was reading a novel and I came to this sentence:

Now this night the sun had left the sky in a cascade of magenta over pale blue, and the autumn moon nearly full had begun to illuminate the huge dark clouds piling on the horizon.

It stopped me. I had been having some difficulty or resistance since the beginning, but I'd sort of pushed it away from consciousness and kept on reading. With this sentence I suddenly realized that I couldn't *see* that sky—and that there'd been lots I hadn't been seeing all along.

Now perhaps I would have seen the sky without any effort if the writing had been clearer. One gets a bit mixed up about where the moon and sun and clouds are in relation to each other. Or perhaps I would have seen the sky if it hadn't been the creation of a student, for credit, and therefore constituted required reading for me when I felt like doing something else. Or perhaps the image might have jumped into my head if I hadn't been irritated with the student. For I guess I better admit that I was already annoyed with her even before I started reading her words—for reasons that had nothing to do with her writing.

But however ample these explanations might be for my failure to see her sky, they do not in the slightest undermine what I suddenly realized: that no matter how good the writing, no matter how freely I am reading, no matter how well liked the writer, the fact remains that whenever I actually *see* or *experience* something in a set of words, I must consent to do so, and I must in addition supply the imaginative or psychic energy that is required to form that image in my head. (I am talking in this chapter, by the way, about descriptive and narrative writing. I will consider expository writing in the following chapter.)

Whenever in the past I had stopped reading because of this kind of frustration, I had tended to describe it as a case of the writing "not working." For the first time I now realized that beneath most cases of words not working lies an act of refusal by the reader. (There are, I admit, some cases where the reader doesn't refuse and tries as hard as she can and still gets no meaning or experience. But readers usually refuse to try any more long before they've really given their all.)

Of course, I'd many times previously been aware of an *out and*

out refusal: refusal to read altogether, refusal to pedal at all, refusal to keep on reading or go any further. But this was different. I kept on reading that novel. It was, in this case, my paid duty. I kept on understanding what she was saying in virtually every sentence and, to a large extent, recognizing the skill and experience and sophistication she often displayed (for the sentence I quoted above was one of the least skillful of all). And I was able to make judgments about one passage or phrase being stronger than another, and so on and so on. I kept right on and performed what must be called a conscientious job of reading—going on afterwards to make some written comments to the student.

What emerged finally was this distinction which now seems so important to me: I allowed that writer access to my *mind*, but I didn't allow her access to my *experience*. It's as though I were a musician reading the score for a symphony on paper in silence. I was looking at it, seeing what key it was in, seeing what kinds of melodies and harmonies it uses, how it blends winds and brass, seeing where it is loud, dramatic, quiet, and so on—all without hearing any sounds in my head. I was doing a competent job of reading the directions for the production of music, but it would have taken an extra piece of effort, an additional investment of self—however automatic or subliminal that effort might be for a good musician who enjoys what she is reading—actually to *hear* the sounds, to *experience* the music. If I content myself with merely reading I can usually make judgments—"Yes, that is a well-formed melody; yes, that is a clever alternation of strings and brass; no, that is an ungainly harmonic progression"—based on my past experience with music. These may be astute judgments or not, but they are made without hearing the music. Perhaps, then, my comments to this student were sound or perhaps not, but the fact remains that I made them without experiencing her words—only understanding them.

The crucial fact about reading, then, is that the reader is engaged at every moment in making a choice of whether to invest the energy required to *have* the actual experience implied in the words, or merely to *read the directions* for constructing an experience. It may not feel as though I am making that choice or investing that extra effort when I am reading something I find powerful. It feels as though I am just sitting back and letting the writer do it to me—as though she is *giving me* experience. It feels as though I

can just relax and purr and say "Yes, I love it, do it to me again." But that feeling is misleading. Really I had to supply both the consent and the energy. What the writer gave me was the kind of directions that made it seem fun and easy. I guess the reason it doesn't feel like work to construct experiences from good writing is that we never do it unless we want to. They can't make us do something that internal. They can make us read, but they can't make us experience. (Thus, my act of refusal came to my attention in a piece of required reading.)

Another example from required reading. Teachers are always complaining that students don't "follow directions" even though the students did read and understand those directions perfectly well. Or employers require us to read memos or instructions, and we do so, yet we go on to act as though we hadn't read them: following the wrong procedure, breaking equipment, forgetting the essential step. The answer is that we read, but we didn't really read. If we were given a straight-forward test on our understanding of what we had read, we would probably pass the test. We did understand; we can recall. It's just that we didn't have the *experience* it would have taken to make a dent on our unself-conscious behavior.

Even our failure to assemble a toy or appliance according to its "simple instructions" is illuminated by this question of whether we build an experience out of words—whether we hear music as we silently read. It's not usually that we didn't comprehend the directions, but rather that we didn't *remember* to put in that damn bolt or bend that strut over to the left even though at the moment of reading those words we understood them. That piece of advice simply passed through us because there was so utterly little sense of *experiencing*, *visualizing*, *hearing* what the words were saying. The writer failed utterly to get us to *participate* in any feeling of what it would be like to put that bolt on or bend that strut over.

Since I've come to notice how the reader must supply both the consent and the energy for any powerful writing, I see more clearly what often really happens when I am not satisfied with a novel or poem or story. Instead of just saying, "Oh, the writing doesn't work," or "I guess I'm not interested enough in that subject"—and those judgments may be correct—now I often notice something else: I don't *trust* the writer enough and I'm damned if I'm going to have the experiences she wants me to have. There are