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SAY IT, DON'T WRITE IT: ORAL STRUCTURES AS FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHING WRITING

ABSTRACT: *Basic writers, confused about the conventions of writing, need to understand that speaking and writing are two valid but different forms of communication. That understanding begins with using, not denigrating, their familiarity with oral language. By exploring with students the patterns of oral language, we prepare the foundation for understanding the structures of written language. We need to present speaking and writing as two different ways of organizing and presenting information. This paper provides the background information necessary for discussing with students the characteristics of oral and written language.*

"I myself, have no specific style, no consistency, and usually, no idea of what I am doing." These words, written recently by a freshman in a two-year college taking English 101, summarize the problem facing many basic writers: they don't know what they are doing and have no idea how to go about doing it.

Basic writers know they don't know. They just don't know a way out. Their difficulty with writing has been internalized and generalized as an intimidating affront to their intelligence, a denial of their ability to communicate. So they hold on to their ability to speak and further entrench themselves in their reluctance to write.

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The reluctance to write is deeply rooted. Basic writers, in spite of years of grammar tests and English teachers, have not yet learned how to crack the code. As writing instructors, we need to shift the focus, shift the framework and begin anew. That new framework is found in oral language.

Basic writers are comfortable, confident, and competent using oral language. Beginning with what the students already know not only validates the language resources they bring to academia; it affirms the language over which they have control. Oral language is a valuable framework because it is structured. The structure of oral language provides a natural and easily accessible entrance to the structure of writing. When students recognize that speaking, the form of communication which seems to come so naturally and easily, is structured; when they realize that they already communicate in a structure—talking—they are more receptive to accepting another structure for communicating—writing.

Students need to know that speaking and writing are two valid, two valuable, but two different forms of communication. Jack Goody, in *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*, maintains that the differences between orality and literacy are not due to differences of thought or mind but "to differences in the nature of communicative acts" (26). We need to present speaking and writing as two different ways of communicating, two different ways of organizing information (Halliday 71).

Good writers know what they are doing (Brandt): they are aware of themselves as writers in the act of writing. Before basic writers can be aware of what they are doing, they need to be aware of writing itself. We need to clarify what writing is all about: it is a different way of organizing and presenting information than speaking.

In this paper, I will summarize the importance of the background material which has informed my presentation to students. The term *oral language* refers to natural conversation; *written language* refers to expository writing.

Writers Need to Know Why Speaking and Writing Differ

Conversation, produced face-to-face, is created on the spot. Because understanding can be immediately evaluated and addressed, words can be spontaneous. The speaker does not need to know in advance where the discourse is going; both the author and the coauthor create the "text" together. Words are but one element of the communication; pitch, stress, pauses,

facial expressions, gestures, and references to items outside the text also communicate and tie the text together. Because of the immediacy of shared knowledge and context, words do not have to specify the referent, sentences do not have to be completed, and the subject can change without verbal markers.

Writing, produced with the conversant absent, demands that the writer create meaning in a time gap, the time between the giving and receiving the message. Martin Nystrand calls that gap the "context of production" (107). It is this "context of production," which distinguishes oral from written language. When a speaker creates, the context is shared immediately; when the writer creates, the context is delayed.

Because the writer cannot "gesture out to the material world right here" (Brandt 62), words alone create context. Writers need to anticipate and fill in the gaps; they need to provide temporal, spacial, and logical connections. We need to present the importance of those connecting words within the framework of making meaning for the reader. Basic writers need to recognize that transitions, subordinating conjunctions, endophoric reference, and reiteration are essential for making meaning. These are not mindless and meaningless academic regulations designed to intimidate; they are ways of insuring that communication survives the delayed context gap.

Basic writers also need to recognize that there is an advantage to the absence of that free-flowing spontaneity of coauthored discourse: time. Without the need to maintain verbal contact with the conversant, without the need to avoid socially unacceptable silence gaps, and without the need to hold the floor by maintaining the flow, writers have time to focus on the text.

Writers Need to Know How Speech Is Produced: Intonation Units

Basic writers need to understand the patterning of oral language in order to appreciate the unique nature of oral language, to understand how and why that patterning is different from the patterns of writing, and to better recognize oral remnants in writing. Spontaneous speech is not a continuous flow of words; it consists of a series of brief spurts, each of which is approximately five words long in English. These intermittent spurts of speech, which Wallace Chafe calls "intonation units" (*Studying Writing*), are marked by pausing and intonation. Pauses, of varying length, indicate the end of a unit. The most consistent

marker is intonation: rising pitch indicates semiclosure of an idea or image; falling pitch, closure of an idea or image (Chafe, *Pear Stories* 14).

Each intonation unit centers on a single focus, which Chafe calls a "focus of consciousness." A single focus of consciousness expresses a limited piece of information. Chafe theorizes that the size of the intonation units is determined by the amount of information the mind can keep in focus at a singular point in time (*Studying Writing* 13). Although the mind may travel simultaneously across a multitude of thoughts, it must narrow the focus when communicating that knowledge.

Written language follows oral language in presenting information in units. Chafe theorizes that this parallel nature of communication "is probably not so much that writers write in information spurts of that kind, but that they grasp their readers' need to process information in such chunks. Readers resemble listeners in their capacities for assimilating information" (*Studying Writing* 20). Writers translate intonation units into clauses, using punctuation to mark their boundaries. Although punctuation has a rule system of its own, punctuation marks "are at least rough delimiters of units that are analogous to intonation units" (*Studying Writing* 18).

Before presenting the structuring system unique to writing, we need to explain how people talk—in chunks or intonation units. Basic writers often record information as it comes to them; therefore, a series of intonation units patterns their writing. The following sentence exhibits the oral patterning of intonation units: "They live in a for room apartment, the apartment is very depressing, its crowded and roach infested."

Helping students understand why they write as they do is an important step toward exchanging the oral pattern for the written pattern. If spoken, the above sentence would be effective and conventional. Separated intonation units not only deliver information in digestible chunks, they emphasize the significant. Isolating "Its crowded and roach infested," rather than integrating these adjectives in the previous sentence, draws attention to their significance. This basic writer is communicating effectively the oral word; he needs to become aware that the conventions of oral and written language are different.

Writers Need to Know How Speech Is Produced: Center of Interest

Although intonation units reflect the pattern of emerging thought, they do not mirror the larger focus and intent of the

speaker. Chafe calls this larger focus and intent a "center of interest." The center of interest is communicated by a series of intonation units (*Pear Stories* 27). Oral patterning is evident in the previously cited student's sentence where three intonation units communicate one center of interest: a crowded, roach-infested, depressing four room apartment.

Because a limited amount of information is held in each intonation unit, the mind surveys memory and reports the numerous amounts of information in a series. When the speaker has communicated the full center of interest, the voice falls. Closure has been achieved in reporting the image. Speakers generally use rising pitch to connect the intonation units and lower pitch to indicate the closure of the center of interest. These intonation markers indicate suspension and closure of thought. If these oral forms of communication were to be marked with punctuation, commas would connect the focuses of consciousness and a period would mark the closure of the center of interest. It is important to note that in punctuating oral speech, the period marks the end of the center of interest, not the end of a grammatical sentence (*Pear Stories* 9-51).

Because the voice falls at the end of the center of interest, the beginning writer may close his completed center of interest with a period. Punctuation here marks thought completion, not the conventions of grammatically complete sentences.

A prevalent basic writer error is the run-on sentence, of which Chafe's concept of the center of interest offers one explanation. As I reflect on students' writings, it seems to me that a run-on sentence is often an oral remnant: the basic writer is punctuating a center of interest. The following basic writer's sentence about her difficulties with writing provides such an example: "I don't think I write well because, I just seem to have this feeling, whenever I have to write about something out of the ordinary, such as something that I don't know anything about, I just tend to keep putting it off until its to late, then I have to cram one weeks work into one nights work."

Recognizing many run-ons as closures on centers of interest provides insight into the logic of this basic writer error. Explaining the run-on sentence to our students as an acceptable oral convention but an unacceptable written convention will enable them, also, to understand why run-ons seem so natural.

Writers Need to Know How Speech Is Produced: Chaining

In oral language, intonation units are most often connected by "and" or "or." Chafe calls this method of accumulating in-

formation by accretion "chaining." The center of interest remains open as the speaker chains together the various focuses. Speakers commonly use two methods of keeping the center open: simply reporting them next to one another (adjoining strategy) and connecting them with coordinating conjunctions, most commonly with "and." A third method, using subordinating conjunctions, is less common in informal speaking. This more complex method of connecting ideas involves intentional integration, a task avoided by most speakers as they concentrate on one focus of consciousness at a time (*Pear Stories* 9-51).

Basic writers commonly use the oral method of chaining to tie thoughts together. The intonation units are held together by "and" and "or" until the center of interest is closed. The following student, writing about promiscuity, reveals this oral remnant: "But the fact is that they have crossed the line between their body and someone else's when they decided to have sex without any contraceptives to begin with and now they have to face the consequences of their thoughtlessness and perverseness and they have no right whatsoever to take away this new life because of their mistakes."

Chaining thoughts with "and" and "or" is an oral convention which works in speech because of the immediacy of shared context, supplemental prosody and coauthored text. Because of the delayed context, however, written language needs more exact connectives. Explaining to basic writers the differing contexts of oral and written language and introducing them to transitions will provide them with the necessary replacements, and increase their awareness of what words do, and why.

Writers Need to Know How Speech Is Produced:
Topic Announcement

Speakers often begin a conversational segment by immediately announcing the topic to be discussed. My daughter recently began her telephone conversation with "Tomorrow." Spoken with intonation blending both the final lower pitch of statement closure and the higher pitch of question closure, she was both stating her topic and asking if I understood that she was going to discuss something that had to do with "tomorrow." Following what I have termed "topic announcement," she continued to discuss the complications she was facing in maintaining the preplanned schedule for "tomorrow."

The oral language pattern of topic announcement might explain another common basic writer error: the redundant

subject. In the following example the writer, discussing her hopes for English 101, uses the redundant subject: "And the topics we write on, we should have class discussion to fully understand what the instructor expects for us to do."

While topic announcement is an effective convention of conversation, it is unacceptable in academic writing. Because writers have time to integrate thought, the written tradition expects that topics will be announced within a verbal context, not simply blurted out. Again, basic writers need to become aware of the differences between oral and written conventions.

Writers Need to Know Oral and Written Language Have Different Genres or Forms

Because language is situational, different genres involving both vocabulary and structure have developed. The varying characteristics of spoken and written language are reported by Wallace Chafe and Jane Danielewicz in "Properties of Spoken and Written Language."

Their research subjects are professors and graduate students, people skilled in using language, people able to adapt language to varying contexts, audiences, and purposes. The conversations are transcribed from dinner party conversations, lectures from the academic setting, letters written to friends and family, and academic writing from journal publications. The transcribed oral conversations contain all the markings of oral language; the lectures and letters fall in the middle; and the academic papers contain all the markings of written academic discourse. Yet, all are language choices of articulate, educated people. The differences between the oral and written modes have nothing to do with intelligence or the capability to abstract. The subjects know that different codes are at work; they have acquired the knowledge of code-switching. The awareness of code-switching is an invaluable lesson for basic writers who have internalized failure at writing as the inability to perform adequately in the academic setting. Basic writers need to know that choosing language appropriate to the situation is like playing by the rules of the game. Language choice does not reflect one's mental capacities for abstraction or complexity.

Writers Need to Know How Speaking and Writing Differ

Chafe's and Danielewicz's research on the characteristics of speaking and writing will further enable us to guide basic writers

in understanding the oral and written conventions. The research reveals that speakers of both conversation and lectures differ in language choice from writers of both letters and academic papers. Speakers use a limited and colloquial vocabulary, writers, a more varied and literary vocabulary. Speakers have the fewest words per intonation unit; writers have the most words per unit. Speakers separate prepositional phrases and adjectives into separate intonation units; writers place them within the sentence structure. Speakers use the most chaining with "and"; writers incorporate these strung-out intonation units into the sentence structure and use more precise transitions.

Writing differs from speaking because writers have what speakers do not have: time. Time to reflect, time to choose the most appropriate word, time to condense, time to revise. Chafe's and Danielewicz's research reveals that time is the factor which enables writers of both letters and academic papers to use:

1. more word variety
2. more explicit references
3. longer intonation units
4. more sequenced prepositional phrases
5. more attributive adjectives and nouns
6. more compound nouns and verbs
7. more participles

Time is the writers' most valuable advantage. Recognizing that writers have time will counter the disadvantage of having the conversant absent. Writers have time to organize and integrate information by using prepositional phrases, attributive adjectives and nouns, participles, compound nouns and adjectives. Such compact packing increases the size of intonation units and achieves much of what is expected in academic writing.

Conclusion and Implication for Teaching Academic Discourse

Oral language is a valuable approach to teaching writing not only because it is a bridge from the familiar to the unfamiliar, but because it is a framework for presenting the structures of writing. Through this framework, students recognize that writing is but another form for patterning and presenting information. Through this framework, they recognize that genre, not intelligence, is at work.

I have used the oral framework successfully with basic writers by beginning with a discussion about which is easier—

writing or speaking—and why. This discussion, which reveals how writing and speaking differ, sets the stage for looking at the structures we use when we talk and then the structures we use when we write. I begin with the kernel sentence and then introduce all that can be added before a sentence breaks apart. This building-block method differs from the grammar so many students have rejected: a mass of disconnected nonsensical grammatical rules to mindlessly memorize. From this building-block foundation, I have developed for my classes a step-by-step manual which presents writing as building blocks and patterns, a manual which can be used with any standard curriculum.

The oral-written structure provides a framework for responding to students' writings throughout the semester. Students accept that they are dealing with a different structure; they understand what Shaughnessy calls the logic of many of their errors. In our writing workshops students are often the first to comment, "This is how we would say it, but this is how we need to write it."

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