

Becoming Aware of the Myth of Presence

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It has been a fundamental axiom of writing instruction for generations that good writing is like speech inasmuch as it has "voice" and is aware of its audience. And this comparison seems to make sense, because both activities draw on a common reservoir of language skills. But why, then, do so many students have trouble writing when they seem to have so little trouble speaking?

The argument of this essay is that teachers of writing have in several crucial respects over-emphasized the similarities between speaking and writing and, in so doing, have reinforced what Jacques Derrida has called the "metaphysics of presence." Like most of Western culture, we have treated writing as if it were speech or essentially a substitute for it, even though the problems students have with writing are precisely with those aspects of writing that don't work like speech. Moreover, the relation between writing and speaking, as well as the methods by which we write and speak, are changing rapidly in response to technological innovations—computers, telecommunications, dictation systems, and the like. These innovations have changed the "scene of writing" in ways that teachers of writing need to be aware of. I want to argue that Derrida's critique of presence enables us to come to a sharper understanding of how these new developments affect the teaching of writing. I am not one of those who believe that Derrida can be "found everywhere," that the entire world can and should be read through lenses polished in Paris; in fact, the pedagogical model I want to develop finally is not one that Derrida would endorse. But I find Derrida's discussion of the relation between speech and writing (particularly in Part I of *Of Grammatology*, "Writing before the Letter") entirely relevant to current issues in the teaching and study of writing.¹

Logocentrism: Privileging the Spoken Word

One of the key themes of Derrida's thought is the concept of *presence/absence*. Derrida sees the metaphysics of presence, which he also calls "logocentrism," as the dominant tradition in Western thought from Plato and Aristotle to the present. Logocentrism is the privileging of the *logos*, or spoken word, over the written word, and Derrida rather sweepingly asserts that the Western tradition has always privileged the spoken word or oral language over the written. In oral communication, the speaker is

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present to an audience, and, according to this tradition, this presence ensures full, unmediated communication; writing, in contrast, is seen as secondary to speech. As Rousseau has said, writing is "nothing but the representation of speech" (qtd. in Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 27). We resort to writing only when the more secure method of face-to-face communication is impossible—when the person we wish to communicate with is absent. Thus, writing is seen as a system for transcribing speech, a system that functions as a supplement to speech in the absence of the speaker, and the specific differences that exist between the written and the spoken codes are a function of the perceived difference between their natures.

Although Derrida has been faulted by his critics for ignoring examples which tend not to support his point, he has gathered an impressive array of passages in which key Western thinkers privilege speech over writing, presence over absence.² Plato's attack on writing as a falling away from the purity of speech is perhaps the *locus classicus*.³ Aristotle also viewed writing as secondary to speech: "Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words" (qtd. in Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 36). And Derrida has criticized such contemporary thinkers as Saussure, Levi-Strauss, and J.L. Austin for their analogous privileging of the oral over the written (*Of Grammatology* 27-73, 101-40; "Signature"). Moreover, a sense of the spoken word as vital is, of course, crucial to the Judeo-Christian tradition: "In the beginning was the Word." And "God *said*, 'let there be light.'"

It is difficult, perhaps, for many of us to share Derrida's agitation about this dominance of logocentrism. Derrida speaks of "the historical-metaphysical reduction of writing to the rank of an instrument enslaved to a full and originally spoken language" (*Of Grammatology* 29) as if writing were the victim of a nefarious authoritarian conspiracy. But, certainly, Derrida is correct in arguing that the way we customarily regard writing ignores the differences between writing and speaking, between reading and listening. I found it, for example, far more natural two sentences ago to write "Derrida speaks of" though I have never heard him say these words. We speak of what Shakespeare "says" in Sonnet 129 or of what an author is "telling us," and these metaphors are the marks of a metaphysics of presence that treats writing as if it were speech or, more precisely, that assimilates writing under a model of communication based on speech. Though the writer is absent when we read, we ignore that fact and treat the writer as if he or she were present, speaking to us in an unmediated way. This response ignores everything that is different (and much that is problematic) about writing, the essence of which is that the writer's writing functions in the absence of the writer. We see the differences between speaking and writing as contingent, not essential, as mere "devices" writing must use in order to approach the full, unmediated presence speech has unproblematically. The value of speech thus comes from its presence, and, in Derrida's view, the metaphysics of presence conflates

speech and presence, thus automatically denigrating writing as absence.

Derrida argues that this metaphysics of presence, this logocentrism, utterly pervades the Western intellectual tradition; good evidence for this view is provided by the fact that even the discipline of the study of writing has continued in many important respects to be logocentric. For instance, the aim of one influential pedagogy—Zoellner's "talk-write"—is to increase students' written fluency by leading them from talking to writing.⁴ Further, the tradition of rhetoric originated in the study of oral, not written, discourse, and the continuing influence of classical rhetoric on composition studies helps reinforce logocentric language and concepts. We find it more natural to refer to a writer's "awareness of an audience," as if the writer were on stage declaiming, than to refer to a readership; we also refer to the importance of a writer "finding his or her own voice," again as if the writer were speaking. Moreover, we teach writing orally and seem unaware of the resulting tension. Many of us conduct conferences, believing that comments given in person will be more effective than written comments even though our oral comments are about writing. Others work extensively with peer groups, in which a writer tries to say what he or she means and peers provide oral responses to the writing. In any of these situations, if the writer's meaning is unclear, we ask, "What are you trying to *say* here?"

Despite some important exceptions, much research in composition is also still enmeshed in logocentric assumptions. The relationship between speaking and writing is an important topic in composition studies, but the trend in these studies has been largely to emphasize the similarities—not the differences—between speaking and writing (for example, see Kroll and Vann). Moreover, armed with Derrida's critique, we can find traces of logocentrism in many other aspects of composition theory and practice today: in the methods of protocol analysis, in references to "inner speech," and in references to disciplinary or interpretive communities of discourse. However, it would be wrong to present all the approaches and theories in composition today as unequivocally logocentric. For example, in a spirit largely (if not totally) compatible with Derrida, those theorists who stress writing as a mode of learning—rather than as a mode of putting down on paper what one has learned—reverse the logocentric vision of writing as mere transcription.⁵ But Derrida suggests that logocentrism is so pervasive that we must keep reminding ourselves that it is writing—not rhetoric, not invention, not inner speech—that we study and teach. All too readily, anyone working from Western cultural assumptions comes to see speech and writing as hierarchically related and, therefore, subsumes writing under a model of communication which privileges speech over writing, presence over absence.

Student Writers and the Metaphysics of Presence

Derrida's description of the metaphysics of presence also explains much about the state of mind of the average college writer. The "basic"

writer, so Mina Shaughnessy and others have argued, is often overly aware of—and therefore intimidated by—the differences between speaking and writing. But the "average" college writer, sufficiently at ease with writing to have avoided the intimidation the basic writer experiences, far more often ignores these differences, treating writing as if it were speech or simply a device for transcribing it. A number of serious problems in student writing stem from this unarticulated premise about writing.

Most students, of course, have had much more experience with the spoken than with the written code, so it should come as no surprise that many of the most common errors found in student writing stem from excessive reliance upon the spoken code as a guide to writing. No one seems to know how to use an apostrophe anymore, largely because no one has ever spoken an apostrophe. Many spelling mistakes, and most of the frequent ones, arise from the same source: when in doubt about the spelling of a word, the student sounds it out and then writes it down as he or she hears it. This simple speech-based rule of thumb is often unreliable, so the student writes *piticular* instead of *particular*, *temperment* instead of *temperament*. Other examples of common errors that arise from transcribing speech as writing are *most all* instead of *almost all*, *should of* instead of *should have*, and *suppose* and *use* as past-tense forms.

Punctuation, of course, is a feature of writing, not of speech, but four punctuation marks—the period, comma, exclamation point, and question mark—correspond fairly straightforwardly to the intonations and pauses of speech. And these are the forms of punctuation to be found in student writing. The dash, parenthesis, semicolon, colon—those forms of punctuation that cannot be indicated in speech—do not appear spontaneously in much student writing. But extensive reliance on the comma and the period does not mean that even these punctuation marks are used correctly. The punctuation errors that students make, unlike those concerning plurals and the apostrophe, do not typically arise from students' having forgotten the rules they were taught about comma use; these errors often come, on the contrary, from having learned one "rule" extremely well. For example, I hear semester after semester about a basic rule of comma usage taught across the nation: use a comma to indicate a pause. This rule is a wonderful example of the privileging of speech over writing: punctuation exists to indicate something in speech—pauses—that writing lacks. But, clearly, writing is richer, not poorer, than speech in this regard. Moreover (and this is the source of the problem), most of us pause for other reasons as well, and we do so quite haphazardly.⁶ This means that following the punctuate-when-you-pause rule leads to some very oddly punctuated sentences.

These are some of the common mechanical and sentence-level errors that appear in students' writing, and we should be able to see the pattern in these errors. The pattern should tell us that our students make errors precisely where the connection or overlap between speaking and writing breaks down. Acting on the unarticulated premise that writing is simply

transcribed speech, students make errors in those aspects of writing that require discriminations not found in speech. Where mastery of the spoken code suffices, the average college writer today does an acceptable job; it is where the written code works rather differently from speech that most student writing begins to manifest problems.

This phenomenon can be seen on a level beyond the surface and grammatical features I have described so far: in the problems students have creating a coherent text. The issue of how we produce formally coherent texts is, of course, enormously complicated, and I wish to point out only a few aspects of this problem here. One important means of creating coherence is the use of cohesive ties. Halliday and Hasan demonstrate that cohesion is realized by five means: reference, substitution, ellipsis, lexical cohesion, and conjunction. Though studies have shown that better writers use all of these cohesive devices more frequently than poorer writers do, the difference is largest, according to Witte and Faigley, in their use of conjunction (196; also see Gebhard). Conjunction is established primarily by what Halliday and Hasan call the "discourse adjunct," the conjunctive adverb or prepositional phrase (such as *consequently* or *on the other hand*) that signals the connection between sentences, and it is surely used less frequently in conversation. The "discourse adjunct" is under-utilized in student writing, I would argue, precisely because it is less frequently used in speech. The only conjunctive adverb students seem to use extensively in their writing is *however*, but even this word is usually used incorrectly as a conjunction. Even the simple word *nonetheless* strikes the student ear as unnecessary and foreign—unnecessary because it adds no new information about the referential subject and foreign because such an indication of the logical relation between two parts of a discourse is more a part of the mechanism of formal written discourse than part of the repertoire of conversational speech. But by refusing to employ devices that don't *sound natural*, students cut themselves off from fully learning the mechanisms of writing, some of which admittedly do not sound natural. Does anyone speak in footnotes?

The footnote is just one example of the devices employed in written texts but not characteristic of conversation and that, therefore, students tend to resist. Introductions, conclusions, transitional phrases, the apparatus of scholarship contained in notes and in bibliographies—all are part of the formal repertoire of writing and deliberately call attention to their written formality as a way of signaling the coherence, the *integritas*, of a written text.⁷ Students, by and large, have difficulty with these devices, preferring a more purely referential, subject-oriented prose that calls much less attention to itself as writing.

Though our students run into many different kinds of problems creating coherent texts, a remarkable number of these problems are traceable to a common root: they are not characteristic of the conversational speech our students have mastered. And as long as our students have not mastered the facets of writing not found in speech, they are going

to continue to have problems in all these areas, from "surface" conventions like the apostrophe to larger whole-discourse units. Another way of putting this is that our students' problems are a function of their logocentrism, their privileging of oral over written discourse. And it is difficult to make students aware of their logocentrism because it is part of the much larger culture of logocentrism Derrida has described. Our students regard writing as a transcription of speech, a supplement to speech that we resort to only when face-to-face communication is impossible, because they have been taught—consciously or unconsciously—to regard writing this way. They see writing this way, in short, because their culture does. Understanding this phenomenon is helpful in itself because it can lead us, instead of uselessly blaming our students' mysterious recalcitrance about apostrophes, to see how and why these errors are reinforced by the culture as a whole.

Articulating the Myth

In the writing classroom, therefore, we must discuss the myth of presence, make our students conscious that we all subscribe to such a myth. We need to articulate for our students a more complex and sophisticated view of writing, showing them that writing is not a supplement to speech but a different form of language in its own right, with advantages over speech as well as disadvantages. But such theoretical teaching must complement—not displace—the more concrete teaching of the specific problems that result from the myth of presence. Only a combination of the two will really do the job.

How can this be done? How can we make students aware of the myth of presence? (Here, beyond giving us a useful theoretical framework, Derrida is not going to help us very much.)⁸ First, we can lead students to see from their own experience how writing can be of use in its own right and not just as a form of communication to resort to when face-to-face communication is impossible. The difference between letters and conversations on the telephone is one useful example. Even, or especially, if they do not receive many letters, most students feel that a letter "means" more because of its permanence and because, as reluctant writers themselves, they think that more work went into it. Love letters, for instance, have a value that conversations on the telephone do not exactly replace. Complaint letters provide another useful example; everyone has had to complain to someone about something, and it is easy to see that to get results one has to complain by letter, because organizations seldom keep accurate records of the phone calls they receive. And almost every student has had a similar experience with job applications. By means of such examples within their experience, most students can be brought to see the distinctiveness and usefulness of writing as a system of communication in its own right and not just a device for recording speech.

Ironically, perhaps, the use of oral presentations and formal public-speaking practice can also help make students conscious of the myth of

presence. A good presentation is almost always scripted and written in advance; a terrible presentation is one that partakes of the spontaneous, disorganized nature of everyday conversation. So the introduction of such elements in a writing course suggests that writing may, on occasion, be prior to speech, not the other way around.

I also think it important to insist on students' typing (or now, word processing) formal essays precisely because typed text looks more foreign to the student than the student's own handwriting. That foreignness brings home the lesson of absence. It enables the student to see his or her own work more as others would see it, which means that the student sees its errors and weaknesses more readily and, more importantly, that he or she realizes *that* others might see it: "Someone could read this who doesn't know me at all, who doesn't even know that a 'me' wrote it." Writing, students will see, is indeed a different activity from having a conversation with a friend. It can also be valuable to discuss these matters in class as well as have students experience them; I always speak in my writing classes about what it feels like to see my own work in print and how I often see errors at that point that I never saw before. Mature writers as well as immature ones have to grapple with the problems of absence; such problems are, indeed, part of the nature of writing.

A Pedagogy of Absence/Presence

But, of course, introducing examples from public speaking and discussing differences between writing for ourselves and writing for publication reveal that the presence/absence distinction is not exactly the same as the speaking/writing one; they are at least partially—and also usefully—distinguishable. There are, however, *intermediate cases*, kinds of writing close to the presence of speaking—a note to a friend or a note to oneself, for example. In these kinds of writing, we can use the code we often use in speech because we are not concerned with the intelligibility of our message to a large audience and may, in fact, be trying to prevent such intelligibility. Our almost-present audience may indeed welcome and certainly won't mind the more personal and intimate writing which behaves like speech. And in these situations in which we can write more the way we talk, more colloquially and informally, correctness is no longer an issue. Thus, the problems of absence are not part of the nature of writing as much as they are part of the broader category of communicating in the absence of the recipient. There are also intermediate forms of *speech* which have some of the characteristics I have been ascribing to writing. In public speeches, for example, the audience—though physically present—is relatively absent in much the same way readers are. This absence means that the language used in public speech falls between that appropriate for face-to-face communication and that appropriate for writing. Indeed, as I have already said, such speeches are generally written in advance, though written from the idea of being spoken, and this perfectly establishes public speech as an intermediate case.⁹

Moreover, the presence/absence concept just sketched is being radically transformed by new technologies of communication. Something as simple as Post-It notes, in making writing detachable and readily disposable, creates a new kind of writing more like speech in its impermanence. Electronic mail makes writing radically present even across great distances; other electronic media, particularly television and video storage, make public speech possible in contexts of absence—despite a powerful illusion of presence. In contrast, audio mail and dictation/transcribing technologies (recently studied in Halpern and Liggett) present speech situations in which speech functions much like writing or is designed to be transformed into writing.

It is impossible to predict the effect these new technologies will have on writing, since we are experiencing transformations we cannot see the end of. But I want to relate Derrida's thoughts on presence/absence and speech/writing to these new technologies. On the one hand, the new technologies demonstrate incontrovertibly that we need a partial distinction between speaking/writing and presence/absence. On the other hand, Derrida's distinctions—modified in this way—give us a powerful theoretical perspective on the new technologies. The new technologies help shatter or deconstruct any simplistic speech/writing model and help blur the overly neat speaking/writing distinction that this essay began with and that most research in this field assumes (and that is represented by the disciplinary distinction between departments of English and departments of speech and communication). This blurring means that if we stick to the old speaking/writing problematic, we won't be giving our students the distinctions that will help them cope with and adapt to the changing scene of writing. We need to shift our thinking from speaking/writing to presence/absence because our students are writing in a world described more adequately by the presence/absence problematic. And Derrida has given us the terms with which to describe this new world of writing.

What our students need to learn, in short, is to move from presence to absence, not just from speaking to writing. And showing that the writing/speaking difference is less fundamental than the presence/absence difference is a crucial part of leading our students to negotiate both differences. Playing a random set of messages left on a telephone answering machine, for example, quickly shows students how this form of communication shares some characteristics with writing. Communicating successfully here requires a very different sense of language than does conversation; normal context-dependent or presence-oriented speech doesn't work well in this context. In contrast, Post-It notes circulating among departmental colleagues are largely unintelligible removed from their original context, in just the way comparable snippets of conversation among the same people ("What did you decide about that thing I gave you?") would be. Such presence-oriented, contextually-dependent notes are far easier to compose than are messages left on the answering machine of a stranger.

This observation helps show students that their writing problems are only partially a function of their inability to master the specific conventions of writing as opposed to those of speech; and, probably more importantly, it shows that these problems are partially a function of their inability to master the general conventions of communicating in the absence of a recipient.

It is not writing that is so difficult for our students but communicating in the absence of a reader. The aspects of writing that give them trouble are not there to give English teachers things to find wrong with their writing but to ensure communication in a situation of absence. When communicating to someone who is absent, one must master two skills not necessary for those who communicate in the presence of their audience. First, one's communication must partake of certain formal characteristics which mark it as a coherent piece of discourse; second, it must be error-free because an absent audience has none of the tolerance for error allowed a present speaker. Students need to see this, not only to learn to write but also to learn other modes of communication characterized by absence. And they will learn these modes of communication more quickly if they encounter them aware of what these modes have in common with writing as well as of how they differ.

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Notes

¹ The essays collected by Atkins and Johnson avoid this issue altogether, focusing instead on the relationship between reading and writing. Crowley's early essay is the pioneering work to explicitly relate Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence to issues in the teaching of writing, although she emphasizes less the speaking/writing issue than the related one that language is not primarily a representation of ideas and therefore should not be valued only for its clarity or transparency. Derrida is never mentioned in Kroll and Vann or in either of Tannen's collections of essays.

² Schafer provides considerable support for Derrida's claim. In an excellent summary of the work that has been done on the similarities and contrasts between speech and writing, Schafer shows how until quite recently linguistics neglected this topic because it took the spoken word as primary and, thus, as its principal object of investigation.

³ Connors has recently argued that Plato's attack on writing (in the *Phaedrus*) lines up with his attack on rhetoric (primarily in the *Gorgias*) and on poetry (primarily in *The Republic*) because all three are one-way modes of communication "that cannot be questioned" (55), as opposed to the dialectical reasoning Plato wants opened up through the insistent questioning of Socrates. This argument redraws Derrida's distinction but doesn't obliterate it. What Socrates represents is the presence of dialogue; and, to anticipate a point made later, the public speech of rhetoric and poetry would, in this view, approach the condition of writing in relative absence.

⁴ Liggett's recent and useful bibliography lists a number of studies influenced by Zoellner's work.

⁵See Emig and Elbow, for example. I say "not totally" both because of Elbow's insistence on the importance of voice in writing and also because both writers would agree with the reservations about Derrida's position explained in note 8 below.

⁶Shaughnessy subscribes to the speech-based notion that writing is primarily a way to transcribe speech when she suggests that "the writer perceives periods as signals for major pauses and commas as signals for minor pauses." But she goes on to provide an excellent summary of the different reasons for pausing when we speak: "Pauses mark rates of respiration, set off certain words for rhetorical emphasis, facilitate phonological maneuvers, regulate the rhythms of thought and articulation, and suggest grammatical structure" (24).

⁷Schafer suggests that the problems inexperienced writers have with transitions and with opening and closing their texts comes from the fact that in conversation we get help from the other party in these acts (23-37). Writing, a monologue not a dialogue, requires the writer to do these things alone.

⁸I say this because Derrida's position is that, because of its acontextuality or "iterability" (the fact that writing can be significant fully stripped of its originating context), writing can never unequivocally transmit authorial intention; it can never work in quite the way its author would want. This is, of course, a hotly disputed position; my sense, which I assume most teachers of writing share, is that this is not a view likely to be enabling in the writing classroom, however useful and enabling Derrida's discussion of the absence/presence distinction can be. A number of people disagree with me, however; see the Atkins and Johnson collection.

⁹Hirsch cites radio broadcasting and writing to oneself as examples that blunt the absoluteness of the distinction between speaking and writing:

From the structure of these speech situations, it is evident that the distinctive features of written speech do not depend on its merely being written down. A radio talk is, functionally speaking, written discourse. A private note is, functionally, oral speech. Moreover, we encounter utterances which belong equally in the two functional categories, for instance, a rather formal conversation, or a very informal and elliptical letter to a close friend. As with most generic distinctions in speech, one discovers a continuum where one had hoped to discover definitive classifications. *But a good reason for keeping the functional distinction between speech and writing is that the typical, private character of written speech creates the main difficulties in teaching and learning composition.*

(22; emphasis added)

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