Editors: What advice would you give to someone just starting out as a writer or a writing teacher?

Peter Elbow: I’m thinking especially about writing teachers. It’s so important for writing teachers to write a lot, to experience themselves as writers and not just as academics. Good writing teachers are people who enjoy writing and who ideally do more than just academic writing.

It also strikes me as very helpful if teachers have had trouble with writing. I think one of my advantages has been that I had such a struggle with writing and had to quit graduate school because I couldn’t do the papers. So I can sympathize with and identify with people who struggle to write. On the other hand, I’ve now come to enjoy writing and feel like I want to write.

Now, for someone just starting out as writer, I should talk about freewriting. My wife makes fun of me—she says, “Whatever the question is, the answer is freewriting” (laughs). But people have to learn to write a lot, to write garbage.
People, especially academics, are scared of writing badly. But when things don’t go well, when people don’t write enough, it’s usually because they aren’t writing badly enough. You probably know the advice of William Stafford: “When I have trouble writing I just lower my standards.”

Now that said, there’s another thing my wife makes fun of me for. She says, “You always talk about freewriting but people probably don’t realize that you spend 80% of your time revising.” And that’s absolutely true. The revising is long and slow and it’s not totally intuitive. When you revise, you are trying to make conscious, deliberative decisions. I have some techniques that I think help. For example, my essay about the music of form is about how to think about organization in writing. But the job of revising is always hard work. I like to say that writing is easy—just open your mouth, just freewrite. And it is, if you do it this way. But then to turn that into something that works takes a huge amount of work and sometimes struggle and occasionally agony. I won’t deny that. Still, the only reason I’m willing to agonize and try to produce something tight and strong and clear is because I got excited in the early drafting when I was making a mess.

Editors: You said that you yourself struggled with writing in graduate school. Was that messy pre-writing process of freewriting important to you in overcoming the problems you faced there?

Peter Elbow: Yes, absolutely, but I sort of had to invent it for myself. I went to graduate school for the first time in 1959 and found I couldn’t write, so I quit. I never wanted to enter an institution of learning again. I was so burned because I had tried so hard, and I had committed myself to that life path and failed.

But then I fell into a teaching job. I had decided that I hated being a student and I couldn’t write, but teaching wasn’t so bad. My first three years were at MIT with some wonderful students, and my next two years were at Franconia College in New Hampshire from 1963-1965. These students at Franconia were considered very weak students and were
defined as failures, but after working closely with them I discovered they were smart.

After five years of teaching, I decided to go back to graduate school at Brandeis for very pragmatic reasons: my teaching had made me realize I wasn’t happy with the way higher education and education in general worked. I felt I wanted to change it. But I realized no one would listen to me if I didn’t have a PhD. So that’s why I went back to grad school.

I had started at Harvard but when I went back I went to Brandeis. Given my past experience, I was scared I wouldn’t be able to write again so I made myself this discipline: if I had a twenty page paper, I had to have twenty pages of writing one week early. The night before my first one-week deadline, I still didn’t have it, because I was still doing what I did before, which was to write and cross out and rip up. But because I was really scared, I had to find a way to keep to my deadlines. This meant I just had to write, and write more, and write more badly, until I had twenty pages. I wasn’t thinking about this as freewriting at all, I was just thinking about the need to get twenty pages—and the need to accept crap. Eventually, I discovered that with a week I could turn this mess into a decent paper and sometimes a good paper. That’s how I sort of backed into it.

I guess I had already used freewriting, but not calling it as such, in my journal writing. I had a bunch of very hard years in my life and I wasn’t good at asking for help or having close friends or confiding, so I did a lot of journal writing that was really just blurring. This involved just typing as fast as I could, putting all my feelings onto a typewriter. So, I knew how to freewrite, but at that point I didn’t think of it as freewriting. Gradually, though, my thoughts came together by the time I finally managed to get through graduate school. During these years I kept a kind of journal in which I began to really think about what was going on when I got stuck. And by the end I had tons of little notes I had written to myself and they helped me figure out what freewriting was. And those notes eventually turned into Writing Without Teachers. So by the end of graduate school, I had theorized it.
This illustrates a bit of a mystery about memory. I know I had heard of freewriting years earlier when I was at Franconia College from reading something of Ken Macrorie’s. I had even written him a letter and sent him a pamphlet about writing. But somehow my reading didn’t take. I never asked students to freewrite and I somehow didn’t think of my own journal writing as freewriting. (A lot of that journal writing had come earlier, even when I was studying at Oxford and couldn’t write.) I love Ken Macrorie and he probably gets credit for planting the seed in my mind. But I couldn’t harvest that seed until I had worked it through myself without thinking of it as freewriting.

So this business of learning to make a mess and learning to write and write badly is what I learned in graduate school. In a sense I’ve made a career and written much too much all based on that seed. It just seems central to what I do. Right now I’m trying to write a book on speech and writing, but there’s a sense in which it’s actually all about freewriting.

Freewriting is no longer controversial. A lot of teachers will suggest it, and most handbooks have a little chapter on freewriting, saying “Try this out.” But despite the acceptance, it’s sad how seldom it is well exploited. People don’t really do it consistently and push it and milk it, even though a lot happens when people do.

Editors: It seems some version of the idea of freewriting has been around for a long time. In his Institutes of Oratory, the Roman rhetorician Quintilian seems to be critical of techniques like this. He says,

A different fault is that of those who wish first of all, to run through their subject with as rapid a pen as possible, and, yielding to the ardor and impetuosity of their imagination, write off their thoughts, extemporaneously, producing what they call a rough copy, which they then go over again, and arrange what they have hastily poured forth; but though the words and rhythm of the sentences are mended, there still remains the same want of solid connection that there
was originally in the parts hurriedly thrown together (Bizzell and Herzberg, 405).

How would you answer him? Is there something to be said for “getting it right the first time” without going through multiple drafts?

**Peter Elbow:** What a wonderful quotation. I have to admit the truth in the core of what he is saying, but (big surprise), I don’t let it talk me out of freewriting. I have two responses.

First, he’s saying, “if you make a mess, it’s hard to make it neat.” That’s true. I have some very concrete ways of dealing with that. But it is hard and there is no way of getting around it. But I resist the standard cure for this problem: start by making an outline. This advice, has been terrible for me and I think it’s terrible for a lot of people. Before you start, you haven’t usually got much to outline. People tend to make an outline in which they’ll have three points that they’re somehow making out of one-and-a-half ideas.

**Editors:** Because you *have* to have three.

**Peter Elbow:** *(laughs).* Yes, but *after* I have freewritten tons and tons of stuff, *then* I need an outline because, as he says, it’s a mess. It needs to be organized.

Admittedly you can start by making an outline if you really know everything you’re going to say in an essay. Teachers are always assigning essays to students on topics they know a lot about and the students don’t. In this case the *teachers* could make a useful outline, but the students usually can’t because they don’t have enough material yet. Furthermore, even if I know tons of stuff about something, I always find that when I do a lot of freewriting and exploratory writing, I come up with more.

But there’s a more complicated interesting response to the truth in what Quintilian says. I think, and I talk about this in *Writing Without Teachers.* If you can write it *right* the first time, things are more intricately connected. I think the metaphor I use there is cooking. There’s a difference between
cooking it on paper and cooking it in your brain. If you make a mess in writing, you have all that junk on paper, and you have to try and cook it and organize it on paper. You do your best; you make your outline. But often readers can notice slightly awkward joints and see that somebody had to rearrange things.

In contrast, if you have managed to think deeply enough about what you’re writing, and you’ve pondered it, and talked about it to people, and taken walks as you think about it so that you really cooked the damn thing in your brain, then you can sit down and write it in one piece. Writing like this is deeply connected. The molecules are connected. And that’s wonderful. It’s just that I don’t think it’s reasonable to ask that of ourselves on a regular basis because it so seldom happens. I know some writers don’t write until they’ve cooked and cooked and cooked in their heads. And if they can manage it, then fine. But not many people can.

Editors: So writing is an easier technique for discovering ideas for most people than the classical idea of composing in your mind before you put it into words.

Peter Elbow: Exactly. That’s a great summary. I find that if I walk around and think and think, my mind often goes around in circles. It’s when I start writing on a piece of paper, or using a word processor, that I am able to find more new ideas. I don’t want to deny that there might be some people who are the other way around, especially those people who are negatively conditioned to the act of writing to the point that it gets in their way. That’s one of the wonderful things about freewriting: it gets rid of your negative conditioning, it makes you no longer hate picking up a pen.

Editors: So then, how do you use freewriting in your own writing?

Peter Elbow: Well, I’m not very organized about it. I don’t sit down and do freewriting exercises when I’m on my own. I get plenty of chances to do freewriting exercises when I teach and
when I’m giving invited workshops. Sometimes I feel guilty that I don’t set the clock and make myself freewrite every day (which is what many people do and what I tell others to do) and I think, “Why am I not practicing my own medicine?”

When I’m trying to write something, nine times out of ten I just start going, relying on what I call my “freewriting muscle.” When you’ve freewritten enough, you develop this mental muscle, which allows you to generate language unplanned. You see, the essential core of freewriting is the act of producing unplanned language and unplanned thinking. For if you have to go fast, you haven’t got time to plan. The precious product, the berry, the fruit, or whatever of freewriting is this funny act of non-planned language and non-planned thinking. Which is of course why it makes a mess. But for some reason—and I’m not really sure why—it also leads to a lot of good stuff.

There’s an interesting connection here with talking. Producing unplanned language feels peculiar to most people when they pick up a pen or use a word processor, but we do it all the time when we talk. Right now as I’m speaking to you, I’m not planning my words, I just sort have a felt sense for what I want to say and I get to open my mouth and say it. We’re all good at producing unplanned language when we do it in speaking.

So when I’m writing, I’ve learned that I can easily use that unplanned language gear. Even sometimes when I’m revising and am carefully consciously planning everything, trying to figure things out, moving very slowly and deliberately, I’ll get into a little tangle that I can’t figure out and I’ll just lapse into freewriting. I’ll just write, write, write, write until I can clear up the tangle. I notice times when I am revising and struggling and trying to get things right or finding the right phrase—and it goes on and on unfruitfully, suddenly I wake up and realize that I’m wasting time. I think, “I could solve this quicker if I just went to freewriting; it will make a mess, but it will solve my problem.” So when you’re in the deliberative mode, you can forget to use this tool. You have to remind yourself: “Open your mouth, stop planning, just let
the ideas and the words come out.” So that’s my relationship to freewriting.

Editors: You’ve recently written about the importance of voice. What, in your opinion, is “voice”?

Peter Elbow: It’s so interesting. As an issue, it goes right to the heart of our profession, and it goes right to the heart of writing, too. For cultural studies and social constructionists, it’s a pebble in the shoe—(laughs) I love etymology. The word scruple comes from a Latin term that refers to a pebble in your sandal as you’re marching along. It’s keeps bothering you. Our field has had a big scruple about voice.

Starting back in the 60s or the 70s, people in our field started using the term rather loosely. People made great claims about things like “authentic voice” and were very enthusiastic. I was certainly an enthusiast, but I actually managed not to say too many outrageous or overly ambitious things about voice, but a lot of people did. People mistook writing with voice for good writing. Right from the beginning in Writing Without Teachers, I was very careful to say that voice in writing is great but it’s not the same as good writing. You can have writing with lots and lots of voice and it can still be terrible. Voice is a virtue because it will get people to listen, and it may be generatively useful for yourself, but it’s not the same as good writing.

Of course this whole issue is connected to the notion of the self. In fact, at a physical level, everybody has an identifiable voice; there is even technology that uses “voiceprints” to identify people as well as fingerprints. Because we recognize people by their voice, it’s tempting to identify the voice with the person—“That’s my true self, that’s my authentic self.” In some of my writing I think I sort of implied that, and I’m still very torn. But in a recent article in College English, I tried to look at both sides of voice. There I argue that we don’t have single voices, we have multiple voices and our voices can change.
I also want to mention there’s value in ignoring voice. We don’t always want to sound like a strong voice. We don’t always want to sound like ourselves.

The extreme skeptical position on self says there’s no such thing as a self, that it’s just a bourgeois delusion. I can’t go that far. I think the big problem in these theoretical discussions is when people get into these yes-no binary arguments (I know we can’t talk forever now, but I would love to talk about binary thinking). But, anyway, people pose theoretical questions like, “Is there a self or is there not a self?” or “Is there a voice or is there not a voice?” The theoretical binary is a problem, and it helps to look at the question empirically. Some people have rather narrow selves, they are just always the same person, whereas other people are more multiple, shifting all over the place—persons—like Keats talks about with “negative capability.” So instead of thinking, “Is there a self or isn’t there a self,” we do much better to ask what’s going on with people who have more self or less self.

I don’t want to be doctrinaire, but I do feel clear in my own mind that even if we have multiple selves, they hang together at some level. Or when they don’t, that is when we break down or they cart us off to some institution. I’ve felt very close to breaking down at various times in my life, and I’d say it’s very obvious when your “multiple selves” are tearing you apart. It’s hard to handle.

But in all I’ve written about voice I hope it’s clear that voice has all kinds of different meanings and I’ve tried to spell out what some of them are.

Editors: What about imitation? Do you think that turning off the editor in your brain without thinking or planning is a way of imitating voices that we’ve heard and that that process is what it means to discover your own voice?

Peter Elbow: That’s a neat question. I like to do workshops where we work on voice and I ask the participants to list all the voices that have been important in their lives: moms and dads, teachers, friends, anybody. If we have time I ask them
to do a bunch of freewriting and to think about that freewriting by asking, “What voices do you hear in your head? Which ones are strong and weak?” For I certainly don’t want to claim that if we freewrite and engage in unplanned language that means we’re plowing a fresh field and there are no other voices in there—no influence of other people.

There’s another thing I find useful in these writing workshops. In addition to asking them to list the voices that are important in their life, I also ask people to list the voices that they themselves use—their angry or their whining voice, their confident voice, their timid voice, their sexy voice, or seductive voice, and so on. Typically, these lists are very helpful and fun. Then I ask them to write in some of those, for maybe ten or fifteen minutes, or longer. What I always say is to pick a voice you don’t get to use very much, maybe a voice that you were told not to use. For instance I grew up being told, “Don’t whine,” so it’s very helpful for me to write in a whiny voice. It’s very common for doors to open when we write in an under-used voice, because it’s a dog we don’t get a chance to take for a walk very often.

My theory is perhaps too simple for some people to buy. I think that a lot of power is tied up in the voices we were told not to use—linguistic power and cognitive power—and of course emotional power. Obviously, I’m not going to confuse this with good writing, but I am identifying it with power, power to tap the self. For I won’t run away from the notion that we do have a self and that there’s a lot of power there, and that we often can’t harness all that power. I can’t help thinking about this at the physical level. I always notice little babies and the power of their physical voices. I sing in some groups, but I don’t have a good voice. I look at a baby and think “How does that little body make so much noise?” And little kids, when they talk, they are not rhetorically shrewd, but they get a lot of meaning into their words. I sometimes think about it this way. (This too is a rather simple or crude theory—in fact it’s a mystical theory—it’s just a metaphor for what I don’t know how to explain.) I think that the meaning in kids’ writing comes through so strong (also in their drawing), because they are more able than most adults to put their
entire attention on what they are writing or drawing. We as adults are seldom so good at pouring our entire attention on words—meaning them with our whole selves. Some of our attention is always leaking away and so less of the meaning is embedded in those words on the page for the eyes of readers. How’s that for a far out theory!

So, anyway, you asked about imitation. When people were theorizing about voice, and maybe I’m a little guilty here, it might have sounded as if we were saying, “Never use anyone else’s voice. You only can use your own voice.” If I said that or implied that, I ask forgiveness, because that’s bad advice. Imitation exercises are great. And, as you say, the imitating can be completely. There’s a wonderful exercise that I learned from others in which you read a passage by somebody with a strong voice, Hemingway, or Henry James, or somebody like that, and you read it out loud and try to get the sound and the feeling of it in your mouth and in your bones. And then you freewrite where you actually try to write in that voice, one that is very far from your own voice. It can be done; it’s not so hard and you can get off on it and it’s great. It stretches your voices and your capabilities.

Editors: You mentioned reading aloud as a way to imitate voice or to learn voice. Thinking about the connection between speech, writing, and reading, how important do you think reading and speaking are in learning how to write?

Peter Elbow: Thanks for bringing me back to that. A big issue for me is the connection between reading and writing and speech. First let me talk about reading and writing. One of the essays of mine that I care most about is called “The War Between Reading and Writing—and How to End It.” In habitual speech, we always say “reading and writing.” It’s like “horse and carriage.” The word reading comes before writing in our mouths. In our culture reading is dominant.

Ninety-five-percent of the courses that anybody takes in college are essentially reading courses, in which reading comes first, or lectures, or input. And the writing is always there to serve the reading. The output serves the input. The
input is honored most. In other words the model that is implied is this: we have empty heads and the teacher has to fill up our heads with a book or a lecture, and after our heads are not empty anymore, then we got to write in order to see if we got the input right. Writing is usually a handmaiden to reading in educational institutions.

That’s why I love and value first year writing courses—and any other writing courses—since they are one of the few places where writing is the dominant linguistic activity, not reading.

I’m a cheerleader for writing. I don’t think writing is more important than reading, but I want them to be equal. I want situations in which we write before we read. I find exactly that process extremely useful in my teaching. If I want someone to read something, I get them to write about that topic before they read it because then they have all types of thoughts about the topic, and they find the reading much more interesting and they don’t go to sleep.

And it’s not just students who go to sleep if something’s boring or dry. If I’m trying to read something that I haven’t thought about—if it’s just input, input, input—I often get bored. But, if I’ve written about the topic first, then I’m more interested in seeing where I agree and where I disagree, or where the writer is right and where the writer is wrong. So I don’t say that writing should always come first, but I want it to come first at least half the time.

Editors: So we have privileged reading in a way that’s out of balance, and we need to restore the balance. Is that right?

Peter Elbow: Exactly, and it goes very, very deep. Reading means, “Sit still. Pay attention. Listen. Get it right. Shut up and listen.” And writing means, “What’s on your mind? What do you have to say? What do you want to think about?” The privileging of reading and the dominance of reading fits in with the mentality of schooling: “Sit still, and do what you’re told, and get it right.” I’m struck with how much that’s the case in elementary and high school, especially in high school, but in college too. To succeed in education, you have to follow
orders. Of course we often need to follow orders, it’s very important and I don’t want to doubt that. But it’s a filter that weeds out a lot of kids. A lot of people who don’t do well in education just get tired of following orders, and our society loses out because they don’t do well in school.

In fact, I concluded after the fact that my inability to write in graduate school was really an underground way of saying, “I refuse to write for you damn teachers.” For so long, I’d been such a good boy, such a good student, doing what I’m supposed to do, and trying hard. And then I got to graduate school and I continued to try hard and couldn’t write the damn papers. I would go to my tutor at Oxford and say, “I’m really sorry, I tried hard all week”—and I did try hard and I couldn’t do it. Same in graduate school, I couldn’t do it: “I tried and tried and tried. Poor me. I’m such a good boy. I just can’t do it.”

Looking back five or six years later after pulling my life together a little bit and, needless to say, delving into my mind and counseling and that sort of thing, I began to get a whiff of what had really been going on. It had gotten to the point where I was tired of doing papers, having teachers tell me what to write and doing what they said. But the part of me that says “fuck you” (talk about a voice that doesn’t get a chance to work—I never said “fuck you”) was totally unacceptable to my conscious mind, so I didn’t even experience it. I only experienced myself as ineffectual and weak. I had no experience with my self saying, “I don’t want to write your damn paper.” That feeling only emerged later as I took more voices for a walk.

Editors: You were allowing yourself to resist, or push back—

Peter Elbow: That’s right. The only way I could push back was to fail. I think we need to look more closely at people who fail. They’re often resisting.

You also asked about speech and writing and that’s my current obsession. I’m writing a book about it. I’ve been spending five years working on it—since I’m retired I’m letting myself write more slowly. When you’re teaching, you say, “Oh
my god, I have to finish this thing or I’ll never get it out.” It used to scare me that I was writing slowly, but I’ve finally accepted it and I’m letting things percolate more. But I’m getting there.

Probably two thirds of the book is very pragmatic in looking at how we can use speech better to help our writing conform to the current conventions for what counts as correct writing. Correct writing is very different from speech, of course. Even just plain “clear writing” is different from messy, disorganized speaking like I’m doing now.

I need to make a parenthetical little digression that’s very important. Because you guys are kind enough to listen to me, and not just listen but actually say you’re interested in making something useful out of what I say, I find it so easy to just ramble and ramble, and of course I digress. But this kind of interested listening is what everybody needs. That’s what a good teacher does for students: to be interested, to want to hear, and that makes the student braver about taking her own thinking and feeling seriously. The person discovers all those things in their head that they didn’t know about until they had somebody who really wanted to hear what was on their mind. That’s why we have a mommy, but not all mommies do it. So, I’m talking now and I’m having a nice time, and wanting to tell you everything in fifty-five minutes. But I’m making a great mess. But because you’ve set up these weird conditions in which I can make a mess, I’m able to have a lot of thoughts and find a lot of words.

So in effect you are letting me do one main thing I’m advocating in the book: speak onto the page. (In this case you are putting it onto the page for me.) Then there’s another major practical suggestion for bringing speech to writing: reading aloud, particularly at the late stages of writing. Talking onto the page, freewriting, is a way of using speech in the early stages of writing; reading out loud is a way of using speech at the late stages of writing. Revising by speaking aloud is completely different from speaking. It’s taking a text and reading it out loud, fiddling with every sentence until it feels right in the mouth and it sounds right in the ear.
But I love the theory implied here. When we revise by reading aloud, we’re not using rules, we’re just using our mouths and our ears. What we’re using is a built-in language competency, as Chomsky says. I don’t mean that’s built in from birth but it has gradually been internalized. It’s in the body. Of course it’s in the mind too: it’s body and mind together—but I want to emphasize body. When we’re reading out loud until we get a sentence that feels right in the mouth and sounds right in the ear we’re not trying to think about the nature of the sentence, we’re trying to just notice what pleases our mouth and our ear. We’re calling upon the same built-in linguistic ability that we use in speaking—and yet the resulting language is very different. When we speak we’re so messy, our syntax is all fragmented, and yet our mouths and ears want nicely shaped clear syntax when we read out loud—even elegant sometimes.

So the same gear that lets me make these horrible broken uses of the language—the same body, the same ear, the same mouth, the same knowledge that I don’t have to use my thinking for—helps me when I read out loud and my mouth and ear insist on clear strong sentences. It’s very interesting that those are both part of our faculty of language.

So those are the two techniques for using speech for writing that I’m exploring—writing in order to meet our present-day standards of writing: drafting by speaking onto the page and revising by reading aloud.

But the last part of the book swerves in a different direction. “Wait a minute,” I ask. “Why do we have to conform our writing to present standards of “correct writing”? Why must we stick with our present culture of literacy?” Here it’s more political. Every child, by the age of four, has mastered his or her mother tongue, which as the linguists tell us, is incredibly complex. A linguist can’t even explain all the rules that a four year old follows in his or her syntax. It’s amazingly intricate and complex—what the mind can do. But then it turns out, as it were, that somebody passed a law: “Let it be known by all that the language you’ve mastered may not be used for serious important writing.” So that language you’re a master of, you’re not allowed to use it for writing.
So I’m arguing that literacy functions as a plot against the body and the voice and against people without privilege. However I also insist that this perverse “law” effects even people with privilege. I grew up with “standard” “good” language, as it were, but correct writing isn’t my mother tongue. Correct writing is nobody’s mother tongue. Everybody has to use an alien language. Of course it’s harder if your mother tongue is further away from edited written English.

So, the last third of the book is about the fact that literacy is arranged in our culture (and in many cultures) as an exclusionary device—and that it doesn’t have to be that way. There have been many situations in various cultures where people could write in whatever mother tongue they have. It happened in English at various points—in the Middle Ages for example, and I think that the Internet is going to take us there now. During much of the Middle Ages, only Latin was considered correct for writing. It took a number of centuries to change that and now French and Italian and English are considered acceptable for writing. And now those and other “new” languages are turning around and trying to exclude other vernaculars—when they used to be the downtrodden vernaculars themselves.

It took quite a few centuries for the European vernaculars to become legitimate for writing, but the present process of accepting vernaculars is moving happening much more quickly now. We have The Color Purple and we have a lot of writing in various dialects of English. And on the Internet nobody is forcing people to use a single correct form of the English language. I frankly foresee that our culture of literacy is changing to the point that we won’t have to worry about a single correct form.

But I’m suggesting that that we as teachers can move things along faster so that everybody can write in what their mother tongue is. This new situation for literacy will feel very weird to many people, because it means that there’s no single form of correct writing. They’ll say “My God, you can’t have serious writing in all kinds of versions of English; we need a single standard.” I just say, “No we don’t. We see the new situation on the net.” Our culture can deal with different
forms of writing. Chaucer and the Gawain poet in England were able to, and so can we.

Editors: What would English teachers do if there weren’t standards to uphold?

Peter Elbow: I have a wonderful answer to this! English teachers would have to learn to tell the difference between correct and good. Of course, plenty of them do already—I don’t have to be too mean here. But teachers would have to figure out what good writing is, even if it’s in a dialect they find odd.

Editors: It’s a lot easier to talk about what’s correct than it is to talk about what’s good.

Peter Elbow: It is! “Good” is so hard to figure out. There’s no reliable answer to what’s good. Good is different for different people. That’s important to know. So then we have to talk about different readers, which gets complicated. It’s much easier to identify what’s incorrect.

Editors: Thinking of our special topic for this issue, what are your thoughts on oral history or interviewing, especially ways they relate to the classroom? What are the best kinds of questions to use in an interview?

Peter Elbow: Oral history. Look at Studs Terkel. People can be so eloquent when you take what’s best in their speech and leave out what’s a mess.

Best questions? It’s a matter of finding what interests somebody. You have to ask some questions to get things going, but then when you hear them get interested, get more invested, you just need to say, “Tell me more, tell me more.” Sometimes it seems as though they digress, but it may not really be a digression. Chaucer has a saying: “The tongue returns to the aching tooth.” People get to the things that are interesting to them.

Editors: How is that important in teaching?
Peter Elbow: In teaching first year writing, I came to always assign one essay was based on interviewing (it’s in our textbook). They have to listen to people talk. I tell them to tape if it’s feasible, but taking notes works well too. (People are always flattered when you take notes as they talk.) I always stress that they should get plenty of quotes and if possible extended quotations from the actual words of the person they interview.

It is very helpful for Freshmen, and I think for all writers too, to get some of that oral language into an academic essay, because the language itself is more full of life. I guess we haven’t talked about this in the context of free writing. Oral, unplanned language has more juice in it, usually.

When I revise now, I try to revise to make it have the liveliness of unplanned language. In part of my book I’m exploring what makes language have energy and clarity and there are some secrets there if you look. I’m having to learn some linguistics. I like the oral dimension of interviews and getting some of that on paper. When my students do this it infects their writing a little bit and when they’re revising their paper, they say “Oh my gosh, this stuff I’m quoting is good.”

I should probably go now, but I appreciate the invitation. You didn’t stop me to say, “Wait a minute, make that more organized.”

Editors: No, this is perfect—I hope it has the “liveliness of unplanned language.” This has been a great illustration of what you were talking about as far as seeking out the sore tooth.

Peter Elbow: That’s right. When I give talks, sometimes I’ll read from text, especially if I’m trying to cram a lot into a limited time. But often enough I’ll talk from notes. And virtually always I have worked very hard to get my notes in order and when I give my talk I stick to the structure of my notes pretty well—you know, I’m a good boy. But people at the end say to me, “I just love the way you were just making it up.
as you went along.” I’m sort of annoyed and pleased at the same time.

Editors: When you digress, do you think you are resisting the rules and not going exactly according to people’s expectations.

Peter Elbow: In those cases I’m describing, I mostly stick to my structure and prevent myself from digressing. Where I have lots of messiness, though, is at a syntactic level. I have a hard time speaking a sentence from beginning to end. Even if my train of thought is very organized the syntax sounds like I’ve been smoking something. That may explain why people think I was less conceptually organized than I actually was.

Editors: Well, we really appreciate you giving us the chance to talk to you.

References


---. Website: works.bepress.com/peter_elbow.


Copyright of Issues in Writing is the property of Issues in Writing and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.