

2010

10. The Need for Care: Easy Speaking onto the Page is Never Enough

Peter Elbow, *University of Massachusetts - Amherst*

June 2010

DRAFT**Chapter 10****The Need for Care: Easy Speaking onto the Page is Never Enough**

The biggest objection that some readers might express at this point is valid: enough celebration of carelessness. How about *care*? It might look as though I'm against care. When I spend so much time celebrating noncareful speaking, this boils down to celebrating carelessness. But I affirm also the need for care. If we want to create a good piece of writing, we need to use *both* mental processes--careless mental speaking *and* careful mental writing. My overall goal in this book is to find what's best about speaking and bring it to what's best about writing. One of the best things about writing is how it invites care. It gives us time for detached scrutiny and slow, careful, conscious, decision making. When we speak with natural spontaneity or use our speaking gear to write, we mostly *give up* the linguistic virtues of care. But just because we it up during early stages of the writing process, that doesn't mean we have to give up care entirely. It's not either/or when it comes to carelessness and care in writing.

Why Care is Indispensable

So I do affirm the view that's widespread and traditional: if we want something good, we can't get along without cold scrutinizing vigilance and careful decision making. That is, even though easy freewriting, emailing, and blogging *can* yield short stretches of smart, powerful, charming, and rhetorically effective pieces of writing--even though Darwin *could* sometimes get better sentences with blurting than with care--nevertheless we can't get *sustained* pieces of good writing without the use of deliberate conscious care. Care is particularly needed if you take the invitation in Part Two to relinquish care and speak onto the page.

Indeed, the careful mental writing gear could be seen as *more* essential than the careless speaking gear. That is, many people have written brilliantly using *only* vigilant care, while few if any have written well without it. In Chapter 8, it might have looked as though Buckley and Trollope and Woolf learned to write well without care: they became so practiced and skilled as native writers of careful writing that they could produce it as fluently as most of us can speak. Perhaps these writers are so practiced that they make decisions at lightning speed, or perhaps they can achieve an almost mystical "flow" condition where "decisions get made" without any need for conscious attention. But nevertheless, if they want to be sure their writing is good, they cannot avoid *reviewing with care* what they have written so quickly and well. And even if they make no change at all after reading over their text, that review involves a cold careful *decision not to change*, based on a shrewd expert examination.

This mental reviewing is not a process of *producing* language; it is a process of *examining* language from the outside with a detached monitoring, critical mentality. Earlier, I pointed to the good writing that Michael Dyson and many others have produced from spoken interviews where much of the language was surely uncaredful speech (Chapter 6). But Dyson had to use careful deliberation to choose and organize and edit the good bits.

Language that *looks* spontaneous often costs great care. Many novelists and dramatists testify as much. Alan Bennett writes plays that brilliantly render spontaneous careless speech, and his “Talking Heads” are masterful and touching monologues. I’d gotten to know Bennett a bit when I studied at Oxford and have had the occasional tea with him since then, and so a few years ago I proudly sent him some articles of mine about freewriting or speech in writing. He thanked me on a postcard saying something like this: “I read with grateful pleasure your interesting words about quicker easier writing. Meanwhile, I’m afraid I spend all day trying to write just a sentence or two.”

There’s a venerable tradition that goes back to the Greek and Latin rhetoricians who advised writers and speakers to use *craft* for creating language that *looks* natural and spontaneous--as though it came out all by itself. As Aristotle wrote,

We can now see that a writer must disguise his art and give the impression of speaking naturally and not artificially. Naturalness is persuasive, artificiality is the contrary; for our hearers are prejudiced and think we have some design against them, as if we were mixing their wines for them. (*Rhetoric* Book III, Chap I, lines 17ff [1404b])

The classicist Richard Graff summarizes:

Throughout antiquity, spontaneity or apparent spontaneity, was held out as an ideal for oratory, an ideal embodied in the famous doctrine that “art should conceal art.” For the orator, this demand for naturalness could be fulfilled in at least two ways, either by perfecting his skill in true oral improvisation or by mastering the ability to compose a written text and manage his oral delivery of it so as to make the whole performance seem spontaneous.

Consider all the writers who produce text for radio announcers or TV anchor persons--text that is supposed to sound completely unplanned and “naturally” spoken. Not easy; it can’t be tossed off. We don’t notice the skill of these writers. We only notice when they fail and the announcer recites a sentence that’s too complicated for speaking. (At Stanford University, Andrea Lunsford teaches a course on writing for radio.) Consider writers for *Glamour* or teen magazines. They are often highly educated and exert self-conscious sophisticated skill to produce unselfconscious-sounding gushy “teenspeak.” When you call up the bus company and ask for help with schedules, you sometimes get a pre-recorded voice that starts out, “Okay, let’s see. I’ll do my best to help you.” Someone had to write those words. A good critic, Louis Menand writes:

[C]hattiness, slanginess, in-your-face-ness, and any other features of writing that are conventionally characterized as “like speech” are usually the results of laborious experimentation, revision, calibration, walks around the block, unnecessary phone calls, and recalibration.” (104) Menand, Louis. “Bad Comma: Lynne Truss’s *Strange Grammar*.” *New Yorker* (28 June 2004):102-04

Oesterreicher provides an extended and fine-grained examination of allegedly “oral” features in medieval epics in order to show that many are not products of an “oral” speech gear. He gives good evidence for how some of them are built of careful literate language designed to give the *effect* of orality.

Because vigilant care is so essential for good writing (even to make it look spontaneous), lack of care often shows up as the biggest and most obvious problem in writing. Carelessness explains much of what’s bad in our email boxes, on line, in rushed daily newspapers--and in teachers’ hands. It’s not surprising then that the most traditional advice for writers is this: *exert care and planning at all times*. Many people follow this advice and never let down their guard. Some of them write brilliantly this way. Ian McEwan is a striking example. He says that he writes

without a pen in my hand, framing a sentence in my mind, often losing the beginning as I reached the end, and only when the thing was secure and complete would I set it down.

I would stare at it suspiciously. Did it really say what I meant? Did it contain an error or an ambiguity that I could not see? Was it making a fool of me? (quoted in Zalewski, 55)

McEwan can make it work, but I call this “the dangerous method” because it stops so many people from writing and tangles up so many words in what others do write. The dangerous method only works if all the conditions are right. You have to have what McEwan has: enormous skill with language, stamina, and faith in yourself to believe that you actually can *find* the right thoughts and words. Some teachers and writers will respond, “Of course. No one should pick up a pen unless they have skill, stamina, and faith in themselves.” But that dictum excluded me and it excludes many others who would otherwise write usefully and sometimes well.

But it’s not *vigilant care* or mental writing that puts us in danger. The problem is *unrelenting* care--the feeling that you can *never* relax your skeptical scrutiny. Most of us, if we want to write productively, need some *relief* from vigilance, some time for no care in putting down words--so we don’t choke off the rich supply that is actually available to all of us. Most of us benefit from learning to write down words and ideas before knowing whether they are acceptable or good.

In short, we don’t have to choose between vigilance and easy blurting; we need both. Carelessness alone will lead to careless writing. Vigilance alone--staying always on guard even while we are trying to find words and ideas--will drag us to halt unless we have massive skill, stamina, and confidence. Nevertheless cold vigilance is exactly what we all need during the revising and editing stages. And revising usually takes longer. I spend more of my writing hours revising than speaking onto the page. But I couldn’t get things written if I didn’t call on carelessness to give me fodder, and my writing would be clunkier and harder to read if I didn’t call on some of the linguistic virtues of careless speech.

Two Techniques for Using Care to Bring Coherence Out of Chaos

When people first try writing by speaking onto the page or freewriting, they sometimes terrify themselves by having created such a mess. They find themselves with lots of loose, informal, inexact words that are wrong for writing. They have lots of ideas in the random order they came to mind--some of them wrong or else inappropriate for this piece. Often one idea has slithered into another--and then into another--so the ideas are all tangled up and seem inseparable or unorganizable. To overcome these problems, we need to call on care. We need the traditional kind of care that sharpens thinking, clears up organization, and clarifies language.

Here are two different procedures for using this kind of care in order to deal with the generative chaos we sometimes get from easy speaking onto the page--two structured ways to use mental writing. The first one--using collage form--is much quicker and easier; it leads to a coherent and pleasing piece of thinking, but not a fully explicit and logically organized essay. The second procedure, what I call the skeleton process, is more thorough and conceptually powerful and leads to a more careful, traditionally organized essay.

Using the Collage to get from Chaos to Coherence

A “collage” in the original sense--as used by painters and other artists--is a picture produced not by painting or drawing but by gluing actual objects on the canvas: theater tickets or bits of colored paper or cardboard or metal. (*Kolla* is Greek for ‘glue’.) A *written* collage consists of separate, disconnected bits of writing rather than one continuous, connected piece. Often there

are spaces or asterisks or decorative dingbats between the separate bits. That may not sound like good writing, but finished collages are often remarkably satisfying and effective as writing. At a symposium on fiction, Donald Barthelme said that “The principle of collage is one of the central principles of art in this century and it seems also to me to be one of the central principles of literature” (Menand 74). [I could print a short brilliant collage obituary from the *New Yorker* as an appendix to this chapter]

You’ll find many written collages in the world—even though lots of them are not labeled as such. Many articles in newspapers or magazines are really collages. They contain many quick changes of focus but don’t mark the change except with a new paragraph, but readers take these changes in stride. Feature stories in newspapers and magazines lend themselves particularly to collage form. Think of something like “A Portrait of Lower Manhattan.” TV documentaries are usually collages: they continually jump us from one clip to the next, and most viewers take the nontransitions in stride. The collage form is alive and works well.

A collage can serve as a quick and simple way to produce a finished piece. That is, after you have done a lot of freely and carelessly generated writing, you can just pick out the passages you like best, do minimal revising or editing, and put them together in whatever order strikes you as intuitively interesting or fruitful. Mark Twain thought he was making a joke, but really he was describing the collage: “Writing is easy. All you have to do is cross out the wrong words.”

Creating a written collage is fairly quick and painless. The process helps reassure you that there is actually good stuff in all the chaos you produced. It helps you clear away all the distracting mess and see the good bits. The collage form lets us simply *avoid* the hardest jobs in writing:

- Revising weak passages. For a collage, just throw them away.
- Figuring out the main point and stating it clearly. For a collage that is effective with readers, you don’t even have to figure out exactly what your main point is.
- Figuring out the best logical order for the bits. Instead, let yourself use intuition to decide on an order that seems interesting, fruitful, or intriguing.
- Making good transitions between the sections. There are none.

Here then are some directions for creating a collage:

- Look through all the rough writing (speaking onto the page) that you have written for this piece and choose the bits you like best. Some will be as short as a sentence or two, some as long as a page. If you are working on paper, cut them out with a scissors. On a computer, put these passages into a new file and put asterisks or dingbats between them. (Be sure to keep the original file unchanged; you may want to raid it again.)
- Lay them out in front of you so you can see them all. If you’ve been working on screen so far, print them out and cut them into pieces that you can physically rearrange. Then read through them—slowly, thoughtfully, respectfully, even perhaps meditatively.
- Then arrange them in what feels like a pleasing or compelling or interesting order. Feel free to decide by instinct or intuition.
- At this point, you may see the need for a couple more bits: missing thoughts or images or stories you want to add. Fine. Perhaps you see your core idea better now and can say it with clarity, or you are moved to write a reflection on it. Or you remember a badly written bit you threw away and see that it’s needed. Or maybe you see a good way to

write something for an opening or closing bit. But good collages can get along without “introductions” or “conclusions.” They can work well if you simply find a bit that’s good for “jumping in” and another for “closing the door” at the end.

- Next, revise it all--but invite a kind of minimal and purely “negative” approach. Just leave out words, phrases, sentences, or passages that don’t work. Of course you’ll do some rephrasing, perhaps for clarity or energy, but see how far you can get without heavy rewriting (unless there’s some particular section you really want to rework). Reading your words out loud is best for this process.
- Instead of trying to make nice connections or transitions between your pieces, just leave spaces for asterisks or dingbats.
- If you want a finished piece, copy edit your collage carefully and type and format it to make it look its best.

By the way, there’s a continuum that stretches between collage and essay, so one of the options is to start with a bare, scanty, and merely suggestive collage--and then revise it *in the direction of* an explicit essay.

Collaboration. Collage is an ideal form for collaborative writing--particularly for people who are inexperienced or leery of writing with others. It lets you mix individual and cooperative tasks in an interesting way. Each passage is wholly individual work; no one has to bend ideas or writing style to fit the others; no arguments about which word to use. (However solo authors can get feedback on their bits from the others if they want.) But everyone cooperates in collaboratively deciding which pieces to use and what order to put them in. A collaborative collage is often stronger and more interesting if it shows sharp contrasts or even conflicts between different people’s ideas and points of view. It becomes a dialogue or conversation, not a monologue. (See my “Collaborative Collage.”)

Using the Skeleton Process for Building a Coherent, Well Organized Essay from Disorganized Exploratory Writing

In using the metaphor of “skeleton,” I’m suggesting that you start by looking for stray bones lying around on the ground and then gradually build them into a strong coherent living skeleton. The process harnesses a fruitful interaction between chaos and order and uses an especially productive kind of outlining.

(1) *Create bones.* Read slowly through all the rough writing that pertain to the topic. Read it all in whatever random order you find it. Look for any passage that somehow feels pertinent or important. It may be long or short--occasionally just a sentence. Many will be important because they contain a thought or idea or point (big or small); but some will be important because they contain *examples* or *stories* rather than ideas or reasons. For each important passage, create a tiny summary *germ sentence*. Make it as brief and pithy as possible. If a passage contains more than one idea or point (perhaps it’s longer passage), summarize them all. In writing these summary sentences, you may need to spell out a point or idea that’s not clear or perhaps only implied in your rough writing. If the important passage tells not a thought but rather an illustrative story or example, summarize it too. But try to say what it is “about.” For example, don’t just say “The ad for Coca-cola”; say, “The Coke ad implies that it will improve your health.”

The main thing is this: if a passage of rough fast writing *feels* important in some way for the topic you are writing about, force it to yield a germ sentence. You are creating bones.

And make sure that you summarize them in *sentences*--not just in single words or phrases. Don't just write "salaries"; write "women had lower salaries than men." The goal of this activity is to create ingredients that will later help you see the *logic* of your thinking. You won't be able to see the logic if you just write "the Coke ad" or "salaries." Single words or short phrases are mute and merely *point* to an *implied* concept or idea. A little sentence *says* something and has conceptual or semantic energy that helps you get you from one idea to the next. Verbs strong-arm you into thinking.

Most of all, germ sentences will help you later when you are trying to figure out a sequence or organization. They don't have to be long sentences--the shorter the better. I often find that the mental energy I need to crunch my points into kernel sentences with verbs makes my ideas stronger and clearer. Even if a particular "point" is nothing but an example or illustration, the sentence still helps, for example, "he spoke monotone--but it was powerful." If you come across the same idea or example again (which often happens with freewriting or easy speaking onto the page), there's no need to write another sentence unless a better one springs to mind.

This process will yield a long list of germ sentences. They'll likely be in random order. Fine. You aren't worrying about sequence or organization yet. You aren't yet even trying to figure out which idea is the main one and which ones are supporting or even unimportant. (If you write these on index cards, it's easy to arrange them in different orders--but I usually get along just writing them on regular paper--which makes it easier for me to see them all at once.)

(2) *Figure out a main idea.* Now look through this long list of kernel sentences or bones--in the order you find them. First mark or underline the ones that feel important or central. Then look through these marked ones and figure out your main idea. Maybe it's obvious at this point. But maybe you still can't figure it out. This happens to me a lot. Maybe all that exploratory writing and thinking have led you through ideas you've thought about before, but really, your exploratory writing has carried you along on a journey towards an idea that you've never had before. You *still* don't quite have it. Maybe there's a kind of *felt but absent* main idea that's been pulling you--driving you in your exploratory writing. It's an idea that's trying to hold all this interesting material together, but it isn't here yet. That's a good sign; you are on your way to a piece of new thinking.

But now you have to figure it out. If you can, write out this implied main idea in a crude short germ sentence. But even now, that may be difficult. If so--if you can feel the need for it but can't yet say it--then freewrite some more out of this *feeling* so you can work your way to it. Or talk it through with a friend. When you finally have it, you can move on to step four.

Notice, by the way, that if you had made an outline *before* doing the exploratory writing, you never would have come up with this interesting new idea you're now trying to figure out. We're often advised to *start* the writing process by making an outline, but that's almost never worked for me. I can never make a useful outline till *after* I've done a lot of exploratory writing. And even then, outlines don't become useful for me till I learn to build them out of *sentences*.

(3) *Build the skeleton.* Now that you have a sentence for your main point (and of course your main point *can* change later as you write--which also can be a good sign), you can begin to work out a good organization or sequence for your ideas, reasons, examples, and stories.

Start by looking at the germ sentences that seem most important. Looking at them together, try to figure out a sequence or order for these main points in your whole line of thinking. Because you forced yourself to write your points in the form of *sentences*, it will be easier to figure out how to string those sentences together so they make good sense or tell a good story. More ideas may well come to you during this process--ideas for more germ sentences.

You could call this an outline, but I find it helpful to think of it as a *story outline*. It's made of sentences that tell a kind of *story of thinking*--a story that feels coherent and sensible. It's an outline of *thoughts*, not just single-word or single-phrase *topics* or *areas*. The idea of "story outline" helps me realize that there's no "correct" sequence for my ideas. I'm not trying to write a perfect geometric proof. My goal is a good sequence of sentences where each point *follows* the previous one naturally and where the whole sequence is going somewhere and has a felt shape--like a good story. Most good essays are actually more like stories of thinking than pieces of lockstep logic. There are lots of ways to tell a story well. Good stories can start in the beginning of the events, the middle, and the end. So too with good stories of thinking and good essays: they can start at the beginning, but they can also work well if you start in the middle or else start with some random interesting story--or start with the conclusion and tell the story of how you got there.

As you arrange your sentences to tell a good story of thinking, you may find that there are some gaps--some ideas or points that are missing if you want it all to hang together as coherent. If so, you'll have to write these missing sentences now. It's very common to need more examples and illustrations, though that need may not come so clear till you actually start to write a coherent draft.

(4) Create a coherent draft. When I used to make conventional outlines made of words or phrases instead of sentences, I always had a hard time writing a draft from them. Somehow the "points" wouldn't "go" into prose. I've found that a story outline of actual sentences works much better. Sometimes some germ sentences provide little titles or subheads for a section.

Using the skeleton process for revising or feedback I've been describing the skeleton process as an early process for creating a draft. But it can also be useful late in the process for *revising* a draft essay that you've already worked on or even finished--but which somehow doesn't work. (Perhaps you gave the draft to readers and they are dissatisfied, but they gave you all kinds of suggestions that you mostly don't trust.) If you use it this way, it becomes, a way to revise a draft or even a completed piece. In effect, the skeleton process is a method for clarifying thinking--a way to harness critical detachment---which is just what's needed for giving feedback to yourself. It is also helpful when writing collaboratively: everyone has lots of ideas and you need to figure out how they go together.

*

*

*

The collage form and the skeleton process are disciplined ways to use *care*--to harness detachment, scrutiny, and correction. They are ways to use not the tongue or mental speaking but mental writing. They are ways to stand back and figure out what we are *trying* to say or *ought* to say, to figure out what order things should go in, and to change or cut out what's wrong. They involve coming at language with critical distance from the outside--extricating ourselves from being caught up inside the language and thinking we are generating.

Turning to Language and Style: A Kind of Care that Uses Carelessness Instead of Fighting It

The collage and skeleton processes center on *substantive revising*. They are all about *content*--ideas, thoughts, and how to organize them. This is the realm where conscious decision making is most natural. It's a realm where logic itself can have some play. But what about more subtle matters of language and style? I'm arguing that conscious care is just as necessary in this murkier realm.

Am I arguing, therefore, that careful decisions will always produce good language and style? Speaking of logic: all men are mortal, but what about slugs and gazelles?--they're mortal too, but they aren't men. Careful decision making may be necessary, but it's not sufficient. It has, in fact, produced much of the *bad* writing we see. Most bad published writing represents careful decision making--not only by the writer but also in most cases by a professional copy editor. Here's an example. It was published not in a academic journal but in an alumni magazine for generally educated readers:

My own research shows that in a model simultaneously accounting for both House and presidential on-year voting in terms of voters' issue preferences, partisanship, economic evaluations, assessments of the presidential candidates' personal qualities, and demographic characteristics, the electoral value of being an incumbent rather than an open-seat candidate fell to 16 percent, on average, from 1980-88 to 1992-2000. An analogous model of midterm voting, necessarily absent the presidential voting equation and the presidential candidate variables, reveals comparable decline in the power of incumbency from 1978-86 to 1990-98. (Born, 12.)

Careful decisions were used, but were they good decisions?

So why should careful decisions lead to bad writing like that? The answer stares us in the face: the decisions were careful but they were bad. We see bad careful decisions in all realms of life. People are often careful when they choose a job, a spouse, an investment, or an outfit. But what criteria or principles were used with care? So the crux question arises: What makes a writing decision good? Can we find principles or criteria for good decisions?

There are various sources we can turn to. Classical rhetoric can tell us about the competing demands of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*--or about the problems of logical fallacies or *ad hominem* argument. Strunk and White's famous *Elements of Style* is full of clear and attractive and principles for clear prose in the modern style--mostly sound. For even more principles, teachers can look to Joseph Williams' much respected *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. But I don't have faith that all these principles are will help writers most--especially student writers. I want students to spend their time writing a lot and getting specific responses from other students and me about what their words actually made happen in the minds of readers. You don't have to teach long before you realize that it's hard to improve someone's writing by giving them principles for good sentences or paragraphs or essays or stories. The most commonly taught principles for deciding what makes good writing seem problematic: either hard to understand or hard to apply or hard to remember--or wrong!

So am I arguing that there's no point in looking for good principles that are relatively easy to apply? No. But my approach to principles is paradoxical. It takes me back to the virtues in careless speech. Yes, we need care and even vigilance when we revise, but if we want *good* decisions, I think we need something different and subtler than the normal kind of care that simply

fights carelessness and chaos. Our care must also be informed by principles we can learn from careless speech itself. But I'm not suggesting that we *analyze* speech in order to extract theoretical principles and then consciously apply them as we revise. (Extracting principles from speech is interesting and I was trying to do it in some of the early chapters, but not for the sake of conscious rule-applying as we write.) No. I'm suggesting that we can use our *ears* and our *mouths* for careful decision making--for learning and applying the principles we need.

That is, if we speak onto the page in the ways I celebrate in Part Two--and if we revise by reading aloud in the ways that I will describe in the next section, Part Three--we will get a *feeling* for the virtuous principles that exist in careless speech. We get to know those virtues in our bones and learn to recognize them and use them as *implicit* principles for careful decision making as we revise--harness them to vigilance. That is, we can make slow, careful, thoughtful, conscious decisions, but we can make them by feel and by instinct--by mouth and by ear--on the basis of what we learn from the tongue. Such decisions will be no less deliberative and careful just because they are not conscious analytic applications of abstract principles. There's something precious in carelessness itself, but it takes care to find it and use it.

This sounds mysterious, and it is. And yet, like speech, it's something everyone can do. In a recent draft I wrote this:

One of my arguments against voice focused on its tendency to . . .

Because I'd learned to hear the virtues of speech and spoken language, I could feel in my mouth and hear in my ear that something was slightly muddy. This encourages me to fiddle with various alternatives. My goal in fiddling was not random; it was to find what I valued in speech--what my tongue and ear wanted. I came up with this:

When I argued against voice I said that it tended to. . .

Not a huge change, but better; easier to understand; more energy. (Admittedly, the problems in my original sentence were not quite lethal and they might not be heard or felt by someone who hadn't worked at the reading aloud processes I will describe in Part Three.)

An analyst of style might say that what bothered me in my original sentence were clunky nominalizations--and that I turned two of them into active verbs. True, but I wasn't thinking about nominalizations or verbs or abstract principles for good writing. I was just paying attention to how the language felt on my tongue and sounded in my ear--just looking for what my mouth and ear find pleasing and effective in everyday speech. These intuitive but deliberative decisions will not always result in "correct grammar," and if they are made by ESL speakers or speakers of nonmainstream versions of English, they may not sound idiomatic to mainstream readers. But they will be clear and strong. A final stage of copy editing will always be needed.

E. B. White himself was surely talking about the implicit principles we can find by using our mouths and ears when he expressed some scruples about the fame of his "little book" for writers: "I felt uneasy at posing as an expert on rhetoric, when the truth is I write by ear" (Roberts C3). "Writing by ear" will always be a somewhat mysterious process, but in Part Three I can throw light on it and give some very simple and concrete suggestions.

This chapter has been all about the need for care, and I want to conclude by calling attention to the two *different* kinds of care I've described.

The kind of care that most of us associate with writing is care that runs away from carelessness or tries to get rid of its effects. It's defensive: "*Uh oh. Get rid of that wrong word, wrong thought, wrong organization, wrong grammar. Eliminate all careless wrongness.*" This is the kind of care

we are traditionally advised to use in revising. It's indispensable. It's the kind of care I harnessed for the collage and skeleton revising processes that I described above. But at the end, I've been describing a different kind of care that runs *towards* carelessness, not away from it. For careless speech itself offers principles for good writing--models of excellence--but the principles or models are hidden. To make use of them as we revise--to get the linguistic virtues hidden in carelessness--we need care, scrutiny, and judgment. All of Part Three is about how to use *reading aloud* to exploit this kind of care in the late revising stage of a writing project.

Using Care in the Process of Writing

I see this chapter as the conceptual hinge of the whole book: no one can write well without exercising vigilant, cold, sharp eyed care; yet few can write well unless they also relinquish care, especially during the early stages of a writing project. Most of us need to welcome unplanned, unvetted, probably-wrong words and ideas onto the page if we want to find rich enough fodder for the vigilance and care we need later--but we can't give up care.

The practical problem then is this: how can we be both carelessness and careful? How can we harness the best of both? People learn to rub the top of their heads and pat their bellies at the same time, but not to do truly contradictory things. But time comes to the rescue: we can be careless and careful at different moments or stages of a writing process.

In this final section of the chapter, I want to argue that the overall *process* we use for getting things written is a realm where care and conscious decision making are particularly appropriate. It turns out that many people who rail against carelessness are not actually very careful about process they use for writing. (Some even scorn attention to "process"--like professors of a disciplinary subject who scorn attention to "pedagogy.") They just carry on writing the way they've always done ("carefully") without really thinking it through from a position of conceptual consciousness.

This is not a "how-to" book, but *care*--conscious conceptual thinking--has shown me a writing process in which carelessness and care can interact in a fruitful. It's a process that has been implicit in the chapters up to here--and in the rest of the book.

- (1) Generating. This is for exploring on paper and early drafting, speaking onto the page or freewriting in whatever language comes most easily and comfortably to the mind and mouth.
- (2) Substantive revising. This is often a slow difficult process of digging in and thinking hard. It's likely to involve plenty of slow pondering. I often find an outline helpful here (as opposed to in the beginning). In this book, I mostly neglect this crucial process of substantive revising since I don't see a special role for speech in it. But in this chapter about care, it makes sense for me to offer two revising techniques that don't call much on the tongue: the collage and the skeleton process.
- (3) Late revising. This is for clarity and style. Read each sentence aloud and subject it to the test of mouth and ear (explained in Chapters 11 through 14).
- (4) Final editing of surface features. These are usually matters of convention. So if the piece needs to end up in "correct" Edited Written English, this is the time to make the changes that are needed. If it has to fit a certain genre or audience--for example if it is a lab report or grant application--you will need to find and apply now whatever special knowledge is needed. (Most people get help on matters like these from someone who knows the

conventions better. Publishers offer copy editors to authors.) Even if it doesn't have to be in Edited Written English, this final editing step is still needed for typing mistakes and other carelessnesses (even for consistency of spelling in whatever version of English you are using).

The germ idea here--that good writing requires us to deploy cognitive mentalities that interfere with each other--was the conceptual core of my first book (WWT, pp---). In that book I framed the conflict in terms of mess/neatness or chaos/coherence. Now, because of my explorations of speaking and spoken language, I define the conflict of mentalities as one between carelessness and care. (The seemingly neat opposition between inviting chaos and coherence breaks down because it turns out that careless unplanned speaking yields not only the chaos of unorganized thinking, but also the amazing *coherence, structure, and elegant intricacy* in spoken language.) So let me spell out how the four stages get carelessness and care to interact:

- The first stage, generating, invites spoken language or mental speaking in their full carelessness. However the results, careless spoken language, will be full of rich coherences, structures, and rhetorical effectiveness even though also messily unsuitable for well formed writing.
- The second stage, substantive revising, invites full conscious care--figuring out the thought and the organization. Careful and even logical thinking will be of great use. But the substantive revising of poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction--like the collage--will also invite intuition, and intuition *can* involve relinquishing care.
- The third stage--late revising for clarity and style (the topic coming up in Part Three)--involves an intriguing marriage of care and carelessness. The revising process here is careful and deliberate, but the main *tool* for this revising is careless speech. And it's an intuitive or unselfconscious speech that's completely different from conversation.
- The fourth stage, final revising for surface conventions, deploys nothing but conscious care and it depends on conscious knowledge of conventions of "correctness" and of the conventions of different genres and registers.

This is the kind of process I use in writing essays for publication and for this book. Of course when I want to do certain kinds of diary or journal writing, emailing, and exploratory writing, I can settle for the first step alone. And when I want to write informal pieces that don't matter so much--some letters, quick memos, slightly more important emails, and the like--I can skimp on steps 3 and 4.

In listing four linear steps, I don't mean to sound too simplistic or rigid. If writing is going well, there may be no need to follow these steps very closely. That is, in the middle of loose freewriting or easy talking onto the page, you might find that it doesn't distract you too much to stop and do some revising or editing: fix some spelling; rephrase some sentences to make them clearer or more inviting to the tongue; ponder at length to revise a thought that isn't quite right or is elusive. If it works, fine.

But for anyone who is not satisfied with how their writing is going--anyone who is having what feels like too much trouble or anxiety or even pain, what's needed may be some genuine rigidity. As you generate words and thoughts, you may need to forcibly *stop* yourself from fixing spelling, improving phrasing, trying to get your thinking clear. Unless my writing is going perfectly, I often need to hold a kind of gun to my head and rigidly prevent myself from trying to rewrite a sentence that is positively ugly or stupid sounding when I'm trying to generate ideas or even draft.

Otherwise I grind to a halt. The main thing that slows writers down--discourages, frustrates, and sometimes swamps them altogether--is the process of continually becoming distracted or derailed by a problem that they really should forget for now. Just keep going. The biggest problem comes from trying to perfect each sentence before moving on to the next. Face it, you can't know till later how this sentence ought to look. Why struggle to get it just right when you may well have to cut it later. Or worse yet, you *should* cut it later but won't be able to bring yourself to do so because you worked so hard on it.

It often happens as we write that we come up with an idea, but then suddenly suspect that it's not quite right, and this leads to a different idea version or idea. We can't quite figure out which version is right. Unless you are feeling very good about your process at the moment, I'd suggest *not* stopping to try to ponder it out. Better, usually, to leave both versions there on the page. Just keep writing out your thinking. This often leads to a third version. At this generating stage of things, you are not in a good position even to *know* whether the first, second, or third idea is better. Wait till the revising stage to fix all matters of careful thinking and organization. And wait till the editing stages for all matters of correctness and delicacies of style. I consciously try to work pretty much within these linear stages, and advise others to do the same. I even turn off the automatic spell check and use it only at the end.

Note however: it's only in *one direction* that this linearity helps me out. That is, my main problems come from jumping *forward* into revising and editing as I generate. Jumping *backwards* into generating is inevitable and useful. That is, during the *later* stages of writing--even as late as looking over the publisher's copy-editing of what we thought was entirely finished--it can be useful to allow ourselves to notice problems in thinking, organizing, or style. At these moments, we have to be willing to plunge back into the chaos of new generating or organizing--either by talking onto the page or by slow deliberate revisionary thinking. This is why all writers tend to breathe a sigh of relief to discover there isn't time. Without deadlines, it's hard to finish anything.

I remember when a mainstream journal turned down an article I submitted (it's hard to forget our rejections) complaining that I seemed to advocate a writing process that was simplistically linear and one-step-at-a-time. Hadn't I heard of all the research about experienced and professional writers using a more "recursive" writing process? But when scholars scorn any talk about "linear steps" in the writing process and wave the flag of recursiveness, among "skilled practitioners," they are invoking a misleading empiricism. Are "skilled practitioners" always our best models for the writing process? As an extreme example, should we all try to write like Ian McEwan? Researchers who use "the practices of skilled writers" as their standard should explore a "practice" they use that's probably more central to success in good writers: the courage *throw away* what they labored over with those hours and hours of sweat and blood. Most of us have trouble letting go what we've invested in so heavily. That's why most of us do better *not* to invest too much sweat and ego in passages of writing till we know that they belong in the final version.

Let's by all means try to emulate the *product* that Joseph Heller achieves--his powerful writing--but do we really want to emulate his process? He wasn't entirely joking when he famously said: "Writing is easy: All you do is sit staring at a blank sheet of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead." Similarly, the former first violinist of the Julliard String Quartet, Robert Mann, played brilliantly, but it would be crazy for any violinist to try to imitate the ungainly inefficient physical technique he somehow managed to wield. Sondra Perl did foundational research showing how novice writers are often hamstrung by *recursiveness*: they tended to stop after almost every sentence or two to read back over what they had written to look for problems and worry that it might be wrong. Often they rewrote it--perhaps even two or three times. They couldn't develop any momentum; they couldn't create sustained trains of thinking.

Some Works Cited

Aristotle. *Rhetoric* Book III, Chap I, lines 17ff [1404b]. Modern Library Rhys Roberts trans.
Born

Graff, Richard. "Early Views on the Integration of Speaking and Writing in Rhetorical Instruction."
Conference paper. Western States Rhetoric and Literacy Conference. 2006.

Menand, Louis. "Saved from Drowning." *The New Yorker* (Feb 23 2009): 68-76.

Roberts, Sam. "Big Birthday for a Powerful Little Book." *NYTimes* 4/22/09, C3.

Zalewski, Daniel. "The Background Hum: Ian McEwan's Art of Unease." *The New Yorker*,
2/23/09: 47-61,