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4. Speech as Product: Eight Virtues in Careless Spoken Language

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DRAFT

Chapter 4

Speech as Product: Eight Virtues in Careless Spoken Language that Careful Writing Needs

We can borrow the easiness of speaking and use it for writing, but this will lead us to language that's wrong for writing. This is true and I've been maintaining it for years. But now in this book I can show that it's not the whole truth. Even though careless speaking gives us language that's wrong for careful writing, nevertheless, it is full of *valuable linguistic resources* that are *good*--even for our most formal and careful writing. Linguistic and rhetorical virtues grow wild like weeds in our careless speech. But if we want to use them to help our writing, we have to learn to notice them and harvest them. Unfortunately, many people rip out the good weeds with the bad. That is, many people get rid of all the good language they already have in their rough drafts or freewriting, in their efforts to get rid of what's wrong.

In this chapter I'll describe nine of these weedy virtues in speech. In the next chapter I'll describe a tenth virtue, intonation, that is particularly valuable and powerful for writing.

(1) Informal Speaking Tends to Avoid Too Much Nominalization.

When people write essays, they often come up with language like this: "*The construction of the pyramids represented the Egyptians' attempt . . . .*" The same people would almost never have *said* it that way in unplanned speech--even in an academic setting. They would tend to say something more lively and less noun-heavy: "*When the Egyptians built the pyramids, they were trying . . . .*" Essayist writing seems to promote nominalization.

> "Nominalization is the device by means of which [the verb] "applaud" becomes "applause" and "infer" becomes "inference." Written texts are peculiar in the way they turn such actions into entities. Moreover, the device permits the formation of complex, technical discourse. An expression such as "decreased crack growth rate" may seem incomprehensible until it is seen as the accumulation of simpler facts: Glass cracks: cracks can grow; crack growth proceeds at a rate; crack growth rate can be decreased. Notice how the verbs "crack" and "grow" become nouns and are added to the noun phrase thereby creating a complex entity "crack growth rate" and at the same time sum up the argument within a grammatically ordered sentence. (Olson 118).

Halliday gives a much less extreme example of nominalization that's fairly typical even in good scientific essay:

> The conversion of hydrogen to helium in the interiors of stars is the source of energy for their immense output of light and heat. (79)

The sentence tells of *action*. But what is the verb? *Is*. The sentence tells of *concrete things*: hydrogen, helium, stars, light, and heat. But what is the claim? *A conversion is a source*. The claim has nothing to do with things or actions; it's wholly abstract.

Admittedly it's not a horrible sentence. We'd be lucky if this was the worst we had to read in textbooks or academic writing. But note how its meaning is easier to understand if we use the kind of language that's common in speaking--where we usually steer away from too much nominalization:

> Stars convert hydrogen into helium in their cores, and that's how they get energy for so much light and heat.
>
> OR
>
> When stars convert hydrogen into helium in their cores, they get the energy they need for putting out so much light and heat.

There are plenty of situations where nominalizations are useful and don't get in the way. Halliday himself describing at length how the growth of science leads to nominalizations. But he also warns against abuse. People like to claim that we need nominalization for brevity and complexity. Olson seems to think we can't get along without locutions like "crack growth rate." But when I used my tongue to rewrite the sentence about stars and hydrogen, the "spoken" versions are no longer and they don't reduce or oversimplify the meaning.

Indeed, it's nominalizations that sometimes leave out essential meaning. Halliday: "Nominal constructions [often] fail to make explicit many of the semantic relations that are made explicit in clause structure." He uses this published example, "Youth protest mounted," and notes the ambiguity. Does it mean "More and more young people protested"? or "Young people protested more and more"? (77). "Written discourse conceals many local ambiguities of this kind, which are revealed when one attempts a more 'spoken' paraphrase. . . ." (76)

When academics have to produce brief abstracts for long journal articles, they usually come up with paroxysms of nominalization, embedding, and lexical density. Yet most abstracts could be just as short if they were blurted over a beer, "What is your article actually saying?" Bar-stool colloquialisms could easily be edited out, and the resulting abstract would be correct literate writing--and clear and brief.

Nominalizations are a universal feature of language--they exist in casual talk. But in academic and essayist writing, they are more common and often more clumpy. Our casual speech may often be fragmented and messy, but it often goes for verbs that give life: "When the Egyptians built the pyramids," and "stars convert helium into hydrogen." We learn from years of talking to listeners that we get fewer blank stares and requests to clarify when we go for concrete terms and avoid too much abstract nominalization. We come to learn what directness feels like in our mouths and ears.

But note well: I'm *not* arguing that we always speak with simple crispness. I'm not saying that my spoken translations about stars and hydrogen came tripping easily off my tongue. It's central to my argument to point out that I had to work hard for my translation. I had to try out at least half a dozen possibilities before finding less nominalized versions that worked. I had to use lots of conscious planning--and a bit of mere trial and error. That is, I was trying for a *virtue of speech*, but I had to use care and deliberation and conscious choice-making to get it. I couldn't get it with easy speaking. Yet I knew what I was striving for because I had the feel of it in my mouth and ear.

A few teachers and copy editors will say that my phrase "That's how they get the energy" isn't right for writing. They'll say that "the register is slightly too informal." But what they really

mean (though they may not realize it) is that the phrase suffers from what I have learned to call "the taint of speech." These teachers and copy editors are suffering under the assumption that written language shouldn't sound as though it could come easily from a mouth. For in fact my revision doesn't contain the slightest hint of error, looseness, or colloquial language.

Sadly, people who want to write "well" in our culture of literacy, often try (sometimes unconsciously) to strive for certain words and phrases *because* they would not naturally come out of a mouth. Thus people write "obtain" instead of "get"; "in this way" instead of "that is how." People who believe they have a "feel for good writing" often instinctively avoid words like "get" and "in this way" in order to distinguish their writing from speech. Academic and professional writers like to say they can't say what they mean without all their nominalizations but it's not true. But plenty of good writers and intellectuals--and a certain number of academics--use clear, direct, language like "get" and "that is how," and most readers are grateful when they do.

> McNeill argues that nominal compounds (such as "escape propulsion system" instead of "system that will propel an escape") are used in the space industry to gain a literary effect of technical expertise. Space journals even outdo the technical literature, using 200-300% more nominal compounds. The record McNeill reports is "liquid oxygen liquid hydrogen rocket powered single state to orbit reversible boost system. (McNeill, quoted in Scollon 420.)

Here's a lovely example of how our culture of literacy infects people's minds. A student revised the speech-based clarity and energy out of a draft essay and added heavy nominalization because he felt some kind of pressure in the air to make sure his final version was "real writing":

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

> REVISED. We should admit that freedom of expression is not truly realized in the United States, since the censoring of materials which are considered obscene constitute a definite limitation of this freedom. (Elbow, *Power* 289)

Everyone seems to take extreme nominalization lying down--as though there's nothing to be done about it. But we don't have to. I'm struck with how much good and clear serious science writing--some of it technical--is published for a wider literate audience. It's often written by high level, award-winning scientists, but they don't run away from language with the finger prints of speech on it. [examples. Peter Medawar. Bruner.)

(2) Speaking promotes flexible syntax.

Yeah, right. "Flexible syntax." Why not just come out and say it: bad grammar! Speaking does indeed promote lots of grammar that's bad for correct writing. Indeed lots of spoken grammar is castigated when it comes out of someone's mouth. But that's not the whole story about grammar as it relates to speech and writing. Halliday insists on a more complicated analysis that avoids the prejudice against spoken language:

> The general picture is that of written language as richly endowed, while speech is a poor man's assemblage of shreds and patches. (67)

> [S]ince the study of grammar grew out of writing--it is when language comes to be written down that it becomes an object of study, not before--our grammars are grammars of the written language. . . . [W]e look at spoken language through the lens of a grammar designed for writing. Spoken discourse thus appears as a distorted variant of written discourse, and not unnaturally it is found wanting (66-67).

> "Written language tends to be lexically dense, but grammatically simple; spoken language tends to be grammatically intricate, but lexically sparse. . . ." (66)

So even though the grammatical intricacy of speech can lead to what written grammar calls "bad," the resulting grammar can help careful writing. For example, in unplanned speaking, we often catch ourselves in mid sentence with an impulse to add or qualify. We often just break off and start a new piece of syntax. What's interesting is that this syntactic habit *can* be very effective in writing. Look at how Halliday exploits this spoken flexibility in the very sentence I just quoted

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He interrupted himself and plopped a whole new sentence into the middle of the one he was writing. Yet it works well as writing. We learn this syntactic flexibility from speech. Yet unskilled writers don't usually know they can use it. It is seldom taught, yet it grows wild in their everyday speaking. It can be harvested for careful writing. Look at this sentence from a good poet, William Stafford:

> Writers are persons who write; swimmers are (and from teaching a child I know how hard it is to persuade a reasonable person of this), swimmers are persons who relax in the water, let their heads go down, and reach out with ease and confidence. (22-23)

Notice the repetition: "swimmers are . . . . . . swimmers are." This is characteristic of speech. We instinctively realize a need to repeat a piece of the syntactic thread we want to return to after we'd strayed into one or two digressions. It's something that Henry James often does when he's inserted a digression and realizes that readers need to be reminded of the original subway car they were riding on.

Writers who have had lots of errors red inked in their school writing often take a defensive play it safe with wooden Dick-and-Jane sentences. They don't realize they can exploit the natural gymnastic flexibility in their speech and create interesting, intricate sentences. My claim is that if we want flexibility in our written syntax, we need to do more speaking onto the page--as with freewriting. It will produce too much that is too wild--wrong. But when we revise, we can learn to use our ears and capture the best of the bravery and audaciousness of the human tongue as it leaps and jumps. Good writers and handbooks know that it's a virtue to vary the length of sentences--even short ones up against long ones. This is common in everyday speech. (Research has shown that when unconfident writers are introduced to freewriting where they can throw down any old words, they tend to produce tidy prose; they need plenty of practice and confidence to exploit the freedom [Haswell and Belanoff]. When people get practiced in *speaking* onto the page, they are quicker to exploit syntactic flexibility.)

Look at this sentence that most people consider *too* flexible. The historical linguist Milroy quotes it from present day Belfast speech: *"These are the houses that we don't know what they were like inside"* (12-13). As Milroy points out, English

grammarians call it "hopelessly ungrammatical," but it's absolutely correct in Norwegian and Danish! I can't help admiring the lithe complexity.

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(3) Speaking Promotes Right-Branching Syntax--Which is Easier to Process

Francis Christensen was famous for celebrating syntax that branches "right" rather than "left." Right branching sentences start with the main clause and then add phrases or clauses *afterwards*: if you diagram the sentence, the added bits come to the right. In contrast, left-branching sentences "pre-add" phrases or clauses--they come *before* the main clause--I.e., to the left in a diagram. Notice the difference:

> (Right branching): The cumulative sentence serves the needs of both the writer and the reader, the writer by compelling him to examine his thought, the reader by letting him into the writer's thought." (Christensen 6)

> (Left branching): Compelling the writer to examine his thought and letting the reader into his thought, the cumulative sentence serves the needs of both parties in the transaction.

My left branching revision of Christensen's sentence is harder to process because it forces us to store--and not process--the opening bits of the sentence while we wait to learn what these bits are going to be *about*. This is no problem, of course, when the left branch is small or somehow very easy to process, for example, "Despite differences, speech and writing are . . . ." or "Compared with writing, speech is . . . ."

Left branching sentences have become a kind of syntactic cliche in journalistic writing: "Just having returned from three months in Afganistan, reporter Allen Appleby . . . ." There's some kind of unspoken fear of writing, "Allen Appleby just returned from three months in Afganistan." ("I'll sound too simple.")

Christensen was interested in how right branching syntax leads to what he calls the "cumulative sentence." He points out that it's often a "looser" sentence, but he doesn't mean that as criticism. (Halliday is not criticizing spoken language when he notes that it's grammatically intricate, but lexically sparse.") Christensen shows that right branching syntax is common in good published writing, but not sufficiently recognized or taught in classrooms. The linguists Horowitz and Samuels observe:

> The most readable forms of writing . . . employ right branching and keep the reader moving at a steady pace and rhythm from left to right as opposed to left branching, which is characteristic of formal prose that requires regressive movements and bottom-up reading. (32)

Right branching syntax is common in speech because it fits how the mind finds language for thinking. As we are talking, it's hard to plan the left branch *before* we open our mouths. What's easier and more common is something like this: We have a thought or the germ of a thought and we want to say it; we start with the first key phrase or clause that comes to mind; it probably doesn't express the whole thought--we may not even know the whole thought yet. But as we speak, we keep adding bits. In this way, the structure *generates* thinking. Christensen calls right branching syntax "generative rhetoric." This kind of syntax enacts the way we often refine, qualify,

and double back on our first thought. And listeners and readers don't have to store the left branches while waiting for the sentence engine to arrive.

But you might claim that the right branching syntax of casual speech is bad for listeners because all the bits are probably in a less than ideal sequence. This is certainly true when the randomness is extreme, yet the spoken sequence is the sequence in which a live consciousness *generated* them, and this, interestingly, is often a sequence that a live consciousness can readily follow.

> The cumulative sentence is the opposite of the periodic sentence. It does not [like the periodic sentence] represent the idea as conceived, pondered over, reshaped, packaged, and delivered cold. It is dynamic rather than static, representing the mind thinking. (6)

But I hear another skeptical response: *You and Christensen just like right branching syntax because it lets you be lazy and careless and not think through what you are trying to say.* Yes it *is* good for lazy careless unthought-through utterance; this explains why we get so much of it in casual talk. But carelessness alone is not enough. We need to revise with care. (I develop this notion more fully, in Chapter 10, "The Need for Care: Easy Speaking onto the Page is Never Enough.") But when we learn the right branching habit in our careless speaking--as a weed--we are learning a valuable syntactic *pattern* that we can exploit with *care* in serious writing--a pattern that makes language easier to process. When we speak easily onto the page, the right branching added bits might well be in a higgledy-piggledy order that needs to be adjusted when we revise--but not always.

It might seem surprising, but Henry James (careless writer?) relies heavily on right-branching syntax. Consider this partial sentence from *The Golden Bowl*:

> But she saved herself in time, conscious above all that she was in the presence of still deeper things than she had yet dared to fear, that there was "more in it" than any admission she had made represented--and she had held herself familiar with admissions . . .

But James also liked left branching syntax. What I quoted would seem enough to make a whole sentence, but it's really only the first half. Here's the second half, and it's left-branching:

> so that, not to seem to understand where she couldn't accept, and not to seem to accept where she couldn't approve, and could still less with precipitation, advise, she invoked the mere appearance of casting no weight whatever into the scales of her young friend's consistency. (*Golden Bowl* 184)

I love much of James' complex syntax for the way it *enacts* the workings of a highly generative "fine" mind, but his left-branching structures are much harder to process and sometimes too much for me to enjoy.

I haven't spent much time analyzing James' syntax, but as I've looked around among some of his complex sentences, I may have found a syntactic habit: "give em a right, but then hit em with a left." Here's another example of this right-and-then-left pattern. (He is celebrating the American nation and its language for the opportunities they provide to writers):

> [*right branching*] Homogeneous I call the huge American public, with a due sense of the variety of races and idioms that are more and more under contribution to build it up, [*left branching*] for it is precisely in the great mill of the language, our predominant and triumphant English, taking so much, suffering perhaps even so much, in the process, but giving so much more, on the whole, than it has to "put up" with, that the elements are ground into unity. (James, "The Question of the Opportunities" 51)

"Homogeneous I call the huge American public" is just the kind of odd impulsive motor-phrase that we are liable to blurt as we launch ourselves into a thought.

You might say that "looser" right branching syntax is only right for "creative" or informal personal writing. For example, here's Hemingway:

George was coming down in the telegraph position, kneeling, one leg forward and bent, the other trailing, his sticks hanging like some insect's thick legs, kicking up puffs of snow, and finally the whole kneeling trailing figure coming around in a beautiful right curve, crouching, the legs shot forward and back, the body leaning out against the swing, the sticks accenting the curve like points of light, all in a wild cloud of snow. (cited in Christensen 8)

But Christensen is at pains to show that right branching syntax is widespread and functional in nonfiction and academic writing. Joe Williams also affirms the value of this kind of syntax: "Avoid opening sentences with long introductory clauses or phrases" (86). Here's an example of right branching of syntax from the academic linguist, Wally Chafe:

In spite of problematic cases, intonation units emerge from the stream of speech with a high degree of satisfying consistency, not just in English, but in all languages I have been able to observe and in fact in all styles of speaking, whether conversation, storytelling, oration, the performance of rituals, or even (or especially) reading aloud. (*Discourse* 62)

(4) Spoken Language Tends Toward *Parataxis* Rather than *Hypotaxis*

I've had to learn these technical Greek terms three or four times, but they name a distinction that is interesting and important:

Parataxis: *God said: Let there be light, and there was light*

Hypotaxis: *Because God said Let there be light, there was light.*

A down to earth example of parataxis: *The driver stepped on the gas. The car lurched forward.*

Hypotaxis: *The driver stepped on the gas and therefore the car lurched forward.* (Or *After he hit the gas, the car lurched forward.)*

In parataxis, the elements simply sit "side by side" ("para" = "next to"). But in hypotaxis the elements are hierarchical so that one gets to be on top and the other must lie "under" ("hypo"= "under"). So hypotaxis insists on *articulating the relationship* between the two elements and usually insists that one element is dominant and the other embedded. The paratactic form is simpler and leaves the relationship unexpressed or implied--setting the elements democratically side by side and not insisting that one element sit on top.

In everyday speech, side by side paratactic structure is more common than hierarchical hypotactic structure. (This is widely note in linguistic research.) We say one thing; and then we say another (as in right branching syntax). As we converse, we don't take planning time to work out a hierarchical relationship between elements before opening our mouths. But when we write, we can take more planning time. As children get older, parataxis turns up more frequently in their writing.

Perhaps it's not surprising then, that hypotaxis and embedding came to be generally accepted as representing "syntactic maturity." And so in the 1970s there grew up a huge movement among teachers and theorists of writing--almost an industry--championing *sentence combining* exercises. These exercises teach students to start with two or three sentences in a "flat" paratactic relationship to each other and turn them into hierarchically embedded hypotaxis. (Strictly speaking, sentence combining *can* produce long *paratactic* sentences, but embedding and

explicitness were the goal. The exercises were almost always set up to demand hypotaxis and embedding.)

Enthusiasts for sentence combining made a number of nontrivial arguments. The exercises force students to *articulate* the logical relationship between the various elements of a sentence. "*Don't just let the elements sit there and "lazily" <u>imply</u> how they are related. You probably haven't even figured out how they are actually related.*" Fair enough. Hypotaxis demands more explicit thinking. But there was a second argument that wasn't so fair. It was potently silent. They simply had to use that key phrase, "syntactic maturity." (*Raise your hand if you are against maturity.*) In our present culture of literacy, there seems to be a solid consensus that essayist and academic writing should have lots of hypotaxis.

If someone like me complains that hypotactic embedding makes sentences harder to read, fans might argue back like this: "*Sure, hypotaxis is harder not just for writers but also for readers, but we need to spell out syntactic complexity if we want to convey complex meaning. Writers and readers will just have to suck it up.*" But hypotaxis doesn't always add precision; sometimes it just adds mud. Here is something from the very NCTE pamphlet that argues for sentence combining. O'Hare gives an example of clausal ingredients that students are asked to combine into a single sentence. Here is the model answer: *James Watt's discovery that steam is a powerful source of energy led to Britain's establishing an industrial society* (86). I'd say that readers are better served by syntax that's more like what comes out of people's mouths in everyday speech--something more paratactic and naturally less nominalized: perhaps something like this: *James Watt discovered that steam is a powerful source of energy, and this discovery led Britain to establish an industrial society.*

Is it really better to spell out all relationships? Some are obvious, and it can be pompous to spell them out. (For example, it's more explicit to write *Because the driver stepped on the gas, the car lurched forward*, but the writing is stronger and just as clear using "and" instead of "because.") It's especially clogging when sentence combining encourages writers to turn an action ("Watt discovers that steam is a source of energy") into an abstract static noun ("Watt's discovery that steam is a powerful source of energy")--and make the whole lumpen nominalization into the subject of the poor little verb, "led."

Is it really more "mature" to use parataxis and embedding? It is *one* kind of maturity or sophistication, but not the only kind. Consider this question: What professional writing in our culture is *most* wise and mature? I'd claim that the answer is *good literature.* Good stories, poems, and creative nonfiction get a good deal of their power by leaving things implied. When something is implied, the reader is pulled in and *participates* more deeply in the meaning--*experiences* the meaning--rather than just understanding it. And many good writers of expository and academic writing do *not* succumb to the syntactic bias among writing theorists in favor of hypotaxis, embedding, and left-branching syntax. Writers reach readers better when they know how to call *also* on the rhetorical virtues of parataxis and right-branching syntax that's so common in everyday speaking.

I fear that hypotaxis is a convenient feature of grammar that is indispensable for helping *machines* grade student essays. The software has to count observable features. Counting is all it can do--it cannot read. (Should I have written, "*Since it cannot read, counting is all it can do*"?) You can bet that one of the things they count are words and phrases that signal hypotaxis: *for example, therefore, because, as a result, moreover,* and *nevertheless.*

Here is part of Erich Auerbach's meditation on hypotaxis and parataxis in his classic study, *Mimesis*:

[W]e are reminded of certain Biblical passages, which in the mirror of the Vulgate become: *Dixitque Deus*: *fiat lux*, *et facta est lux* [Genesis 1: 3 And God said: Let there be light, and there was light]; . . . [other examples] *aperuit Dominus os asinae*, *et locuta est* (Num. 22: 28) [The Lord opened the mouth of the ass, and she spoke]. In all of these instances there is, instead of the causal or at least temporal hypotaxis which we should expect in classical Latin (whether with *cum* or *postquam*, whether with an ablative absolute or a participial construction) a parataxis with *et*; and this procedure, far from weakening the interdependence of the two events, brings it out most emphatically; just as in English it is more dramatically effective to say: He opened his eyes and was struck . . . than: When he opened his eyes, or: Upon opening his eyes, he was struck . . . .(61-62)

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(5) Spoken Language Is Good for Pith, Gists, and Nutshells

In the chapter before this one, I described how most teachers learn to ask students "What are you trying to *say* in this tangled essay?"--and students usually blurt out the point in clear language. But that chapter was about the process of speaking. Now I want to focus on the product: what are the linguistic features that reflect this quality of getting to the point?

Of course casual spontaneous speech often leads us to be diffuse--rambling and digressing. We often speak three words or phrases instead of taking the time to decide which is the right one. We don't *have* the time because the listener is right there waiting for us to finish the sentence. Besides, listener are "enablers" for our tendency to be unclear and imprecise. They can tell us when we're not clear, ask us what we were trying to get at, and play the midwife to what we really mean--or what we should have meant but didn't. We've heard the Nixon tapes.

But nevertheless, there seems to be something about the language in unplanned speaking that somehow--*and characteristically*--lead people to pithy directness: linguistically crunched sayings. Spit it out. Hit the nail on the head. Think of "sayings." Sayings are *said*. They have a nutshell quality. Sayings take lots of experience and meaning and coil them up into a tight energized spring. Sayings came from someone's mouth--and they live in mouths. Nice guys finish last. Winning isn't the main thing, it's the only thing. Cut to the quick. ("Quick" is the old word for "alive." The quick and the dead. "Cut to the quick" means cutting down to what's alive--and thus also a cut that kills. Cutting away dead wood. "Quick" speaks to the persistent life of old dead meanings in our "quick" oral language.) It's not that people speak consistently in pithy sayings--far from it. But the intonational habits we learn in speaking give people the rhythmic, intonational, and rhetorical structures they use to package well digested insights. Speech provides the ideal *potential* for sayings. I recently heard this one from Iraq: "If you are hunting for rabbit, take a rabbit. If you're hunting for gazelle, take a rabbit."

We have evidence for how Ben Franklin exploited this resource in the syntactic structures of spoken language to create some of his sayings in *Poor Richard's Almanac*. He did what I'm arguing for in this book: he used writing, but exploited the resources of speech to make better sayings. He took "A Man in Passion rides a horse that runs away with him," and turned it into "A Man in a Passion rides a mad Horse." Here's a borrowing that was already pretty good--"Many things are wanting to them that desire many things"--but he made it better still: "If you desire many things, many things will seem but a few." (Lepore "The Creed" 80.) Lepore, Jill. "The Creed: What Poor Richard Cost Benjamin Franklin." *The New Yorker* (28 January 2008): 78-83

But oral pithiness is not restricted to old buried sayings. We find it in everyday human speaking. We mostly don't notice this power of compression--and even professional linguists who record and study speaking tend to overlook it (as far as I know)--because these nutshell elegances are scattered among the many imprecisions of everyday talk. But we all have pith coiled up in our tongues.

Consider this example from *The Anchorage Daily News*. Jason Lange was driving his snow plow at night in a blinding snow storm. In his headlights, a moose and its calf suddenly appeared. He jammed on his brakes, but he couldn't keep from skidding--and neither could they. The reporter quotes Jason: "Their feet were moving 100 miles an hour but they weren't going anywhere." (Section B, p 1, Sunday 12/28/04)

Imagine the context for this single sentence. Some reporter hears about the overnight moose-kill and phones or comes to interview Jason--perhaps even the very next morning when he's sleepy. The reporter turns on the tape recorder and asks questions. If the reporter was any good, he invited Jason to ramble on--letting him interrupt himself, move back and forth in time, move around between events and feelings and opinions--and even vent. Among all the rambling, the tape recorder probably captured some other eloquent bits, but the reporter shrewdly pounced on this one for his first paragraph. It's a perfect example of how, in the midst of our babbling and imprecision, our tongues can be an organ for power, precision, and compression. We all come up with these things, and we can notice them if we keep our ears cocked. (Ears cocked--like a rifle--ready to go off.)

Imagine if Jason Lange were set the job of writing an essay about his evening's plowing. He might well, in fact, be in college--driving his plow for a night job. From my experience as a teacher of students like Jason, I can say that he would be much less likely to have come up with a formulation so pithy if he were writing an essay. I see plenty of good writing--but not many formulations as forceful and condensed as what came out of Jason's mouth. It's a nutshelling that is characteristic of speech at its best. It took free flowing conversation to produce this "saying."

Perhaps you'll say that I'm falling into the stereotype of the unskilled uneducated working class Alaska snow plow driver who can only be eloquent when he speaks. Not at all. There's every chance that Jason is actually a PhD academic, who fled the Lower Forty-eight because he couldn't find a good academic job or got tired of the academic rat race. Alaska is full of such folks and they often have jobs like driving snow plows all night (sometimes enjoying life far more than they did before!). Consider even the most educated academics--prominent leaders in their fields who have written influential books and articles in their disciplines. I read lots of their writing too, and they are seldom any better at hitting the nail on the head in their writing than the college freshmen I teach. Actually the freshmen pull it off more frequently than most respected academics do.

It's not that trained economists or physicists are hobbled by the complexity of their thinking. If you hear them in a bar talking about their ideas with inviting listeners, they *can* hit the nail on the head. They can express complicated ideas in clear condensed pithy words. Some of these formulations between sips of beer are slang, but many of them would be perfectly appropriate on the page of their most learned books or articles. These academics would probably do pretty well with a reporter who puts a tape recorder on the table. But for all their learning and skill with words, these learned, authoritative writers can't usually manage to nutshell while they write. They seem to lack pith.

But it's somehow hard to hit the nail on the head in writing--especially when we are trying to work out complexity. And it would have been the same story if Jason Lange were a software engineer, a Wall Street trader, or a business executive--as he might well be in Alaska. It would have taken speaking.

There's one significant exception to all these stories I'm telling about various Jason Langes. He might well be driving that plow because he's a fiction writer or poet. Alaska is also full of these folks with jobs like driving snow plows at night. (The reporter probably has a drawer full of stories and a novel he's finishing.) Poets and fiction writers *do* learn to hit the nail on the head with their hands, not just their mouths. But--to telegraph the point of the book--it would have been the power of his mouth that they would be harnessing for their fingers. Poets and fiction writers learn to enlist their tongues for syntactic and semantic force.

But my argument here is that nonfiction writers, even academic writers, can do the same thing--either through learning or wise instinct. Here's an academic historian who knows how to get coiled up spoken energy into careful prose (It's Richard Hofstadter on Teddy Roosevelt):

> The straddle was built like functional furniture into his thinking. He was honestly against the abuse of big business, but he was also sincerely against indiscriminate trust-busting; he was in favor of reform, but disliked the militant reformers. He wanted clean government and honest business, but he shamed as "muckrakers" those who exposed corrupt government and dishonest business . . . Such equivocations are the life of practical politics, but . . . Roosevelt had a way of giving them a fine aggressive surge. (24)

Why do some people seem to come up more often with pithy sayings? Mere practice can't explain it since so many prolific speakers and writers are windy and verbose. The answer is a mystery, but I can't help thinking about Wordsworth's infamously sentimental generalization in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*: that poetry needs the "real" language of "uneducated country folk." This is a wild generalization that's easier to argue against than for, but I wonder if solitude and silence may not help invite pungent speech. New Hampshire farmers and Maine fishermen are famous for their laconic zingers. I suspect that something useful happens to our thinking and language when we have to spend lots of time alone in our own heads--talking only to ourselves. I was once invited to co-lead a weekend workshop on silence and voice at a Quaker retreat center at Pendle Hill near Philadelphia. You bring "voice" and we'll provide "silence." Throughout the weekend, we experimented in all kinds of ways, and after a while it became clear that eloquence was enhanced by periods of silence.

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(6) Spoken language is more coherent than written language.

What? Can this be true? Spoken language seems so messy. Yes, the mess is there, but so is a certain important kind of *cohesion*. It takes the form of what linguists call a "*given-new contract*" that governs most spontaneous speech. That is, as speakers say one clause and then move to the next one, they almost always help listeners with a kind of linking structure: they start off the new phrase with a reference back to information or concepts that were "*given*" in the previous phrase (or easily accessible or recoverable--or already prominent in the conversation). Thus, as speakers, we build to what is new by starting with what is given--what is already active in the minds of our listeners. Here's a particularly obvious example:

> But that's not really the main thing. The main thing is that...

This structure is sometimes called "known-new." As Chafe writes,

> It would make sense that one would employ as a starting point a referent that is already active in the discourse. And indeed one of the most striking properties of subjects [or starting points] in conversational language is the fact that such a high proportion of them do express given information. In the sample examined, 81 percent of the subjects were of this type . . . . Ninety-eight percent of these given subjects were, in fact, pronouns [which by definition refer back to a person already mentioned]. (85)

As speakers we have learned to take account of the problem of listeners listening in real time; they have no leisure to go back and re-hear what we say. Our habits of speech have been shaped throughout our lives by listeners saying "What? Slow down" when we've gone too fast for them. Haviland and Clark note that "the speaker tries, to the best of his ability, to make the structure of his utterance congruent with his knowledge of the listener's mental world' (Clark and Haviland 1977, p. 4. Quoted Chafe 169). This "given-new" structure in spoken language fits with what Paul Grice (1975) called the "cooperative principle." His term points to a wide variety of conversational structures that increase the chances of successful communication.

Of course speakers aren't always as blatant with their given-new as in my simple example ("But that's not the main thing. The main thing is . . . .") Here's an example of a young woman speaking about a party. I wouldn't have noticed the given-new structure in this passage before I began to study spoken language. I'll explain it below. (In transcribing continuous speech, Chafe gives each intonational unit its own line. More about intonation units in the next chapter]):

1 I started talking to another guy,

2 when Bill walked off.

3 And all of a sudden I'm realizing,

4 this guy is stringing complicated sentences together,

5 and he's dropping literary terms,

6 and names,

7 and I'm kind of going,

8 where are you from?

9 He's an army brat.

10 He speaks fluent German.

11 He's lived in about thirty places.

12 And I said,

13 you must have an easy time making new friends,

14 it's easy for you,

15 and he said oh yeah.

16 But also what it had done,

17 it caused him to be introverted,

18 so he read a lot,

19 when he was a kid.

20 So he's really self taught.

So most of these intonation units start off referring to this unnamed "another guy." He was "new" in line one, but he's obviously a "given" from then on--easily accessible to consciousness. Chafe pointed out above that a huge proportion of spoken sentences start with a pronoun--which by definition point back to something said before.

We can see a striking feature in this passage that correlates with the given-new structure. Speakers always put a stress or accent on new information. Thus you can see (or hear) that virtually all these intonation units start from nonstress and build to stress. The stress and the news tend to come after what's unstressed and given. (As we read the silent text, we're tempted to see line 2 as an exception and put the stress on "Bill." But of course he was "old" from what the speaker had been saying before our extract. In the recording, "Bill" was in fact *unstressed*. The stress fell on "walked off" which was the news here. Speakers *sometimes* decide to violate this given-new habit for some rhetorical reason, but when they do, they alert listeners by starting off with an unexpected stress that says, in effect, *Hey, listen up!*

Halliday also gives prominence to this given-new structure in speech. He's particularly interested in the role of intonation and insists that intonation is *invariably* a matter of syntax. (See Halliday/Matthiessen, pp 87-94 for a summary of his treatment. See Crystal for an argument against too a link between intonation and syntax.)

Peter, you seem to pretend that speech is always clear. When are you going to acknowledge that we misunderstand each other all the time in speaking? (This could be my wife talking--and it's *my* unclear speech that she notices.) Yes. And the passage of speech I've just quoted gives us a good example of why spoken language is so often *unclear*. Notice how the young woman speaker plays fast and loose with "it" in lines 14, 16, and 17. In line 14, she is referring back to "easy time making friends," but in 16 and 17 she is referring further back to "lived in thirty places." Both meanings had been activated in the conversation and thus are easily accessible--but she forgot to notify the listener that she was switching. (We don't know whether her listener was in fact confused.)

This pronoun switch by the young woman brings up a feature of "given-new" that Chafe particularly stresses and most other linguists ignore: the *speaker*. Chafe sees the given-new pattern not only as a courtesy to listeners but an actual *constraint* on speakers (sometimes calling it the "given-new constraint"). He hypothesizes that as we are speaking in fast flowing conversation, we have only so much cognitive attention available at any given instant. Thus he sees the given-new pattern in spoken language in these terms: *activation cost* (how much mental effort is required to get a new idea into consciousness); *light subject constraint* (how hard it is to start off an intonation unit except with what's already in mind); a*nd one-new idea* (how much information we can focus on at one moment. See *Consciousness* passim). He finds that this sequencing pattern "involve[s] the expenditure of a minimum amount of mental effort in the activation of subject referents." (289) By the way, Chafe insists on linking his theory to what is not observable--events inside the consciousness of speakers. He chides most linguists and social scientists for the thinness of their theories because they are not willing to do so. See his eloquent methodological introduction.)

I can't resist translating Chafe's notion of a cognitive constraint into a crude analogy. As we speak in conversation, we don't have much time or attention for getting our new meanings into words. This is why we characteristically start from what we already have in mind as we look for words for expressing the new meaning. That is, as speakers, we do the same dance that we do when we are mowing grass that's too long for our mower: we push four feet ahead into the long grass, but then pull back two feet; push ahead four feet and pull back two feet--and so on. We can only deal with what's new from a foundation of what we've mastered.

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*   *   *

But how does this given-new pattern in speech apply to *writing*? Let's look at some trade-offs between speaking and writing when it comes to clarity. Speakers have three tools for

creating coherence for listeners: they characteristically use *given-new links* for connecting phrases or sentences; they use *intonation* to signal what is new; and they can take advantage of a *shared context* between the two parties and thus refer as "given" to all kinds of things visible around them that they don't need to put into words. Writers lack two of these tools. They can use given-new links between their phrases. But they lack the advantage of spoken intonation (since the written page is mostly silent); and they lack a shared context with reader who get the words at a different place and time.

But writers have a big advantage that speakers lack. They can revise; they are free from the tyrannical constraint of time:

> The fact that writers are free of the necessity of producing language at a rapid pace, coupled with the fact that they are free to revise what they have written, gives them the option of relaxing the strong constraint against new subjects that appears so clearly in the conversational samples. (Chafe "Grammatical Subjects" 52)

He makes that sound like good news--and it is. As writers we can consciously change and rearrange words and clauses and sentences and try to make our language conform to careful thinking and to "good style" (for example by trying to avoid passive verbs). But in this conscious process we often *violate* the unconscious habit of providing given-new links between our clauses and sentences--thereby destroying the coherence or flow that is natural in spontaneous speaking. Joe Williams speaks directly to this problem. Here's how he describes cohesion:

> We feel one sentence is cohesive with the next when we see at the beginning of a second sentence information that appeared toward the end of the previous one. That's what creates our experience of "flow." (80).

To illustrate this advice, he gives a problem passage of three sentences where the second and third ones are harder to process because they start off with what's *new*:

> Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists studying black holes in space. The collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble creates a black hole. The fabric of space is changed in puzzling ways when so much matter is compressed into so little volume. [p 80]

Here's his improved version where the second and third sentences flow better because they start with meanings that are already given:

> Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists studying black holes in space. A black hole is created by the collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble. So much matter compressed into so little volume changes the fabric of space in puzzling ways.

Note the passive construction in the middle sentence ("A black hole is created"). Williams observes that writers often make their writing *less* coherent and harder to understand when they are preoccupied with the ubiquitous advice to change all passive sentences to active form. By making every sentence active, they often violate the "given-new contract" and make the language harder for readers. Passive sentences are often exactly what is needed to create helpful given-new links between pieces of information. We get the same helpful advice from teachers of writing who base their thinking on Halliday: learn to do consciously in writing what we do unconsciously in speaking (Hancock).

Chafe looks at a passage of one thousand words of writing from Hemingway and notes eight new subjects.

> The first general observation we can make is that all of these subjects are of trivial importance; all are incidental participants in the development of the story. In that respect they conform perfectly to one of the constraints on new subjects observed in conversational language [I.e., they are "light" and don't introduce new information] (290).

That is, both listeners and readers have trouble with a new subject at the start of a sentence if it's also significant or weighty. Passive constructions often serve to "lighten the load" at the start of a sentence.

Here are two sentences I found in a rough freewritten draft:

> We lose touch with mouth and ear. This leads to writing without flow.

Notice how my "this" is a nakedly helpful example of a given-new link--and very characteristic of spoken conversation (after all, I "spoke" it onto the page). Sticklers might accuse me of "using a pronoun without a precise antecedent." My "this" doesn't point to a word but to the whole thought. But it points clearly to what is given and makes it a "light subject" or "starting place" for the new element I am introducing ("writing without flow") I didn't have to work to produce this pattern of linking coherence or flow; I just had to recognize it and value it. (In Chapters 11 and 12, I'll describe how reading aloud can help us harness more given-new coherence during the late stage of revising.)

The same practical moral applies. It helps to learn and follow the rule from people like Joe Williams: start new sentences with an element from previous sentences. But we can also learn to get the *feel* of this given-new pattern that comes for free in our speaking and that we will find in our speaking onto the page. (In fact, my first simple example of the given-new pattern in speech--"But that's not really the main thing. The main thing is that . . ."--actually came from a piece of freewriting where I was trying to figure out my thinking.)

(7) Spoken language is less messy than written language.

This sounds dead wrong too. But that's because we don't usually count draft writing *as writing*. If we look at the words people *actually write*--before they clean up their drafting into a revision--we see language that is often much messier than their spoken discourse--certainly more incoherent. That is, the process of writing often leads to *more* false starts, interruptions, cross-outs, and changes of directions than speech. In the case of unskilled writers, sometimes even the *final* drafts are less coherent than their speech.   (Admittedly, a few writers won't write down a sentence till they've cleaned it up in their heads; see the case of McEwan in Chapter 10.) Halliday points out that writing is

> characterized by hesitations, revision, change of direction, and other similar features; these tend to arise when attention is being paid to the process of text production. Since highly monitored discourse is typically written, these features are actually more characteristic of writing than of speech; but because most written text becomes public only in its final edited form, the hesitations and discards are lost and the reader is shielded from seeing the process at work." [70-71]

His larger point is that incoherence comes not from speaking as a mode but rather from the mental process of being self conscious and self monitoring when we produce language. This variable of *mentality* cuts across the difference between speaking or writing:

> Speech, we are told, is marked by hesitations, false starts, anacolutha, slips and trips of the tongue, and a formidable paraphernalia of so-called performance errors. . . . There is no disputing the fact that these things occur, although they are much less prevalent than we are asked to believe. They are characteristic of the rather self-conscious, closely self-monitored speech that goes, for example, with academic seminars, where I suspect much of the observation and recording has taken place. If you are consciously planning your speech as it goes along and listening to check the outcome, then you naturally tend to lose your way: to hesitate, back up, cross out, and stumble over the words. But these things are not a particular feature of natural spontaneous discourse, which tends to be fluent, highly organized and grammatically well formed. If you are interacting spontaneously and without self-consciousness, then the clause complexes tend to flow smoothly without you falling down or changing direction in the middle . . . (68)

When I think about this point--how planned and careful language tends to break down more than unplanned unselfconscious language--I understand something that has always intrigued me about student writing: I can virtually always understand their freewriting, however messy and jumpy it might seem, whereas I often can't understand their carefully revised texts. Halliday is eloquent on this feature of unplanned language:

> This [point] . . . runs counter to our received attitudes toward speech. . . . [S]peech allows for such a considerable degree of intricacy; when speakers exploit this potential, they seem very rarely to flounder or get lost in it. In the great majority of instances, expectations are met, dependencies resolved, and there are no loose ends. The intricacy of the spoken language is matched by the orderliness of spoken discourse. (67)

So yes, we make messy blunders in our speaking. But those blunders are often part of an utterance that is actually more coherent than what we write when we write with care--constantly monitoring, crossing out, changing, rewriting.

How can we harness the coherence of our oral "blundering" to help our careful writing? All too often, I've found myself deeply engaged in revising something important--revising it more and more--and gradually got more and more tangled in a swamp. Suddenly I remembered that I had earlier *spoken* this train of thought in a conversation--or even more fully to a class or a conference audience. As I was tangled up in my revising swamp, I realized that my spoken version was actually *clearer* than the struggled-over words in front of me on the page. The spoken version may have been messy and lacking much of the precision, development, and careful qualification that writing can give, yet my life would have been easier if I'd started "talking" my thinking through my fingers--or even used a transcript of my talking--and *then* revised so as to bring in the benefits of the slower writing gear: more details, richer development, and more effective organization.

(8) "Spoken Language Represents Phenomena as if They were Processes [while] Written Language Represents Phenomena as if They were Products."

The quotation is from Halliday ("Spoken" 74). who calls spoken language *superior* for this reason:

I am inclined to think the written language of the future will go back (or rather forward) to being more processlike; not only because the traditional objectlike nature of written discourse is itself changing . . . but also because our understanding of the physical world has been moving in that direction, ever since Einstein substituted space-time for space and time. ("Spoken" 79)

If that sounds merely abstract and theoretical, look at the written and spoken sentences about stars that I presented earlier. Notice how the written version creates a crystalline *stasis*, while the spoken version transforms it into *action* or *motion*.

[written] *The conversion of hydrogen to helium in the interiors of stars <u>is</u> the source of energy for their immense output of light and heat.*

-[spoken] *When stars <u>convert</u> hydrogen into helium in their cores, they <u>get</u> the energy they need for <u>putting out</u> so much light and heat.* (or) *Stars <u>convert</u> hydrogen into helium at their centers. That's how they <u>get</u> the energy to <u>put out</u> so much light and heat.*

In the written version, two entities are connected by an equal sign spelled "is." In the spoken, we have a *story* about action and energy. Halliday compares a written and spoken version of the same idea and concludes: "the written variant tells the story in nouns: *visit, sense, risk, attempt, action* whereas the spoken version tells it in verbs: *visited, ended up feeling, might get hurt, tried to do.*"

When Halliday praises the process-oriented tendency in spoken language, his interest is theoretical and epistemological. He argues that reality, as science shows it to us, is more about *events* than *objects*. I agree, but my interest is less theoretical. My concern is good writing. Language is usually better at getting its meaning into the minds of listeners or readers when it embodies movement or change through time. Putting this crudely, stories tend to help us experience a meaning better--even a conceptual meaning--than purely conceptual language. (More about this in Chap X about language and time.)

Halliday's contrast between stasis and movement fits with Christensen's contrast between left-branching and right-branching syntax. Left branching syntax gives us the static periodic sentence--"conceived, pondered over, reshaped, packaged" (Christenson 6) that "represents phenomena as if they were products" (Halliday "Spoken" 74). Right-branching syntax gives us the cumulative sentence--"dynamic rather than static, representing the mind thinking" (Christensen 6) that tends to "represent phenomena as if they were processes" (Halliday 74).

When we write we are told to figure out ahead of time what we want to say ("Start by making an outline!") and let the writing represent the fruits of *completed* thinking. When we talk, on the other hand, we are often still working out our thinking: our words represents thinking in process. The advice to writers is understandable since our spoken attempts to figure out what we mean often creates a linguistic mess. Yet language is more lively and energetic when it represents thinking going on--and this kind of language helps readers *experience* our meanings. In fact it's possible to get the best of both worlds: we can speak onto the page at the early stages, and then in revising save the best of spoken thinking in action--but shape it and organize it so it's not a mess. (I focus on this issue--theoretically and pragmatically--in Chapter 15.)

Halliday writes further:

I have usually had recourse to metaphors of *structure* versus *movement*, saying, for example that the spoken language is choreographic. The complexity of spoken language is in its flow, the dynamic mobility whereby each figure provides context for the next one, not only defining its point of departure but also setting the conventions by reference to which it is to be interpreted.

> With the sentence of written language, there is solidarity among its parts such that each equally prehends and is prehended by all the others. It is a *structure*, and is not essentially violated by being represented synoptically, as a structural unit [all at once--outside of time]. With the clause complex of spoken language, there is no such solidarity, no mutual prehension among all its parts. Its mode of being is as process, not as product. But since the study of grammar grew out of writing--it is when language comes to be written down that it becomes an object of study, not before--our grammars are grammars of the written language. We have not yet learnt to write choreographic grammars; so we look at spoken language through the lens of a grammar designed for writing. Spoken discourse thus appears as a distorted variant of written discourse, and not unnaturally it is found wanting" (66-67 my emphases).

Halliday traces this grammatical style to seventeenth-century scientific writing, a kind of writing that worked more at "the construction of an 'objectivized' world through the grammar of the written language" ("Linguistic Perspectives 16). See also Adolph and Olson on this historical development.

Implications for Teachers and Writers

We can't get good writing by just speaking easily onto the page or using transcripts of speech. But we do need the *resources* of speech for good writing: some of the syntactic features and rhetorical habits that come with speaking. Speaking onto the page is likely to have the features I've talked about: coherent given-new links between clauses and sentences, directness, avoidance of clogged nominalization, flexible energetic syntax, right branching syntax, more action and movement. In Chapter 7 on freewriting, I'll give additional specific examples of these virtues as they appear in speech-derived freewriting.

In my teaching I have used lots of freewriting or speaking onto the page and I think I see it gradually infecting students' careful writing for the better. By some kind of simple osmosis, students seem to begin to get into their careful writing more of the lively energy, directness, clarity, and voice that exists naturally in their speech and freewriting. It sneaks into their ear too and can thus provides a basis for their revising (if they trust their ear). Many other teachers have seen the same thing. (See Hilgers for striking careful empirical research where students who had practice in freewriting wrote essays judged better than students who used other practice exercises.)

How can we get the benefits of these resources into our careful writing? My main answer comes in Part Three about reading aloud to revise. That's where we learn to harvest the resources of speech for careful writing.

The techniques in Part Three are most useful for harvesting the valuable resources in spoken language, and those techniques rely most on the mouth and ear. But I'll mention here a few conscious analytic exercises that can help reap the resources of speaking onto the page:

- Read over your fast careless textual speaking onto the page (even if it's produced by voice-transcribing software) and look for linguistic virtues. There's no need for technical terms ("Let's see: Where is there parataxis and right branching syntax? Where are the nominalizations?"). No, just look for words and phrases and passages that feel strong, lively, and clear. Many people look at their freewriting when it is

messy--perhaps digressive and too wordy--and see only the mess. If we look at it and expect to see some linguistic virtues, we'll find them.

• Compare pieces of our fast careless writing with pieces of careful writing we've already finished or with pieces of published writing. What are the different strengths and weaknesses we notice? Discussion is very interesting and productive when people compare their different perceptions of strong and weak passages.

• Simply look for strong passages and create a collage in the way I describe in Chapter 9.

There's one more great virtue in spoken language and I'll treat it in the next chapter: intonation.

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