

# STYLE AND SELF: THE EMERGENCE OF VOICE

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ROBERT L. ROOT, JR.

Research into the composing processes of professional expository writers which I have conducted by interviews and examination of drafts has verified the reliability of two recent paradigms. The first is the cognitive process model of composing created by Linda Flower and John Hayes, which adds the task environment and the writer's long-term memory to the writing process (Hayes 11).

Although described as "a model of competent writers [which] can serve as a guide to the diagnosis of writing difficulties" (Hayes 29), the model has clear implications about the development of writing abilities: if competent writers are able to draw upon knowledge of the topic, knowledge of the audience, and stored writing plans, and beginning writers are frustrated by their lack of specific kinds of knowledge in long-term memory, the key to writing competence must lie in the development of exactly those elements of long-term memory. Flower offers a clue to this development in her distinction between writer-based prose (an associative reflection of the writer's process) and reader-based prose (a communicative reflection of deliberated purpose) (Flower 19-20). She argues that "writer-based prose represents a major and familiar mode of expression which we all use from time to time" (20). Less experienced writers may need to begin with a writer-based draft simply to discover what their ideas are before attempting to make them clear to a reader. Donald Murray seems to support this view when he argues that, through multiple drafts of a composition, a writer moves from greater attention to the exploration of the subject for his own benefit to greater attention to its clarification for a prospective reader's benefit. This seems to suggest that the movement from writer-based prose to reader-based prose is a part of every act of composition.

Yet professional expository writers whom I have interviewed repeatedly assert that they do as little discovering as possible as they write. As Neal Gabler, film critic for *Monthly Detroit*, put it, "I would never discover while I write because to me that would be too frightening. It means that I've missed something in the initial process." The act of discovery for them goes on before the act of writing. Like freshman composition students, the writers I talked to have specific deadlines to meet and specific assignments to perform; they produce reader-based prose very early on, partly because they draw upon long-term memory to deal automatically with the elements the inexperienced writer must manipulate consciously. The ability to produce reader-based prose at an early stage of the writing process may thus indicate that the writer has achieved a stage of development where he need not generate writer-based prose initially.

The second paradigm that the study of professional writers supports is the model of writing development proposed by Carl Bereiter. In this model each successive stage of development subsumes into it the stages before it and the skills related to them (84). Associative writing, a combination of controlled association of ideas with written language production on a fundamental level, is the simplest stage, corresponding to the kind of writer-based prose Flower describes among inexperienced writers. The second stage, performative writing, adds to the skills of associative writing an awareness of the rules of style and mechanics, externally imposed expectations about the product. The third stage, communicative writing, adds an awareness of audience, an intended reader.

The fourth stage, unified writing, adds to the earlier stages the skill of critical judgment, in both literary and logical terms; "it takes account not only of other people's perspectives but of the writers's own perspective *as a reader*" and it marks a significant change in the writer's understanding of his task.

Once one is able to integrate one's own evaluative reading skills with one's writing skills. . . an important feedback loop is established. Writing comes to be shaped according to one's own standards, which in turn are shaped by what one has written. As a result the writer begins to develop a personal style and a personal viewpoint. Writing becomes more authentic and satisfying.

One does not merely write to entertain the reader but also to please oneself. One does not argue simply to convince the reader but also to present an argument that oneself finds convincing. . . writing becomes a productive craft and not merely an instrumental skill.(Bereiter 87)

The final stage is epistemic writing which “emerges when the person’s skill system for reflective thought is integrated with his skill system for unified writing”; it is “the culmination of writing development, in that writing comes to be no longer merely a product of thought but becomes an integral part of thought” (88).

Bereiter’s stages are arranged not in a natural order of mastery but rather in a likely order based on achievement of automaticity, “proficiency such that the behavior in question requires little or no conscious attention” (89). In terms of Flower and Hayes’ cognitive process model, this means that skills systems in which the writer has achieved automaticity have been imbedded in long-term memory and do not demand the conscious attention in short-term memory that impedes immediate attention to the writing process.

In general my research on the composing processes of professional expository writers supports the validity of both Flower and Hayes’ cognitive process model and Bereiter’s developmental model, and offers further implications about writing development and the writing process. My research suggests, first, that changes in the task environment may have a regressive effect, forcing even experienced writers to a lower level of automaticity and requiring them to repeat the learning activities which led them to a higher stage of development in a different task environment. Second, my research suggests that the achievement of automaticity in unified writing occurring with the emergence of voice (the combination of personal style and personal viewpoint) is arrived at through two complementary means: immersion in context and experience in expression.

Of course, the very fact that both task environment and long-term memory impinge upon the writing process argues that changes in writing tasks may have a regressive effect. A writer who has reached the stage of unified or epistemic writing in one area, presumably with proficiency in the earlier stages, may find himself having difficulty at performative and even associative levels due to unfamiliarity and inexperience

in a different area. Teachers of writing witness this regression each semester, when students attempt to shift from expressive writing to transactional writing. Mastery of the personal narrative simply does not translate automatically into mastery of the thesis/support or documented research papers.

A writer's style depends upon his understanding of the writing task and his understanding of the topic. The style an inexperienced writer evinces in writer-based prose is often repetitive, awkward, and tentative, because the writer himself is uncertain about what he knows and what he intends. The style expressed in reader-based prose is clearer, more coherent, more direct, but not solely because of an intention to help the reader. In fact, the style reflects a change in the way the writer sees the topic and the way he intends to represent himself. A reader's sense of the author's self derives from his style, which in turn depends upon the author's understanding of his own meaning as well as his comprehension of the topic.

For example, when Susan Nykamp, who had been an excellent writer in college, began to write professionally for the Photo Marketing Association, she had problems at the sentence level because of lack of background in her subject. Her first job was to write short pieces for association newsletters on various aspects of photo-retailing, but, she said,

"I was very limited because I could only take the information I'd gotten for that article as what I knew to be true. For example, I had to do an article on equipment breakdowns and I was telling people about all this equipment and I didn't even know what it was."

In other words, she was a good enough reporter to repeat what she'd been told, but she hadn't reached a point at which she could independently judge the reliability, validity, or significance of what she was saying. At some moments she would have to turn to a more experienced, professionally knowledgeable editor for confirmation of her accuracy: "I would ask, 'Am I on base here? Am I on target?'"

Part of her writing often demands that she create an entire sentence for attribution based on the kernel of a quote in her notes, but in the early period of her employment particularly, sometimes, if she hadn't transcribed a complete sentence, she would be unable to use the quote; her understanding of her topic was so limited that she didn't trust herself to "make up the rest of it." Usually that would entail

having to phone her source again and have him supply the complete quote.

However, two years after she had begun writing on photo retailing, she was calling her sources back much less frequently, because a glance at the note would reveal to her the obvious context for it given what she knew about the profession. By that time she had risen from a beginning professional writer whose style was controlled by the limitations of her understanding of her subject to managing editor of the association's major publication, *Photo Marketing*, overseeing the accuracy of people in her previous position and writing not only most of the magazine's feature articles but also major position statements for the association's chief executive.

Nykamp's initial difficulties in her position, despite her college competence, were replicated in my own writing under similar circumstances. In the summer of 1983 I undertook to write an article for *Photo Marketing's* "Anonymous Consumer" feature in which I would compare approaches to the sales of 35mm camera filters in several Kansas City area photo retail outlets. Because I had virtually no knowledge of filters prior to the research, I found that my notes directly quoting whole sentences or key phrases had to be used almost verbatim in the article; I simply didn't know enough to alter the language without possibly altering the meaning. Although my confidence increased as I researched more stores, I still sent in the article uncertain if I had made any major gaffes and was able to complete it only after discussing my findings with the editor, reading a draft over the phone, and being assured that she understood what I was talking about. Like a student writer tentatively offering an assignment to a teacher, I was able to say what I thought I knew about the subject, but only my editor could tell me for certain if I actually had very reliable knowledge.

Both of these instances demonstrate a regression in skills and a need for automaticity in lower level skills before achieving competence in higher level skills. Both of us were experienced writers, and both had had difficulty at the associative and communicative levels because of unfamiliarity with both the subject and the task. These examples also support the view that the development of a personal style and a personal viewpoint can only be achieved at a level where the writer has already achieved automaticity in associative, performative, and communicative writing. Until that point, style

is controlled by the limitations of knowledge about the subject.

A significant reason for the regression to an awkward, muddled style in transactional writing among students who have achieved automaticity in expressive writing is simply that their command of their subject is insufficient to allow them control over expression. For example, their knowledge of their research paper subject may be limited to quotes taken from outside sources. The incidence of plagiarism in such papers may be directly proportional to the writer's lack of comprehension of the subject — he simply can't say these things in any other way than his source said them; he can't manipulate language because he is unable to manipulate the idea. The student's own voice emerges only after he is able to make language express his unique understanding of his topic.

Prior to the emergence of voice at the stage Bereiter calls unified writing, the student's style is usually either speech-based or imitation-based. Writer-based prose often provides examples of the writer writing the way he speaks. Inexperienced writers at the associative stage have to draw upon the only language style they have. The writer may also attempt to imitate models of writing with which he is familiar; one of the ways we intuit how to say things in writing is by imitating, consciously or unconsciously, the ways others have said things under similar circumstances. The inflated, pompous prose style some students affect is often modeled on their understanding of academic writing. Polysyllabic unintelligibility may be an accurate reproduction or an unintentional parody, but most often it is a case of a student assimilating the rhythms and syntax of a prose style without comprehending on any level the relationships between the style and the meaning. Whether imitative of speech or of prose models, the style does not grow organically out of the writer's sense of his subject or of himself.

Professional writers give evidence of this development in their comments about style and persona. Neal Gabler has said that he reached a crisis of confidence in his writing when he began to feel too strongly the influence of Pauline Kael and other critics. He felt it necessary to have a better sense of his own style, which he describes as "a bridge from a very academic kind of criticism on the one hand and a very colloquial kind of criticism on the other." Another film critic, David Denby of *New York Magazine*, also admits to the influence of Pauline Kael and says, "about half a dozen years ago I made a

very conscious effort to take that sort of stuff out.” In the case of both men, the development of an individual prose style was related to their need to establish an individual identity in their writing in order to achieve their own ends in criticism. In Be-reiter’s terms, it is difficult to produce epistemic writing without first having achieved the union of style and self through automaticity at unified writing.

In writers who have reached this stage of development, the task environment itself is influenced by the writer’s sense of self, even when he/she seems to be perfectly aware of the audience and the task. Each of the professional writers I interviewed demonstrated a conscious awareness of the publication for which they wrote and at least a general awareness of its readership. Walter Kerr’s distinction between the Sunday and daily papers is based on the approach to reading subscribers take. David Denby states that he decides his topic based in part on “whether I think the *New York Magazine* readers need to know about this movie.” Susan Nykamp is aware that the reader of *Photo Marketing* wants practical, straightforward writing about how to improve business.

Nonetheless, most of these writers claim that by and large they write for themselves. Walter Kerr says, “On Sundays there’s a choice and everybody knows you’ve got a choice; therefore what you say ought to seem important to you.” David Denby says that the decision about what to write is “made on the basis of what I’m interested in and whether I have an edge on the movie, [whether] I have something I really want to say about it.” Neal Gabler is influenced in his choice by whether the film is important enough to write about and preferably whether “the film interests me so deeply that I feel the compulsion to write about it.” Tom Wicker says, “If the subject interests me, then I figure it’s well worth writing about.”

This insistence on a personal involvement in what they write is related to the kinds of writing they do and the places where it appears. It is as much a case of the context selecting the writer as the writer selecting the context. Explaining why he writes for *Monthly Detroit*, Neal Gabler says that *Time Magazine* “would never hire me to write this way. . . I’m not their kind of critic.” The publication fosters the kind of writing the author wants to do; it’s a symbiotic relationship which allows the writer to adopt a personal voice representative of his own viewpoint. As Walter Kerr says, “For certain circumstances, if you don’t invent a personality, you adapt whatever personality

you have to the circumstances, a matter of what sounds right in this position on this job." He seems to suggest that the writer is never wholly able to adopt a persona which is not to some degree his own.

But the persona is also keyed to a personal response to the subject. As David Denby points out,

"I do try to adapt my language and my style to the nature of the subject; that is, what kind of film it is. I mean, if it's a kind of pop-culture thrown-together movie, I try to write in a slangier way, and if it's more severe or classical, I try to write in a more chastened way."

His style, the sense of himself represented in his writing, and his individual reaction to the subject of his writing are all firmly linked.

Obviously, style and self are inextricably bound together in a writer's work, and the voice which they create emerges only after a certain level of writing development has been reached. For that development to take place the writer has to have been thoroughly immersed in a context and has to have had plentiful experience in a specific form of expression. By immersion in context I mean the gradual comprehension of a subject matter to the degree that knowledge of it becomes as much a product of the writer's generative powers as it is a product of his retrieval skills. By experience in expression I mean the gradual mastery of the writing task by repetition until the writer attains automaticity at lower level skills systems and transfers those competencies into long term memory, freeing short term memory for more reflective thinking about the subject at the moment of creation.

We have all witnessed the effect of immersion in context and experience in expression in our own writing, although perhaps on a smaller scale than that experienced by professional writers. For example, although as English majors we may have come to college with automaticity in performative writing skills, our development into writers capable of publishing on our discipline required years of subject-specific study and experience writing the kinds of analytical papers demanded by college English teachers and journal editors. The cynical joke that the discipline of English chiefly teaches students to write English papers has more than a kernel of truth to it. Students in other disciplines who have consulted me about their writing often display an attempt to master the formats, special language, and habits of thought of their cho-

sen fields, trying to make their subject matter their own instead of trying to emulate their mentors. They are struggling toward epistemic writing.

Bereiter notes that "traditional writing instruction, based on style manuals, models, and teacher correction, is almost wholly devoted to moving students from associative to performative writing" (88). It may be that the best that Freshman Composition does is help students reach the college level of performative writing. The great disappointment about student writing that teachers in subject fields frequently voice and that English teachers themselves feel when they look at the writing of upperclassmen in all departments may grow out of the subconscious awareness that Freshman Composition's focus on associative and performative writing levels is not advancing students very far toward the unified and epistemic levels they need to achieve in their chosen professions. It may grow as well from the unconscious realization that, after taking Freshman Composition, students will be required to develop their writing abilities through immersion in context and experience in expression entirely on their own. This may mean that, for most of them, we will wait in vain for the merging of style and self, for the emergence of voice.

Robert L. Root, Jr. is an Associate Professor of English at Central Michigan University (Mount Pleasant, Michigan) and formerly the Director of Composition there.

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