

# Don't Be Quiet: Talk as a Tool for Improved Writing

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In this article, I discuss why it's important to talk about our ideas and our writing. The act of speaking makes our brain do things that writing alone or thinking silently can't accomplish, and I pull from Lev Vygotsky and Kenneth Bruffee to illustrate this. I conclude with an unfortunate example of what can happen when writers don't talk to others about their writing.

Okay, so maybe that's a little bit of an understatement. I *love* to talk.

I like to talk. And, I do it all the time whether anyone is listening or not. Grade school was difficult for me because I could not stay quiet. I needed to talk to get through the day. My teachers often admonished me for talking even when it would seem that talking should have been allowed. I particularly remember being scolded in the cafeteria during lunch time. From the very beginning of our educational experiences, we are taught that talking is not a valuable tool for learning. While I understand that teachers need to teach the “proper” classroom etiquette of listening to the teacher and respecting everybody’s different needs for quiet work time, some of the restrictions on talking are not at all reasonable. What I’ve found in my research, and what I want to share with you, is that my eight-year old instincts about talking were right. As it turns out, talking is a vital part of the writing process. A vital part that we were all taught to ignore or suppress as children. Talking allows for actual cognitive work that can’t be done silently. It allows us as writers to physically “join a conversation” with others in our field. It gives us

I had never had a meal in my lifetime where the conversation wasn't at least as important as the food.

Seriously, to expect a kid like me to stay virtually silent for seven hours is really ridiculous.

Okay, so this is quite a bit more complicated than I imagined it at eight, but it's pretty cool, and I'll *talk* you through it.

A complicated neuroscience word for “thinking.”

the opportunity for immediate feedback, and it allows us to hear our own perspective within a larger social context.

The first thing that talking allows us to do is use parts of our brains that aren't used when just writing alone. If you have ever trained for an athletic event such as running a marathon, you know that trainers encourage you to do cross-training in order to engage and develop different groups of muscles. Talking is cross-training for writers. Lev Vygotsky says that the most significant movement in learning occurs when speech meets practical activity<sup>1</sup>. So even though we're talking about writing and not about getting candy, his idea about being able to flex certain brain muscles by talking is still important. For us, Vygotsky's theory indicates that we actually *think* differently when we talk. We activate different parts of our brains by talking. Other scholars say that talking allows us to learn with other people. Kenneth Bruffee says, "The first steps to learning to think better are learning to converse better."<sup>2</sup> Bruffee's idea is really interesting when we think about the ways we were taught to think. Think if we expected a child who was only crawling to suddenly stand up and run a marathon. Impossible, right? To run a marathon, you have to learn to walk first. Bruffee is saying that learning to think (and write) is the marathon and conversation or learning to talk is the same as learning to walk. We have to learn to talk before we can learn to think or write. Talking builds the muscles that help us move to the next step.

I should probably tell you that Vygotsky studied the ways children and apes responded to a challenge to solve a problem or puzzle to get a piece of candy.

Forgive me because we're going to go back to the marathon example. I pretty much only run when chased, but I completely admire people who can put one foot in front of the other for 26.2 miles. And, let's be honest. Sometimes writing feels as taxing as a marathon.

Talking helps us flex the mental muscles that writing alone doesn't flex, but it also serves as a way into the field that you're interested in. I want you to imagine a cocktail party. When you come into the room, there are lots of groups of conversations going on all over the room. Some of the conversations are really lively and others are pretty calm. As the new person to the party, you are tempted to stand in the corner and just observe. However, at some point, you are going to have to join a conversation. You have to walk up to a group, listen for a minute and then introduce yourself and contribute to the group's conversation. This cocktail party is a metaphor for your discipline. The guests are all the people who have ever done research or writing within your field. However, these guests were never actually all in one room together. They lived at different times in the history of the discipline, and even if they were alive at the same time, they might never have met. However, they do have conversations. Within any field of study, people who work in that field respond to, argue

Just go with me on this one. I promise, I have a point.

I'm sorry that the metaphorical cocktail party didn't have drinks or snacks. Feel free to provide your own.

with, or build off what others have said before them.<sup>3</sup> Most of the time this work is done in published writing and research results. In order to take part in “the conversation,” you have to know its context and you have to step up to a conversation and add your opinion or comments. While this move can be somewhat difficult in writing because you are responding to people who aren’t actively provoking you, it is much easier in person. Talking with your professor or your classmates is the first step to entering a conversation. It is an easy way to walk up to the conversation at that metaphorical cocktail party. Talking helps you take that first step into the field you are interested in.

Talking gets us into the conversation of the field, and it also allows for immediate feedback about our writing. At some point, you have turned in a paper and waited anxiously for feedback from your teacher or your reader only to wait for several weeks. Despite our fears about showing our writing to others, we all want someone to read our work and tell us what they thought. Talking about our ideas allows us to get immediate feedback. If we talk about our ideas, our audience has no choice but to respond. As you talk about ideas, the person you are talking to might counter your ideas, affirm that you are right, or give you suggestions for other ideas that might tie in. This type of immediate feedback is invaluable to writing. If we wait for a reader to read and respond to our writing, we are often on to the next project. But, talking is “in the moment.” You can mentally revise your thoughts much easier than you can revise a paper that has been “finished” for weeks. The immediate feedback of talking also allows you to respond to concerns by asking questions and getting answers.

Okay, sometimes I would rather not know what people think of my writing, but I still want to know that someone read it.

Talking is a two-way street in a way that the writing and feedback process is not. Once you have received feedback from a teacher or a reader, there is not a lot of room to ask questions about their feedback or respond to the feedback that was given to you. As an example, think of a movie review. Movie reviewers provide a lot of feedback for actors, directors, and producers. They comment on the things that were great about a movie or they comment on the things that were disastrous. But, the movie review comes too late. By the time the review is published, the movie is complete and showing in the theatre. There is nothing that actors, directors, or producers can do to change the movie. But, think if that movie critic had been allowed to come to the taping or the production of the movie. Maybe their feedback would have given the actor something else to work with to improve their performance. Or, maybe the producer would have chosen to include a scene she deleted because the reviewer said that it was critical to the plot structure. Talking about our ideas is like inviting the critic to the filming of the movie. It allows us to respond to the reader and make changes to our performance before

we produce a final product. Talking to someone about your ideas allows you to get feedback on the ideas that you have written and the ideas that you are too afraid to write. Sometimes as writers we have ideas that seem a little “out there.” Having a conversation about these ideas might encourage you to include them in your writing. But the conversation might also encourage you to ditch those ideas and focus on something different. ~~At any rate, talking is like giving yourself a trial run. You can revise without having to delete massive amounts of text that took you hours to write. The feedback is immediate and can be a really efficient use of your time.~~

You're looking for smiles and nods here.

When my friends' eyes bug out of their heads or when they look really perplexed, I know it is time to move on.

In addition to receiving immediate feedback from others, talking about your writing allows you to hear your own writing in a larger social context. If you have ever had that spontaneous moment of comic genius and thought of the perfect joke or funny comment only to finally tell it out loud and have everyone look at you like you are an alien from another planet, then you know what I'm talking about. ~~Sometimes~~ what seemed funny in my head is not funny at all, and sometimes as it leaves my mouth I know that it is offensive. Writing is like that too. You might write a whole paper, and after turning it in, realize that it was offensive. Hearing your ideas and saying them out loud in conversation helps you hear it before you write it. It allows you to realize that your audience, your readers, are real people with real feelings. Sometimes it is hard to imagine this while we're tapping away at the keyboard. But talking allows us to experience that and hear our ideas as they come out of our mouths.

Oh, come on. I know I'm not the only one who is a stand-up comedian in my head and not at all funny in the real world. Have you ever watched NBC's "Last Comic Standing"? I'm not the only one.

I'm pretty sure that Greg Sammato, managing editor of the Johns-Hopkins student paper, wishes that he had talked about the article he wrote entitled, “Local Bison Bear All at Psi Kappa Psi's Annual Lingerave.” The article, which has since been removed from the newspaper's website, claimed that “fat girls systematically befriend hot girls to get into parties.”<sup>4</sup> Sammato went on to write various unflattering things about his overweight female peers. As you might guess, critics obliterated Sammato. Sammato's self-defense tactic was to claim that he wasn't a misogynistic creep but that the piece was meant to be satirical. But you see, nobody read the article as satire. Nobody. If Sammato had tried talking ~~about his writing before publishing it, he might have saved himself the grief of having to defend his ideas. I'm pretty sure that if he had run the article past at least one female friend she would have told him that it was offensive, or at least she would have hesitated~~

Personally, I like to think he is a misogynistic creep who meant to write a satire.

Granted, misogynistic creeps don't always have a lot of female friends.

to gush praise at his satire writing skills. Writing, as Sammato found out, is sometimes dangerous business.

We can substantially decrease the danger of writing our ideas for the world to see if we take time to talk about them. In conversations, you might hear yourself say, “Oh, that didn’t come out right,” or “That’s not what I meant to say.” Most of the time, these are totally self-recognized edits. In other words, you don’t necessarily need other people to tell you that it wasn’t right. Just hearing what you’ve said triggers something in your brain that lets you know that your words were a little off. Hearing your words in a larger social context helps you understand some of the implications you didn’t realize you were making. Talking about your ideas allows you to have these self-editing moments in a way that writing alone does not.

I’ll admit that talking about your ideas can often be as scary or scarier than writing about them. But, talking is a useful tool to improve your writing. So, I’ve got some tips on how to cross-train for writing and get into the conversation before you write. First, take full advantage of any in-class time to talk about your writing. Participate in peer workshops; ask questions of your teacher and your peers. But, talking about your ideas doesn’t have to be formal. Do it casually. You can talk about ideas with friends and family members who don’t know much (if anything) about your topic. Remember that you hearing your own words and activating that speech portion of your brain is the important part. You may also want to choose different audiences to talk about your ideas. For instance, conversing with a professor might give you a lot of really good feedback, but talking with a classmate might allow you to bounce ideas off each other and generate even more ideas. Additionally, sometimes talking out loud to yourself can help you achieve the same goals. Most of all, talk. Talk about your ideas. Talk about your writing.

You might want to avoid doing this in public. People will think you’re crazy. Not that I know about it from personal experience or anything.

Which is kind of funny because I just spent this entire paper writing about my talk.

## Endnotes

1. Vygotsky, L. S. and Michael Cole. *Mind in Society: the Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1978. Print.
2. Bruffee, Kenneth A. “Peer Tutoring and the ‘Conversation of Mankind.’” *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing Center Theory and Practice*. Eds. Robert Barnett and Jacob Blumner. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001. 206-218. Print.
3. Graff, Gerald, and Cathy Birkenstein. *They Say / I Say: the Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*. New York: W.W. Norton &, 2010. Print.

4. "Johns Hopkins Student Paper Would Like Women To Know How Fat And Terrible They Are (Updated)." *Jezebel: Celebrity, Sex, Fashion for Women. Without Airbrushing*. 18 Sept. 2010. Web. 21 Sept. 2010. <<http://jezebel.com/5642109/johns-hopkins-student-paper-would-like-women-to-know-how-fat-and-terrible-they-are>>.



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