Breathing Life into Words: Text Rendering or Reading Out Loud

It's an old principle that the best interpretation of a text is a good performance of it: a good reading of it out loud. Whether your goal is the enjoyment of a text or the practical goal of having to work out a full interpretation (perhaps for an essay assignment), the fastest and most satisfying way to learn what a text means and how it works is to read it out loud.

But first, we want to speak for a moment to any misgivings you may have about reading out loud. It may be that you hate it. Many students do: when we make them do it, they feel we are punishing them. There are many reasons you may feel this way:

- You may feel self-conscious when you read out loud: as though you are "making a spectacle of yourself" or "sticking out"—or even "making a fool of yourself."
- You may be bad at it.
- It may in fact have been "punishment" in school when everyone had to take a turn reading aloud from the book—and if you were bad, you had to read more.
- You may even hate having someone read aloud to you, feeling as though the enjoyment is "babyish" (even though you undoubtedly loved it as a child).
But we find that once we give students practice in reading aloud, most of them appreciate it: partly for the practical benefits that we stress here, but also for the pure pleasure of making words alive instead of dead. There are some important guidelines we’ve learned, however, for overcoming bad feelings about it.

- If you’re not used to reading out loud, it’s best to start with your own writing. Then you have the best reason to read out loud: your text is probably handwritten, perhaps marked up with corrections and revisions, so that others would have a hard time reading it. But you know how it should sound, and you have a reason to want to get it across to others. (We hope you’ve already done lots of this reading in sharing sessions.)

- When we push someone to render something he didn’t write, we always give him some time to practice reading it aloud to himself: to whisper privately or speak it out loud in his head. This gives him a chance to stumble and experiment, to check out the pronunciation of unfamiliar words, and to figure out what the piece means and how to express it. It’s not fair either to the reader or to the listeners to push someone to read something out loud they can’t read decently. (After someone has practiced, we help him with his shyness by insisting that he come out with it forcefully.)

**TRYING IT OUT**

The main thing is practice. Following are four slightly different ways of practicing text rendering as interpretation.

1. Text rendering or interpretation as figuring out the *literal meaning*. Suppose you are faced with a text that is difficult to understand. You look at it and it looks odd; you start reading it over silently and can’t figure out what it’s saying (even if you know most of the words and phrases). Perhaps it is a modern poem—perhaps one without any punctuation—or an experimental short story or novel, or something with older language like Chaucer or Shakespeare used.

   Try reading it out loud. Force yourself to *say* the words—trying to feel out the best way to phrase them. If the language seems odd or difficult, sound it out tentatively and listen for how it “goes”: where the words seem to speed up, pause, or stop; where the stresses appear; where your voice rises and falls in pitch. Your instinct can guide you as you proceed. Of course you may stumble a bit and need to try a line one way and then another. You may find yourself repeating a particularly difficult spot. But you’ll be surprised at how often your *voice* and your *ear* find sense in a passage of words.
where your eye was lost. Your voice and ear have better instincts than your eye about rhythm, intonation, and syntax.

Here is a poem that seems difficult when read silently, but becomes clearer (if not completely clear) when you read it out loud. You need to give yourself a chance to stumble and experiment as you try it out. Don't just go through it once and give up; don't allow yourself to get bogged down by trying to interpret it as you read. Give your voice and ear freedom. Read it through five, six, seven times—however many times it takes to go from beginning to end fluidly.

SPRING AND FALL:
To a Young Child

Márgarétt, are you grieving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
Leáves, like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?
Ah! ás the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder
By and by, nor spare a sigh
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
And yet you will weep and know why.
Now no matter, child, the name:
Sórrow’s spríngs áre the same.
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.

—Gerard Manley Hopkins

2. Text rendering or making the meaning live. Reading is no fun, however, if it's only figuring out the plain meaning—as though it were a puzzle. What makes reading worthwhile is when the meaning seems alive and jumps from the page to your mind—and lives in your mind. Text rendering helps here too more than anything else. When language works at its best, the “inner dimension” (meaning) and the “outer dimension” (sound, rhythm, emphasis, and tone) all work together. This is what it means for words to have life or breath. Try reading the Hopkins poem again—but this time make your task not just to figure out the literal meaning; try to read the text aloud in a way that can help make the meaning clear to a listener who has never heard the words before and has no text to look at. In fact, when you first read it to someone, she should not have the text before her.

Or try the activity with this poem by William Carlos Williams:
A SORT OF SONG

Let the snake wait under
his weed
and the writing
be of words, slow and quick, sharp
to strike, quiet to wait,
sleepless.

—through metaphor to reconcile
the people and the stones.
Compose. (No ideas
but in things) Invent!
Saxifrage is my flower that splits
the rocks.

We’re not trying to imply that text rendering is only for poetic or cre-
ative texts. You can take any text—or passage from a text—that you simply
want to understand better. Practice saying the text till you can say it so that
listeners hear or experience the meaning. That’s all. But it’s not easy. The
process will make you not just understand the text but get inside it so that
you can mean the words as you say them. For that’s the central act in read-
ing something out loud so it works: you have to succeed in feeling or expe-
riencing the meaning in the words. Listeners can tell when you are asleep at
the switch, when you are just going through motions and reciting something
you haven’t gotten inside of. This is just as necessary when reading expository
prose as when reading fiction or poetry. If you are reading a physics
textbook and having trouble, you can solve much of the problem (perhaps
not all) by forcing yourself to read it out loud.

Try working out a reading of the following passage from William James
till you can really experience what he is saying, till you can say it so that a
listener will get the meaning.

The Empirical Self of each of us is all that he is tempted to call by the name of
me. But it is clear that between what a man calls me and what he simply calls
mine the line is difficult to draw. We feel and act about certain things that are
ours very much as we feel and act about ourselves. Our fame, our children, the
work of our hands, may be as dear to us as our bodies are, and arouse the same
feelings and the same acts of reprisal if attacked. And our bodies themselves, are
they simply ours, or are they us? Certainly men have been ready to disown their
very bodies and to regard them as mere vestures, or even as prisons of clay from
which they should some day be glad to escape.

You will sometimes feel a kind of click when you get something to sound
right—and when you do, you will immediately understand better what the
piece is about and how it works.
It is helpful to hear different readings of the same passage by two or more people (and the readings will differ even if the passage is a plain and straightforward piece of prose). Listeners can simply tell which parts of which readings came through most clearly. If you then discuss individual reactions, the discussion will inevitably lead you to the relationship of the form and the meaning and to questions of how words work on readers—and thus lead you right to the heart of the most important questions for interpretation.

Notice that you are trying to act or perform or dramatize here: you are trying to let the meaning find its way into sound. Have you noticed that good readers of poetry often don’t act at all? Sometimes there is no “personality” in their readings. Sometimes they sort of chant or intone the words, searching not for performance but for the sound of the meaning-in-language.

3. Text rendering or interpretation as finding the right voice, tone, stance. When we discuss the interpretation of a story, essay, or poem, or when we are writing an essay of interpretation, one of the main doorways

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**PROCESS BOX**

[I had been writing in a workshop and now for 15 minutes the assignment was to do some process writing—and perhaps consider the question, “What do you want or need to work on?” Here is part of what I wrote.]

Also I need to work on more “connected” writing—like I did this morning—where I pretend it’s a letter and I’m not to revise. In much of my at-home-on-a-word-processor writing, I make too much of a mess. I don’t enough proceed somewhat slowly as I do now in this by-hand writing, and speak the words deliberately onto the paper. I think there is sometimes more voice and energy in some of the writing I do by hand in workshops like this than the drafting I do on the computer. On the computer I go so fast and make rushes of words—and then change them and change them—sometimes in mid phrase. Here I create more genuine and full sentences—not exactly craft them—but I pause and give some deliberation. I guess there’s a bit of the indelible quality to my by-hand writing—which is after all in ink. I realize I can’t so easily undo it, so I give a bit more weight to what I write. Do I pause first? Maybe. And when I’m embarked on a sentence I somehow force myself to push my way through it instead of just throwing down words and being able to recast or change them.

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in is through voice, tone, or stance. We may argue, for example, about whether words are ironic or sarcastic or straight. To answer such questions is central to interpretation—yet difficult. And arguments about such questions are notoriously hard to settle. Probably the best way to deal with these issues is to work out your own reading and then compare alternate readings by others. Again, your voice and ear often tell you the tone before you even need to think about the question in theoretical terms. And instead of letting two people argue on and on, have them each read the text as they think it should sound. That sometimes settles things, and when it does not (after all, texts do invite different readings) it usually makes the discussion much more fruitful and down to earth.

By the way, don’t assume that you can use this approach only on short poems or short pieces—just because we have used such pieces here for convenience. If you are working on a long essay or story, even a novel, you can pick out passages that seem most interesting or perplexing or passages that seem to illustrate the main voices or tones in the piece—and work out readings. Once you can say and hear an important passage right, you can often hear the interpretation of the whole piece.

For example, if you are trying to discuss how *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* works, you could center the whole discussion on the task of figuring out how its opening passage should sound—how it should be read. Try out different readings and talk about which attempts sound right. The discussion will probably boil down to figuring out what kind of person Huck is and how he relates to Twain. The best way to deal with that slippery theoretical discussion is with the ear as you try out different voices.

You don’t know about me, without you have read a book by the name of “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,” but that ain’t no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. That is nothing. I never see anybody but lied, one time or another, without it was Aunt Polly, or the widow, or maybe Mary. Aunt Polly—Tom’s Aunt Polly, she is—and Mary, and the Widow Douglas, is all told about in that book—which is mostly a true book; with some stretchers, as I said before.

4. Text rendering or interpretation as hearing other voices: play, distortion, exaggeration, parody, deconstruction. Sometimes the best way to discover what’s in a text is by a process of elimination; see what’s not there and what’s almost, sort of, marginally there: try out distorting lenses. Read a text aloud in a way that deliberately exaggerates or parodies it. Obviously you’ll discover what’s not in the text, but the striking thing about this playing around is how it surprises you: you keep discovering that what you assumed was all wrong and a complete violation of the text manages in fact to capture a subtle note that’s really there. When you do a hysterical reading of some staid essay, you’ll catch a glimpse of some below-the-surface hysteria; or a tragic reading of a comic piece may show you a bit of darkness
lurking there. There is often a bit of rightness in that "wrong" voice, tone, or stance.

You can try this playfully "foolish" approach on any of the preceding examples. Or try it on the opening passage of *Pride and Prejudice*.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of someone or other of their daughters.

Try it on an advertisement or a political speech.

Try it on the essay or story you are currently writing: you'll discover some rich hints and possibilities you didn't know were in your own text. Sometimes you'll decide to get rid of this underlying tone or voice: maybe you uncover a hint of whining or self-pity which you know undercuts your meaning. But sometimes you'll decide to emphasize one of these faint notes, bring it more to the foreground and out of obscurity. For example, you may uncover in your serious essay a humorous strand that is worth bringing out. It's not so uncommon to uncover a tone of uncertainty and doubt you didn't know was there. You'll feel the impulse to get rid of it; maybe it undermines your position. But think again. More often than not your piece will be stronger if it *acknowledges* that doubt better and allows itself to be somewhat *about* the uncertainty you were hiding from yourself.

Here then is a way to find the richness of implications in almost any set of words. All these exercises in breathing life into words are ways of learning to read better.