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Can You Hear Me Now? How Reading Our Writing Aloud Informs Audiences and Ourselves

By Kate Carroll de Gutes

Like most writers, I read my work “out loud.” You know, for the inevitable day when Terry Gross interviews me on “Fresh Air” and asks me to read from my latest brilliant essay collection. I also practice the line, “Thank you, Terry, I’m very pleased with how the book turned out and that Random House paid such a large advance.”

Well, actually, I read aloud so I can hear where my mouth trips over the words, and I use this knowledge to drive my revision process. Sound drives my writing as surely as word selection does. But I’m not talking here about sound effects such as alliteration, assonance, and consonance. I mean the way sound changes how the *writer* and her *listening audience* experience and interact with a text.



Most of us have a keen ability to write for readers. We know how to cook up a piece, melding character, setting, and scene together. But as performers of our work, we are more like waiters than chefs. We must time the delivery of the courses perfectly, bringing each word, each dish at precisely the right moment, so that the audience isn’t left looking around, wondering what that weird flavor is or where the appetizers are.

Here are a few tips I gathered over the past year as a fellow in the [Jack Straw Writers Program](#), where I learned new public-reading skills, how to work with recorded audio (or, rather, without an audience) and how to really deliver my writing to live audiences.

1. **Pace your work in a way that engages and doesn't leave your audience or readers spacing out.** You know what happens sometimes when you're listening to a story on the [New Yorker Fiction Podcast](#) or [Selected Shorts](#)? There's the famous writer reading her work and you are reveling in it, loving the way she is stringing you along. But then, you realize that you've spent the last minute imagining a hassock, hung up, in fact, on hassock. Is a hassock the same as an ottoman or a footstool? Who uses a word like that anymore? While you've been obsessing over this, the writer has continued reading, and you missed what happened after the hassock. The flow stops, and listener—or reader—must consciously re-engage with the writing. By reading your work aloud—both to yourself and to your first listeners—you can hear these trouble spots and address them. Here's an example from my essay “And So You Begin Again For The First Time.” Go ahead and read it aloud; I'll wait.

You know, something different than what it's usually been: your father sullen and angry; your mother late to the table because she's been crying in the back bathroom; your sister with Asperger's Syndrome staring at her plate and not making eye contact as she eats her way through white potatoes, sweet potatoes with marshmallows on top, stuffing, and dinner rolls (“Nope. Not eating turkey. Tastes like you just licked a metal railing.” You've called her Rainman for years and the Asperger's diagnosis, when it comes ten years later, doesn't surprise you or your other sister, although your parents will never quite believe it.); your other sister glaring at you because you yelled at your father for making your mother cry (“Jesus, Kate, why do you hate Dad so much.” It's as if her memory has been erased.)

It's a jumbled mess, isn't it? But if you eliminate everything in the parenthetical asides, you can get an accurate picture of my family and, as listeners, you don't have to hold onto the food on the plates, the dialogue, my sisters, and their diagnoses. Without the parenthetical asides, the whole thing reads much more easily on the page, as well.

2. **Scoring your work can show you where the emotion of your piece lies—and often where you need to punch up your language.** Poet Kelsea Habecker says, “We respond to rhythm and sound viscerally—can feel it in our bones—and so the writing (or the experience of the writing) goes more directly into the body rather than staying only in the head.”

It makes sense to me that poets know this better than prose writers, Unless?/They read/In the poet/Voice? Washington State's new [poet laureate, Elizabeth Austen](#), worked with my Jack Straw cohort to teach us how to score our writing. We used our own symbols to show us—at a glance—where we wanted to slow down, speed up, pause, emphasize.

Here's an example of how my essay, “[What Does a Lesbian Bring on a Second Date.](#)” looks when scored. The symbol ↑ reminds me to speed up, while ↓ reminds me to lower my voice. The mark / is an indication to pause briefly and take a breath and // tells me to take a full stop. Finally, underlined words show where I want to put vocal emphasis.

Which is why I found myself on a Wednesday afternoon ↑(when I should have been working)/ uploading a few pictures to the online dating site OkCupid /—because the way you meet girls in 2013 / is on the Internet. ↓ Here is the horrifying thing that happens when you create your profile//: the women rate you.// Less than two hours after my profile went live, Fun4Grrlz rated me 4 out of 5 stars and SalmonGirl rated me 5 out of 5. ↑ Given the dearth of written information in my profile, I can only assume they were rating me based on my pictures //— ↓ I should have been flattered. //

You can see the rests and breaths in the score. You can also see the underlined words—the inflection, by which I mean *emotion*. However...

3. **Don't be surprised if your inflection gives listeners an entirely different experience of your work.** As part of the Jack Straw fellowship, I was paired with Emily Eastridge, a ukulele player who musically interpreted my essay, “What Does a Lesbian Bring on a Second Date.” The piece focuses on online dating, but it also explores being betrayed and left by only the second woman I had ever kissed. I thought the essay captured both my amusement and mortification at dating for the first time at age 48.

Eastridge wanted to meet before she began her own writing process. Over bowling-alley beers, she queried me and quoted parts of my essay back to me, while I explained about feeling 14 and 48 at the same time. I never read my work aloud to her, and she never played her ukulele for me.

Six weeks later, [Eastridge and I stood on the stage](#), under bright lights that hid the full house. I gave a short introduction to my work, and then read an excerpt of my essay while Eastridge watched, ukulele in hand. Then she came to the mic to introduce herself and the song she'd written. She said, “It's awesome to hear Kate read out loud after reading this piece over and over to myself... When we met [earlier], I asked Kate if she could describe the emotions behind the piece in three words...and she said, ‘Fear, shame, and dorkiness.’ And I said, ‘Okay, I get it!’ But then having just heard her read it now, there's such a noble tone behind it all, and it just ended on such a different emotional tone than it did for me reading it. So this song is a little more ‘woe is me’ [than her essay].”

I wondered if my text failed to reflect that I was not bitter or forlorn, and that if I did not exactly enjoy, I was amused by, my adventures in midlife puberty. Was Eastridge's take on the “nobility” of my attitude a side effect of my inflection? Was I telling with words but showing with inflection?

I put the question on slow simmer in the back of my brain and went about my business—updating my Facebook status, sending the random Tweet, and watching late-night YouTube videos. And it was here that I found my answer when I stumbled upon a video of Dorothy

Allison [reading from her first novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina*](#). I know whole pages of this novel by heart—both from studying it on the page and because I guess you could say I’m a bit of a stalker: I attend Allison’s readings every time she visits the Pacific Northwest. I’ve watched Allison enthrall dinner-party guests as well as an entire theater of people with her stories, weaving a trance over her audience the minute she opens her mouth. When Bone, the protagonist in *Bastard Out of Carolina* first cries out “Mama” in Allison’s southern drawl—at once soft and piercing—I feel this child’s gravitas much more quickly than I do when reading silently to myself. The same words are all there on the page, but Allison’s inflection and pacing telegraphs the character’s emotion in a way that feels bigger than the words on the page reflect. The video of Allison reading reminded me that words show, but our human voices always tell.

4. **People listening to your writing have no idea where it’s going, so make sure you put the emphasis on the right word.** Maybe this seems like a Writing 101 insight, but when working with actor Christine Marie Brown, I was surprised to learn that I was confusing my readers. Here’s the opening paragraph from my essay, “What I Won’t Wear,” scored to reflect how I originally read it.

Mac or Bobbi Brown.// Maybelline and Cover Girl are out, too. //Although, Estee Lauder and L’Oreal make excellent moisturizers and everyone needs well-hydrated ↓skin. //And sometimes, I’ll wear a little Aveda brand lipstick/ just to freak out my girlfriend and because,/ in a strange way, /it’s almost gender ↓bending.

Brown looked over my shoulder at the text, following along as I read aloud. Then she scored the paragraph for me:

Mac or Bobbi Brown.// Maybelline and Cover Girl are out, too. //Although, ↑Estee Lauder and L’Oreal make excellent moisturizers and everyone needs well-hydrated skin. //And sometimes, I’ll wear a little Aveda brand lipstick to freak out my girlfriend and because, in a strange way, it’s almost gender bending.

Brown removed the emphasis from the words *Estee Lauder* and *L’Oreal* and asked me to read that line straight through—quickly—without emphasis on any word. She said, “That line is funny and unexpected—especially because you’ve set up the audience with the title. They are not expecting you to like those products.” She also had me emphasize *lipstick* and *gender bending* because of the incongruity of a woman saying this.

You choose your themes, ideas, words, and syntax carefully, striving for writing that rises—[like Brenda Miller’s Challah bread](#)—but you must be careful when reading that your work doesn’t fall flat. Understanding the performance process helps assure that the work you did mixing your words just so leads to a delectable dish when you pull it off the page and breathe life into the words.

Oh, and I'm pretty sure that when you read your work on "Fresh Air," you will leave Terry Gross smiling and stuttering in that charming way of hers.

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Kate Carroll de Gutes is a wry observer who started her career as a journalist and then got excited by *new* journalism, which became creative nonfiction and is now sometimes called...well, you see where this is going. A stickler for the serial comma, Kate also believes that there should always be two spaces between a period and the beginning of the next sentence—unless she is being published in *Brevity*. Then she's fine with a single space because, come on, it's *Brevity*. Some of her favorite publication credits include *Fourth Genre*, *Los Angeles Review*, *Pank*, and *The Seattle Review*. Kate writes on a wide range of topics, but her obsession seems to focus on sexuality and gender presentation. She has an MFA from the Rainier Writing Workshop.