

***My One Habit: Never Speak from a Prepared Written Text***<sup>1</sup>  
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There is a time-honoured tradition—one that goes back to the Ancient Greek Sophists—that says that when it comes to important matters, one should always write down one’s thoughts before speaking them. Many reasons are given for this advice. Writing can nail down specific thoughts that might be difficult to recall in speech. Writing also allows complex thoughts to be laid out in a logical fashion, something that is often hard to do if one is simply speaking ‘off the cuff’.

This was actually good advice in the context where it was originally given—Athens of fourth century BC. However, we tend to draw the wrong lessons from this practice for our own purposes today. One habit I have developed in life involves treating the Sophists with the ‘sophistication’ (a word that pays homage to them) that they deserve.

That you should write down your thoughts before speaking them is certainly very much taken for granted in the field where I have spent my life, namely, academia. Academics respect writing much more than speaking, even though they clearly do both. But academics are not alone. Law and business are two other professions in which the written word—especially in the form of contracts—tends to be valued more highly than the spoken word.

However, all of these intuitions are somewhat misguided. Speaking and writing are in fact radically different modes of communication, just as walking and flying are radically different modes of transportation.

I learned this lesson personally in the early 1980s when I was preparing to give my first American academic ‘talk’, which meant reading from a specially written text. I was in my twenties, still doing the Ph.D., and had never before prepared a forty-minute lecture. The event involved my travelling from Pittsburgh to Denver, about 2000 kilometres. This was a time just before air overtook train as the cheapest form of transcontinental travel in the United States—and also before the portable typewriter was replaced by the portable computer as the cheapest means of producing text. Thus, I spent nearly a day and a half on a train romantically named the ‘California Zephyr’, banging out my paper on an Olivetti Underwood portable typewriter. It was not a pretty sight—or sound—for fellow passengers.

On the day of my talk, I read the text much too quickly, probably because I had just written it and so I could anticipate each succeeding sentence all too easily. Nevertheless, the event was a reasonable success. The University of Colorado at Boulder, which sponsored the talk, became my first employer. However, it was clear to me from the

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<sup>1</sup> Last year I contributed to a Korean anthology called ‘The Guru Challenge’, which presented insights into living from seventy-five distinguished individuals in the arts and sciences. This year a second volume will be coming out, in which contributors are asked to identify a successful habit and explain how it arose from their life experience. What follows is my response. It will be appearing in Korean translation in Douglas Huh, ed., *The Habit: Borrowing Life Strategies from the World’s Most Creative Leaders* (Seoul: Woongjin Knowledge House, 2015). Thanks to the publisher and editor for permission to publish the piece in English

audience questions that only brief fragments of the talk were understood, but they were sympathetically supplemented with the questioners' own concerns. This enabled me to connect what little they understood of what I said with what really mattered to them.

I have come to believe that this is the best outcome of an academic 'talk', when the academic reads a specially prepared text. This is true even for senior academics speaking at more distinguished conferences, with presumably better informed audiences. Yet, most of these interactions between speaker and audience strike me as mainly exercises in interpersonal diplomacy. In other words, both parties have a vested interest in not appearing foolish, and they realize that if one party looks foolish, the other might appear foolish as well. As a result, a lot of bullshit is generated during the 'Q&A' after the talk to 'save face'. I believe that this phenomenon has led many speakers—and not only in academia—to regard the Q&A period as a slightly annoying form of public relations, that is, as opportunities to repeat the original message to members of the audience who may have not quite got it the first time round.

Given this wholly undesirable state of affairs, I have decided that speaking and writing are simply different activities that serve different purposes and thus should be judged differently. Of course, the two activities may productively relate to each other. The most productive relations are already found in the fields of drama and music. In both cases, writing is a work of composition, and speaking is a work of performance. Each draws on the other, but the art that is created in each case is distinct. Playwrights and actors are equally but differently valued in the theatre, just as composers and performers are equally but differently in music. However, I want to make the point more broadly: I really mean the difference between writing and speaking as modes of communication.

Writing is a solitary and self-involved process. The audience is located in one's own mind. The result can be quite articulate and sophisticated, but invariably difficult to follow unless one can reproduce the author's thought process. In contrast, speaking is a publicly oriented process, one best conducted by looking at the audience, not a text. The speaker holds forth for shorter periods at a time and is compelled to respond sooner after she has concluded her communication.

A great writer need not be a great speaker, and vice versa. Moreover, while academic culture privileges the writer over the speaker, popular culture does not. We remember the singers and actors rather than those who write their songs or script their lines—though all of them may be amply rewarded! Interestingly, law and business—despite the significance that they officially attach to the written word—nevertheless also accord considerable respect to those masters of the spoken word, courtroom advocates and salespeople.

In case you are in doubt, I have nothing against writing. After all, I am the author of 21 books and hundreds of articles! However, I am glad that my training in writing and speaking were conducted separately.

In the case of writing, I learned how to weigh the selection of individual words and to read many words in sequence before passing judgement over whether they were true,

false or even sensible. Learning to write as a distinct art gave me a tolerance for ambiguity in expression. Very few things make sense immediately in writing, unless you have previously seen what has been written. To be sure, this often happens, because authors repeat themselves and each other. This is why ‘skimming’ and ‘scanning’ a text is often a successful substitute for properly ‘reading’ it. However, repetition is usually considered to be a vice—not a virtue—of writing. (It may even count as ‘plagiarism’.) Writing is supposed to express a unique thought in each sentence, and ‘reading’ is the art of dealing with a text as if that supposition were true.

The virtues of speaking are very different. Repetition is tolerated—and even encouraged—in order to keep an idea in the forefront of the audience’s mind. This point was first made clear to me when I was taught to recite various speeches, poems and songs as a young student. Classically structured speeches, poems and songs include ‘motifs’, ‘refrains’ and ‘choruses’ precisely because they have been written to be performed in voice. This point helps to explain why so much of 20<sup>th</sup> century music and poetry—and academic writing, one might add—is said to be ‘difficult’. These compositions typically lack such performance-oriented features. For example, if the sequence of notes in a piano-based musical score is too complicated, then the pianist cannot simply do it from memory but must perform at a level below her normal technical expertise, as she is forced to read the notes in the course of playing.

Nevertheless, the virtues of speaking come out clearest in relation to writing. When as a student I was required to recite speeches, poems and songs, I had to engage in minor forms of improvisation. I had to decide where to place emphasis on particular words and phrases to get the point across to a particular audience. Sometimes I felt compelled to alter the original composition in order to improve the flow of my performance. There is an art to this too, since audiences, not least the instructor, may fail to respond well to your improvisation—I remember many frowns and grimaces.

Over the years, I have come to believe that improvisation—that risky zone between writing and speaking—is the true crucible of creativity. You need to be able to both write and speak well, but then you have to play them against each other. Jazz is the most obvious art form that is based on improvisation. But I would add teaching as well. Great improvisers go beyond simply making one text come alive. Rather, they can combine multiple texts with surprising results that would not be evident from performing the texts individually. In practice, this means that when I teach a course, I assign an eclectic mix of readings, the mutual relevance of which may not be obvious to the naked eye. However, the point is for the student to attend my lectures to see how I weave them together.

If you see writing and speaking as distinct activities, as I do, then your own patterns of written and spoken discourse will change. Writing will become more compressed, very much like a musical score, in which no note is wasted. However, speaking will become more expansive, very much like a raconteur who can spin out a narrative indefinitely. This may create considerable dissonance in how others perceive you. People generally find me a very difficult writer but a very accessible speaker. While I am personally surprised by the sharpness of this perception, nevertheless I see it—and I believe that others should cultivate it.

Because improvisations are by definition tied to specific performances, their sense of ‘creativity’ may be difficult to pin down beyond the bare fact that a particular audience finds what it hears likeably novel. However, audio and video recording has done much to convert improvisations into texts in their own right for others to study and improvise upon. This is the standard of performance that you should always aim for—what artists and musicians call ‘virtuosity’. Your current performance should never be reducible to a past performance, let alone a composition on which the performance is nominally based. In other words, what you say should always be worth recording. You should not speak as you write but your speech should be worth writing about.

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