



INSIDE OUT: SPEAKING FOR YOURSELF, WRITING FOR YOUR COMMUNITY

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In many ways our work as writers is intensely personal. Epiphanies come to us when there is no one to hear them but the page. Feelings and ideas within us insist to be conceived, and the urge to write saturates our blood and percolates up through our brains.

Writing, though, is also an external practice, because it is interpersonal: it puts us in conversation with others. By disseminating our work, whether through publishing or simply handing a draft to a friend, we cast the seeds of our private worlds onto a shared discursive field. Language has the potential to be a conductive material, a door between humans that allows us to share these worlds with each other—but to make this a reality requires a concentrated mindfulness of our use of language.

Language expands daily to include new words that come with new ways of seeing the world. Within a learning institution, knowledge is exchanged in the countless dialects native to the academic disciplines we write within. These are sources of power and of exclusion. As writers in this setting, we should work to be aware of the existence and influence of the codes we tap into, consciously or not, when we commit our thoughts to paper.

These academic dialects aren't lists of words whose use will somehow strip your expression of an authenticity that otherwise exists: heterogeneous language is as vital to our fields of study as it is to any other culture. But while certain language may carry authority in academic settings, to write for yourself is to write autonomously. Mindfulness is not the presence or absence of this word or that, but must be practiced in the invocation of any language. We students are often silently rewarded for approaching truths from a safe distance, using the practiced vocabulary of theory and discipline as a substitute for growing into our own grasp of subjects. Because of this, we must consider where our writing draws its strength from.

In my education, I was exposed to established academic mindsets and vocabularies at the same time that my writing assignments became more and more demanding. During times of stress, these began to appear increasingly viable as sources of preformed wisdom to rely on. To engage subjects critically in my writing required me to dig inward, a challenging place to go looking for answers. I didn't always like what I found. So when the search for understanding took me to the threshold of

discomfort, I was willing to defer the work of finding my own words, and rely instead on elevated vocabulary. The ideas that drew me to write in the first place remained uninvestigated.

The surety of academic vocabulary is especially convincing in an environment that often asks for polished writing products and forgets that writing—like learning—is above all a process. For writing to be critical, an internal journey has to take place. In our learning community, it is a legitimate fear that ideas still growing will be perceived as weakness. But when we armor our text with borrowed words to guard it from the criticism of our peers, we build a broken learning community where it is easier to put down others' expression than to expose your own vulnerability. Each writer who forfeits this security allows others to do the same, building instead a community where the vulnerability unearthed by our writing processes is honored rather than hidden.

Before you sit down to write, interrogate your motives and your means. Will you shield your ideas from judgment, or open them to inquiry? Pass up the struggle of writing, or accept its difficulty and grow into the truths it yields? Will your work draw its strength from the voices of others, or will it force you to find and grow into your own? Your writing is a piece of a grand conversation—ask whether it speaks for you.