

Reading Out Loud

Reading your own writing out loud – either to yourself or to an audience – is an amazingly simple method of critiquing your own work. When we read silently, we tend to "see" and "hear" what we intended to say rather than what we actually said. Reading out loud allows us to hear what we really wrote. There are, however, some tricks to reading out loud and some things to think about that will give you the most from this exercise.

1. Read your text exactly as it is written, as if it were someone else's writing. Don't make changes or fill in gaps as you go to make it sound smoother. You want to hear messy spots loud and clear. They should sound jarring, off -- that's the point! When we re-read, we tend to read what we intended to write rather than what we actually wrote down.
2. Read the punctuation that is there (or that isn't). If there is a comma, pause. If there aren't any commas where there should be, don't put them in. Stop at the end of each sentence. The point is to hear exactly what you wrote so that you can correct it.
3. Read very slowly. Rushing may get this over with faster, but reading too quickly won't give you a sense of the "sound" of your piece.
4. No whispering! No mumbling! Read loudly and enunciate clearly, as if you were giving an important public speech. Reading too quietly or not articulating clearly enough will make reading aloud useless. If your reading starts to sound like a robotic, monotone drone (à la Ben Stein), you won't notice any of the problem areas because everything will sound the same: boring.
5. Don't worry about sounding pompous, pretentious, or silly -- no one else is listening. Okay, that won't be true today when your group will be listening, but most of the time, you will probably be reading your paper aloud by yourself where fear of embarrassment won't be a distraction.
6. Listen as you read for spots that sound awkward, not as good as they could sound, more complex than is necessary, less detailed than they need be, etc. Also listen for those places that just don't say what you want them to say.
 - If you stumble over something, it's usually an indication that there's something wrong in that place.
 - Questions to ask yourself as you read aloud: Can I read a sentence in one breath? Or am I completely winded? Does the logic of the sentence work well? Or does it contain way too many thoughts? Do I use two words in a sentence that mean the same thing? Why do I stumble when I read this part?
 - The most common problem is over-complication, saying something in an unnecessarily complex way (you know to call this "Engfish"). For example, read the following sentence out loud and ask the questions above.
 - "There are a series of interlocking and interesting passages where the author's usage of pathos reveals itself to the reader as he/she reads and expresses the deep, emotional sentiments the writer uses through pathos, the use of an emotional appeal."
 - When you have time to go back and look at the places you mark (see #7 below), simplify and find the most direct way of saying what you want to say.
7. Mark those areas that have problems. Quickly underline or circle or highlight them, but don't interrupt your reading to correct them now. Go back to these spots later on, figure out the problem (wording, content), then work on fixing it.
8. Read your paper out loud more than once; several times, if you can. Ideally, you should read your paper aloud each time you make major revisions. You might read individual sections (especially important ones, like your thesis or introduction) more than a dozen times. That's not being obsessive; it's being concerned about your work. Keep in mind that most seemingly "effortless" pieces of writing, even those written in very casual, conversational style, probably involved many revisions and reworkings.

Much of this assignment is taken from the Assignment Sourcebook for Writing Teachers, developed by the Program in Writing and Rhetoric at SUNY Stony Brook. 08/17/2006