

Stutter Voice in Writing: Rethinking Dysfluency

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One's voice is partly a marker of one's authorial personality. Voice is both metaphorical and rhetorical. Further, the concept of voice embodies one's cognitive *and* auditory representation of oneself. Voice articulates an ethotic narrative, of sorts, that offers insight into the storyteller. I stutter. I have for as long as I can remember. My internal dialogue has to accommodate my outward voice, which can be dysfluent and haphazard. My voice, and yours too, carries with it personality and experience. The latter can be a burden. However, it is true to who we are. Our voice carries hopes and dreams, fears and ambitions. It can freeze us or free us.

As a writer, I recognize some level of liberation from my dysfluency when I write. So, *in theory*, I can write anything I want without dysfluency. But my thoughts are constructed by my experience as a dysfluent speaker, so my thoughts are driven by how I might "say" it, *even though it is written*. In other words, the proverbial baggage of being a dysfluent speaker is never far from my writing, and as such, dysfluency informs my writing. While I may not actually "stutter" when I write or think, both of those activities are affected by my dysfluency. When writing, I ponder how to phrase a sentence and that, more often than not, forces me to consider how I would verbalize it, which in turn makes me reconsider the phrasing. It becomes a rhetorical cycle of specificity, clarity, and ability. Specificity is needed to connect concepts and ideas in the usual academic ways to other concepts and to the realities we engage with daily. In similar fashion, clarity focuses me to convey meaning in productive and understandable ways, which is balanced by the specificity of the idea.¹ However, the most complex part of this triad is my ability.

Regardless of the precision and understandability of my thoughts, *I am bound by my body's ability (or lack thereof) to speak them*. This next observation, to my knowledge, has yet to be made regarding the impact of dysfluent speech upon writing. It reflects my personal experience, obviously, but it is worth asking whether other writers with "stutter voice" have experienced the same. As to my ability, I have to choose my words with the understanding that I may need to speak to others or read aloud portions of my written word. In this sense, I am bound (literally and figuratively) by the biomechanical nature of creating voice/sound, because I might need to produce the sounds of my written words. To be even more pointed, stuttering is part of who I am; I

¹In some respects, dysfluency has added concision, clarity, and simplicity to my writing style—qualities valued by the classical rhetoricians, the Stoics especially.

carry my baggage wherever I go (as do we all). As part of that, I feel as if I'm revising my thoughts, my words, and my prose, and reworking them all the time. This ongoing and continuous process is exhausting.

Of course, my perspective may not be understood or shared by others. Many people who have heard stuttering recognize it as a repetition of a word or a block where the speaker is unable to produce sound. People who stutter have a stigma stuck to them. It is thick and unrelenting, much like the stutter itself. In my dissertation, I noted comments in various academic journals (1917–1960s) related to stuttering or similar speech dysfluencies:

[People who stutter] are described as diseased (Mones 20), egoists (Mones 21), nervously deranged (Mones 23), defective (Martin 23), weak hearted (Poley 491), basket cases (Mauk 291), grotesque (Fielder 4), and independent scholar, Miriam Brody (165) suggests that even Fred Newton Scott refers to those, like me, who speak with occasional dysfluency, as possibly “of primitive races” (2). And it gets worse; Clarence Stratton admits that it is a “terrible affliction to make stutterers speak” but he doesn’t end there; he writes, it’s “especially terrible to the listeners” (466). Perhaps the most damning is speech educator Clarence T. Simon’s suggestion that “The most intelligent comments made by students *lose their value* when they are uttered with a painful stutter [emphasis added]” (142). He explains, “the content of their recitations is obscured in *our* amusement, annoyance, or shock at the manner of their speaking [emphasis added]” (142). Simon views comments made with dysfluency as invalid because he and other students cannot overcome the dysfluency of the speaker. Simon continues and contends that the goal of speech training should be to make those that are dysfluent “normal individuals” (143). (Meyer 18–19)

Through this brief overview, the listeners of people who happen to stutter are burdened by our speech and, more importantly, our speech is discounted before it is even complete. Even today, stuttering is treated as a condition that requires treatment, therapy, or some kind of technological intervention. More precisely, we are told it *needs* to be treated, because it’s not normal, nor is it seen as normal, or at least not normal enough. Yet, no one is perfectly fluent. As children, dysfluent speakers are often relentlessly teased by others (as many children are for any number of nonsensical reasons). But our means of communication, our speech, is the focus of critique. This burden of being misunderstood and marginalized can be debilitating, fatiguing, even paralyzing. Most people who stutter, I believe, recognize these feelings and these burdens.

While the above contains typical comments about speech dysfluency, Robert Zoellner is not so entirely dismissive of us; he writes, “the vocal non-fluencies which comprise stuttering may [...] conceivably have some functional, diagnostic, or remedial connection to the scribal non-fluencies that the English teacher encounters in the classroom” (290). Zoellner suggests that we need to study stuttering because it may provide insight into writing and ways to help students improve it. However, this comment is more a digression than an idea to explore, being but one phrase in a fifty-page article.

It's only in the last ten or so years that stuttering or verbal dysfluency has been taken up in disability studies and other related journals.²

While Zoellner never seems to have followed up on his digression, more recent scholars have, such as Joshua St. Pierre and Chris Eagle.³ Both have positioned their work as questioning the notion that we must all speak fluently or what's understood as "normally." Of course the idea that we can all speak fluently (or should) is impossible, and even possibly offensive. Very little consideration has been given to the possibilities of dysfluency. Too few have asked such questions like, "In what ways might stuttering be seen as positive or have potential?" So much has been written about it as a problem to solve (i.e., the medical model), but so little has been written about what it offers. If I were to apply "vocal non-fluencies" to "scribal non-fluencies" (as Zoellner suggests), I might look to the teaching of writing and, more specifically, underprepared writers. Some writing teachers focus on grammatical error as "the problem to fix," whereas writing theory reminds us that students' grammatical competence rises or falls in accordance with their command of the subject matter. When a student is struggling to master a subject—that is, is struggling to master *the discourse* of a subject, learning the vocabulary and its methodologies—the grammar reflects that struggle. Until students learn to think within their subjects, *how can they write within them fluently?* Surely "writer's block," where one gets stuck (often in mid-sentence, uncertain how to finish) is itself a sort of dysfluency, perhaps better termed "thinker's block." This is a topic worth further exploring.

Regardless, in a response to an AAUP report entitled, *Accommodating Faculty Members Who Have Disabilities*, I participated in a forum with several scholars. The AAUP report provided for increased recognition of faculty with disabilities. I, along with several other disability scholars, wrote a response cheering the awareness but critical of several aspects of it. My concluding remarks there allow for some additional mileage here: "My point is that the report focuses on what faculty members must do to be considered equal instead of on what they are able to do. The result is that disabled faculty members are confined by and often must defend their disability instead of being free to utilize it." In other words, the narratives created about me confine me in other people's eyes. *Their* narratives and perceptions affect *me*.

Now, let me turn it around to you.

Unless one stutters, one probably does not (really) understand stuttering. Imagine beginning to speak: your thoughts and the words become sound and others turn their attention to you. Then, one of (at least) two things happens.

On one hand, you start a word and one of the syllables gets carried away, overly excited and repeats itself over and over and over. Like you're on a roller coaster and you just went past a high point and you're charging down a slope repeating yourself over and over, and you can't stop it. You have no control over it. The repetition has control over

²Much discussion and scholarship in the field of communication science and disorders has been done, partly driven by Charles Van Riper's extensive and foundational work, most notably *The Nature of Stuttering* (1971) and *The Treatment of Stuttering* (1973).

³For example, see St. Pierre's recent book, *Cheap Talk* (2022) and Eagle's *Dysfluencies: On Speech Disorders in Modern Literature* (2013).

you; it's dictating what sounds you're making, what speed they are being produced at, and the elongation of them. You are locked into a feedback loop and it could be aching seconds before it eases. Your stomach pushing on your lungs only deepens the repetition, until finally the roller coaster is forced back up, clicking past the safety locks as you think it's over, but then the next steep slope, and it's out of control again. Each breath, like another steep slope, may (or may not) bring another repetition. You don't know if you'll spin into the loop or slip through it.

On the other hand, without warning, your voice and sound stop and the mechanical features (mouth, throat, vocal cords, etc.) of your voice stop working. You cannot move; they cannot move, but your mind is racing, asking what is happening and how do you get out of this thick mud. Maybe your eyes bulge, your mouth freezes, your fist clenches, or even your breathing stops. A momentary inability to breathe forces your mind to instinctively panic. People are looking away, uncertain of how to react to you. Their eyes widen; they are frozen too. Your voice has been snatched away from you; you know what you are saying and what you're planning to say. But you can't. The mud surrounds you and you feel like you're suffocating. Then just as quickly as these feelings came on, they are gone. But they are always there, and you know they are always there. And they can (and will) return at any time with limited, if any, warning.

That is what stuttering is like for me. My speech dysfluency is part of my voice. My voice is part of my dysfluency. We dance. We step on each other's feet a lot. I'm not a good dancer. But we dance because speaking is one vital way I communicate to the outside world. The biomechanical aspects of my voice have more control over my voice compared to other people. My own body can stop me. This uncontrolled repetition or blocking is not like your talking. I assume most people think words and say them with little consideration as to *how* to say them or how they might sound as they leave your body. I have no choice *but* to think of how to say them, or even *if* I *can* say them. Do I say a word fast to give the impression of a casual tone? Do I say it slowly, focusing on every syllable to make sure I articulate each one fully in hopes of wrestling it into submission? Do I speak softly and hope for a tacit understanding of my words? Do I add an accent to fool my brain for a minute in order to get the word out? Do I say another word in place of the word I want to use, which is often shorter, less complex, or just not quite right? Do I spell the word out or say a condensed version when I know I cannot say it? Do I start the word and hope some brave soul steps up and says the word I'm stuck on, so we can continue our dance of communication? None of these questions can be answered now. They are in the moment and transitory. As you can see, giving myself voice is a complex endeavor.



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