

Burnt Tongue: A Writing Technique

- First, let's establish this right from the start—this technique works best when used in moderation; or more like, it's used best when the author wants to say something in such a way that the reader is forced to slow down and pay attention—but that only works well if it stands out from the rest of the writing—so moderation is key.
- Why use it? According to Chuck Palahniuk, Burnt Tongue is often used to:
 - “Creat[e] a sense of immediacy in the story,” which means making the phrasing and word choice reflect the narrator's voice in such way that it shows the narrator to be unique, emotional—and real. This is not dialect. This is not an accent. This is the way someone might phrase or word something because of who they are and the circumstances of the event.
 - “Slow the reader and force them to pay close attention,” which means the author wants the reader to pay attention to a particular detail, an idea really, usually conveyed with one unusual BT word. Marrigability.
 - “Creat[e] interest with poetic or unusual language,” which is close to his second reason for using it, but a little different; in that, here the author is not trying to capture a real authentic voice or force the reader to consider an idea as much as they are catching the reader's eye and making the reader consider what is being written. This one is my favorite. It can be used with either third person POV or first person.
- Diccio's Revised Version b/c he thinks Palahniuk's is incomplete and has inconsistencies.
 - *So, here goes. First, what I agree with.* Palahniuk's “Burnt Tongue” comes from the teachings of Gordon Lish and Paul Spanbauer who basically named and expanded on a common writing technique, a technique where writers, via their narrators word something in a way that no one else would, a way that is original, sometimes beautiful, sometimes ugly, but always different. It should be no surprise to any writer to learn that writers purposely manipulate their language to produce a desired effect--it's called *writing*. However, what Palahniuk and his mentors do a good job of is making new writers aware of something that becomes second-nature for seasoned writers. It's good to know when you're “burning” and maybe why. Is it between sections to mark a change in the story? Is it at the beginning? Does it show intensely a beautiful or scary moment? A painful one that becomes hyper-intensified by a pumped-up prose that slow motions the moment with poetic nuances? If the moment's not important and suddenly the language is awesome or different--why? Can you harness that skill and let it loose somewhere else in the story, if only for a line or two?

- o *Where I slightly disagree and will expand.* Let me clarify here, because what I'm disagreeing with, Palahniuk contradicts himself about anyway. He both defines Burnt Tongue as a method of making the language wrong and then as "poetic or unusual language." So, which is it? I want to open it up to both. Instead of thinking of Burnt Tongue as one or the other, consider it a method of pulling in the reader more closely or slowing them down or making the reader linger, forcing the reader to appreciate a moment or a section or something. Sometimes "Burnt Tongue" means you're "burning" and you're on fire, and your prose is electric, the kind of current that won't let the reader let go. Other times, yeah, you might use an odd simile or a weird word or metaphor that stops the reader in his/her tracks. Maybe the word is awkward and makes the reader pause. Maybe the simile is so different it reads like wet lightning buzzing a yellow kiddie pool. So recap - when you manipulate the language anyway you, the writer, sees fit to grab the reader's attention. Poetic language (burning). Weird words. Awkward phrasing. Different similes. Imaginative metaphors. Language reflective of a flustered or emotional 1POV narrator (*she sat down and who cares and here goes and blue balloons popping*). Burnt Tongue or Burning — saying something in a way no one else would--original and different.

- **Below are author Chuck Palahniuk's thoughts on the BT technique & Amy Hempel's usage of it:**

"The next aspect, Spanbauer calls "burnt tongue." A way of saying something, but saying it wrong, twisting it to slow down the reader. Forcing the reader to read close, maybe read twice, not just skim along a surface of abstract images, short-cut adverbs, and clichés.

In minimalism, clichés are called "received text."

In *The Harvest*, Hempel writes, "I moved through the days like a severed head that finishes a sentence." Right here, you have her "horses" of death and dissolution *and* her writing a sentence that slows you to a more deliberate, attentive speed.

Oh, and in minimalism, no abstracts. No silly adverbs like *sleepily, irritably, sadly*, please. And no measurements, no feet, yards, degrees or years-old. The phrase "an 18-year-old girl" -- what does *that* mean?

In *The Harvest*, Hempel writes, "The year I began to say *vahz* instead of *vase*, a man I barely knew nearly accidentally killed me."

Instead of some dry age or measurement, we get the image of someone just becoming sophisticated, plus there's burnt tongue, plus she uses her "horse" of mortality."

BURNT TONGUE ASSIGNMENT

For this unit, you're to write a story or a poem that incorporates the Burnt Tongue technique. Use class discussion, notes, and the models to refine where you burn and how you burn. Try the different versions of the technique if possible, and consider, both in your own writing and during workshopping of others, if the burning/burnt tongue works, to what effect. Is where it is used appropriate or best? Could it better serve the story or poem to play with the language at a different moment or to play (burn) with the language in a different way?

- The single piece can be as short as a decent-sized micro (250 words) or as long as a short story (1001 words and up) or it can be poem with a page worth of stanzas or a series of individual poems (page worth)--either way, the big part is that you must evoke the burnt tongue technique at least **TWICE**, **bolding** wherever you burn (or underline in your notebooks).

Things to remember:

- The notes. The notes. The examples. The models. The notes. I wrote them for you.
- During the fall semester, I studied the how of happiness like a Tibetan monk, letting Grandma Ruth's antique candle collection burn down to little black nubs that reminded me my time at Darthmon was over soon like a barn burning in dry July, in my dry mind, in this stupid flammable dorm room far from my father's farm.
- My synesthesia breakfast consisted of a porcelain bowl of blue.

Day 1-2: Review of technique and professional models - 1/8, 1/9

Day 3: Review of Notes & Assignment - 1/9 (Tues)

Day 4-6: Writing Day I, II, III - 1/10, 1/11, 1/12

Day 7: Workshop 1/16 (Tues)

Day 8: Workshop/Revision 1/17

Day 9: Share Day 1/18

Submitting to e-portfolio

***Like all units/schedules, this is subject to change. More time may be required at different points. Don't panic! We'll adjust!