



Teaching Voice in Writing

We've all heard teachers talk about "voice" – how a piece of writing somehow has it – or doesn't. Often referred to as "author's voice," it is a frequently misunderstood concept, an illusive quality that often seems difficult, if not impossible to teach. In fact, some people feel that authors are either blessed with the gift of "voice" or not, or they believe that writers can only discover their voice through writing a lot. While it's true that consistent practice in the art and craft of writing is a necessity for improvement, it is also true that ***an understanding and emergence of voice can be nurtured and honed through awareness, discovery and informed teaching.*** In other words, teachers can, without a doubt, help in the development of "voice" in their students' writing.

Let's begin with a definition of "voice". Voice can be described as the unique quality, tone, or style that jumps off the page in a given piece of writing – but while voice involves tone and style, style and tone are not synonymous with voice. "Voice" in a piece of writing also takes on different meaning according to the genre and purpose.

Voice in Narrative Writing

Character's Voice – Yes, Author's Voice – No

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The term "author's voice" has no place in narrative writing. "Voice", yes—"author's voice", no. In a piece of narrative writing (defined here as a story written about a character who encounters a problem, adventure, or significant personal experience) **the voice which emerges must belong to the MAIN CHARACTER**, not the author. What does this mean? Think of a number of unique, memorable, fictional characters from literature – it might be Barbara Park's comic heroine, Junie B. Jones, Katherine Paterson's tough talking foster child, Gilly Hopkins, Roahl Dahl's quirky and kind Big Friendly Giant. Each point of view character is defined, we see their view of the world, their attitudes and feelings about life, through the words they speak as well as the thoughts they ponder. Their inner and outer "voice" is consistent in pattern, word choice, rhythm and attitude. Everything about each carefully chosen word resonates the personality, experience, age, education, values, beliefs and feelings of our point of view character.

This is precisely why "author's voice" does not apply to narrative writing. In the Junie B. Jones series, we never get a sense of author Barbara Park's voice – in fact, her unique voice – that of a mature woman – would diminish and undermine our heroine, Junie B. Jones. Years ago, in a writing class presented by Newbery Award winner Patricia Reilly Giff, I had my first lesson in "voice". Giff, in discussing her art of writing

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for children, stated that every sentence, phrase, word or thought from the main character must align perfectly with the age, experience, and personality of that character. Tempting as it may be to use impressive vocabulary within the author's grasp to more easily depict meaning, believable characters are revealed when the voice the author assigns them is completely consistent with who they are – not with who the author is!

And, voice involves not only what the main character says and thinks – **the “voice” of this character might better be thought of as a lens through which the reader experiences every aspect of the story.**

Therefore, when the author wants to describe a story critical character, setting, or object, she/he must do so only in and through the life experience, strengths and weaknesses, prejudices, beliefs, and vocabulary of the main, point of view character. When an author uses sophisticated segments of description inconsistent with the main character's world view, or steps back and draws from their all-knowing author's perspective and experience, this diminishes character and pulls the reader out of the story world.

Let's look at an example of “voice” in a fictional setting. Think about the following scene – a character is considering taking a swim in a watering hole.

Character 1 – a mischievous eight year old boy:

It was so way hot and phew! Even my shirt was all stuck to my back and what I really wanted was a blue popsicle or maybe a Gatorade. My mouth got all watery thinking about it which made it worse even. But that wasn't gonna happen – the popsicle that is – no way – me and Jerry, we were way out there in the woods and that's when I 'membered the mudhole behind the trees. Not a mudhole really, it was like a pond, but a small one. Yeah, we could take a dip! That slowpoke Jerry was not even near me, he was walkin' slow way behind. “Hey, slug, (that's what my poppy called me when I was dallying) “last one to the mudhole is a...”

Jeez, it was too hot to think... “last one is a...a... big dumbhead!” I got a headstart cause I started runnin' right when I called out “slug”. I don't think Jerry even heard, but when I took off, he took off too. I could hear his big feet coming up in back of

Character 2 – an introspective young woman

Sophie felt the sweat tickling and trailing down the small of her back and soaking her gauzy white blouse. She ran a hand through her hair, which felt even longer and thicker in the humidity of the afternoon. The sun filtered through the trees and dappled the leaves on the ground. The heat, even in the shade of the woods, was uncomfortable, but Sophie went with it, preferring to allow her movements, her breathing, even her thoughts to slow down accordingly. ‘Torpid’ was a word that hovered at the edges of her brain, which she acknowledged and dismissed without conscious thought.

A hint of green-blue up ahead caught her eye and she felt something inside her stir. She'd almost forgotten the water hole, where she and her cousins had splashed as children. The idea took hold gently, and by the time she stood at the edge of the small murky pool, she had peeled away her damp clothing. Sophie felt the cool, still water lap her ankles as she slipped into the past.

Each character is revealed through both voice and action. Neither could be confused with the other—they are each unique. The action, description, thoughts, words, and feelings depicted are consistent with the way each respective character views and responds to the world.



Voice in Expository/Informative Writing Author's Voice – Yes

We can certainly talk about “author’s voice”. Since the author is writing exposition to inform the reader, there exists a relationship between the two. Therefore, the reader is exposed to, and responds to, literally, the “author’s voice”.

Contrary to what many people have been taught, **expository or informational writing need not be dry, dull, or boring**. “Encyclopedia Voice” is a detriment to the delivery of information, as it does nothing to interest the reader – in fact it can bore them to tears. **Another fallacy** is the notion that expository writing should never involve first person point of view – that the author should never personally address the reader. William Zinsser, in his marvelous book “On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction”, discusses its use:

“What I’m always looking for as an editor is a sentence that says something like ‘I’ll never forget the day when I...’ I think, Aha! A person!”

“Writers are obviously at their most natural when they write in the first person. Writing is an intimate transaction between two people, conducted on paper, and it will go well to the extent that it retains its humanity. Therefore I urge people to write in the first person: to use ‘I’ and ‘me’ and ‘we’ and ‘us’.”

It is, therefore, **impossible to have voice in a piece of exposition if the humanity, the first person perspective, is removed**. And, unlike in narrative writing, in expository writing we welcome the “real” voice of the author. It can be interesting, entertaining, and exciting to feel as though we know the writer, that this person is actually speaking to us.

Often times, in exposition, it is **the topic that influences the style and tone of the piece**. The topic also determines the extent to which the author’s personality dominates. Take, for example, a piece of writing about the possible extinction of the great apes. This topic calls for a serious tone. A lighthearted or glib tone would appear at odds with the content of the piece. Does the author need to wear a scholarly or academic hat, a casual, playful hat, a serious or cautionary hat? Depending on the topic and purpose of the piece, the author’s voice needs to correspond consistently in word choice, tone, and style.

Another aspect of voice in expository writing mirrors our voice in the real world. Anyone who has had to make their way in the world understands that we often alter our voices according to the intended audience. We might relay information to our children one way, to our spouse, a friend, our boss, the queen, another way. We use casual language with our friends, formal language with a dignitary. **In writing, authors identify their target audience and consistently address this audience in the tone and style they will likely respond to best.**

continued

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Let's look at two examples of voice excerpted from a piece about kids learning to play the piano:

Ex. 1 – Audience: Parents

Those piano lessons you're pushing on your reluctant ten year old, stressful though they may be, will pay off down the line. No one was worse than me as a kid, giving my mother (bless her soul!) a run for her money every day at practice time. She had to round me up, tear me away from my friends, sit me down on the bench, and then listen to me moan and watch me squirm for the required half an hour. I learned, through her calm persistence, that I might as well apply myself, since I was wasting a half hour anyway. She always smiled and said, "Someday you'll thank me!" She stuck to her guns, and offered HIGH PRAISE when my dirty little fingers produced anything that remotely resembled music. After awhile a surprising thing began to happen – the scales and Hanon exercises started to pay off and my fingers gained some kinesthetic knowledge of their own. I discovered, to my reluctant delight, that I COULD PLAY! The key was consistency, her quiet but unfailing persistence, and her confidence and belief that she was giving me a gift I could not yet recognize.

The author's voice here is conversational, light, and warm. It feels as though this is someone you could chat with at the soccer field or at a dinner party. The voice is unassuming and hints at a good sense of humor. It is the voice of someone who has learned something in spite of himself, and offers encouragement for those guiding their child through this process.

Ex. 2 – Audience: Piano Teachers

The challenge in teaching piano to children is not in acquiring students, rather it is in keeping students motivated and engaged. A "one size fits all" approach will leave you with only a handful of students. The gifted, in-demand pedagogue is the one who sees each student and adapts a balanced combination of technique, repertoire, and theory in a variety of ways based on the ability, attention span, maturity, and personality of the individual student. This involves a good deal of careful observation, time spent researching or creating appropriate music and material, and taking the time and energy to pinpoint the motivational devices that move a student to want to practice. Of course, demonstrating a real passion and zest for your own playing, and sharing that freely is often the most powerful way to intrigue and motivate your young protégés. At a recent conference on piano pedagogy and methodology we explored a variety of specific strategies which I will share.

The author's voice here is more authoritative and serious. There is a no-nonsense tone, and the word choice suggests an author well-versed in her topic. This is an author who would capture the attention of her audience through her clear grasp of the topic at hand and her readers would read on, expecting to receive some practical, seasoned advice.

Clearly, in expository writing, **the voice that the author projects must be appropriate to her/his purpose and audience.** The voice will either invite or put off the reader, inspire confidence or doubt, empathy or disdain, and project credibility or inexperience. The word choice, sentence structure, tone, and style all contribute to the voice in the piece. Because the purpose and audience may vary piece to piece, the author will likely adjust his/her voice accordingly.

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How to Teach Voice?

In narrative writing, focusing on the main character, the point of view character, is critical. Encourage your students to know their characters through and through – what is the age, social status, personality, life experience of this character? Where does the character live, who and what does the character care about? What does this character like to do? What is the character afraid of? What does the main character want most of all? This is the lens through which every thought, word, and action should be crafted so that the character seems genuine and that the character's words are consistent with her/his experience, feelings, and motivations.

This kind of thinking – aligning a character's words with thoughts, motivations, and experience requires a level of personal life experience that may be beyond the developmental capacity of younger students. It requires quite a lot of interaction and observation of others in the context of the real world. Therefore, while you can point out certain touchstones that point to the creation of voice, what it ultimately requires is time. An author develops voice in narrative writing over time, with much practice, through a keen awareness of what it is that makes people (and therefore characters) tick.

Developing the author's voice in expository writing is somewhat easier. Students can be directed to assume the stance and expression of any number of personas relative to their topic in order to raise their awareness of "voice". – How would a teacher say this? How might your grandma say it? How would you say it if you were speaking to the president? How would you say it if you were speaking to your best friend? Can you name the tone? Is it serious? Academic? Friendly? Humorous? Look at the words you chose – are they serious, academic, friendly or humorous? Every word must match the tone! Try writing a piece about, for example, penguins. Write it in an academic tone, then in a humorous tone. Who might the audience be for each? These are the considerations authors of expository pieces must make relative to voice.

As you read – magazines, novels, journals, newspapers- begin to do so with an eye and ear for voice. Begin to read with "author's eyes" in order to continually develop an awareness of the sometimes seemingly intangible, yet consciously, intentionally crafted quality we call "voice". What you will notice is that when "voice" is done well, we simply enjoy the writing, but when it is done thoughtlessly or inconsistently it begins to jump out at you. Have these conversations with your students as they read, and later, as they write. Awareness is always the first step toward application.