

Writing and Communication Center

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Voice in Writing

“Voice is the single most important element in writing. . . . Voice separates writing that is not read from writing that is read.”

(Murray, 1984)

- A Writer’s Voice: Why Voice Matters
- What Is a Writer’s Voice?
- Consider This
- A Range of Voices: Personal, Academic, and Detached
- Tips for Developing Voice

A Writer’s Voice

Readers react to powerful writing; they are moved by the words—sparks ignite. When writers write from their own voice, the words feel “real” and jump out at the reader. A connection is formed between the writer and the reader, as if “eye contact” has been made.

Because writing exists without the benefit of eye contact, gesture, expression, body movements, spoken inflection—all the things we normally do to reinforce our speech—we need to compensate with our written voice. With voice, our writing comes across as a conversation between two individuals: the writer and the reader. It becomes more personal, more sincere, and more believable.

What Is a Writer’s Voice?

According to Peter Elbow:

“Voice...is what most people have in their speech but lack in their writing.”

“Voice, in writing, implies words that capture the sound of an individual on the page.”

“Writing with voice is writing into which someone has breathed...writing *without*

voice is wooden or dead because it lacks sounds, rhythm, energy, and individuality.”

According to Donald Murray:

“We must teach ourselves to recognize our own voice. We want to write in a way that is natural for us, that grows out of the way we think, the way we see, the way we care.”

Consider This: How Do Your Words Sound?

Does your written voice represent your true self, or does it resemble a voice that you have imagined will impress your reader? If your own voice has been disguised to impress your reader it's likely the reader will see right through your façade and will question your credibility.

A Range of Voices

Voice can establish a relationship between the writer and reader that ranges from intimate to detached. It all depends on the writer's choice of words.

Fear of writing badly can hold people back from writing with a powerful voice, and an academic audience can be especially intimidating. Yet any kind of writing, from personal to academic, can have real voice or lack of voice. The following examples show a range of writing with varying degrees of voice:

Personal Voice

The example below comes from a journal entry from a Writing Center consultant, describing a student's writing:

She was out to control her words rather than experience them. She held the power over her words like a master who whips his dogs. Her words were well disciplined, but they didn't lick me in the face.
(Opsata, 1994)

Although this informal piece of writing is not as personal as a letter to a friend, it's emotional and visual, which allows the reader to easily connect with what the writer is saying. Words like *control*, *power*, *master*, *whips*, and *disciplined* jump out at the reader. The phrase “but they didn't lick me in the face” helps to make the visual and emotional connection. Because the reader gets a strong sense of how the writer feels about the subject, the reader becomes involved—and a relationship with the writer is established.

Academic Voice

Although more distance may exist between the writer and reader in academic writing than in personal writing, academic voice can and should be vigorous and lively; it need not be impersonal. Below, the previous example of personal voice has been re-written to illustrate a more distant academic voice:

Because the student was overly concerned with using proper grammar and punctuation, she failed to recognize the significance of using her own words. As a result, her paper appeared stiff. Rather than producing invigorating prose, she had successfully completed a mechanical task.

This piece of writing conveys the same message as the previous example, but it's more formal and informative. For instance, the subject is first referred to as "the student," and we learn about the student's concern for writing "proper grammar and punctuation." More analysis of the student's writing has been offered, through phrases such as "failed to recognize the significance" and "as a result." The passage lacks the effects of visualization. However, we still get a sense of the writer's reaction to the student's paper, and descriptions such as *stiff*, *invigorating*, and *mechanical* help to paint a picture, which connects the reader to the writer.

Detached Voice

The following example reflects the same message as above but severely detaches the writer from the reader:

The choice of words is an important factor in the facilitation of communication.

Although the wording is more economical, the writer's voice somehow got lost in the editing process. The words come across as stark and impersonal. The reader feels no connection with these words, which results in a lack of power—and not spark.

Tips for Developing Voice

- Write about something important to you. If your topic has been assigned, find something that interests you in the topic.
- Be yourself—sound genuine.
- Relax and have confidence.
- If you aren't allowed to use "I," at least think "I" while you write, or write the first draft in the first person and then take the "I"s out.
- Practice writing without editing yourself—frequent and regular freewriting exercises are the best way to get your voice into your writing.
- Read your writing out loud to hear how it sounds.
- Ask several readers to give you feedback on your writing. Where do they really believe your words are sincere and where do they believe you have doubts?
- Expect a reaction—good or bad—from your writing with voice; it will most likely stir your reader.
- If the fear of your audience's expectations intimidates you, practice writing without an audience.
- Don't be intimidated by the power you have to affect others with strong writing, even though it may make you feel exposed and vulnerable.
- Resolve to make a personal commitment to your writing—listen to your voice and to the imagined response of your reader.

Sources:

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Murray, Donald. *Write to Learn*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984.

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