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MAKING SURE YOUR VOICE IS PRESENT

Learning Objectives

- Write in an original voice
- Distinguish between formal and informal occasions for writing

by Kyle Stedman

The Terror of Voice

I like order. I love the comfort of a beautiful and functional Excel spreadsheet. I organize my CDs by genre and then alphabetically by artist. I eat three meals a day.

But my love of order sometimes butts heads with my love of writing. That's because no matter how much attention I pay to following the rules of writing, I know that to produce writing that astounds readers—moving them, making them gasp, enticing them—I'll have to include more than just correct writing. I'll need to find a way to make my voice present.

And sometimes, that terrifies me with the uncertainty of it all. I sometimes wish writing excellently were like working in Excel. I know I can make a spreadsheet *absolutely perfect* if my formulas are coded properly and my data is lined up correctly. Writing excellently is messier than that: it means admitting the difficult truth that even when everything in my essay follows all the grammatical and mechanical rules, my writing can still lack qualities that will make my readers' eyes pop out of their heads with delightful surprise.

I often tell my students that the difference between *A*-level and *B*-level writing is voice. In other words, essays often deserve *B*'s even when they have perfect punctuation and grammar, an intriguing concept, brilliant ideas, excellent and well-integrated sources, and a Works Cited page that would earn a standing ovation at the annual

MLA convention. An essay can have all of those things but still feel dry and voiceless, reading like a dying man trudging through the desert, sandal-slap after sandal-slap, lifeless sentence after lifeless sentence.

So What is Voice in Writing?

“Voice” is a weird term, right? We usually say your *voice* is the quality of how you sound when you talk out loud—but aren’t we talking about writing?

First, let’s think about everything that makes your speaking voice distinctive. It has its own aural quality, formed by the size of your mouth, throat, and tongue, along with your distinctive habits of how you use your body to manipulate the sound of the air exhaling from your lungs.

But beyond the sounds your body naturally produces through your mouth, you also have your own way of choosing words, and that’s part of your voice, too. You have words you use more often than others, phrases you rely on, and ways you make the musical tone of your voice go up and down in distinct ways. All of those choices are partly based on how you learned to speak in your family and culture, and they’re partly based on what you bring to the table as an individual. Sometimes you just let out whatever you’re thinking, and sometimes you pause to consider how you want to sound.

Don’t miss that: qualities of spoken voice are, to some extent, *chosen*. Depending on where and when and with whom we’re speaking, our voice can change.

Now let’s turn to writing. I would define voice in writing as *the quality of writing that gives readers the impression that they are hearing a real person, not a machine*. Voice in writing is therefore multifaceted: it’s partly an unconscious, natural ring that dwells in the words you write, but it’s also related to the words you choose (stuffy and overused or fresh and appealing?), the phrases you rely on (dictionary-like or lively?), and how you affect your readers’ emotions (bored or engaged?). And it’s not something that is magically there for some writers and not there for others. Voice is something that can be cultivated, practiced, watered, even designed.

I’m reminded of a quote from poet D.A. Powell, which I heard on the trailer for a documentary called *Bad Writing*. He says, “Bad art is that which does not succeed in cleansing the language of its dead—stinking dead—usages of the past.”¹ Voice in writing is like that: it gives readers the sense that they’re hearing a fresh, cleansed voice unlike any they’ve heard before. The writing in this documentary is called “bad” because of its lack of an authentic voice.

1. MorrisHillPictures, “Bad Writing – Official Trailer,” YouTube, April 13, 2010, accessed May 24, 2011. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=raWLS2_PeFl

We Need Voice in Academic Writing, Too

A common misconception among writers is that writing for college, especially in a fancy-looking, citation-filled essay, should have the complexity and difficulty of *Pride and Prejudice*: “She is all affability and condescension, and I doubt not but you will be honoured with some portion of her notice when service is over” (Austen).² That is, we sometimes assume that academic writing is where we say things with big words and in roundabout ways that seem sort of something like what we imagine talk is like around a gilded dinner table in a palace, somewhere.

I think this assumption is wrong. Even when reading essays that were written for college classes, readers don’t want to be bored or confused. They want liveliness; they want voice.

I recently taught a class that focused entirely on blogging for the first thirteen weeks of the course, followed by a final academic essay at the end of the semester. Students regularly asked me what style they should adopt in their final essay, how formal to be, what kind of voice to adopt. To most of the students, my reply was, “Write it how you wrote your blog!” To which almost all of them said, “Huh? That was *informal*. This is *formal*.” To which I said, “You’re partly right. You paid less attention to details when you were blogging, sure, but your voices were there. You used sentences that sounded like you! They were *resonant*! I was *moved*! Do you hear the *italics* in my voice? That’s how good your writing was! So don’t lose that by putting on a new coat of formality when it doesn’t fit well!” As the one who was going to read their academic essays, I was afraid that I was going to get a bunch of essays that sounded like *Pride and Prejudice*, with big words and roundabout sentence constructions. I wanted big, complex ideas in these final essays, but I also wanted stylistic liveliness, sentences that made me sit up straight and open my eyes wide. I admit that after the students had written first drafts of their essays, I backed off a little, and we talked about the ways that formal writing situations do indeed demand a different kind of voice than a blog post—but I was always insistent that *no* writing situation called for bored readers.

You should know this: teachers talk about their students. And I’ve heard the following story, or some variant of it, something like twenty times: “My student wrote this awful draft that confused me to no end. So I emailed the student and told him to come into my office to talk about it. And he gets there to my office and I say, ‘What are you trying to say on page 2?’ and he explains it, and—get this!—he explains it in this beautifully clear language, and it becomes clear that he knew all along what he wanted to talk about and how to defend it and even how his ideas relate to his sources. So I asked him, ‘Why didn’t you *write* it that way? Why don’t you write the way you talk?’ and you know what he says? He says, ‘Because I thought I was supposed to write formally.’ I swear, sometimes I think students get into more trouble trying to write formally than it’s worth.”

I’m serious. Every semester, I hear that story.

Of course, I see the other side: there’s a place for formality in a lot of writing. Depending on the

2. Jane Austen. *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) Project Gutenberg, September 5, 2010, accessed May 24, 2011.

circumstance, sometimes our most formal coat is indeed what we need to wear. In your future college classes, you might not get much of an idea from your professor about what kind of coat she expects you to wear, so you'll probably have to do some asking. ("Dear Professor X, I'm baffled about what kind of voice to use in my essay. For example, may I write the word *baffled*? Please send examples. Sincerely, Judy Jetson.")

My favorite trick here is one I learned from a small writing textbook called *They Say, I Say*: purposefully mixing the formal and informal in a single sentence or two. If you want to talk about something using a formal term, which is often a good idea in formal writing, use the formal term but then turn around and say it again informally. Like this: "Spoken voice is affected by our use of the epithelium, the vocal ligament, and the vocalis muscle. We've got a lot of ways to make sound." The authors of *They Say, I Say* remind us that "translating the one type of language into the other, the specialized into the everyday, can help drive home a point."³

That leads me to the stuff you're probably here for: actual ideas about how to get this elusive thing called voice into your writing.

Suggestions

1. *Trust the gush—but then come back to the gush with a critical eye.*

In one of my favorite articles about voice in writing, writing scholar Tom Romano tells the story of a student who turned in a piece of paper with the words "TRUST THE GUSH" messily scribbled on it. Romano expounds on what the phrase means to him:

Trusting the gush means moving on the heat quickening in you.

Trusting the gush means being fearless with language.

Trusting the gush means writing about what you are emotionally moved by and perhaps don't even know why.

Trusting the gush means putting onto the page those thoughts, connections, and perceptions that stand ready to be uttered. (51)⁴

It's beautiful advice that feels true to me. I've had times where I turn off the screen of my computer and write with no visual reference, letting words gush out of me in their most natural, voice-filled way.

But remember how I said that voice isn't just natural, it's also constructed for specific occasions? My gush is usually full of some good, usable words, phrases, and sentences, but it's also a big, gushy mess. So that's when I back away for a bit of time (more than a day, if possible), returning later to my gush in search of the lines that seem most lively, most full of voice, the ones that fit best into my current writing context.

2. *Don't be afraid to use some of speech's informalities, but always punctuate them in formal ways.*

3. Gerald Graff, Cathy Birkenstein, and Russel Durst, *They Say, I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing, with Readings* (New York: Norton, 2009), 118.

4. Tom Romano, "Writing with Voice," *Voices from the Middle* 11 no. 2 (2003): 50-55, NCTE, accessed May 24, 2011.

Sometimes students ask if they can use contractions in their academic essays, and I always say yes—but then I regret it when I get “theyre not understanding” and “he said your not smart enough” in submitted work. But on the flip side, I find I’m more willing to be lenient with student writing that is slightly too informal for my taste when the writer shows that she knows what she’s doing with her punctuation. Life is like that, you know? If you take one step of goodwill (knowing your punctuation), people want to give you lenience in other areas (accepting informality, even if it seems to step over the line).

This advice extends to colons (never mistaking them for semicolons and never using a hyphen as a colon), em-dashes (using them wisely and punctuating them perfectly, as two hyphens between two words and no spaces at all), and commas (especially when someone is being addressed, as in “I agree, Mr. President” and when introducing a quotation immediately after a verb, such as when I write, “Yessiree”).

3. *Read your work aloud—and don’t be afraid to have fun with it.*

I tell students to read their stuff aloud all the time, and usually I get a scared, silent look in return. (I think this look might mean, “Do you have any idea how stupid I would look if someone walked in while I was talking to myself?”) Well, fine—play around with it:

- Read your own stuff aloud to yourself. I like to do this after printing it out. Listen for places where you stumble, where you seem to be saying the same word over and over, where you think you might be boring. Peter Elbow justifies this well:

I find that when students have the repeated experience of reading their writing aloud, they are more likely to write sentences that are inviting and comfortable to recite—which in turn makes the sentences better for readers who get them in silence. Putting this differently, the sound of written words when spoken is a crucial benefit for silent readers, yet too few students hear the words they write. When they have to read their writing aloud frequently and thus hear it, they tend to listen more as they write—and readers hear more meaning as they read.⁵

- Have someone else read your stuff aloud to you, with another copy in front of yourself to follow along with and mark spots that feel voiceless. Ask your friend what sounded best, what s/he/they remember most on the sentence level, and/or where it sounded like *you*.
- Play The Boring Game: have three people sit down, each with a piece of paper with a line drawn through the middle; this is The Boring Line. Make one person the timekeeper. Start reading your essay out loud to them, and ask the timekeeper to raise his hand every thirty seconds. At those moments, the readers all make a dot on the paper to show how bored they are; a dot way above the boring line means they’re absolutely engaged, as if beautiful aliens had just transported into the room, while a dot way below the

5. Tom Romano, “Writing with Voice,” *Voices from the Middle* 11 no. 2 (2003): 50-55, NCTE, accessed May 24, 2011.

boring line means they're wondering why they agreed to play the stupid boring game with you. After the essay is done, ask them to connect the dots, showing you a line of where they were relatively more or less bored. Talk to them to help identify what parts of the essay bored them; you probably didn't have much voice in those spots.

4. *Surprise Your Readers*

I'm serious: make sure that throughout your piece, every once in a while you throw in a word or phrase that makes you think, "I bet they *never* saw that one coming!" (In this piece that you're reading now, one of my attempts at that is my first heading, "The Terror of Voice." I'm counting on readers thinking, "Wait, the *terror* of voice? . . . I'm confused! I'd better read on to figure out what he means!")

My guess is that with a little practice, this won't be too hard to achieve. You could read through a draft of something and highlight (either on paper or the computer) every place where you think you're breaking the expectation of your reader in a surprising way, whether because of the topic you chose to dive into or because of a phrase or sentence they might not have seen coming. Then you skim back through and find places without any highlights around, and try to work something in there.

As with most of my suggestions, this can backfire if you take it too far, which is why I think playing The Boring Game (above) is so important, so you can feel out your choices with real people. Obviously, your readers will be surprised if you start slamming sexually explicit words onto the screen, but that's clearly not the kind of voice I'm talking about. Less dramatically, I've been in situations where I go for a strong, surprising personal voice and later discover (on my own, or with the help of someone else) that it's just not working for that audience.

This happened to me recently when I was writing a piece about integrating sources into essays. I worked up this detailed analogy involving Jane Austen, gardens, statues, and helicopters (seriously), and I even kept the analogy through a few drafts. But a friend, whom I had asked to read my draft, told me she was a little confused by the whole thing. At first I ignored her—I was being surprising! There were helicopters—*helicopters*! But eventually, I realized she was right; I had to back down and rework my surprising analogy into something that just plain made more sense. The revised version was still surprising (involving Spider-Man), but it was surprising *and it worked*. There's a difference.

5. *Use Rhetorical Figures to Help Shape Your Sentences*

Sometimes we hear or read something and say, "Wow, there was so much power in those words!" And sometimes, we fall for a common lie: we think that powerful speakers and writers are just plain born that way, that their skill comes from some indefinable something that they have and we don't.

I like rhetorical figures because they expose that thinking as a lie.

Since the days of classical Greece and Rome, instructors in rhetoric have realized that this lie existed, so they formulated organized ways of figuring out what exactly makes some speaking and writing feel so powerful. They labeled these terms and encouraged their students to try using these sentence forms in their

own sentences. Here are some examples, all of which are direct quotes from *Silva Rhetoricae: The Forest of Rhetoric*,⁶ an awesome site at <https://rhetoric.byu.edu/> (Burton):

- anaphora: Repetition of the same word or group of words at the beginning of successive clauses, sentences, or lines. Example: This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England, this nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings.
- asyndeton: The omission of conjunctions between clauses, often resulting in a hurried rhythm or vehement effect. Example: Veni, vidi, vici (Caesar: “I came; I saw; I conquered”)
- epitasis: The addition of a concluding sentence that merely emphasizes what has already been stated. Example: Clean your bedroom. All of it.

These and dozens of others are available at *Silva Rhetoricae* and at the (somewhat more manageable) *American Rhetoric* site, especially the page on “Rhetorical Figures in Sound” (Eidenmuller).⁷

The idea is to force yourself to try setting up a sentence or two following the guidelines of one of the rhetorical figures, and then to sit back and gauge the result for yourself. Often, I think you’ll be impressed with how excellent you sound, with a very present and powerful tone of voice.

The Terror of Practice

In the end, there’s one more terrifying thing about writing with voice: it’s unlikely that you’ll see a huge change without lots of practice. And that means lots of writing. And that means time. Which you might not have.

So I’m closing with a word of moderation. To see a change in your writing voice in just a short semester, you’ll need to think about voice in every piece of writing you do. Shooting off a quick Blackboard forum response? Try using a rhetorical figure. Confirming a meeting time with a friend over text message? Try to surprise her with an unexpected phrase. Writing an in-class essay? Read it over slowly in your head, paying careful attention to how it would sound if you read it out loud. (Or, if your teacher lets you, just read it out loud there in the classroom. This is unlikely.) Writing an essay draft that feels like busy-work? Play around with how you might perfectly punctuate some informal language (and don’t be afraid to ask your teacher if you did it correctly).

Even though a YouTube search for “voice in writing” will give you lots of good advice—including one devastatingly cute video of young kids baking brownies while the “Word Chef” talks about what makes for a

6. Gideon O. Burton, “Silva Rhetoricae: The Forest of Rhetoric” Brigham Young University, n.d., accessed May 26, 2011, <http://rhetoric.byu.edu/>.

7. Michael E. Eidenmuller, “American Rhetoric: Rhetorical Figures in Sound,” American Rhetoric, 2011, accessed May 26, 2011, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/rhetoricaldevicesinsound.htm>.

strong voice in a book about a cockroach⁸—there really is no substitute for practice. Thinking about writing is never, ever the same as practicing writing.

And most of all, breathe. Our voice comes from our breath, the life that flows from our bodies into the minds of our listeners. Shape it, practice it, use it for good. (That’s asyndeton—did you catch it?)

Author’s Note: This chapter, “Making Sure Your Voice is Present,” is written by Kyle Stedman and has been made available through Writing Commons. The work has been slightly altered to remove embedded videos, reformat citations, and reformat the font and layout in order to be included in this textbook with permission of the author.

8. Teachertubewriting, “Word Chef Voice in Writing,” YouTube, Sept. 29 2009, accessed May 30, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2FqTim2PgYk>.