

The Write Voice

Using rich prompts to help student writing come alive

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1

Can You Hear My Voice?

“Voice is the sum of all the strategies used by the author to create the illusion that the writer is speaking directly to the reader from the page.”
—Don Fry (in Clark, 2006)

What Is Voice?

When we talk about “voice,” we mean the personality that writing takes on. When writing has voice, readers are able to gain an insight into the author’s thoughts. We are able to hear the author reading, talking, sharing his or her words with us. The writing seems to come alive in our minds. When a piece of writing has voice, it is able to share a mood, create a mental image, or stir up an emotional response within the reader. It allows readers to connect with the text, to feel like they are a part of a conversation—as if the author were speaking directly to them.

Ruth Culham (2003) defines voice as “the golden thread that runs through a piece of writing. It is how the reader knows it is really you speaking.” She describes voice in this way:

[Voice is] the writer’s music coming out through the words, the sense that a real person is speaking to you and cares about the message. It is the heart and soul of the writing, the magic, the wit, the feeling, the life and breath. It is flashes of spirit.

Two Grade 8 students were assigned the task of preparing and presenting a script for hosting a school concert. At one point, David decided to take a break from writing and let his partner, Hannah, finish up. Later, when they were practicing reading their script, one of the supervising teachers noticed that their dialogue seemed odd and asked, “Is *that* the voice you’re going to use?” To which David replied, “No, that’s Hannah’s voice, but I’ll read it anyway.”

Voice is one of the most intangible elements of writing. Teaching students to write with voice is not like teaching students to use periods and capitals or to group sentences into paragraphs. Those skills are quite mechanical and their results clearly visible. Voice is the hidden element of writing that allows words to come alive. It is the part of writing that gives it personality. It is what changes words on a page into meaningful phrases that conjure up mental images.

Culham (2003) describes voice as “the way the writing draws the reader in and creates a bond between reader and writer.” Voice is the passion and conviction that an author uses to connect with the audience through words. It is the way a piece of writing is compelling and engaging. When a piece of writing has strong voice, a reader is able to connect with the author by sensing who the author is behind his or her words. Voice creates the tone of a piece, and reflects the writer’s passion for the topic. It is, indeed, “the heart and soul” of the writing.

Voice is also the author’s awareness of context. Writers recognize that they need different voices for different purposes, forms, or audiences. The context of

As students strengthen their writing voices through a range of strategies, they'll begin to find ways of adapting voice to suit the requirement of different tasks. They can use the tools they need to do the job, taking into account the form, audience, and context.

the writing will have particular impact on the content and style. For example, you would write a note to your spouse differently from an e-mail to your boss and, similarly, you would write a report differently from a narrative. A piece of writing that requires a formal voice would have a very different feel from a piece with a casual voice. Likewise, writers can use voice to change the mood of their writing, from humorous to sad or from suspenseful to inspirational.

From "Hearing" Voice to Teaching Voice

You can't teach voice, you either have it or you don't. This is a common sentiment we've probably all heard, or perhaps even caught ourselves saying. While it may be true that some students naturally show more voice in their writing than others, there are explicit strategies we can teach students to include in their writing that will help them build their voice. We can help them recognize voice in the writing of others and experiment with their writing to find their own voice.

In order to teach voice, as teachers, we must first be able to recognize it ourselves. Sometimes we are inexplicably drawn to a piece of writing, but find its appeal difficult to explain by citing its tangible qualities. We know we like it, we just don't know why. But in order to truly understand voice, we need to deconstruct writing, isolating elements that attract us to certain pieces of writing more than others. It's the "why we like it" that defines the voice of the piece. Why do you connect with this piece of writing more than another? What is it about this piece of writing that brings about an emotional response in the reader? Do you feel like you have a better understanding of the author? Were you able to create mental images as you were reading? Did the writing make you laugh out loud, burst into tears, or feel the need to call someone and tell them, "I love you"? When we begin to define more clearly the elements of writing that allow us to hear the author's personality coming through, we are able to identify the elements that make up the voice of the piece. When we understand the parts of writing that create its voice, then we're able to explicitly teach students to use these elements in their own writing. Although it's true that some students naturally show more voice in their writing than others, it is possible for all students to learn and use strategies that will allow them to strengthen their writing voice.

Once we help students identify strategies they can use to strengthen their voice, they can try them out in their own writing. These voice-building strategies should not be used as a checklist of requirements, but rather as a toolkit of tricks that students can rely on to enrich their own writing. When we provide our students with all of the tools, they can then use them in innovative and creative ways.

The voice-building strategies can be introduced to students in a variety of ways. Teachers can use mentor texts and authentic student writing as a way of showing voice in action. They can play games and use collaborative activities to strengthen students' awareness of these strategies. But the most effective way of building voice in students' writing is by providing them with rich, engaging tasks; identifying an authentic audience; and giving them frequent opportunities to write, share, receive feedback, and set personal goals.

Voice is the personal touch that makes each writer's style unique. While some writers naturally develop a special flair in their writing, there are many whose writing is flat. If we explicitly teach students how to add voice to their writing, they will begin to develop their own style and find a voice that is uniquely their

own. When we help our students explore these strategies through their writing, their voice will come shining through.

Real Kids...Real Voice

Do you still have lingering doubts that you can't teach voice? While it's clear that some kids innately have stronger writing voices than others, there is no doubt in my mind that voice *can* be taught to all writers.

A few years ago, I was teaching a group of Grade 6 students. As a regular part of my instruction, I had students focus on the importance of building voice in their writing. I was constantly pushing them to try new words, include emotional cues, and—more than anything else—“write like an author.” A few years later, Arthur Birenbaum, a colleague and friend of mine, visited this same group of students. He was leading them through a community-building activity that involved writing. By that time, these students were in Grade 8 and leaders in their school, and were writing a *touchstone*—a creed of agreements that would guide the entire school in choices, behaviors, and interactions. Arthur paused to remark out loud: “I'm really impressed by how carefully you are choosing your words.” To which one of my former students replied without hesitation, “It's important to always write like an author. Our Grade 6 teacher taught us that.” *Hurrah!* It's amazing to hear that the seeds that were planted years earlier had continued to grow and thrive in these young writers. Writers writing with voice! They knew what voice sounded like, they knew it was important, and they knew how to build it with their own words. Explicitly teaching students to recognize their own writing voice, nurturing and fostering it using simple strategies, will ensure that everyone can “write like an author.”

Recently, I was thumbing through my students' writing books. Doodled across the cover of one of the books was “*I rock at writing! See for yourself...*” I smiled to myself and thought that this was possibly the best student self-reflection a teacher could ever hope for. It was true that this student was an extremely competent writer, she had a clear sense of herself, and her voice shone through in every writing task. But I could also tell from that reflection that she knew that her voice was authentic. She knew that her words were able to affect others and that her writing was unique to her. Her writing exuded confidence, and her brief reflection certainly captured that feeling.

From the student samples I present here, we can clearly see that the writers have applied the strategies to build voice in their writing. The samples show how the students have learned to include emotional cues, sensory statements, and creative wordsmithing. Each student's personality is clearly visible through the words, and they are using conventions to add style and flair to their writing. In some cases, the changes are so dramatic that it is difficult to believe that it is the same student—only a few months later.

Writing sample by Frankie, age 10
Before

I would see a gost, I would feel so hurt, burning wind, what's going on. I would be very scared/worried. I would want to go home. I would be tarifid. Also disy.

After

The wooden raven glimmered as the night grew colder and darker. I started to see a red sparkling light in the distance. Then as I started to run I noticed that the raven was gone. I started to feel anxious and a bit worried. Then out of the shadows came the raven. The raven leaped towards me. I jumped for safety. Then it jumped towards me again, and it was about to crush every bone in my body. Luckily I moved to the side. I started running. I started to see a glimmering spark. The raven was able to catch on fire and was still chasing me. A little spark of a flame got on my clothes and started to burn into pieces. I knew this would be the end of me, but it wasn't the end.

I survived the pain but that night I felt a pain in my chest. I didn't feel good in my throat. I felt like I was going to throw up.

The pain in my chest made it hard to breath. I felt like [my heart] was skipping beats. I then the pain from my chest spread into my lungs. My lungs started to feel like they were on fire.

The police came to the rescue. I was moaning on the damp wet muddy ground...

Writing sample by Marcus, age 10
Before

The wind tore at my clothing and the icy wind chilled me to the core. I struggled to my feet knowing that the only way I could survive was to keep moving.

I was so thirsty that I stopped walking and lay on the grass and then I saw my dad and he was puled to jail and I went with him and I also got into jail and we had a plan to get out.

Later

The crowd gathered around. The noise intensified as everyone started shouting amongst themselves. The tension in the air was thick and the mob started pushing together, trying to get a better view.

I had to run right away because the noise hurt my ears so much. So that's how I wanted to run away. The mob wants to get rid of me. A couple of souldjer's stoped me from running. I'm trapped, I slid under their leg's and they triped. I fell into a hole in the ground. The next day, I was tide up in a cave. Spider's started to bite me and they were poison.

After
See page 79 for how this writing is a
good example of personalization.

Dear...um.... Dearrrrr!

Ok I didn't sign up for this because it's SO hard. Let me start again: Dear whoever I'm writing to. I have a story for you. WAIT, I mean a weird story for you. This weird story I'm telling you, is about me at recess. By the way, my name is Billy. I get lonely at recess and this is how it started out. First I was playing with my friends and then all of the sudden came Ryan Bluck. He elboude [elbowed] my two friends. I had no idea what to do so I just ran away. WAIT, ran away? That's not what happened. What really happened is that I was fighting Ryan Bluck and he had to go to the hospital because of me, I mean awesome me.... Don't believe me? Fine. I'll tell you the truth. I ran away. Alright, I told you the truth.

Writing sample by Bilal, age 10
Before

The earth shook under my feet as I heard the ground groan and rumble one final time. The bridge above me creaked and moaned. A small piece of rock fell from above.

As I ran for shelter I could not find any, so I look for any small buildings in the area. So I saw one and it was half way across town with all thease obsticals in my way. I could not get to it in time so I ran. The earth split in half and I relized it is all over.

After

The dark sails became visible on the edge of the horizon. There was no doubt that the Spanish galleon was now a pirate ship.

As I saw my crew loading everything on board, gold coins and loot. Then suddenly ten ships came. I knew the smoke of burn-ing wood alerted them. I quickly grabbed a torch and said "Men, all hands on deck." I tied up the captain, threw my torch and watched it burn slowly as I heard the popping noises it made. I said: "Sail in an eastward direction!"

The storm was coming as a great beast. I knew we were doomed....

What brought about the revolutionary change in these young writers? How did their writing go from simple and flat to rich and alive? The key to their success is found in three fundamental classroom approaches.

- Students are introduced to a toolkit of voice-building strategies that they can use to enrich their writing. Strategies include emotional cues, sensory statements, creative wordsmithing, perspective, character development,

personalization, and style. They allow students to bring passion and life to their words.

- Writers see the value of being inspired. When young writers find their inspiration, they will write with passion and purpose. Inspiration is often a neglected element in student writing, and yet it is the most important component for all writers. Helping students to find their inspiration allows them to embrace writing. It is through inspiration that writers are able to allow their true voice to be heard. When we are inspired, we are passionate about our ideas, enthusiastic about our writing, and engaged in our craft.
- Classroom routines are instrumental to helping students become a collaborative community of writers. They learn how to support each other through accountable talk, provide feedback to one other, and set and monitor personal writing goals. They come to understand the importance of an authentic audience and the value of ongoing conversations about their writing.

These three fundamental classroom approaches enable students to utilize a range of strategies to bring their words to life, find their inspiration, and work as a collaborative community of writers. Young authors whose writing was once flat and simple now write with voice and conviction. They have found ways to fill the page with their words, capturing their ideas in powerful ways and sharing their voice with passion.