The Power of Voice

To become accomplished writers, students must do more than master grammar, spelling, and punctuation. They must develop a presence on the page.

Tom Romano

Back-to-back study halls at the end of the school day made a writer out of me 43 years ago. Thank heavens for bad scheduling of 7th graders. Thank heavens for movies and reading, too.

Students weren’t permitted to talk during study hall, so my friend Jackie and I wrote stories. We wrote lurid, action-packed tales inspired by war movies that we had seen on television and by the many juvenile novels we had read. When the teacher turned his back, I passed my story up the aisle to Jackie; he passed his story back to me. Within moments Jackie looked over his shoulder, eyebrows raised, a big smile on his face. "Yes!" his expression said.

I was discovering the power and pleasure of my written voice. With a pen I could conduct an inner monologue on paper, directing a stream of words that had accumulated in me from 12 years of talking, reading, and listening. When I read what I had written, I heard my own voice. More remarkable still, I could give my written words to others and they, too, quickened to the voice I’d created on the page.

More than 20 years ago, in his groundbreaking book Writing: Teachers and Children at Work (1983), Donald Graves maintained that voice was the dynamo in the writing process. Fifth grade teacher and writing consultant Jack Wilde (Kentucky Educational Television, 2004) says that the primary motivation for his students to write is voice. Not grades. Not praise. Not threats. Not deadlines. Voice. The chance to be known. The chance to put the linguistic muscle to use as a communicator.

Voice and an appreciative audience drove my writing in 7th grade. Teachers at every grade level can take a lesson here. Voice is the key to helping our students develop into writers. We must give them opportunities to hear their own written voices and the written voices of others—their peers, their teachers, and the best authors.

Freeing Students to Write Boldly

Students who write with confidence will be more open to strategies that allow them to express their written voice. That’s why, as soon as I can in a class, I strive to get students putting
words fearlessly on paper. I want them to become Bravehearts of the written word. I want them to develop the same confidence in producing writing that they have when they talk with friends and family—times when they easily fall into natural language rhythms.

My determination to get students to throw open their linguistic floodgates has implications for my writing instruction. I must create the kind of classroom atmosphere where students feel free to express themselves—where both error and accomplishment are natural, expected parts of learning. Students must be comfortable taking risks with language, genre, and topic choice because they know that everyone else in the class is ready to be amazed at their linguistic creativity. And any kind of writing—not just imaginative writing—involves linguistic creativity and the exercise of verbal intelligence.

What strategies can teachers use to help students write boldly? Middle school language arts teacher Linda Rief (2003) uses quickwrites to teach her students to launch their voices and outrun the inner censor. Using literature, she helps her students develop the habit of producing language on the page without much forethought or stress.

For instance, in one activity Rief shares with students Cynthia Rylant's picture book, *When I Was Young in the Mountains*, letting them experience the rhythms of language as the narrator speaks of her childhood in the mountains, repeating the refrain, "When I was young." She then asks students to begin a sentence with the words "When I was young" and to write rapidly for two or three minutes about their own memories and experiences. Invariably, students surprise themselves with phrases, sentences, and sometimes whole paragraphs of genuine strength—maybe a memorable detail, an argument with convincing reasons to back it up, or a linguistic ramble full of unique observations.

Rief leads her students in several quickwrites each week. Students take the quickwrites they find most interesting and shape them into longer, fully realized pieces of writing. Once they have words on the page, developing those words into longer pieces is not as intimidating as facing a blank sheet of paper. Rief contends that frequent quickwrites build students' confidence, develop their written fluency, and bring out every student's inner writer.

Rief’s idea of using literature to prompt quickwrites has an ancestor in the concept of freewriting pioneered by Peter Elbow (1973) and Ken Macrorie (1976). In freewriting—an especially valuable strategy for writers who have little experience or confidence—students develop ease in putting language on paper by writing nonstop for a set amount of time about anything that enters their mind. Don't let the pen stop moving, Elbow advises. Write steadily, learning to accept the words that offer themselves. In 10 minutes, students will have filled a page.

Freewriting and quickwriting help students develop the habit of writing without hesitation. Once students allow themselves to enter a flow of language, they begin thinking in a concentrated way that only systematic use of language makes possible. Language is generative. We put down words and those words lead to more words—maybe not the perfect words, but words that reflect thought, words that can be shaped to better communicate what we want to say, words that represent our voices.
Qualities of Voice
What is voice, anyway? Writer Ralph Fletcher says that "writing with voice has the same quirky cadence that makes human speech so impossible to resist listening to" (1993, p. 68). Columnist Donald Murray calls voice "the magical heard quality of writing" (1998, p. 151). Researcher Donald Graves maintains that "voice is the imprint of ourselves on our writing" (1983, p. 227). One of my college students said that voice is the writer's DNA. Another said that voice is just the reader using writing to talk naturally to another person.

I resonate to all those definitions. Voice is the writer's presence in a piece of writing. That presence can take many registers. I've read articles so blustery and pompous, so windy and jargon-filled that the meaning of the writing was impenetrable (perhaps just the way the writer wanted it). I've read other pieces that were vivid with memorable detail, muscular verbs, and direct sentences that moved along at a fast clip. My reading speed increases when I read such writing.

Voice may have little to do with grammatical or editorial correctness. In my 34 years of teaching writing, I've read voices that were cluttered with misspellings, inaccurate punctuation, and usage errors—yet the energy of the writing was exhilarating, the writer's presence undeniable.

My bias as a writing teacher is to teach students to write in accessible, engaging, and irresistible voices. Such voices—whether produced by adults, teenagers, or children—have certain qualities in common:

- They deliver interesting information.
- They often employ techniques of narrative.
- They exhibit perceptivity.
- They offer surprising information and observations.
- Quite often, they demonstrate a sense of humor.

Here is a single sentence by a middle school student that reveals these qualities of voice. Donald Graves reports on a 12-year-old boy in an urban school who wrote, "When Mrs. Bell yelled, everyone's ass tightened a little bit" (1983, p. 205).

My mind lights right up to the voice of this passage. The information the boy delivers is a vital part of the classroom culture. He swiftly communicates the respect, fear, and awe that Mrs. Bell inspires. Mrs. Bell is not meek and retiring. When tested, she responds, and students physically react to her response. The tension promises conflict—the heart of riveting narrative. The writer's succinct, street-savvy sentence contains characterization and plot, too—the basic elements of narration. The boy's perception and honesty surprise me, making me a more attentive reader. The humor in his sentence grows out of his unflinching truth telling.
Teaching the Qualities of Voice

*Information*
We do not write with words, says Murray—we write with information (1990). As readers, we crave information. We read to find out how a character changes, how a plot turns out, how historical events have shaped our present, how people live in other parts of the world. Reading is best when we gain interesting information that adds up to something—when what we are reading is so informative, so rewarding, that we are driven to learn more.

*Teaching implication:* Show students how to gather information about their writing topics. Whether the student is a 3rd grader writing about a snowstorm, an 8th grader writing a book report, or a high school senior writing an essay to accompany a college application, that student will benefit from learning how to collect and present pertinent information. Teach your students how to excerpt facts and quotations from print and other media, brainstorm ideas and details, list information that can guide their writing, tentatively put pieces of information in order, and write lead sentences and paragraphs that make readers want to know more.

*Narrative*
Readers love stories. They perk up when they see characters in action. Narrative clearly figures into the writing of fiction, memoirs, and personal stories, genres that rely on character and plot. But even in informational writing, elements of narrative can heighten readers' interest and let storytelling enter our voices.

*Teaching implication:* Staff developer Vicky Vinton speaks of using *mentor texts* to model effective writing techniques for students (2003). Make sure that you and your students read novels and stories not just as readers but also as writers. You will find every technique of strong narrative writing illustrated in literature: interesting characterizations, vivid scenes, realistic dialogue, and precise descriptions. Spend time with your students talking about how writers write.

An excellent resource to help you locate narrative techniques is *Craft Lessons* (1998) by Ralph Fletcher and JoAnn Portalupi. The authors use children’s picture books to illustrate the writer's craft. Using high-quality picture books works with writers of all ages, and their brevity makes them perfect for efficient use of class time.

*Perception*
I once heard a professional writer say that the most important thing a writer needed was *sensibility*: the ability to perceive, to look closely, to notice what others might not, to recognize hidden emotion. That 12-year-old writer in the previous example does not dismiss his perception of the effect of Mrs. Bell's yelling. Many would. Many would see mentioning it as indelicate. And they would thereby lose out on a compelling detail.

*Teaching implication:* During and after field trips, when demonstrating something in the classroom, and while reading passages from literature, have students practice looking closely and describing their observations. Display photos or paintings and hold class discussions about what students see in these pictures. Some of us have the capacity to add things up more
quickly and with more insight than others. But we can all learn to perceive more deeply by slowing down, looking closely, and naming what we see.

**Surprise**

Not all surprises in students' writing are welcome, of course. We would rather not be surprised by the errant spelling, misused word, or abrupt and unsatisfying ending. But we do delight in surprises of detail, perception, language, and thinking. A 3rd grader writes,

> I love my sefe more then pizza because I am more impoittane then pizza. Because I thike that I am post to love my sefe more then pizza. Corse pizza is food and it don't need love like I do.

This 8-year-old is still working to master the phonetics of spelling and the idiosyncrasies of the English language, such as the meaning and subtle sound difference between *then* and *than*. The nonstandard usages in her writing do not surprise me. What does surprise me, though, and what I hope she never loses, is her drive to put things together, to ferret out logic and illogic. To simply say that the child's writing is cute is to trivialize her developing mind. When she thinks about food and little girls, she realizes a key difference between them, and she makes her logical assertion with rhythm and gusto.

*Teaching implication:* Robert Frost once said, "No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader" (Murray, 1990, p. 101). Get students to talk about the surprises they experience on the playground, in the busy hallways between classes, and in their study of science and history and math. Point out how writers spring surprises on readers. Encourage students to craft their writing so that readers encounter surprises, just as the writer did.

**Humor**

"You mean a writer can't have a strong voice without humor?" If you backed me into a corner, I would have to throw up my hands and admit that humor is not an essential quality of an interesting, appealing voice. But a little lightness and playfulness in writing makes the reading experience more pleasurable.

When I was teaching high school students, one girl—a stellar writer—came down with the flu and missed a week of school before winter break when her peers were putting together collections of their poetry. The day before vacation, I received a manila envelope containing Joy's poetry and this note:

> Mr. Romano,

> I have to apologize for how awful these poems are. Of course, it's hard to be poetic when you're deathly ill! Please don't throw up when you read these 'cause one of us throwing up is enough.

I carried myself a little lighter for the rest of that day because of Joy's note. She was quiet in class, but articulate when asked to speak. In her writing, her personality bloomed. She was detailed, pointed, and, when her subject matter allowed it, playful, funny, and satirical.
**Teaching implication:** Point out humor, playfulness, and irony in published writing and in daily life. Show students how cartoonists and writers use humor to make serious points. Discuss with students the jokes, puns, and kidding that are a natural part of our interactions with others. Some students might choose to start experimenting with humor in their written voices. Their readers will be grateful.

**Teachers Who Write**

The best writing teachers are writers: not necessarily writers with a capital *W* who send their work off to magazines and journals, but people who value writing, make it part of their lives, and try their hand at writing with their students. Teachers who write know how to help students lay out an argument, build a character, and create imagery because they themselves have struggled to do those things. A teacher who writes and shares with students the errors he or she has made during the process gains credibility in students' eyes. That teacher is not just saying, "Do as I say," but demonstrating, "Do as I do."

Once we get students producing written words with confidence, we can show them the effectiveness of writing with detail and sensory images, varying sentence length, and using active verbs. We can show them how to use figurative language, craft strong leads, and support their assertions with evidence. We can show them scores of writing strategies that will help them create written voices that are distinctive, appealing, and irresistible.

**References**


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