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# Voice in Writing

## Abstract

There is a need to clarify the concept of "voice in writing". Theorists, who advocate writing as a "process", (Romantics) see "voice" as an all important but nebulous quality of good writing. Rhetoricians (Classicists), on the other hand, can specify those features of language which constitute "voice". Teachers who attend to such rhetorical features will be better able to comment on "voice" in student papers, because they will have a more concrete body of information to draw upon. The writer chooses a mask and invents an audience. By manipulating language, he can control the "voice" he wishes to present to the reader.

No matter what pitch of frankness, directness, or authenticity he may strive for, the writer's mask and the reader's are less removable than those of the oral communicator and his hearer. For writing is an indirection. (Walter Ong)

The concept of "voice" in writing needs to be demystified. Current theorists, who advocate writing 'as a process', suggest that "voice" is important but mysterious. There is vagueness in the naming of the attributes of the concept. Sometimes it is equated with tone, distance, attitude, style, ethos, authenticity, honesty, truth-telling. So the mystifying process grows. But vagueness is no help in pointing out this quality in student papers nor in praising it when teachers confer with students about their

writing.

Classical rhetoric provided an almost endless number of specific features of language. There was a name for virtually every stylistic choice. As rhetoric fell into disuse -- especially in this century with the emphasis on the "plain style" -- the richness of this tradition seems to have been forgotten. That may explain the confusion of the current talk about voice. Bringing closer together the extremes of the classical (structure, "rules", atomization of devices) and the romantic (the naturalistically arrived at, the spontaneous, the mysterious) seems a useful and more complex approach to composition. There is no monolithic writing process, Janet Emig (1982) reminds us; there are writing processes. It is not either/or but both/and.

### What is "voice"?

Let's look at the confusing way voice is discussed to get a clearer picture of the problem. Peter Elbow (1981) on voice:

...writing was most fun and rewarding to read that somehow felt most 'real'. It had what I am now calling voice. At the time I said things like, 'It felt real, it had a kind of resonance, it somehow rang true.' ... Writing with no voice is dead, mechanical, faceless. It lacks any sound.... It would take an extra step of revising -- and revising consciously and for the sake of voice -- to change her written words so as to break out of that **language construction** into a **saying of words** on paper.... Writing **with voice** is writing into which someone has breathed. It has that fluency, rhythm, and liveliness that exist naturally in the speech of most people when they are enjoying a conversation. Some people who write frequently, copiously, and with confidence manage to get voice into their writing.

Writing with **real voice** has the power to pay attention and to understand -- the words go deep. I don't know the objective characteristics that distinguish writing with real voice from writing with mere voice. (pp.3-4)

Elbow is equating voice in speech with "voice" in writing. "Voice" in writing, however, is merely a construct of the mind, a metaphor. The situation is complicated by isolating "real" voice, "mere" voice (that isn't real?), and voiceless writing. Although he cannot identify the objective characteristics of voice, he is, nevertheless, implying that they exist. Consistent with a Romantic view of the composing process, voice is a "new and mysterious standard". Ken Macrorie (1978), quoting Mary McCarthy, contributes to the mystique of voice:

What's confusing is that style usually means some form of fancy writing -- when people say, oh yes, so and so's such a 'wonderful stylist'. But if one means by style, the voice, the irreducible and always recognizable and alive thing, then of course style is really everything. (p.161)

Are style and voice synonymous then? Is voice the single criterion by which we judge the vitality of a piece of writing?

Is the Ken Macrorie of **Telling Writing** equating voice with honesty, sincerity?

In that paper, a truth-telling voice speaks, and its rhythms rush and build like the human mind travelling at high speed. Rhythm, rhythm, the best writing depends so much upon it. But as in dancing, you cannot get rhythm by giving yourself directions. You must feel the music and let your body take its instructions. (p.150)

The Romantic view that the poet and the poetry are inextricably connected is reflected in "You must feel the music and let your body take its instructions." The inherently good person can only have a "truth-telling voice." The overflow of powerful emotions generates the "rhythm, rhythm" and the writing source is in feeling "the music."

In 1979, in a checklist of the qualities of good writing, Donald Murray writes: "Voice: Good writing is marked by an individual voice. The writer's voice might be the most significant element in distinguishing memorable writing from good writing" (p.69). Here Murray is saying that memorable writing has voice. "Memorable" adds to the confusion. Some functions of writing do not require this quality.

And in a checklist, where do we look for "voice" if our intuitions are unreliable?

In 1984, Murray tries to further clarify the concept of voice by naming individual characteristics of it:

Voice gives a text concern, energy, humor, individuality, music, rhythm, pace, surprise, believability. . . . Voice is the writer revealed. Voice is the character of the writer, and the point of view of the writer towards the subject, the caring of the writer, the honesty of the writer. (p.144)

Murray is all-inclusive in describing voice in this passage. "The point of view of the writer towards his subject" defines the

point of view of the writer towards his subject" defines the literary concept, tone. "The character of the writer" suggests the classical rhetorician's understanding of ethos. The "honesty of the writer" is reminiscent of the 18th century doctrine of sincerity. The "energy", "individuality", "music", "rhythm", "pace", suggest the qualities of the speaking voice that can find their way into a piece of writing.

### **Speech and writing**

It seems clear that process theorists have typically regarded voice as a generic term for the personal element in writing rather than talking about it as that quality of speech which is simulated in writing. To recognize the complexity of that personal element it is necessary to look at what happened when writing became widespread and distinguished itself from speech. Walter J. Ong (1977), in describing the shift from orality to literacy, explains the nature of contrivance, a point which seems absent in the current talk about voice.

With the advent of writing and the application of rhetorical principles to written persuasive discourse, the power of the speaker to influence is radically changed. The sounds of the words are translated to marks on a page. The speaker is removed from his audience. The writer must de-center and imagine what a reader needs to know. The reader is left to "re-create the text." In *Interfaces of the Word*, Ong (1977) writes: "In writing and print, the narrator is distanced because his voice is not alive, but visually mummified for visual-aural reprocessing" (p.295). The word "mummified" is particularly apt. Words on a page are, in effect, well-preserved corpses. The reader reprocesses the silent word, giving the written discourse metaphorical life, that is, "sound". "Silent reading", writes Donald Wesling, "must supply the voice on the basis of what is known about speaking and about style in writing" (Wesling, p.31). Because sound is absent from the written word, we now talk of "voice" metaphorically, to include the person behind the voice. When we discuss voice, then, we speak "nostalgically," yearning for an aspect of the speaking voice which cannot be re-called.

### **"Voice" and rhetoric**

The modern rhetorician, well versed in the dynamics of the ethical, emotional, and logical appeals, has been able to speak less ambiguously about voice in the modern context of that word. "Elocutio" or the stylistic features of speaking and, later, writing was perhaps the most clearly articulated aspect of classical rhetoric. Most current discussions of voice subsume what had been called "elocutio". What Macrorie and others have called honesty or truth-telling or authenticity or sincerity were, in

classical rhetoric, included under the rubric of "ethos". The problems of tone, attitude, and distance did not apply when the speaker was present before his audience. Gesture, tone of voice and timbre of voice made clear his meaning.

### **Persona**

In the writings of Wayne Booth, Walker Gibson, Richard Lanham, Richard Ohmann and Harold Martin, among others, the topic of "voice" is given a complex and more concrete treatment. The point of departure for this complexity is the awareness of the contrivance of the self. When we write we determine the "voice" we want to assume. This "voice" is variously equated with "character", "personality", "persona". "Persona" is a mask or a disguise. The notion of a "real" voice, the notion of a **univocal** understanding of voice, does not take into account the necessity of the writer to adopt a "mask" with regard to audience and subject matter.

We use the word (mask), then, in a metaphorical sense -- it is as if the author, as he 'puts on his act' for a reader, wore a kind of disguise, taking on, for a particular purpose, a character who speaks to the reader. This persona may or may not bear considerable resemblance to the real author, sitting there at his typewriter; in any case, the created speaker is certainly less complex than his human inventor. He is inferred entirely out of the language; everything we know about him comes from the words before us on the page. In this respect he is a made man, he is artificial. (Gibson, 1969, pp.3-4)

Several levels of complexity are implied by Gibson: the author creates a persona and invents an audience. This implies that there can be more than one persona, more than one invented audience. This comes closer to expressing the scope of voice. Simplistic attempts have not gone far enough; they have been expressed as dichotomies rather than as spectrums or ranges of possibility. Language has been classified as formal or literary or informal or colloquial, standard or substandard, familiar or formal. The division of writing into "English" -- writing which for the most part distances the writer from his audience -- and honest, or truth-telling writing (Macrorie, 1978) or theme-writing and authentic writing (Coles, 1978) or voiceless writing and writing with voice (Hammond, 1985) does not do justice to the complexity of stances that a writer can take toward his subject matter and his audience.

### Stance and metaphor

What does take into account the complexity of these stances? Wayne Booth (1972) and others consider the significant factors in any communication effort: 1) the available arguments about the subject itself, 2) the interests and peculiarities of the audience, 3) the voice, the implied character of the speaker. What happens when this balance is not maintained is so various that the range can only be hinted at. When the writer underplays the personal relationship between him and his audience focusing exclusively on statements about his subject he assumes what Booth calls "The Pendant's Stance". Too much emphasis on the effect and not enough attention to the subject leads to the "Advertiser's Stance". Too much emphasis on the self, the personality, the "charisma" and not enough emphasis on the subject matter leads to the "Entertainer's Stance". Walker Gibson's categories include the Tough, the Stuffy, the Sweet. "The Tough Talker, in these terms, is a man dramatized as centrally concerned with himself -- his style is I-talk. The Sweet Talker goes out of his way to be nice to us -- his style is **you**-talk. The Stuffy Talker expresses no concern either for himself or his reader -- his style is **it**-talk. These are three extreme possibilities: the way we write at any given moment can be seen as an adjustment or compromise among these three styles of identifying ourselves and defining our relation with others" (Gibson, 1966, p.x).

Other theorists discuss the "possibilities" or choices that a writer has in taking a stance toward his audience and subject matter in varying metaphors: Martin Joos' (1967) categories range from frozen to intimate; Hartwell's (1982) range includes "The Bubble Gum Voice", "The Neutral and New Voice of Journalism", "The Bureaucratic Voice", "The Detached, Discursive Voice", and "The Committed Personal Voice". Richard Lanham (1974), Martin Ohmann (1976), Graves and Hodge (1979) and others emphasize the complexity of voice and choice of stance by focusing on the deliberate dishonesty and disengagement of the self in opaque styles.

### Features of language

Not only have these writers and others described the stance that the writer takes toward his subject and audience but they have also described the features of language that contribute to that stance. Walker Gibson, perhaps more than others, has articulated a list of useable stylistic features in trying to characterize "voice" in writing. Although many of these features are derived from classical rhetoric, Gibson has put them in a form that could be used as a tool by the writing teacher. Gibson proposes sixteen grammatical-rhetorical qualities as elements of isolating styles, of accounting for distinctions that we feel in the voices addressing us (Gibson, 1966, p.115). Gibson's quantification

includes **questions about word-size** (proportion of monosyllables and words of more than two syllables); **questions about substantives** (number of first and second-person pronouns and imperatives, e.g., "you understood"); **whether the subjects of the finite verbs are mostly neuter nouns**, or whether they refer to people); **questions about verbs** (the proportion of finite verbs to total words, what proportion of these finite verbs are forms of **to be**, what proportion of these verbs are in the passive voice); **questions about modifiers** (what proportion of the total words are true adjectives, how many of these adjectives are themselves modified by adverbs, what proportion of the total words are noun adjuncts); **questions about subordination** (the average length of the subordinate clauses, e.g., "included"; proportion of the total passage inside such clauses, frequency with which subject and main verb are separated by intervening subordinate structures, length of these interruptions); **other effects of tone** (frequency of the determiner **the**; sentences without subjects, without verbs, or both; presence or lack of contractions; occurrences of marks of punctuation: parentheses, italics, dashes, question marks, exclamation points.)

### Styles

While this list appears to be formidable, requiring clarifications for many students to understand the grammatical terms themselves, we can talk about voice without the metaphorical vagueness which now pervades the current talk. Since "style" and "voice" are being equated, is it not useful to have some way of quantifying stylistic features of writing that the student can use in revising his drafts, in making the choices of how to present the self? The writer now has a concrete list of attributes that he can use in "modulating" his voice to make it closer to the way he wants to "sound".

Less clinically than Gibson - but helpful in his specificity none the less - Hartwell (1982) describes some of the features of what he calls the "Bubblegum Voice": It uses lots of questions in an attempt to talk to the reader, to make her feel part of the story; it uses funny spellings for words to make them closer to spoken words; it's filled with quotes, italics, and exclamation points. These devices help to bring into writing the sounds of spoken language. He also suggests that the bubblegum writer is a bit uneasy about words, thus calling attention to them. This style uses rhyme, plays with the sounds of words, and uses puns, slang, and clichés (pp.61-62).

Hartwell is less dense than Gibson in naming some of the qualities of the bubblegum style, yet he does not fall into the vagueness trap in his description. In the revision stage of writing, a student could "dialogue with his emerging text" or "refine the inchoate 'inner speech'" to conform more closely to the way he

wants to "sound" by avoiding those qualities of the bubblegum style which make his text sweeter and stickier than he wants it to be.

Richard Lanham uses different categories. He calls "The Official Style" the kind of writing that frequently appears in text books and in the academic bureaucracy's official pronouncements — among other places. Lanham defines the basic elements of this style:

1) It is built on **nouns**, vague, general nouns. These are usually of Latin derivation, 'shun' words like **fixation, deviation, function, construction, education organization.** 2) These are often, as in the game, modified by adjectives made up from other nouns like them, as in 'incremental throughput' or 'fractional input'. 3) All action is passive and impersonal. No active intransitive verbs and no direct objects. Never 'I decided to fire him' but, 'It has been determined that the individual's continued presence in the present personnel configuration would tend to the detriment of the ongoing operational efficiency of the organizational unit in which the individual is currently employed.' 4) Nothing is called by its ordinary name. You don't decide to bomb a town; instead, 'It has been determined to maintain an aggressive and operational attack posture.' You don't set up an office, you 'Initiate an ongoing administrative facility.' 5) The status quo is preserved even in syntax. All motion is converted into a stasis. The Official Style denies, as much as possible, the reality of action. You don't dislike someone, you 'maintain a posture of disapproval toward' him. You don't decide to hire someone, you 'Initiate the hiring situation.' (Lanham, 1979, p.69)

Lanham is exhaustive here in describing the "Official Style" precisely because this will enable the student "to translate into and out of" it. "Into and out of" indicates that Lanham is not didactic about "voice". Voice, or how the writer wishes to present the self, involves the possibility of choosing the Official Style as one of his options.

The explicit naming of stylistic features enables the writer to become self-conscious about the available choices he has when he writes. The various kinds of styles (The Official, The Bubblegum, The Entertainer's, etc.) are not explored to demean and banish them. They are explored to enable the writer to be wide awake about how he wants to come across to a reader and to make him aware that he has choices that he can make to approximate this objective. The moral implications of some of these styles, while they may appear reprehensible to some, do not take away the possibility of somebody choosing them for his



purposes, base or noble. Their usefulness here is to give the writer a greater self-consciousness. He need not remain in a somnambulant state when he comes to write.

This notion of self-consciousness, connected with an "ethic of clarity" is explained by Donald Hall (1968) in his introduction to **The Modern Stylist**:

(The writer) does not have to become good in terms of conventional morality, but he must become honest in the expression of himself, which means that he must know himself.... If the style is really the man, the style becomes an instrument for discovering and changing the man. Language is expression of self, but language is also the instrument by which to know that self. (Hall, pp.6-7)

### Students' writing

If Coles, Macrorie, Applebee, and the experience of hundreds of teachers are to be believed, the essays that students write are pathetically alike: they are distanced, disengaged, predictable; they contain the received wisdom of any given topic, are falsely authoritative, misjudge an audience, and are dishonest or at least lacking in passion, self-consciousness, spontaneity, etc. How can we move them from this point and show them the range of possibilities that are available to them? If theme writing (Coles) is stuffy (Gibson), official (Lanham), pedantic (Booth), bureaucratic (Hartwell) then can we not encourage a voice that is looser, tentative, and has the pretense, at least, of sincerity, personality, wit, probity, fair-mindedness?

Even though Gibson (1969) has applied his criteria to the fiction of recognized authors, he has not done so with the kind of student theme that we get everyday. To illustrate the workability of his schema, let us comment on an excerpt from a student paper written in the Stuffy voice.

In life, there is a thin line between sanity and insanity. The mind is a very delicate organism, therefore it does not take much pressure to turn a rational human being into one who has crossed the boundary of social and moral acceptability. Under the proper conditions, man can traverse his breaking point. It also may not take much to push a stable society into social collapse. **Satan in Goray** is a harsh depiction of the extent to which a society can be stripped of all its beliefs and morals in the pursuit of an impossible goal. It shows how quickly the people of this town can turn away from their faith when the infrastructure -- the fabric of their society -- has been

shattered. (From a sophomore college essay)

The teacher and student can first ask the general questions that Gibson suggests: "Is the voice I hear in these sentences primarily a writer's voice or a talker's? How am I being asked to respond to this persona -- are we friendly and intimate or distant and unsociable?" (Gibson, 1969, p.46). Can we not go beyond the questions that Gibson raises to also ask: Is this person excited or passionate about what he is writing? Does he seem to care about what he is saying? Who is he talking to? Does he show any tentativeness about what he is saying? Do you think the writer is self-conscious, that is, do you think he knows how he is coming across? Do you think the writer convinces the reader that he freely chose the topic? Do you think the writer misjudges what the reader wants to hear and how he wants to hear it? Do you think that the writer imagines himself writing in the same type of voice as that of his fellow students?

Should the student come to her teacher and ask how the paper could be changed to sound more like she wants to sound, now that she realizes that she is being pedantic and stuffy, and presuming that she is not sounding this way because she feels she **needs** to -- presuming all this -- what can a teacher do? Taking only a small number of available categories suggested by Gibson, Lanham and others, how can we help the student see what's wrong with her paper? We might suggest that she avoid vague, general nouns, obscure words, and overuse of the passive. Perhaps she might change some of the polysyllabic words to monosyllabic words; try a **contraction** or two, or a **fragment**; use a fuller range of marks of punctuation including the parenthesis and dash and italics. The result might be something like the following:

How thin is the line between sanity and insanity?  
The mind -- delicate as it is -- can't take pressure and easily gives in. The same thing can happen to a people. **Satan in Goray**, a novel by Isaac Bashevis Singer, dramatizes this collapse. When a goal is hard to reach, people abandon even their faith if the outer support of society is destroyed.

Now that the paper has been translated she might realize the fact that there is not much that is significant there. Isn't she choosing this voice, therefore, to conceal what she does not know? And if this is so, the task of getting her to choose a voice that is closer to the reader, less distanced, might be harder than we imagine.

### Writing consciousness

If one of the important goals of teaching composition is to bring the writer to increased consciousness about his writing, then what is being said about voice is giving the student a schema for looking at how he "sounds". Further, as the student becomes increasingly aware of the range of voices he can choose from, he has the power to find the appropriate rhetorical stance. And the writer is left to decide what is appropriate. He may choose voices which seem strident to us, or pretentious to us. But that's his business. If we confine ourselves to comments like: "I don't like the way you sound here," or if he comes to that conclusion himself and **does not know how to do anything about it**, in what ways have we helped him to become a self-sufficient writer, an author?

In our classrooms, we might broaden the concept of revision to include aspects of voice and style. Through mini-lessons where these stylistic features can be presented, to process logs where students consider, specifically, the voice that is "heard" in their writing, students can be brought to a new level of self-consciousness. In a process log about an autobiography assignment written in a classroom where specific characteristics of voice and style were given some emphasis, a sophisticated level of self-consciousness is apparent:

I like to sound humorous in my writing and make people laugh; I guess it's my style.... When looking over my writing I found parts of some chapters where I appear confused. My story voice sounds more like talking than writing. If I remember correctly, in my expository writing, I had to be very explanatory.... In my autobiography, I'm telling the reader what happened in my life; I'm talking to the reader. In the expository paper, I'm explaining to the reader; I'm making the reader laugh.... I'm starting to be aware of how I want to present myself and my views. My portrait in the autobiography is athletic, funny, worrisome, active, and cautious. (Chris Brown, seventh grader at Great Neck Middle School South)

Are there other ways in which we can avoid the onslaught of the pedantic voices we are now getting in our writing classrooms?

In part, the problem is inherent in our wanting the students to say something significant -- usually about literature. High school and college, we tell ourselves, are not the places to encourage "personal narratives" or "creative" writing. But that's the paradox. We can't have the student write "essays" that are not "attempts", "a trying out", implicit in the essay tradition from Montaigne to the present. Our assignments, or our failure to engage in exploratory talk, or exploratory (free) writing, signal to

the student that he must write about what he does not know, or knows only imperfectly. Would the student whose paper we looked at earlier have written in a stuffy voice if the assignment had not read, as it did: "Respond to **one** of the following topics in a **four page** (1000 word) typewritten essay: **Topic No. 5**: "More important, it is the vivid detailing of the convulsions that rend human beings when the fabric of a stable society is torn to tatters by a revolutionary drive toward the impossible. Discuss." What cues about how to sound is the student given, when the assignment is worded in this way?

There already exists in Moffett's **Active Voice** (1981) a program that does not oversimplify the process of moving more abstractly from personal knowledge to the essay. Moffett's "I", "You", "It" is precisely the chart that most of us must follow to avoid the falsetto voice of the theme. The writer grows intellectually, has a chance to try on masks, and can then express with integrity and honesty what he now knows he wants to say.

In **The Plural I** (1978), Coles describes the almost torturous route away from theme-written papers as students are brought to recognize the voice they project. Students write and then the class and the writer decide whether they want to "sound" this way. They try on different voices. Gradually, slowly, they find the voice that is closest to the way they want to sound. Whether it is in the loosely designed assignment sequences of Moffett or the more patterned ones of Coles, or simply in the naturalistically arrived at "something to say" favored by the process people, there is no primrose path to perfect pitch.

## Conclusion

The importance of voice in the process approaches to teaching writing and the traditional interest in ethos and style investigation among the rhetoricians have made it more incumbent upon all of us to search out the rapprochements between the two approaches to writing and to see them more holistically rather than to emphasize the differences. What each field of inquiry can offer to the other makes the most sense. What becomes a paradigm shift more? It is no longer useful to talk about the process and product, about focus on the writer, focus on the writing, about "mystics and mechanics." Aren't we all interested in the final product but don't we disagree, sometimes vociferously, about the means to get there? Could the process people not benefit from the riches of the two-thousand-year-old tradition of classical rhetoric, and could the rhetoricians not profit by some of the practices of the process people especially in the generation of a text? If this reunion could take place, then an important quality of writing such as "voice" could be demystified. All writing is indirection. All talk about it need not be.

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