

UNDERSTANDING “VOICE”

I have spent years pondering ways to help my students “find their voices”.

What I have come up with, I will present to you today – take it or leave it. If it helps you, so much the better!

First, students should know:

We never need to “find” our voices when we write.

Our voices are there with us all the time.

We need to simply “uncover” them!

So, how do we go about uncovering the voice within us?

The place to begin is to have a conversation about “voice”.

It might go something like this:

Consider your voice when you speak.

You have a thought, you find words for it, you speak them.

Where do your words **come from**?

*(They come from **within you**, from what you feel and think, from your background and social context, from your experiences, and from the way you interpret the various ways of doing, behaving and believing.)*

When you pick words to communicate your thoughts or feelings or emotions, you are picking from a basket of **“you-ness”**

Your word choices are a **reflection of you**, which is another way of saying, of your **personality**.

When you speak the words you have chosen, you give them **“tone”** or feeling.

The words, the tone, the delivery are your “voice”.

The words you use (the expression of your personality), their tone and delivery, are **unique to you**. No one else is like you. Your “voice”, therefore, is **distinctive and distinguishable**.

Let's consider some examples:

Take Goldie Hawn and Whoopie Goldberg.
Jon Stewart, Keith Olbermeyer, and Rush Limbaugh –
put them all in the same room.

Their speaking voices are all very, very different.
The thoughts they have and the words they use to express them are very different.
They **sound** different from the start. And, they are!
They are each distinguishable, one from the other.

You could be blindfolded and tell them apart from just hearing their voices

From hearing someone's voice, therefore, we learn a lot about him or her.
We hear personalities via the words that are used and how those words
“sound” – their tone, and delivery.

Some personalities are sarcastic or ironic; some are bitter and angry; some
are positive and upbeat; some are shy and some are outspoken. Others are
formal or distant or chatty or friendly. But, all are different.

Now: consider voice in the written word:

It's no different.

The written word expresses who you are just as if you were speaking out loud.

It's all about the words you choose and how you put them together into sentences.
The reader can “hear” the voice behind the words.

We may choose **words** for our writing that are complex, sophisticated, pedantic, and
intellectual because that is who we are at our core.

Or, if we are an upbeat, lighthearted, fun loving person, the **words** we choose would be
colloquial, easily understood, and light in their sound.

Additionally, the way we put the words together in **sentences** reinforces a sense of our
personality. Sentences that are short, active, and direct convey a certain type of energy;
Sentences that are long, full of phrases, passive in voice, and sound heavy, convey a
totally different kind of energy.

“Voice” in writing, just as in speaking, is all about expressing who we are.