Crafting Authentic Voice
Crafting Authentic Voice

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HEINEMANN
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For
Nancy McDonald
my sister
who has crossed chasms
A MINOR BIRD

I have wished a bird would fly away,
And not sing by my house all day;
Have clapped my hands at him from the door
When it seemed as if I could bear no more.
The fault must partly have been in me.
The bird was not to blame for his key.
And of course there must be something wrong
In wanting to silence any song.

—Robert Frost
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This book is about developing voice in our writing, particularly our expository writing. The best discussion of voice I’ve ever read occurs in Ralph Fletcher’s *What a Writer Needs* (1993). He writes,

When I talk about voice, I mean written words that carry with them the sense that someone has actually written them. Not a committee, not a computer: a single human being. Writing with voice has the same quirky cadence that makes human speech so impossible to resist listening to. (68)

Voice is the writer’s presence on the page, the writer’s DNA, as one of my students put it. Sometimes that presence might be indiscernible, like a clean window-pane. Sometimes that presence is raucous and spirited, like a roaring fire—I think of Tom Wolfe’s voice in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968). Sometimes that presence is subdued and sincere, like breakfast in a coffee shop after morning rush. Some writers’ presence is aloof and distant, so abstractly intellectual and fraught with jargon that their words are impenetrable, like an unyielding brick wall. I’ve read voices that are windy and cluttered with wordiness and qualifications. I’ve read voices riddled with spelling aberrations, nonstandard usage, and incorrect punctuation, yet the meaning of the words was unmistakable, the presence of the writer undeniable.

I’ve used the word presence for voice. This bespeaks the unease in some of academia about the term voice. Darsie Bowden, in *The Mythology of Voice* (1999), writes that voice is a worn-out metaphor, that it was useful once “in the movement away from current-traditional rhetoric,” but its “particular historical moment” has passed (viii). She suggests that women’s studies offers alternatives to voice, like “web” or “fluid” or “embrace” or “the dance” (105–17). Peter Elbow has used the word juice in place of voice (1981, 286). A writer friend of mine has of late been using the word stance. He refers to a writer’s stance in a piece of writing.
Voice, juice, presence. Web, embrace, stance. Call it what you will. In this book I'm sticking with voice, except when I think other words will better fit the spirit of what I'm writing.

Style used to be the word to describe the particular ways that writers wrote. Don Murray, that venerable writing teacher-memoirist-poet-columnist-fiction writer, prefers the word voice to the word style. Style, he says, “implies something can be bought off the rack, something that can be easily imitated” (1998, 152). I’m sympathetic to this view, especially when I think of the style of the five-paragraph you-know-what and how that style has skewed voice, blocked energy, drained juice. So numbing and disappointing is it to read such essays that some teachers have called them “voiceless.” Oh, I think such writing has voice, all right, just as legal documents, insurance forms, and educational pronouncements have voice. The voice, though, is not one most of us can read for long without our eyelids drooping.

I’ll use the word voice—the sense we have while reading that someone occupies the middle of our mind, filling the space with the sound of a voice, the sense we have while writing that something is whispering in our ear. There is a human quality to writing, related to its sibling, the spoken word, which survived thousands of years before some distant ancestor made marks on sand or dirt or rock, marks that represented what came out of the mouth when the brain formulated thought, the voice box vibrated, and breath pushed out the vibrations.

Voice does not arise from nothing. It’s influenced by much. Our voices are shaped by the places where we learned language—in our parents’ arms, at our school desks, in the neighborhood, on playgrounds and streets. In my case, my dad’s barroom and bowling alleys had me experimenting with spicy vocabulary by third grade. People we play, work, and socialize with influence our voices. Reading shapes our written voices, too. Reading can determine how we come to think words should sound on the page. In the register and vocabulary of early British literature that we read in high school? In the staccato cadences of Hemingway? The reasoned, conversational structures of Barbara Kingsolver’s nonfiction? Lack of reading can cause us to miss picking up useful words like vanish, visage, beneath, stealth, chagrin—any words we more likely encounter in written texts than speech. There are other features of written text we might not pick up without reading, like the skill of sustaining, developing, and elaborating an idea in a monolog that isn’t prompted and interrupted by a speaking partner.

Our very personalities shape our voices and determine how and what we put on the page. Are we timid, reticent, circumspect? Verbal, brash, arrogant? Devious, disdainful, suspicious? Any personality traits can work their way into our written language. Or not. Sometimes outward personality works in reverse: the brash, verbal person has trouble eking out a line of writing, or the timid, reticent person uses the safety of writing to romp on the page.
When others talk to me about my writing, they often talk about voice. “Your book was easy to read,” they tell me. “It sounds as if you are right there in front of me, explaining and demonstrating what heights my writing can go to.” These readers attribute that effect to my voice, which they see as accessible, clear, and companionable.

That’s my bias in Crafting Authentic Voice. I won’t be showing you how to cultivate an erudite, distanced voice, one that is complex, convoluted, unassailable. I’ll show you what I know about being vivid on the page. I’ll show you what I know about pulling readers in and keeping them reading. I want the writing of my students to be direct, accessible, and clear, capable of connecting emotionally and intellectually with readers. I want that for anyone who writes.

In more than three decades of working with writers of all ages, I’ve learned to emphasize information in teaching writing. Writers must learn to choose topics that matter to them. They must learn to find places within assignments that activate their passions. I’ve learned to take students through writing processes, too, not simply make an assignment and designate a due date. I’ve sought to help students write clearly, succinctly, and vividly with detail, drama, and verve. They know when they’ve written this way. Sometimes a quiet sureness comes over them. Sometimes they light right up, so transforming is the experience of writing with voice. Maybe the brightest moment for me as a writing teacher occurs when I see students quicken to the power of their voices.

I am a writer but I am not a writer first. I am a teacher first, a teacher who writes and teaches the craft of writing to others. I’ve done this since 1970. Even before then I was lured by words on paper. Though I don’t remember being read to as a child, I loved reading novels as a schoolboy. It naturally followed that in seventh grade during back-to-back, forty-five-minute study halls at the end of the day, a schoolmate and I began writing stories for each other’s reading pleasure.

We wrote what we knew about. The material we worked with was right out of reruns of old movies on television. When we were doing writing stories about soldiers and war and heroism in which we were the main characters slogging through jungles, flying P-140s, or operating submarines, we traded our writing across the aisle. In the brown atmosphere of those afternoon study halls, above the worn wooden floor, beside the long bank of windows, I found out what it was like for my voice to travel beyond me without speaking. I saw my voice take hold of someone’s attention amid the enforced silence of study hall.

That self-sponsored writing and sharing between twelve-year-olds hooked me. In high school in the mid-1960s I continued to enjoy writing, even though the diet there was strictly essays, book reports, and show-me-what-you-know short answers to questions. I saw these writing tasks, however, as chances to show off with language, flaunting the new words I was learning like demise, implacable, and
repose. But despite my pompous diction, the writing itself caused me to lean into the page, discover insight, create logical, connected thought, and come to understanding.

Writing processes were not broken down and taught during my schooling, but all the writing caused me to discover a magic way to be smarter. After I wrote an essay or book report and read it a day later, I found I had more to say. Sometimes I merely added clarifying words, sometimes I thought of a more accurate way to say something, sometimes a new idea announced itself and I rushed to write it down. I was discovering the power and pleasure of revision. I was, as William Stafford put it, “closing with the material” (1986, 65). I used a green-ink pen to revise my blue words written on college-ruled paper. I loved the mixed color and the margins busy with words, phrases, and sentences. After one such fulfilling immersion in revision, I pronounced to friends, “I’m Edgar Allan Romano!”

Oh, the hubris!
Just what a young writer needs.

This book is about voice and about habits of writing that can help you and your students identify, develop, and shape your voices so readers sit up in their chairs, perhaps even read a little faster, so pleasurable is the language rhythm, so interesting and provocative is the meaning, so companionable is the sound of your voice in their heads.

Crafting Authentic Voice is divided into five parts:

Part I: The Delight and Dilemma of Voice
Part II: Qualities of Voice
Part III: Trust the Gush
Part IV: Crafting Authentic Voice
Part V: Voice and Identity

At the beginning of each section is an antipasto, which translates literally from the Italian as “before the meal.” Antipasto is the first course that serves as an appetizer. “It is designed to stay hunger pains, whet the appetite, and fill the pause while the pasta water or broth is coming to a boil” (Romagnoli and Romagnoli 1974, 1). Chef Jeff Smith maintains that antipasto “is no light little bit of nibbly but rather a serious display of fine food items that help you prepare for the rest of the meal” (1993, 63). That’s what I am shooting for with the stories and poem that serve as antipasti to the five sections of Crafting Authentic Voice. A good antipasto is delicious and fulfilling in its own right. It’s a serious part of the meal. So don’t offend the cook. Read the antipasto before you begin each section.

I often like to read books with short chapters. It makes me feel productive as I fly along, knocking off one chapter after another. Crafting Authentic Voice has
seventeen chapters under a thousand words. I couldn't make all the chapters short, though. Sometimes I had a lot to say about a topic. But sometimes I could make a point or tell a pertinent story with a few hundred words. And often in such cases, a short chapter is connected by theme or topic to the chapter that comes after or before it.

I take philosophical stances throughout the book, stances about language and grammar and teaching and learning. You'll agree with some. Others you'll oppose. Use my stances to affirm and extend your thinking. Use them to stimulate counterstances. There are practical ideas here, too, ideas about spontaneous written expression and ideas about crafting your writing. I'm hoping that these strategies and techniques will be of immediate use to you in your teaching and writing. You might use the “I Am What I Am” prompt found in Chapters 20 and 22 to launch your students’ voices. You might ask students to create parallel language structures to enhance both the rhythm and meaning of their words, as I do in Chapter 23. You might direct students to revise their writing with an eye toward creating a reader-friendly visage on the page (Chapter 38).

I've puzzled about who my audience is in Crafting Authentic Voice. In the previous paragraph I addressed teachers. But I also have in mind readers who look at themselves as writers. I have in mind students, too. I look at myself as a mixture of those identities: teacher, writer, student. I write for my job and my pleasure. I teach for my job and my pleasure. And I am ever a student. I learn from what I read and watch and write and listen to. I learn from my students, whom I accompany on their writing journeys. I hope that however you see yourself—as teacher, writer, student, or blend of all three—you take away from my book ideas, teaching strategies, and examples of strong voice that move you and others along in writing.

I've sought to write this book in a voice that keeps you with me until the final word, which matters just as much as the first word and all the words in between. I've tried to create a voice so compelling that it might keep you awake some night longer than you intend. You can decide whether I've succeeded. I've enjoyed the work of writing. And it has been work, no question about it. But it was the sweet work of creating—work that both empties and replenishes mind and spirit. May Crafting Authentic Voice quicken your voice and the voices of your students.