Identifying Voice

The following is part of an e-mail sent by a BYU student to a friend—

What the CRAP was up with the game this last Saturday down at Air Force? I told you, you should have cheered louder! Did you even watch the game? IT WAS THE MOST PITIFUL JOKE OF FOOTBALL I HAVE EVER SEEN IN MY ENTIRE LIFE! Tell me how you can possibly turn the ball over three, COUNT THEM THREE! times in SEVEN minutes. I would not have believed it possible until I saw it. As you can tell I am mildly upset at the loss. Did you happen to get an All Sport Pass? Well I did, and to tell you the truth I am debating whether or not to get a refund.

We can tell a lot about the student from this e-mail. He is excitable, energetic, jocular, and very enthusiastic about football. This e-mailer’s personality is expressed because the writing has a voice.

“Voice” reveals the personality and character of the speaker—the distinguishing characteristics that set him or her apart as an individual. When we read a piece of writing—whether it is an e-mail, article, novel, brochure, or anything involving printed words—we should be hearing a person speaking to us from the page. Identifying voice means identifying what that person is like. From the voice of the author we can identify his or her attitudes, values, assumptions, judgments, traits, and so forth. We can also tell if there is a difference between the real person and the persona he or she is trying to assume.

1. Natural and Unnatural Voices in Texts

Even though all texts have voices, some express a recognizable human voice and others an inhuman, unnatural voice. The second results from authors whose writing is stilted and impersonal. For example, look at the original and revised versions of a document from the Federal Register, vol. 42, no. 139 (July 20, 1970), dealing with the licensing regulations for citizens’ band radio services:

Original Version:  “95.421. Who may sign applications
(a) Except as provided in paragraph (b) of this section, applications, amendments thereto, and related statements of fact required by the commission shall be personally signed by the applicant, if the applicant is an individual . . .” (Lanham 106)

Revised Version:  “95.425. How do I sign my CB license application?
(a) If you are an individual, you must sign your own application personally” (107).

The original version is so stuffy and impersonal that it is painful to read. The revised version is not only more simple, but more “real.” Unlike the original version, we can imagine someone actually saying the words. The addition of voice makes the document more clear, accessible, and friendly.
As any reader knows, there are good and bad writing styles. The unvoiced writing style is bad because it distances the reader from the author and often characterizes the writer as insensitive, cold, impersonal, or arrogant. Most of us have had the experience of reading boring, incomprehensible textbooks; because the writing is devoid of all personality, the subject also becomes boring and incomprehensible.

The good writing style, on the other hand, recreates the voice of a real person. Voiced texts are more human and communicate more clearly with the reader. Authors build a rapport with their audiences when the reader feels that the person speaking from the page is alive, real, aware of the audience, and considerate.

II. Interpreting or Creating Voice

Just as writers must learn how to control voice in order to make texts accessible, readers need to pay attention to the information voice gives a text. Walker Gibson suggests that we ask three questions as we begin to identify or create voice:

1. Who’s talking? Who is being introduced?
2. To whom is he being introduced? Who are we expected to be as we read this prose sympathetically?
3. By what magic was all this done? How were words chosen and arranged in order to make these effects possible, without physical voice, or gesture, or facial expression? (“Hearing Voices” 326).

A. Identifying Author and Speaker

Can the speaker in a text be different from the author? Yes, an author always creates an image of self in order to appear a certain way to the audience. Consequently, we should always compare the persona created to the judgments guiding the text’s construction – the real person behind the persona. In textual details, we look for this consistency or inconsistency. When we perceive that the persona does not match the real person, then the author becomes untrustworthy. Likewise, when an author creates a narrator, who presents an argument or tells a story, we must compare the persona the narrator presents with his or her judgments (real character).

A speaker may try to portray himself as a rational, logical person, but his argument may contain logical fallacies and loopholes, revealing his actual character as careless and irrational. If the narrator is unreliable, then the author most likely is using satire and the author’s voice differs from the narrator’s. If the narrator is held up as an honorable speaker, then the author’s voice blends in with the narrator’s.

Not only should the personality of the speaker or author be consistent, but the voice should appeal to readers. Certain types of voices engage readers in the text; other types do not. Walker Gibson discusses three examples of voices common in texts: “tough talk, sweet talk,
and stuffy talk" (327). The writing of tough talkers is pushy and largely self-centered. A sweet talker concentrates on cozing up to the reader. Stuffy talkers have little concern for self or reader, and deal only with the subject under discussion.

An example of tough talk is, "I cannot understand the state of the education system in this country. Schools are far less adequate today than they were when I was a student."

A sweet talker would say, "You may have noticed the recent decline in the education system. Perhaps you are asking yourself, Why did I receive a better education than students are receiving today?"

A stuffy talker may write, "The education system in America is currently in a state of decline. Inadequate funding and rising teacher dissatisfaction have resulted in widespread feelings of distrust."

The content in these three examples is basically the same, but the change in voice changes the meaning in each utterance. These three kinds of voices do not encompass all types of possible personas. They provide examples, however, of the types of different voices that are present in texts.

**B. Identifying Audience**

Writers should compose with a particular audience in mind, and they should adapt their voices accordingly. By analyzing the voice of an author, we can often tell what kind of an audience we are expected to be as we read a text. As you read this passage from an article by Anna Quindlen, titled "TV or not TV," pay attention to your emotions and thoughts:

"I like television. This is unfashionable. Sniping at TV has become a kind of pedigree, a guarantee of superiority. One woman said to me proudly not long ago, "We don't even own a TV." Great—so you missed "The Civil War," the Challenger explosion, the "Who Shot J. R.?" episode of "Dallas," the World Series, and a considerable part of American culture over the last 10 years. We have a generation of parents who were raised on a steady diet of red meat, Pez, and "The Brady Bunch" and who now pride themselves on denying their kids sugar and television" (495).

Just as Quindlen creates a persona for herself in this passage, she also creates a persona for her audience. The speaker characterizes herself as an honest, forthright person who is "telling it like it is." As readers, we are expected to respond in a like manner. Ideal readers of this passage will find themselves thinking, "Yes, I like television too, and I'm not afraid to admit it. I certainly don't take part in the modern fad of finding pleasure in hypocritical self-denial." Because authors use many types of strategies and rhetorical devices to create this role for the audience to adopt, it is important to identify the characteristics of the author's desired or imagined audience before deciding whether to be persuaded.

**C. Language**

We identify the voice by looking at the style—at the author's choices in diction, syntax, and presentation. *Diction* is the author's choice of words because of their associated meanings. Diction can be formal or informal, abstract or concrete, flamboyant or restrained. *Syntax* is the way words are arranged in sentences and phrases. Phrases can be tightly or loosely connected. *Presentation* is the overall structure and organization of the text.
Diction, syntax, and presentation reveal voice because they point to thought patterns and give clues for how they should be pronounced when performed. So, when reading, we should ask questions about the way the speaker uses language. Does he or she use slang terms or very formal diction? What words does the speaker use to describe people, places, ideas, himself or herself? Are words or phrases repeated? If the speaker uses slang terms, the reader may feel that the speaker is laid-back or easy-going, whereas very formal diction may reveal a stuffy or sophisticated speaker.

What is the speaker’s syntax like? Are sentences long and circuitous, or short and to the point? Are they in active or passive voice? Are they carefully subordinated or loosely strung together? Hypotaxis usually reveals the subordination of ideas and careful thinking; parataxis may imply a failure to notice relationships and carelessness.

Presentation reveals the higher organizational skills of the author. Analyzing the structure of a text gives the reader a better understanding of the author’s purposes and ideas. Again, we should pay attention to the way thoughts are arranged. Are ideas presented in a parallel form, or are they subordinated? Are they compared and contrasted? How do each of the ideas relate to and support one another? What is the text’s genre?

1. Fiction

Perhaps voice is easiest to recognize in fiction, wherein authors create voices for not only narrators, but also the other characters in the stories. From the voices we infer personalities and characters. In J. D. Salinger’s Catcher in the Rye, the protagonist, Holden Caulfield, is both the narrator and a character. He begins the novel this way:

“If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don’t feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth. In the first place, that stuff bores me, and in the second place, my parents would have about two hemorrhages apiece if I told anything pretty personal about them. They’re quite touchy about anything like that, especially my father” (1).

Holden Caulfield uses a “tough” voice, using slang terms like “lousy” and “crap,” and long rambling sentences, as if he were informally chatting with the reader. Holden talks directly to his audience, addressing the reader as “you.” But at the same time, he assumes a devil-may-care attitude, as if the reader doesn’t matter at all. He says that he won’t describe his childhood because he doesn’t feel like it— “that stuff bores” him. Yet, he tries to impress his audience with an allusion to Charles Dickens and worries about offending his parents. Holden affects a tough, flippant, and disrespectful voice, although clues in the text—like his sensitivity about his parents and affectation of rebelliousness—reveal that he is also very insecure.

2. Non-fiction

Non-fictional texts have voices too, and they are more reader-friendly when the voices sound human. The following is from Russell Baker’s essay “American Fat.” What kind of voice is revealed in this passage?
Americans don’t like plain talk anymore. Nowadays they like fat talk. Show them a 
lean, plain word that cuts to the bone and watch them lard it with thick greasy syllables front 
and back until it wheezes and gasps for breath as it comes lumbering down upon some poor 
threadbare sentence like a sack of iron on a swayback horse.

“Facilitate” is typical of the case. A generation ago only sissies and bureaucrats would 
have said “facilitate” in public. Nowadays we are a nation of “facilitate” utterers.

“Facilitate” is nothing more than a gout-ridden, overstuffed “ease.” Why has “ease” 
fallen into disuse among us? It is a lovely little bright snake of a word which comes hissing 
quietly off the tongue and carries us on, without fuss and French horns, to the object which is 
being eased.

This is English at its very best. Easing is not one of the great events of life; it does not 
call for Beethoven; it is not an idea to get drunk on, to wallow in, to encase in multiple 
oleaginous syllabification until it becomes a pompous ass of a word like “facilitate” (285).

The voice in this passage is casual, straightforward, and conversational. The speaker 
sounds educated and easy-going at the same time, and he displays a wry sense of humor. While 
his diction is sophisticated and visually rich, his voice is far from stuffy or tedious. His attitude 
toward his subject—the trend from “plain talk” to the “multiple oleaginous syllabification” of the 
English language—reveals a mixture of irony and exasperation. It is obvious from his tone that 
he takes language very seriously. Baker speaks to the general, educated public (who would 
presumably understand at once what Baker means by “American fat”) and he speaks plainly but 
not simply, thereby modeling a more appropriate style than the one he is satirizing.

III. Finding an Appropriate Voice

Both writers and readers need to ask themselves this question: What kind of voice is 
appropriate for this speech occasion? There are appropriate and inappropriate voices for 
informal as well as formal writing. The casual, overenthusiastic voice characterizing the e-mail 
cited at the beginning of this handout would be out of place in a formal research paper. Likewise, 
the impersonal voice in a government document would not belong in a persuasive article. Also, 
any voice that compromises the trustworthiness of the writer is inappropriate.

In order to build a trust and rapport with the audience, writers must make sure that their 
voice is suited to the writing situation. Remember that people are drawn to likable and 
trustworthy personalities on the page, as well as in everyday life.

IV. Individual Practice

Analyze these examples for the personalities and characters of the speakers. Cite textual 
elements as evidence.

#1) Fun is hard to have.
Fun is a rare jewel.
Somewhere along the line people got the modern idea that fun was there for the asking, 
that people deserved fun, that if we didn’t have a little fun everyday we would turn into (sakes
alive), Puritans.

"Was it fun?" became the question that overshadowed all other questions: good
questions like: Was it moral? Was it kind? Was it honest? Was it generous? Was it necessary?
And (my favorite) was it selfless?

When pleasure got to be the main thing, the fun fetish was sure to follow. Everything was
supposed to be fun. If it wasn't fun, then by Jove, we were going to make it fun, or else
(Jordan 282).

#2) "Looky here, Bilgewater. ... You ain't the only person that's ben snaked down
wrongfully out'n a high place."

"Alas!"

"No, you ain't the only person that's had a secret of his birth." And by jing, he begins to cry.

"Hold! What do you mean?" "Bilgewater, kin I trust you?" says the old man, still sort of sobbing.

"To the bitter death!" He took the old man by the hand and squeezed it, and says, "The
secret of your being: speak!"

"Bilgewater, I am the late Dauphin!"

You bet Jim and me stared, this time. Then the duke says:

"You are what?"

Yes, my friend, it is too true--your eyes is lookin' at this very moment on the pore
disappeared Dauphin, Looy the Seventeenth, son of Looy the Sixteenth and Marry Antonette."
(Twain 104-105).

Works Cited


Quindlen, Anna. "TV or Not TV." Dialogues and Conversations. 2nd ed. Needham Heights, MA: Simon
