

Lesson 3.1

Defining Voice

A hundred people might tell you their definitions of Voice, but in the end, you need to define this quality for yourself, in your own heart and mind. That definition will guide the voice you put into your own writing. And where does this definition come from? It comes from many places—conversation, hearing gifted speakers, listening to your own thoughts, and above all, from reading. When you can't put a book down, when it seems to echo your innermost feelings, when it makes you tear up or laugh out loud and you can't wait to share it, that's the power of Voice. In this lesson, you'll be part of a writing circle. You'll take turns reading and listening to various voices, and based on what you hear, you'll write a personal definition of Voice.

First Thoughts

How would you define the trait of Voice right now? **Hint:** Do NOT look at a rubric or checklist for someone else's words. Trust your own heart and mind and write what *you* think.



Voices on Parade

The more you read—published writing, student writing, your own writing—the clearer the concept of Voice will become in your mind. In your writing circle, read each of the following three passages aloud, listening for the writer's voice. Then fill in your response to each voice.

As you read and listen, ask yourself:



1. How does this writing make me feel?
2. Would I like to keep reading—or read this again?
3. Would I share this aloud with a friend, just for fun?

Voice A

I know it's not considered cool to announce to the world that you like bugs, but I don't care. I LOVE INSECTS! There, I said it, using ALL CAPS! That's like shouting. My friends may not be as fond of bugs as I am, but they deal with it. They understand my passion. They have learned not to disrespect insects in front of me—and especially not to squash them. One friend even predicted that I would become a famous entomologist (that's an insect scientist, for those who don't know) and maybe even discover an insect I could name. I even had a special shirt made that says, "BUG me—I don't mind!"



On a scale of 1 to 6, Voice A is definitely a . . .

1**2****3****4****5****6**

Faint whisper . . .
and fading fast

Strong voice that
keeps me reading

I would keep reading if this piece were longer.

- Yes, definitely!
- Maybe—at least for a page or two.
- Are you kidding me? That's enough!

I would read this aloud to a friend.

- Yes—this would be fun to read aloud.
- No! This is NOT a piece I would share with anyone.

Voice B

It's *my* job to put out the recycling box and garbage can every Wednesday morning. It's also *my* job to put them back along the side of the house when I get home from school Wednesday afternoon. I get *mad* sometimes because the garbage people don't put the lid back on the can carefully. Sometimes it has rolled or been blown almost two houses down. If it has been raining, the can will get water in it. If I don't pour it out, *my* dad will get *mad*. This *makes me mad*. All they have to do is put the lid back on and everything will be OK.

On a scale of 1 to 6, Voice B is definitely a . . .

1**2****3****4****5****6**

Faint whisper . . .
and fading fast

Strong voice that
keeps me reading

I would keep reading if this piece were longer.

- Yes, definitely!
- Maybe—at least for a page or two.
- Are you kidding me? That's enough!

I would read this aloud to a friend.

- Yes—this would be fun to read aloud.
- No! This is NOT a piece I would share with anyone.

Voice C

There was simply no possible, feasible, rational, or justified way around it. Lisbet Liesel Littleton would have to start delivering newspapers to the McGerren place. Hers was the only route that even came close to the gross old house!

For months she'd been zooming past it at full-bike-velocity, just to get down the block and on with her route. The gloom and doom house was straight out of a monster movie! A rusty wrought iron fence circled the yard, keeping trespassers out . . . or perhaps keeping something *in*. The gates spiked jaggedly at the top and creaked on their hinges in the wind. Wicked, jungle-like grass consumed the yard so that it was impossible to make out much of the house's façade. One particular second-story window was boarded up, a sinister eyepatch. To go barefoot on the rickety wood of the porch would have resulted in splinters, tetanus, the black plague, or worse. And now, out of the wild blue yonder, Mr. McGerren had subscribed?



Needless to say, it was quite the unpleasant experience having to deliver newspapers there.

Lisbet, ever the professional, had a strict “doormat or free” policy. She vowed to land a doormat shot every time, or she’d knock that issue off the next month’s bill.

This meant that for the McGerren house she’d be forced to get off her bike and walk the newspaper up to the splinter-tetanus-plague-inducing porch. Not even the captain of her school’s basketball team could have sunk that shot through the wildlife-infested jungle yard.

And so it was that poor little Lisbet Liesel Littleton parked in front of the cringe-worthy old McGerren place and secretly wished, even if it did cost her newspaper sales, that Mr. McGerren would get his news off the Internet like most normal people nowadays.

On a scale of 1 to 6, Voice C is definitely a . . .

1

2

3

4

5

6

Faint whisper . . .
and fading fast

Strong voice that
keeps me reading

I would keep reading if this piece were longer.

- Yes, definitely!
- Maybe—at least for a page or two.
- Are you kidding me? That’s enough!

I would read this aloud to a friend.

- Yes—this would be fun to read aloud.
- No! This is NOT a piece I would share with anyone.

Sharing Personal Choices

Continue your writing circle discussions. Only this time, share a voice you chose yourself. Read it aloud to the group with LOTS of expression. Then answer the following question—with the help of your group:

On a scale of 1 to 6, the voice I chose is about a . . .

1	2	3	4	5	6
Faint whisper . . . and fading fast			Strong voice that keeps me reading		

Here are three words that describe this voice:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Final Reflection

If you could sound like any writer you heard today, which one would it be? Why?



My Personal Definition: Second Thoughts

Look back over the passages, your first thoughts, and your final reflection. Write your own current definition for the trait of Voice on a separate piece of paper.



Share and Compare

When you have finished, meet in your writing circle with three or four other writers. Take turns reading your definitions. Did anyone think of an aspect of voice you did not think of? Add it if you like!



A Writer's Questions

Sometimes when a listener hears a lot of voice—or no voice—that person will say, “Well, it’s because of the way you are reading.” Do you think that’s true? Does voice come from the way we read—or does it come from the writing itself?



Putting It to the Test

Voice often comes from humor. But let’s say you are taking a writing test and you are writing about a very serious subject—such as how plastic waste is polluting the oceans of the world. Humor probably feels inappropriate. How then would you manage to write with voice? Should you write with voice about such a topic?