

Lesson 3.2

Linking Voice to Purpose

Writing a set of directions for building a custom bicycle is different from writing a scary mystery story. Directions call for a helpful, experienced voice to help readers feel confident as they move carefully and purposefully from step to step. A good mystery calls for a voice that keeps readers engaged, curious, and on the edge of their seats as they rip through pages, biting their nails. As you will see in this lesson, voice often gives the reader some strong clues about a writer's purpose—to entertain, teach, persuade, update readers on the news, share a secret, give readers the shivers, and so on. Purposes for writing are endless, and so are the voices that go with them.

Sharing an Example: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

Here's a short example from Frederick Douglass's autobiography of how he threw off the bonds of slavery. Here, Douglass is unused to the harsh work he's forced to do. When he collapses, he draws the attention of the slave owner Mr. Covey. As you think about Douglass's account, ask yourself, "How would I describe this voice? And what is the writer's purpose?"

He came to the spot, and, after looking at me awhile, asked me what was the matter. I told him as well as I could, for I scarce had strength to speak. He then gave me a savage kick in the side, and told me to get up. I tried to do so, but fell back in the attempt. He gave me another kick, and again told me to rise. I again tried, and succeeded in gaining my feet; but, stooping to get the tub with



which I was feeding the [wheat] fan, I again staggered and fell. While down in this situation, Mr. Covey took up the hickory slat... and with it gave me a heavy blow upon the head, making a large wound, and the blood ran freely; and with this again told me to get up. I made no effort to comply, having now made up my mind to let him do his worst.

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass
by Frederick Douglass

Voice and Purpose

How would you describe the voice of Frederick Douglass? Circle any word that applies. It's fine to circle more than one or add your own words to our list.

| | | | | |
|------------|---------------|---------|---------|-----------|
| nervous | inexperienced | angry | excited | confident |
| respectful | sad | curious | bored | terrified |

Based on this voice, what do you think is the writer's purpose? Check all that are true, and add your own ideas also.

- ☐ To make us nervous and tense
- ☐ To paint a vivid picture in our minds
- ☐ To show how some slaves were treated
- ☐ To give us factual information about 19th century life
- ☐ To reveal what Mr. Covey is like
- ☐ To make us curious about American history
- ☐ To make us laugh
- ☐ To make us feel sorry for Frederick Douglass
- ☐ To make us wish we'd lived in the 1800s

My own ideas:



Different Voice—Different Purpose(s)

Here's a voice that's completely different. Again, listen carefully, thinking of words or phrases that might describe this author's voice. Also see if you can link the writer's voice to the purpose. (There may be more than one.)

There was a feller here once by the name of *Jim Smiley*, in the winter of '49—or maybe it was the spring of '50—I don't recollect exactly, somehow...but anyway, he was the curiosest man about always betting on anything that turned up you ever see, if he could get anybody to bet on the other side; and if he couldn't, he'd change sides... But still he was lucky, uncommon lucky; he most always come out winner. He was always ready and laying for a chance; there couldn't be no solit'ry thing mentioned but that feller'd offer to bet on it and take any side you please, as I was just telling you. If there was a horse race, you'd find him flush, or you'd find him busted at the end of it; if there was a dogfight, he'd bet on it; if there was a catfight, he'd bet on it; why, if there was a chicken fight, he'd bet on it; why, if there was two birds setting on a fence, he would bet you which one would fly first.

"The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County"
by Mark Twain

Given the voice he uses, what is Mark Twain's purpose in writing this piece? List all the possible purposes you can think of—big or small.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____



A Good Match?

Following is a news story about an electrical power blackout. A TV journalist will read this story to viewers. So, what's the primary purpose? And given that purpose, is this the right voice?

HINT: Pretend you're on TV as you read.

What a Blackout!

Wow! That was some blackout we experienced here in Woodville last night, wasn't it? Were you in town? If you were, you might have noticed (unless you were asleep or something! Ha, ha!) that the whole east side of the city from First Avenue up to Biloxi Boulevard was dark, dark, dark! We're talking no lights, no TV, no microwave, no power! One fallen tree and kapow! It was totally inconvenient—and even kind of creepy! Even the streetlights were out. The whole thing lasted for three hours, but it felt like days as people stumbled around in the dark. Probably some stubbed toes and bruised heads out there from bumping into things. Whoa! That's a blackout for you!

Does the voice match the purpose?

- ☐ It's a *perfect* match! This is how news sounds—and should sound.
- ☐ It needs a little tweaking, but the writer is on the right track.
- ☐ This is a total disconnect. The whole thing needs to be rewritten.



Emergency in the Newsroom!

Imagine you write for the news station. (Maybe you will one day!) The anchorperson who's supposed to read the news story about the blackout is in a panic. She says it doesn't sound right for viewers, and she can't do it. Luckily, you're on the job today! With your writing circle, make a plan.

1. Describe the kind of voice you think would be right for a report like this.
2. Look back at the draft. Underline words or phrases that are just wrong.
3. Revise by taking words out, rewriting, or adding any details you wish. It's OK to invent.
4. Read the final copy aloud. You **MUST** be able to read it within thirty seconds or less.

NOTE: Revise right on the copy. You do not need to rewrite unless you want to.

Share and Compare

Take turns reading your revised news stories aloud. Did every group find a voice to suit the purpose? Discuss the kinds of changes you made. And seriously, if a well-known TV journalist did use the original script, how would you feel about that? What would you think of the news station?



A Writer's Questions

What's the last time you can recall hearing or reading a voice that wasn't quite right for the purpose? Can you think of an example in books, on the Internet, on television or radio, or in real life? What was the effect on you?



Putting It to the Test

In on-demand writing, the purpose of the task is usually defined for you. It's built right into the prompt. As a writer, what would be your purpose as you responded to each of these prompts?

- Tell about a time when you were surprised.
- Many inventions have influenced our society. Explain how one invention has changed modern life.
- Some school rules seem unfair. Write a letter to your principal asking for one rule to be changed.

What sort of voice do you think matches each prompt? Look at some other examples of prompts online. See if the prompt alone gives you any clues about the purpose and voice readers might expect.