

Lesson 3.4

From Flat to Fantastic

When you experience strong, voice-filled writing, the words flood your mind with mental pictures and your heart with emotions. You may feel so connected to writing that you cannot stop reading. You may even feel compelled to share it with a friend. Writing that is weak in Voice, on the other hand, leaves you feeling disconnected and uninvolved. So—what does one piece of writing have that the other does not? In this lesson, you’ll have a chance to think about that and to turn a piece of flat, voiceless writing into something readers can’t put down.

Starting Strong: *Bull Run*

Writing that is strong in Voice gives off its own energy—in the form of humor, sadness, outrage, confidence, joy, enthusiasm, or plain old curiosity. When writing lacks this energy, readers have to do all the work. Have you ever pretended you were having a good time when you really weren’t? Putting your own energy into someone else’s writing is a lot like that. It’s exhausting.

Look carefully at this passage from *Bull Run* by Paul Fleischman. *Bull Run* tells the story of the Civil War through the voices of 16 different people: male, female, old, young, black, white, northern, southern. This passage is narrated by Fleischman’s character Toby Boyce. As you read, ask yourself whether you feel

- energized by the writer’s words, OR . . .
- worn out from the writer’s lack of energy.



I was eleven years old and desperate to kill a Yankee before the supply ran out. It seemed that all Georgia had joined except me. I knew I'd never pass for eighteen. You can't very well lie about your height. Then I heard that musicians were needed to play for the soldiers, any age at all. I hotfooted it fifteen miles to the courthouse and took my place in line. The recruiter scowled when I reached the front. "You're a knee baby yet," he said. "Go on home." I told him I meant to join the band. "And what would your instrument be?" he asked. My thinking hadn't traveled that far. "The fife," I spoke out. Which was a monstrous lie. He smiled at me and I felt limp with relief. Then he stood up and ambled out the door. Across from the courthouse a band had begun playing. We all heard the music stop of a sudden. A few minutes later the recruiter returned. He held out a fife. "Give us 'Dixie,'" he said. I felt hot all over. Everyone waited. The fife seemed to burn and writhe in my hand like the Devil's own tail.

Bull Run

by Paul Fleischman

Quick Reflection

How much energy did you feel in this passage?

1

None! I had to do ALL the work!

2

3

4

5

6

A lot! It's alive with energy!

Get the Voice Out!

What if we rewrote this passage (apologies to Mr. Fleischman), draining out most of Toby Boyce’s voice? What would we need to do, exactly? We’ll rewrite the first few lines to get you started. Then, meet with your writing circle to see how much more you can do. Remember—this time, **NO VOICE ALLOWED!** Here we go . . . into the world of the flat and dull . . .

I was eleven years old and wanted to join the army. Lots of other people had joined. I knew I didn’t look eighteen. I was too short. Then I heard that musicians could get in. They were needed to play for the soldiers. I went to the courthouse and got in line. The person frowned and told me to go home because I was too young. I told him I wanted to join the band. _____

Quick Reflection

What did you actually **DO** to cut out the voice? See if you and your writing circle can think of at least three things you changed.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____



Highlighting the Top 5 Moments

Go back now to Fleischman’s original passage. With your writing circle members, highlight or underline the Top 5—that is, the five moments in the passage that you think have the MOST voice. Take time to discuss them—you may not all agree at first!

Now, as a group, see if you can identify from one to five things that Fleischman did to create Toby’s voice in the passages you highlighted. Be as specific as you can.

Author Paul Fleischman . . .

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

Do two more things!

- Put a star by the strategy you think is MOST important.
- Circle the number of any strategy you’d like to try in your own writing.

Reversing Gears: “Greenway Forest”

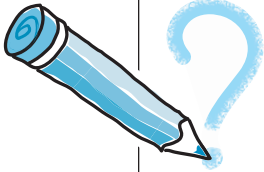
You just finished taking the voice *out* of a piece—sort of like letting the air out of a tire . . . SSSSSSSSSsst. Flat.

Now we’re going to switch gears. You get to put the voice *in*. Remember all those little tricks that Paul Fleischman used to give his writing energy? Use those—or any others you can think of—to put some life into the passage “Greenway Forest.” Edit this piece any way you want, then use the space below for your revision.



Share and Compare

Meet with a partner or in writing circles to share your revised pieces. Have one person read the original aloud first. Then listen carefully to each revision. Make notes on the kinds of things other writers did to add voice. Be prepared to share those observations as a class.



A Writer's Questions

Is there one big secret to writing with voice? Or are there many different things a writer can do? Do you think your way of defining this trait will change over time?



Putting It to the Test

Paul Fleischman probably chose to write about the Civil War because he finds it fascinating. He also likes creating the voices of multiple characters. In a testing situation, you do not always have the freedom to make these kinds of choices. The topic is chosen for you. Author and teacher Barry Lane suggests pretending that the topic IS your favorite—and that you are the world's leading authority on that topic. How might that strategy help you put voice into your writing?