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Finding your Voice

What is voice? As an English teacher, I use the word all the time, *strong voice* and *solid voice* and so on. But how do you define it? I know it's a thing, but don't ask me to tell you how it works. Well, that's not entirely true.

When I introduce the idea of voice in writing, I tell my students that I want them to write like they just bought the place and they're picking out drapes. As the god of your page , own your creation. Voice is a combination of many factors (style, tone, personality) and there are as many individual definitions as there are writers. All of them recognize it as a thing, but try agreeing on a unified working definition. I keep thinking of Winona Ryder's character trying to explain irony. So, if I may not be able to clearly define voice, I can give you some tips on what works for me as a teacher trying to help students discover theirs.

> **"Well, I can't really define irony. . . but I know it when I see it."**
> **Winona Ryder**
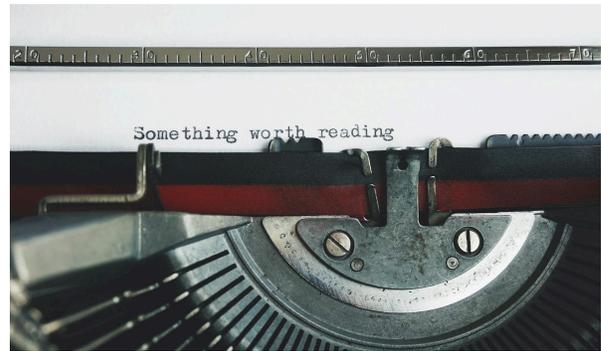
Please, no more is...

One of the things I teach my students is to avoid using *is* with a verb. Although there are exceptions, the use of auxiliary verbs can make your writing feel less punchy. Using a single verb makes the writing more immediate, letting you lean into the subject matter. Rather than write, *Conrad is exploring the use of multiple narratives*, try, *Conrad explores*. It's a simple but effective fix and results in immediate dividends for students.

Be a Yoda

Modals drive me nuts in writing. They're weeny words: *can, might, should, could, may*… They remind me of weasel words advertisers use. Using them projects a sense of insecurity and makes it seem like the writer can't commit to an actual position. Something either is or it is not. Note: This is where I usually do my terrible Yoda impression. Pick a jersey and put it on. Nobody wants to read an unsatisfying piece of writing. I tell students that if a point is worth making, then make it. You need to commit to your writing.

The $10 word

We have this saying. Actually, I have this saying, that there are three kinds of words: $2 words, $10 words, and $20 words. Now, $2 words are the ones we use every day, usually in conversation. I'm not sure where I read this, but I was shocked to see how small the average person's spoken vocabulary was when compared to what they write. I mean, I get it. How often do you use the word "nevertheless" while talking to your friends? $20 words are those really expensive words, the kind you get off Thesarus.com and inject into your essay, hoping your English teacher thinks you're smarter than you are. They're perfectly good words, but often just a little too forma, and depending on your audience, pretentious? And remember, it's all about audience, and if your diction is off-putting, then you risk losing your reader. Just read Orwell's "*Politics and the English Language*" and you'll get what I mean. My advice, find that $10 word. It's the sweet spot between conversational and snooty.
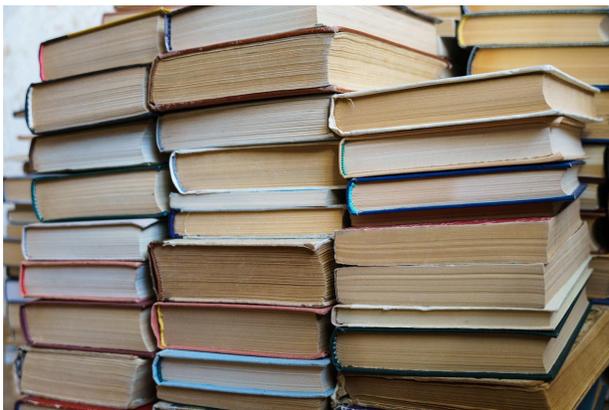
> **"If you want to be a good writer, then you must be a good reader."**

Just read something

It's no secret that students read less. Well, they actually read *fewer* books, but they still read quite a bit. According to David Leonhardt, 6% of Canadians did not read a book in 2022. Granted, his survey size was only 144, but it still warms my heart that it's a low number. What worries me is that according to Scholastic Canada, 4% of Canadian teenagers did not read a single book in that same time period, that includes the ten months they were in school. That's not to say they're not reading at all, but they are reading less and are choosing to read material of lower quality, namely social media. And as they say, you are what you eat, or at least ingest, and a steady diet of social media abbreviations and misspellings have resulted in a much lower level of writing overall.

, and that means reading quality writing. Good writing will give students an insight into how professionals write, allowing them to emulate, eventually developing their own unique style.

Be a little annoying

What I mean by this is students should strive to be that kid that is constantly looking for feedback from their instructor. I remember a workshop I attended in university which said that a student's grade can improve by 10% just by seeking feedback from their instructor. I tried it and it worked. No matter how hard I worked on my papers, I could not break the B+ threshold. He admitted that my essays were some of the best B papers he's read. When I asked my prof what I could do to improve, he

told me to start asking A+ questions. I did and got an A on the very next assignment. Rather than guessing what I was doing wrong, I asked for help, got direct feedback, and implemented the advice. Funny how that works.

One thing I discovered over the years is if you want to see some of the best teachers in a school, then go to the shops and watch them. I've modeled much of my educational approach from their example. I no longer assign homework, but rather structure my classes on a coaching model.

Keep on writing-writing-writing…

Not every student is going to want to become a great writer, but most want to become better writers. They can appreciate the dividend better writing brings with it. In order to do this, you need to write often and consistently. Rather than writing large formal essays, try shorter, exploratory pieces which allow students to experiment with different approaches to writing. Identify areas of possible growth and provide mini-tutorials targeted to these issues. This will allow students to implement new skills and see growth in their writing in real time.

Parting thoughts

One of the last things I wanted to do is relate my transition to online writing and submission. It's taken me a long time, but I've really come around and embraced Google classroom and what it can offer instructors. I'll be the first to admit that I was a bit of a Luddite when it came to embracing technology.

One of the most valuable features of Google classroom is the ability to provide direct and immediate feedback to students. This is perhaps the single most important factor in student improvement. I can see what students are working on and collaborate on documents. As well, after submission, It allows me to suggest edits, which students can reject or apply to their document. Oftentimes, I'll copy a sentence or two and paste it at the bottom of their work, showing them how slight changes in the writing can yield significant results. Lastly, the comment bank is an excellent way to provide targeted feedback in the form of "canned" comments identifying errors. Additionally, I've begun to provide links to short video tutorials which students can access at will.

Developing voice is a lifelong journey. Even after all this time, I'm still trying to find mine. By no means is this an exhaustive list of methods, but hopefully, some of these suggestions might work for you. If you have any other ones that have worked for you, I'd love to hear from you. Just let me know through the comment section on my website.

"Canadian Book Reading Statistics for 2022 and 2023 (Complete Canada Survey Data)." *THGM Writing Services*, seo-writer.ca/blog/canadian-book-reading-statistics-2022 -2023-complete-canada-survey-data/. Accessed 10 May 2024.

"Kids and Family Reading Report." *Scholastic.Com*, www.scholastic.ca/readingreport/the-state-of-kids-and-r eading.php. Accessed 10 May 2024.

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