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## LESSON 19

### GIVING WORDS POWER LIKE A WRITER

#### Voice, Style, and Passion

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Supplies: “Voice Examples” handout, “Worksheet for Lesson 19”; *The Seagull Reader: Essays*

Goal: to understand voice and style and how to develop it in writing, as well as to understand the role of passion in excellent writing

Suggested Time: 5 sessions

Resource credits: *The Hobbit*, by J.R.R. Tolkien; *O, Ye Jigs and Juleps*, by Virginia Cary Hudson

## SESSION 1

### Quote of the Day:

“I must write. My pen is heavy. Oh, lighten the load, for I must write.” – unknown

“I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.”—*Song of Myself*, Walt Whitman

### Warm-up

Today you will do your last freestyle warm-up. This one will be different from the rest, however, because you will only have one option. In your notebook select a page that would be easy to find later when you need it for reference. I suggest you tag this page somehow or include it in your table of contents. Then title the page, “Things and Ideas That Interest Me.” Set your timer for five minutes, and then brainstorm a numbered list of anything and everything that interests you. You need at least 25 items on the list for

the warm-up to be complete. Here is the start to my own list, if you would like an example:

1. books
2. traveling
3. parenting
4. health
5. grade-school education
6. skin care
7. zero-waste living

If I was to finish the list, I might come up with many more than 25, but I'd at least have 25 by the time I put down my pen. Giving myself only five minutes would push my brain to think fast and uncritically, but I would take more time if I felt I could come up with more. Now it's your turn! Do your best on this, because it may serve you well in the future. Not only will I ask you to use this list in unit 5, but you may be glad to have it for future courses with other teachers when you need to generate ideas for new essays.

## Introduction

When I began writing this course, I knew that whatever else I might teach in it, two concepts were non-negotiable: the thesis statement and voice. One is a skill that you can learn and master with practice, and the other is an abstract idea that you can't actually learn, only nurture and develop. Is it any wonder, then, that this is the lesson I was most anxious about writing? Yet here we are, ready to tackle one of the most important lessons I can teach you about writing. Along with knowing how to craft and use a strong thesis, which is the core of each essay and paper you will ever write, learning how to develop your voice and use it to best effect is what I most want you to get out of this course.

Voice, however, has two best friends that like to tag along wherever it goes. These are “style” and “passion.” Some writers may call these concepts by different names, but we all mean the same thing, and we all agree that *they* are what work the magic that makes an audience want to keep reading. Let me say that in a different way, because it is so important. It doesn’t matter how interesting or important your content may be; your voice, style, and passion for your subject are what will keep your audience hooked. It is voice, though, that leads the way.

## Lesson, part 1: Voice

“To gain your own voice, you have to forget about having it heard.”—Allen Ginsberg, poet

In literary-speak the term “voice” has two meanings, each of which refers to a different aspect of writing. The first is a grammar term and is always coupled with one of two additional words: “active” or “passive.” These concepts refer to whether the subject is doing an action or whether the subject is being acted upon. Using these two voices well are also important to good writing, but the second meaning is the one that concerns us in this lesson. It is what we mean when we speak of the writer’s personal presence on the page. If that is not enough of a definition for you, don’t worry. Writers have long struggled to define voice accurately, so here are some other ways to describe it:

- Voice is the magical heard quality in writing. Voice is what allows the reader’s eyes to move over silent print and hear the writer speaking. Voice is the quality in writing, more than any other, that makes the reader read on...Voice is the music of language. — Don Murray, writer and teacher
- Voice underlies every part of the [writing] process. To ignore voice is to present the process as a lifeless, mechanical act...Voice is the imprint of ourselves on our writing.—Don Graves, writer and teacher

- Voice is the shadow we leave on the page.—college student
- When I talk about voice, I mean written words that carry with them the sense that someone has actually written them. Not a committee, not a computer: a single human being. – Ralph Fletcher, *What a Writer Needs*
- I had no concept of my writing being particularly good or bad, it was simply something I did with the words tearing through my brain.—college student

Voice is not only important for bringing a piece of writing to life for the reader's sake, it is also important for the writer's sake. When a writer finds his voice, it can be like unlocking a door and letting in a flood of light. Here is what one college student had to say: "The moment I fell in love with writing was when I realized that I could be myself and write like I was talking to the reader."

Everyone has a personal voice, or a certain way of expressing oneself in speech. We all have a tendency to use a certain body of vocabulary, certain slang words and idioms, certain sentence patterns. We all have a usual manner and attitude that comes across in the way we speak. In fact, people who know you well would be surprised and perhaps even uncomfortable to hear you speaking in a way that is "not you." They know your voice like they may know the difference between a violin and a trumpet. Both may play the same notes, yet we don't need to see them to know which is playing. The voice of each is distinctive.

As difficult as it is to define, there are certain linguistic elements that make up a person's literary voice:

- ❖ syntax--the way the speaker puts together words and phrases to form sentences
- ❖ diction--the speaker's typical choice of words (such as slang, regional dialect, proper standard English, or jargon appropriate to the essay's subject)
- ❖ tone--the attitude the speaker shows towards the topic being discussed

- ❖ rhythm—movement of the language, its ebb and flow; caused by word choice, sentence length and structure, and rhetorical devices like alliteration and poetic repetition
- ❖ point of view—the perspective of the speaker (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> person; past, present, future)
- ❖ punctuation--the way the speaker uses questions, exclamations, hyphens, etc.

You usually express your voice orally; that is how people recognize your manner, style, and personality best (along with your body language and clothing choices). In writing, however, you lose some of the cues that make your voice recognizable, such as the pitch and speed at which you usually speak or little quirks like saying “um” or “awesome” a lot. Although these qualities of your voice usually disappear in writing, other qualities remain so that you develop a “writing voice.” But only if you let it. Just as you can in oral speech, you can also choose to sound like a textbook or your favorite author or a college professor or the kind of person you think your current crush would like. You can put on any persona you want.

There is only one problem with that choice. It’s a terrible idea. First of all, you will likely fail. Nobody can sound like another person as well as that person can. Second, we don’t need another Shakespeare, Austen, or Tolkien. One of each is gift enough for the world; we need new gifts. Third, writing in the impersonal style of a textbook is like talking *at* someone, rather than *to* them. Have you ever had an adult you don’t know well talk *at* you? They say polite and proper things, but you can tell that they aren’t really trying to engage with the real you. Don’t do that to your readers! They won’t like it, either. Fourth, what’s wrong with *your* voice? Why not contribute something new to the literary world? You are about to enter the Great Conversation that has been going on since people first started writing down their thoughts and sharing them with the world. Learn the ropes of writing and literature. Build a solid

foundation on the good and great writers. Then freshen up the Great Conversation by adding your own voice to the mix.

Yes, there may be people who can express themselves in more interesting ways than you can, and yes, there may be people who have more distinctive voices than you do. Those two qualities are one reason that some people become famous for their writing and others who try equally hard do not. Strong voice is powerful, and some naturally have a voice that compels readers to pay attention. Regardless, you have your own voice to lend in the Great Conversation going on all around you. As non-distinctive as you may think your voice is, being authentic on the page may powerfully affect someone else--someone who might be able to connect with *you*, someone who needs to hear what you have to say in the way only you can say it.

This does *not* mean that anything you write is just as good as what anyone else writes or that it doesn't need improvement. This lesson isn't about helping you feel good about yourself. When your voice rings true on the page, however, you have a much better chance of capturing your reader's attention and fulfilling the purpose you set out to achieve. But you still must learn how to express those ideas in an organized, clear, stylish, and interesting way. Even the most distinctive voice will not be at its best without a solid mastery of skills. That is why you must learn the craft of writing—skills, conventions, and techniques—just like we did in units 1-3.

Unfortunately, as I mentioned earlier, voice is one thing a teacher cannot teach you the way we can teach thesis statements or outlines. We cannot create, dictate, define, or force it, and we cannot lay out a foolproof method for you to follow in order to have good voice. We can nurture your voice, but in the end you must develop it yourself. To do that, you have to be “brave on the page,” willing to put aside the smokescreens of fancy language and lofty ideas in order to be present for the reader as yourself on the page. And give your voice time to develop. As you mature, your voice

will too. It may be awkward at first, but over time it will become smoother and more mature.

### Lesson, part 3: Voice Illustrated

Thus far, you have learned about introductions, conclusions, and many other concepts. I chose to place voice near the end because I wanted you to understand an essay's general structure before turning your focus to voice. This was purely for practical reasons, not because voice is less important. Indeed, voice is arguably more foundational to good writing than structure is, because it should infuse every sentence of every essay you write. In a sense, your voice is the spirit of your work, and when you find and begin to use it, your writing will also begin to come alive.

To illustrate what I mean, let's return to an image I introduced way back in level 1, the image of house. I used this image to describe how a piece of writing is built. If you studied that lesson, you may recall that organization and structure in writing are like the frame of a house; it holds up your essay, so to speak. Adding windows, doors, walls, and so on is like adding content to your essay, and the decorative details we add to make a house pretty are like the stylistic flourishes we add to make an essay a lovely experience for our audience, rather than just something for them to endure.

Voice, though—where does that fit in to the house image? It provides neither structure, content, nor decorative style. No, voice isn't part of the house at all. Instead, it is the foundation upon which your writing rests. It provides the ground upon which the "house" is built, because in essence that ground is you, the author. And when this ground is solid—when your voice is strong, distinctive, and authentic—your work is more likely to be strong, distinctive, and authentic, too.

This doesn't mean it will always be likable. No, in fact, your writing might be even less likable to some readers than if you don't speak in your own voice at all. Those

who are brave on the page, who speak as themselves with their own true voice, may simply not connect with you, just as it sometimes happens in person. Have you ever read a book that had an interesting premise, but you found that you just “couldn’t get into it”? It may not have been because the book was poorly written but because you couldn’t connect to the author’s voice.

I have encountered this problem a number of times. At one point in my life I worked as a bookseller, so I encountered all sorts of books that I might not otherwise notice. *The Time-traveler’s Wife*, by Audrey Niffenegger, was one of these. It wasn’t the kind of novel I usually chose, but because of all the excitement over it, I decided to step out of my comfort zone and read it. While the story itself was fascinating, I found that I intensely disliked the author’s voice. Aside from her propensity to use vulgar language, I don’t think I could even tell you why. Most readers did not share my view, though, for the book is a bestseller and a major motion picture (which I liked much better)! In fact, when another bookseller found out I was reading it, she said, “Ohhh, I love that book! The writing is so beautiful; it’s like poetry!” ‘What?’ I thought but kept to myself. ‘How is that possible? I don’t think it’s beautiful at all.’

Why such a marked difference in our opinions? It wasn’t that the writer had done a bad job. Anybody experienced with literature can see that her writing is excellent. Nor was it the plot, for I found it fascinating and original. And while the vulgar language bothered me, it wasn’t the first time I’d read vulgar language in a book. It was simply the writer’s voice. She had done her job well, but writing is like life in this way—when you are being most truly yourself, you cannot please everyone. That is for politicians to attempt, so don’t try. Be yourself on the page, be present on the page, be brave on the page. You may have to control what you say and how you say it (style, content and tone), but always be yourself.

It is almost time for you to begin developing your own voice, but in order to do so, it is important that we look at examples of distinctive voices, so that you can

experience it for yourself. First, we'll read a sample from the literary light J.R.R. Tolkien, and then we'll switch to a very different voice, a sassy little girl named Virginia Hudson.

**STOP and take out the handout, "Voice Examples." Read *The Hobbit* example first (p. 13 only); then read the *O, Ye Jigs and Juleps* example. When you finish, continue with the lesson.**

Quite a difference between the two writers, wouldn't you say? One was a 40-something British scholar and professor at Oxford University, and the other was a 10-year-old, Victorian-era, American tomboy. Yet they are both excellent examples of writers whose voices are so distinctive that it is probably easy for you to see why both *The Hobbit* and *O, Ye Jigs and Juleps* were bestsellers (in fact, Tolkien's work is now considered "classic"). Both authors were constantly present on the page, expressing their personalities and styles through the tales they had to tell.

## SESSION 2

### Lesson, part 4: Developing Your Own Voice

So, if you can't learn voice the way you can a skill and it takes time to develop your mature, adult voice, what are you supposed to do about it now? How can you learn to use your own "real" voice when you write? Read on for tips for finding your voice and for ways that your voice can be stifled if you're not careful.

#### Tips for Finding Your Voice

1. *Get into the flow.* This is why we do writing warm-ups, so you have a chance to develop your voice outside of academic writing, which can be stifling. It allows you to "open a vein," as writer Red Smith calls freewriting. This is also why you should not worry about technical correctness during the drafting process. You can always clean up later, but you can't insert your voice later. It has to come out naturally the first time around as you draft, writing in the flow of the moment. Be wild, be free, and don't

ensor yourself. There will be plenty of time for that later when it's time to revise and polish.

2. *Write like you talk.* Be genuine. You may have to revise and formalize your work a bit during revision, but you will retain your voice. If you're not sure if you are writing the way you talk, think about how you're feeling as you write. If you feel stilted and unnatural, like you're in an uncomfortable suit, then your writing probably is, too.

3. *Forget conventions and technical perfection as you draft.* Again, clean up later.

4. *Write what you know.* And if you have to write about something you don't know, become a mini-expert before you write about the topic.

5. *How do you know you've found your voice?* The words flow easily, and your writing is believable—much like the way an excellent actor makes you forget he's acting.

6. Remember what we learned in lesson 16: *learning how to observe the world around you and to use those observations is crucial to good writing.* This is because an effective writer allows himself to feel and experience the world in sensory ways (i.e., sight, sound, touch, etc.) and then let those observations flow through the writing. Don't hold back; let your readers experience the world as you do through the details that you have to share. Use sensory details even in the most mundane or formal writing, too; just be sure they are appropriate for your piece.

7. Think of writing with authentic voice as a coin. *On one side is freedom and permission to be wild on the page. But disciplined craft is the flip side of that coin.* This freedom is important, but it won't have much power until you have also developed a sense of craft, or how to put language together in beautiful, meaningful, and coherent ways. This is why you take the time to master skills and conventions—so that, paradoxically, you can be truly free when you write.

**END OF SAMPLE**