

## Chapter 7

# Finding Your “Voice”

### What is Your Stylistic Fingerprint? or Discovering Your Signature

Several semesters ago, I had a student who was quite young for my adult online class — 10-15 years younger than her contemporaries — and in her essays and on the Discussion Boards, she consistently demonstrated a sly, caustic, probing (but playful) wit. In a conversation she initiated with me (I encouraged students to telephone), she questioned whether it was appropriate to write using her often playfully flippant (“somewhat smart-ass”— her term) attitude.

With a smile on my face, I answered that she was unwittingly experimenting, searching (and in the process demonstrating), or “finding” her voice. And whether that style happened to be outrageous, consoling, sarcastic, sophisticated, tongue-in-cheek, boisterous, simple, introspective, humorous, erudite, dramatic, dark, intimate, or jovial — it was all the result of who she is. It is a function of her personality and her identity.

Her “voice,” I told her, reflects her core.

What is her stylistic fingerprint? What is her distinctive style when she writes?

Whether you are a thundering Baptist preacher, a folksy country lawyer, a diffident introvert, a gracious poet, or a polished financial sophisticate — you have a style.

Call it a signature.

Read Edith Wharton, Emily Dickinson, Anthony Doerr (*All the Light I Cannot See* — outstanding metaphors), and Joan Didion. Study authors of this esteemed caliber, and you perceive their distinct style. Edith Wharton wrote with facile flair and made measured use of glowing metaphors and extraordinary conceits.

Emily Dickinson graced her tomes with poignant poetry. Doerr with lustrous figures of speech and verbal imagery. Joan Didion with straightforward sarcasm and illuminating wit. Stephen King weaves scary stories. Oscar Wilde, Dorothy Parker, perfected sarcasm and trenchant wit.

Find your style, use it, and enable it to grow.



Stein defined “voice” as:

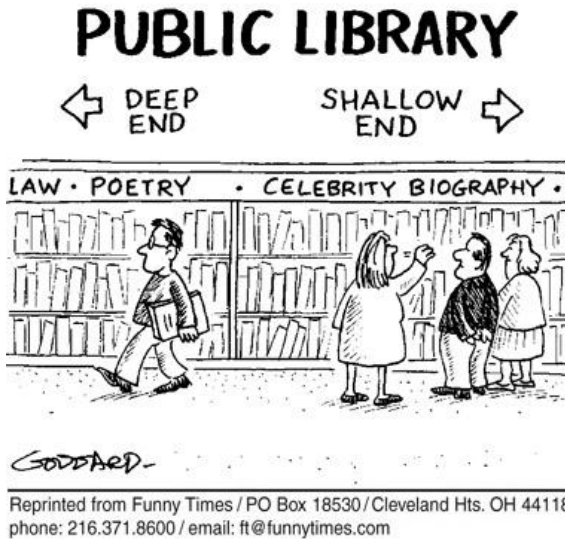
“...an amalgam of many factors that distinguish a writer from all other writers. Many authors first find their voice when they have learned to examine each word for its necessity, precision, and clarity, and have become expert in eliminating the extraneous and imprecise from their work. Recognizing an individual author’s voice is much like recognizing a person on the telephone.”

(*Stein on Writing*, Sol Stein, p. 209; see, also *The Elements of Style*, pp. 68-69).

Again, this harkens back to the conventional wisdom of brevity and clarity. But being distinctive can be refreshing, and refreshing can be rewarding as your style defines your charm.

Be **lyrical**. Let your words dance. Present your sentences as a rondelet, a minuet.

Using figures of speech creatively can help you shape and form your voice and add sparkle and enchantment to your communication.



In *Elements of Style*, Strunk emphasizes that style [voice] is

“...an increment in writing”. He states that “every writer by the way he uses the language, reveals something of his spirit, his habits, his capacities, his bias. This is inevitable as well as enjoyable. All writing is communication; creative writing is communication through revelation—it is the Self escaping into the open. No writer long remains incognito.”

So, finding your voice, expressing your style, exposing your personality — in your writing and your conversing — is a key to elevating your communication excellence.

If you start with the building blocks of words—growing your vocabulary — and segue into figures of speech, wrapping your head and arms around metaphors and conceits, you begin to get a sense of how your language becomes more polished, sophisticated, refined and simply enjoyable to both read and listen to.

**Your personality — as a whole and its specific trait  
— influences your writing voice.**

For example, one can spend hours perusing tomes of Shakespeare. Hamlet must have 20 to 30 expressions that today (400 years later!) are still meaningful and resonate.

“Doubt thou the stars are fire;  
Doubt that the sun doth move;  
Doubt truth to be a liar;  
But never doubt I love.”

“... to thine own self be true.”

“To be, or not to be: that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles...”

“When sorrows come, they come not single spies. But in  
battalions!”

“The lady doth protest too much, methinks.”

“Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.”

Shakespeare’s humor, his wit, his acerbic insight (i.e., Falstaff) are relevant today.



When Edith Wharton in *The Age of Innocence* (Part 1, Chapter 6) says her protagonist “...was, at the very moment of his betrothal — a moment for pure thoughts and cloudless hopes — **pitchforked into** a coil of scandal...”

It delivers a forceful, visual conceit. What a clever, colorful expression.

Why say, “boy, that man is large!” when you can exclaim: “...his chin rested on the acreage of his chest.” (Anthony Doerr)

All these are visual alternatives to the old-school, dry, simple language. And I encourage you to take the initiative to explore new words — countless synonyms — and decipher your mental images to enrich your vocabulary and expression. Let it embellish and burnish your voice.

It’s a rigorous but fun exercise, and your mental endorphins will beat rapidly and grow quickly as you begin to refine your new skill and craft. I particularly liked this exposition:

<https://writingcooperative.com/the-writers-voice-what-is-and-how-to-find-yours-ed82f1884984>

“Writers wish their writing to be captivating and inspiring. No matter if it’s prose or poetry, novels, blog articles, or personal essays — those who write strive to have a distinctive writing style.

A unique voice.

Texts without a voice are sterile and empty of meaning. So, how can we ask the reader to read our voiceless text? They have no way of identifying themselves with the characters or the plot; there’s no life in the words! What is the writer’s voice?

First, I’ll tell you what it isn’t:

- It’s not the writer’s writing style
- It’s not their technique
- It’s not their brand.

The writer’s voice isn’t something you can measure; it’s subjective. But possible to be defined and identified.

The writer’s voice doesn’t include only wording, grammar, or

structure: it's much more than that. It's the personal way the writer sees the world, and how s/he translates it.

It's **you**, as a person, that gives life to the writing: you offer emotions and feelings to the characters. The readers want that connection: they want to feel the same as the characters, to see through their eyes. Only your voice will give them that.

Writing faithfully to your voice it's writing with emotion, with your feelings, passions and dislikes, beliefs, dreams, wishes, fears, and attitudes."



### Your Tools:

Your toolbox of equipment to help you construct your better composition and communication starts with a **dictionary**.

Written and spoken works are dependent on the clarity and precision of what you say and write. A serious writer or communicator soon becomes addicted to words and must enjoy hearing them sing in her head, researching and crafting them. Seek synonyms as you perform your daily mental pushups.

In my class, The Art and Joy of Communication, I require

students to present to me weekly five words in a four-column exposition: defining the word, explaining why they chose it, its relevance, and how they use it. This format came full-grown from the head of my student and enabler in this book, Barbara Khan, and it became a centerpiece of the weekly teaching. Students would springboard from these words into ample synonyms.

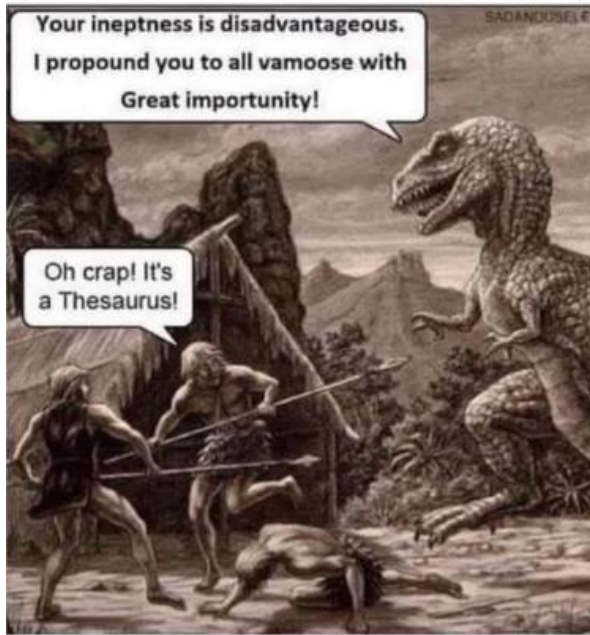
In future classes, I will add a fourth or fifth column and ask for synonyms.

Barbara Khan  
 COM113 – Creative Communication  
 Professor David Lihn  
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Vocabulary List

	Word	Definition	Why Chosen
1	Parsimonious	Unwilling to spend money, stingy	I remember it from a HS SAT prep class
2	Pilfer	Steal (things of little value)	It conveys theft, but in a less harsh way
3	Edification	The instruction or improvement of a person morally or intellectually	I am familiar with the word, but I always think of it having something to do with writing "editing"
4	Fortuitous	Happening by accident or chance, a lucky accident	Used often by a friend of mine
5	Deleterious	Causing harm or damage	Anthony Fauci news briefing
6	Contrived	Created in a way that seems artificial and unrealistic	I think it's a useful word in today's world
7	Nexus	Connection, a causal link, a connected group or series	Heard recently and though I understand the idea, I looked up the specific meaning
8	Sycophant	An insincere flatterer, flattering to gain advantage, fawner	Another word that I get the gist of, but looked up the specifics
9	Mnemonic Device	A memory device, any learning device that helps memory	A reminder to myself that it's mnemonic, NOT pneumatic
10	Sanctimonious	Making a show of being morally superior to others	I like the word
11	Cajole	To persuade through coaxing or flattery	Also, like the word
12	Acutely	Intensely, in a way that shows a perceptive understanding or insight	I overuse the word "very" and need to find some replacements
13	Faalty	Intense fidelity, loyalty	Was in last week's metaphor example.

Online, one can go to the website Miriam-Webster and seek a dictionary or thesaurus and, in so doing, expand their vocabulary just by looking at alternative words. In Word, highlight your word and press “Shift”/”F7” and — voila! — a thesaurus pops up.



Similarly, another helpful tool is writing.

You must practice and experiment. Think it. Write it. Throw it out. Start all over. Search for your voice. Find your signature, your verbal comfort zone. Be bold and fearless.

To perfect your voice, **you must write**. Fail. Feel frustration. Shift your style and test different techniques.

**“The first draft of anything is shit.”**

— Ernest Hemingway



A fantastic tool is...books. **Reading.**

For me, reading novels adds fuel to my thoughts. Seeing fresh expressions, different phrasing, and distinct choice of words all help expand my range and enable me to conjure even more ideas and mental images.



A dear friend had worked with me in Bangkok and, with limited English but enormous ambition, enrolled in the US to enhance her English skills and earn an MBA. Four years later she graduated with both superb language and business skills and recently got married. Mew's exultant (and lucky!) husband was born and raised his first decade in Moscow and Ukraine. His parents brought him to the US when he was 12, with no command of the English language.

So, Gene told me he read. And read. Every night, every day — read — and soon became adept at the Byzantine English language.

Now the happily married couple can argue with fluency, literacy, and verbal acumen!

They both have found their (vociferous) voices!



**Gene**

**Mew**

So, whether you're writing or speaking, or you're submitting a memo, or performing in front of an audience (of one or many) — finding your voice and using your tools are essential to your communicative growth.

**“... let me live, love, and say it well in good sentences.”**

— Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*