

On Writing:
What is VOICE

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You are reading this. As such, you probably have at least three voices. You have your speaking voice (how you talk to people every day), your singing voice (even if you can't sing), and your writing voice. Most people have multiples of one or two of those. I have a speaking voice for my friends and another for professional settings. I have many writing voices ranging from my sonnets to my technical manuals. But this is about your prose voice. My prose voice, even when I change it to fit a specific story or scene, is a quantifiable collection of my preferences, habits, and personal history. You are not reading it now—this would be my technical writing voice—but my prose voice is always hovering in the background.

What the Heck is Voice, Anyway?

VOICE is the general feel of your work relative to other writers. VOICE is what comes out of the choices you make when writing and editing your story. From word choice to plot structure, these decisions happen at every level of your story.

Which **words** do you choose?

How do you structure your **sentences and paragraphs**?

Which **details** do you focus on to tell your story?

How do you structure your **stories and chapters**?

Each of these subjects could be a lesson, book, or lifelong study but together they are your writing voice. I will address each question to help you understand what voice is and what it should be.

WORDS: Soda, Pop, Soda-pop, Coke, and Cola... What You Drink is Where You Are ...or Not

People love maps about themselves. The internet is full of them. Who loves what football team in what region? Which words do the locals use for a sandwich on a long roll or a carbonated beverage? New Jersey, where I grew up, had four distinct regions within that tiny state, each with different ways of speaking.

The words you heard around you as you grew up have become a part of you and will find their way into your writing. You can overcome this but why? Well, if you call a carbonated beverage 'soda-pop' and you are writing a gothic horror in a modern setting, you might want to think about how that happy sounding word impacts the tone of your story. Words are music when you read them. Listen to the **sound**.

Consider these sentences describing a man haunted by a drowning:

He saw her last breaths as he gazed into the bubbling carbonation of his pop.

He saw her last breaths as he gazed into the bubbling carbonation of his cola.

He saw her last breaths as he gazed into the bubbling carbonation of his coke.

He saw her last breaths as he gazed into the bubbling carbonation of his soda.

Thoughts? Your thoughts on which one would be right for this moment is part of what defines your voice. Will the choice reflect the word that would be chosen by the character, the writer, or the moment?

There are no wrong answers... until you write the rest of the story. **To write a good story, you need to have reasons behind every choice you make** and those choices have to come together into a pleasurable experience for the reader. If you write this gothic horror in a modern setting and drop 'pop' into the middle of your gloomy, poetic prose, it could stand out in a very bad way. However, if 'pop' is an established part of what defines your character (i.e., a man with the mind of a six-year-old) it could serve as a reminder of what kind of person is going through this story.

WORDS: Garbage, Trash, or Litter... What you see on the sidewalk is *a part of you*

Which word you would go to first to define a newspaper blowing down the street is also a part of your voice. How often and under what circumstances you depart from that automatic selection is also a part of your voice.

Growing up, the word "garbage" was forbidden in my house. Now I only unleash the g-word in my writing to create impact. Weird, I know. But it is a part of me and it is a part of what defines my voice relative to other writers who weren't raised with the g-word embargo.

Ever since I heard it in a movie and had to look it up, I have always loved the look and sound of "myriad." I like how its sound unrolls but it's an unusual word—in my mind at least—so I keep it for special occasions. I also love to use dog sounds in place of dialogue attribution tags. I also *realize* that I like the dog sounds too much so I try to keep an eye on that or my characters would be constantly barking and growling.

If you think about it, you'll find stories like these in your life. This is your backstory with words. It is what motivates you to choose *massive* more or less frequently than *huge*. But like me you'll need to keep an eye on it. Are your characters constantly *slumping*? Find another word for it or find a different detail to describe your character's state of mind. If they're slumping in sadness, then their face is drooping and their eyes are dropping. There are many cues for each human emotion. Learn them and use them to create variety in your writing. Though there is a place for repetition in writing, purposeless repetition is boring for the reader. The trick is letting your style show through while still following the rules for good writing.



Need help visualizing emotional cues?

Get yourself one of these. "Today I am feeling..."

SENTENCE and PARAGRAPH: A Many Varied Thing

Like with words, you need verity in your sentences and paragraphs. They should vary in length and structure. If you've forgotten how to diagram a sentence then you should brush up on it. If you want to make a living selling sentences, it's a good idea to know how they are constructed. Which structures you favor will be a part of your voice but you need know how to create many kinds of structures, when to use them, and why. Here are just a couple of the things you can achieve through sentence and paragraph construction.

You can use **structure to build suspense** even within a sentence. You are creating a world within your readers' minds. Nothing exists until you tell them it exists. You can use this to create moments of micro suspense. Think of your sentences and paragraphs as jokes; look for the part with the biggest impact, that is your punchline and the punchline should be as close to then end as you can get it. All else should be structured to build up to that punchline.

Here is how I introduce a new character, Roland, in my HUNGUR Magazine story "Crypt Hounds" by having the main character, Victoria, spot him in the middle of a mass evacuation:

Across this surging humanity, stillness caught her eye; it was him, Roland, the rogue vampire.

Here is how I did not introduce the reader to Roland:

Roland, the rogue vampire, caught her eye as he stood still within the surging humanity.

I then go on to explain exactly why Victoria needs and wants to kill him. But in this sentence Roland and the fact that he is a rogue vampire are the most impactful facts. They belong at the end.

Sentence and paragraph length is more than grammar; it's your cinematography. You can use **length to control the speed of time**.

In this scene from my story "Happy Pills and Candy Bars," the main character is pursued by electromagnetic being when he is stopped by his unaware Captain. Note the speed at which this seems to happen:

The wave squirted through the seam around the airlock door. I somehow stood up, my eyes bolted to it. The Captain turned. It lunged. Gronski pulled his gun before falling backwards, smothered under a blanket of electromagnetic pythons. His eyes bulged. His fingers curled. Gun in hand, his cringing finger pulled the trigger.

Short sentences and paragraphs can create a sense of urgency and speed. When in danger, you don't have time. You talk fast. You summarize. You must convey thoughts quickly or bad things will happen. Use this human habit. Up the tempo of your scenes. Make that car chase feel fast.

But you can also linger over a moment, elongating your sentences with successive phrases that build on each other, choosing the long way of saying something or the longer (but still appropriate) word, whether that word is a noun, verb, or other.

The translucent wave squished itself through the airtight seam around the airlock door. I could not pull my eyes away from it as I somehow pulled myself to my feet. Captain Gronski turned to see what I was looking at but it was already too late; the creature lunged across the room, enveloping him. Smothered by the creature, Gronski managed to pull his gun before falling backwards. Under the blanket of electromagnetic pythons, Gronski's eyes bulged and his fingers curled. His cringing hand grew tighter and tighter around the gun until it finally pulled the trigger.

So, which do you choose and when? That's where your voice happens. But like choosing to 'pop' or not to 'pop,' there are no wrong answers... until you write the rest of the story. If you are writing a romance then maybe every time there is a fight scene, you want it to go slow because your focus isn't on who is going to get run through with a cutlass but rather how someone else is going to feel about who is going to get run through with a cutlass.

But I write action-adventure. I want fast fights that feed the plot. I want heart-revving action... until I don't. Sometimes I want to slow the action down. Sometimes I want you to really experience that cutlass, I want you to look into the eyes of the dying man, I want you to look into the eyes of the victor, I want you to know that this moment is import in a way different from all the others in this or any other fight scene. So we are going to take a moment and just be here.

One thing that would be a wrong answer regardless of the rest of the story would be a **redundant structure without purpose**.

The wave squirted through the seam around the airlock door. I got up off the floor somehow. My eyes remained bolted to the door. The Captain turned toward the door. The creature lunged at Captain Gronski. Gronski pulled his gun from its holster. He fell backwards to the floor. The creature, a blanket of electromagnetic pythons, smothered the Captain. His eyes bulged in their sockets. His fingers curled around his gun. His cringing fingers pulled the trigger.

This is, for the most part, a repetition of one of the most basic sentence structures: SUBJECT-VERB-OBJECT. And it is as boring as hell when repeated over and over and over. If I read this for two or three paragraphs, I probably wouldn't read the rest. It fails to do anything with my sense of time and creates a monotonous trudge across the page.

There is a **good kind of repetition. Ploce**. Pronounced PLO-see, it is the repetition of a word or phrase to gain special emphasis, to change the meaning, or to indicate an extension of meaning.

In the words of Popeye, "I am what I am." It is a statement about the character's honesty and simplicity. He is saying that what you see is what he is and he's using ploce to do it. Another example would be having a character repeat something they or someone else had already said earlier in the story. Every time someone uses their own words against them, it's ploce. I have seen this used in many ways. Just remember, repetition is usually very, very boring so be sure to know why you are repeating yourself.

SENTENCE and PARAGRAPH: Poetry Love It or Leave It, It's Up To You

I love poetry. If I thought I could make a living at poetry alone, I'd go for it. But I still love fiction! So, what's a closet poet to do? Breathe a little poetry into my prose! ...in very measured and nearly invisible doses. Readers read my stories to read a story, not see me wallow in self-indulgent meandering of meter and rhyme. However, when the moment is right, when the main character finally sees land, when the starship collides with the space station, it is time.

Hemingway was notoriously sparse and true. In other words, you won't find a lot of meter, rhyme, or other poetic devices. But you will find deep, broad similes and metaphors, often starting right in the title. "Hills like White Elephants" is an excellent example of this. Shakespeare, on the other hand, was all poetry.

On the poetry content scale, Somewhere between Shakespeare and Hemingway is the rest of us. If you're like me, leaning hard to the poetry end, make sure your poetic interludes fit your story so well that no one knows they are there.

DETAILS: One Event, Many Stories

The movie "Throw Momma from the Train" ends (spoiler alert) with the main characters writing two different versions of the same story that they had just experienced together. One is a thriller and the other is a children's popup book. And the movie itself is yet a different telling of the same story. This too is a part of voice. It's the big and little decisions that shape your story and become a part of your voice. Jaws the movie and Jaws the book had a similar gulf. The book focused on the infidelities of the town's residents while the movie skipped that all together.

When two people fall into each other's arms, are you going to fade to black or stick around? When there's a bar fight, are you going to be in the middle of the brawl or standing outside waiting for someone to come flying out the window? Decisions like these define the type of story you are writing and the voice you are writing it in. Think about who your audience is. What are they looking for? Be sure that you are giving it to them. If you are writing for an action-adventure audience, don't spend your words on someone standing outside the bar while everyone is beating each other stupid inside; if that's where you want to be, maybe you should reconsider your genre.

STORY and CHAPTER: The Superstructure Within

A plot can take many forms. The classic rising plot with a final climax and rapidly descending close is the old standard. Many cop shows now start with high action that rapidly falls off and then builds back up to a dramatic conclusion with a minimal descending close. Other plots are roller coasters of rising and falling tension.

Kurt Vonnegut jumps around time like no other, daisy-chaining mini plots by resolving one just as you realize that he has already sucked you into the next one. Not everyone would agree that structure is a part of voice but I cannot define Kurt Vonnegut's voice without that structure.

Like sentences and stories, chapters have structure. They have their own plot structure like a story but they can also speed up and slow down time by being shorter or longer like a sentence. You should strive to make each chapter in a novel the same length as a short story, about 3000 to 8000 words, leaning toward the short side of that range. If you break those boundaries, make sure you have a reason for it. Remember, people are reading your work for pleasure; keeping your chapters near the 4000 word count makes them more digestible. The short story market didn't come up with these numbers arbitrarily.

How to Find *Your* Fiction Writing Voice

To find and develop your own voice start by reading what you want to write. Whether it is historical fiction or space opera, spend time reading those who have been published where you want to be published. Pay attention to the elements I have discussed here. Try to define the voice of someone you like and then imitate that voice by writing a couple of scenes missing from their work. Then do it again for someone else.

But shouldn't I just be myself? **No.** You should be your *trained* self. Learn what makes a good story. Learn what people want to read. Learn what publishers want to publish. Then be your *trained* self. Within those parameters, there is plenty of room to be yourself. Think of the Sonnet. It is an extremely tightly defined structure and yet so many have been written and they are all so different.

Your Voice Is NOT Your Characters' Voices!

When you open a quote, remember those are not your words. The character is your character and the world is your world, but those are not your words. They belong to whoever is saying them. Whether it's a silicon based organism of your own imagining or President Teddy Roosevelt, the words belong to the speaker and you must respect that or it will fall flat. You must know your character well enough to know how they talk and then make sure that they are consistent in their speaking habits.

Killing Your Darlings

The hardest part of editing can be finding and eliminating those beautiful parts of your story that you love so much but really, really don't belong there. This is one of those times where you surrender a little of your voice so that your story is better.

If you are only writing for yourself, keep them. But if you want to have an audience then you will need to keep your audience in mind. The reader is your customer and the customer is always right. If you bog down your work with elements that make people not want to read your work, they won't read it.

The Power of Choice in Action

This is how I open *Morbid Silence*, published by HUNGUR Magazine:

The computer contemplated the light levels for a moment before sliding back the glossy, black lid of the sarcophagus. As it opened, Victoria cringed from the daylight but not enough seeped through the dense fog to do more than sting her skin. Pulling herself up, Victoria found that the outer armor was still warm from reentry; she hadn't been unconscious for long. As Victoria stepped out, placing one high heel and one bare foot into the cold mud, her broken ribs squeezed the air from her lungs. Wincing, she fell back against her armored coffin.

You get the feeling of waking up, gradually reconnecting with the world as your brain comes back online, which is exactly how I wanted this story to open.

In this rewrite, you will find a more energized Victoria:

The computer checked the light levels. Good enough, barely. The sarcophagus lid slid back. Victoria cringed. The daylight stung but a dense fog held it back. She got up. The coffin was still warm from reentry; she hadn't been out for long. Victoria got out. With only one high heel on, her other foot found mud. A broken rib pushed the air from her lungs. Victoria fell back against the coffin, wincing.

By shortening sentences and word choices (contemplated vs checked) and eliminating some description like 'glossy, black,' the scene is infused with energy. Everything moves faster. Victoria is more awake. Even with that broken rib, Victoria is ready to do something.

Here is the second paragraph in *Morbid Silence*:

Victoria needed a moment to breathe and to figure out how the hell she got here. Ah yes, Luke. About a year before, Luke had fed on her. Feeding on a fellow vampire was taboo but few of Victoria's contemporaries understood why. They only saw power stacked upon power, a god over gods, but the more likely outcome remained power warring with power, gradually ripping the battlefield apart. Luke had learned the hard way; his body was tearing itself in half while his appetite had turned from the thirst for blood to a hunger for flesh, the ghoul's hunger. Despite his deteriorating state, tradition dictated that Victoria hunt him down but Victoria didn't need tradition telling her what to do; the bastard had taken her blood and she was going to wring it from his ashes.

Here is a rewrite:

Victoria required a moment to catch her breath and to remember how she came to be here. Slowly, it came back to her. She'd been hunting Luke. A year before, Luke had dared to drink her blood, an act forbidden by tradition—and forbidden for good reason. But reason can be forgotten. Many of those created in Victoria's time simply refused to understand how feeding on a fellow vampire was likely to end. They only saw the power it could grant them, lifting them above their compatriots the way that becoming a vampire had lifted them above the humans. They did not care for the tales of two bloods tearing a body in half, literally. Luke had to learn this lesson firsthand. His body had already begun the long, slow process of splitting in half and his taste had already turned from the vampiric thirst for blood to the ghoulish hunger for flesh.

Luke was dying because of his new blood—Victoria's blood. Tradition dictated that Victoria put an end to it and to him... but Victoria was not one for tradition. Luke had taken her blood and she was going to take it back by distilling it from his ash.

How does this feel different and why?

Please leave a comment. I look forward to reading them.