Voice lessons
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STEP by STEP
Nonfiction

Voice lessons

How to find the right voice for your creative nonfiction

By Mimi Schwartz

ONE OF THE strengths of creative nonfiction is its person-to-person feeling, as if writer and reader were friends. It happens when the writer sounds genuine and trustworthy, thanks to a mix of words, rhythms and attitude called "voice."

Voice conveys personality—someone to believe in, or not; someone who mysteriously charms, or not. When the voice is strong, there's a sense of a real person behind the words, not the anonymous monotone of, say, medical reports and car manuals. The latter may convey important information, but anyone could have written it. *Who* doesn't matter. In creative nonfiction—which includes memoir, personal essay and all nonfiction that emphasizes storytelling—*who* does matter. Voice counts as much as information, because the writer is presenting the world as he or she experiences it. Voice makes the readers decide: Do I care enough to read on?

Of course, "*All* good writing is about voice!" Joyce Carol Oates reminds us. But in creative nonfiction, voice matters even more because the author and the "I" narrator are the same. Fiction writers can say, "That character is not really *me*!" Journalists and scholars can say, "This writing isn't *about* me!" But creative nonfiction writers have no such cover. "That's me on the page all right!" they claim openly—and readers either lean forward or lean away.

It's no wonder, then, that if you ask creative nonfiction writers how their work is going, you'll hear a delighted "I found the right voice!" or a dull "Not so good. I can't find the voice." They know that when the voice is off—too whiny, stodgy, pompous, self-indulgent, self-serving or just annoying—the piece isn't working. And when the voice is on, whatever the subject, people listen.

Consider these two reflections by doctors, each writing about their retirements from medicine. Both use colorful language. Both express their feelings. Yet their voices couldn't be more different in tone, pitch and sensibility. The first is full of certainty; the second is full of questioning:

> Being a doctor is a noble profession, a beacon of light for the ill. I have felt the power of that light for over fifty years, in dark gloomy nights of weather full of torrential rain and snow—and in the eerie silence before the sun rises. Many tough times I've had, but so gratifying! The memories will continue to fill me with fondness and awe—and will fuel the pages of my writing about this life commitment.
>
> ...
>
> It is twelve years since I walked away from my beloved workbench in

... I arrived in Miss Dennis's class trailing all sorts of literary baggage. My usual routine was to write like Colette on Monday, one of the Brontë sisters on Wednesday, and Mark Twain on Friday.

Right away, Miss Dennis knocked me off my high horse.

"Why are you telling other people's stories?" She challenged me, peering up into my face. (At 14, I was already four inches taller than Miss Dennis.) "You have your own stories to tell."

—From "The Miss Dennis School of Writing," an essay in Alice Steinbach's book of the same name

Alice Steinbach's voice evokes her 14-year-old self as she writes about an influential teacher in her book of personal essays *The Miss Dennis School of Writing.*

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the operating room. It was not done with a cheery wave of the hand. For a long time, there was a sense of dislocation as if I were standing on the bank of a stream, and it was the bank that was flowing while the stream stood still. Surgery was my native land. The writer who cuts himself off from his native land does so at great risk. The subject of so much of my writing had been my work as a doctor. Would I be punished for sending myself into exile? Have nothing left to say? I needn't have worried. There is always the sharp and aching tooth of memory.

The second voice, that of doctor/writer Richard Selzer (*The Doctor Stories* and *The Exact Location of the Soul*), is understated. It does not try to impress with a life that's "a beacon of light for the ill," spending countless nights "in dark, gloomy weather full of torrential rain and snow." Instead of self-congratulation, Selzer lets us in on what retirement felt like *for him*, how it produced *a sense of dislocation* and the sense that he was standing on a *bank that was flowing while the stream stood still.*

As readers, we empathize, even if we are 40 years away from retirement. Why? Because Selzer sounds like a genuine, thoughtful guy, someone we might like to know. How do writers make this happen? Partly, it's instinct; partly, it's a matter of craft and experience.

Here are some steps that writers such as Selzer keep in mind when searching for the right voice for a particular story.

1 **Decide who you are in the story.** We all have many voices with which to tell our stories. All can be authentic in that they reveal honest responses to experience, but one usually feels more comfortable, truer. Sometimes this voice appears early on and never falters. Other times we find we have to switch to tell the story well. Here are some examples of different voices:

Child or adult. When writing about a trip to my father's German village when I was 13, I began with a bratty voice of a teenager:

First draft

I am being dragged through Europe by a father who's intent on convincing me that Forest Hills, Queens, is not the world. He hates that his Yankee-born daughter—*me!*—wants to be exactly like my best friend Arlene, whose mother has bleached blond hair and serves Campbell Soup for dinner. "In Rindheim, you didn't do such things!" he'll say, 100 times a day—especially when I want to hang out at Penn Drug on Friday night after the basketball games. Or when I want to go to a party where he "doesn't know the family."

Many drafts later, I let a more adult voice take over, one that allowed me to reflect on the forces that shaped my teenage self.

Final draft

For years I heard the same line: "In Rindheim, you didn't do such things!" It was repeated whenever the American world of his daughters took my father by surprise. Sometimes it came out softly, in amusement, as when I was a Pilgrim turkey in the P.S. 3 Thanksgiving play. But usually, it was a red-faced, high-blood-pressure shout, especially when my sister, Ruth, became pinned to Mel from Brooklyn, or I wanted to go with friends whose families he didn't know.

Workout

Give your writing authenticity

STUDENTS OFTEN ASK, "Isn't everything we write constructed? So how can voice be authentic?" I answer, "Yes, it's constructed, but 'constructed' doesn't mean 'false.' " Authenticity, for creative-nonfiction writers, is a merging of language and meaning until the complexity of our lives—as individuals—is there on the page. For that to happen, we need a compelling voice, one that speaks words with, as Adrienne Rich says, "the heft of our living behind them." No matter who we are—young or old, rich or poor, expert or novice—the right voice empowers us, making those who do not know our world listen—and learn a thing or two. Here are some exercises to help you find the right voice.

Writing in the voice of innocence or experience

Think of a first in your life: first kiss, first communion, first night away from home, first secret, first Big Mac, first betrayal, first whatever. Choose something that happened before you were 16. Write in first-person present tense—as if you were again 8 or 10 or 12 years old.

Example: "I sit in Mrs. Tan's class, sure that Jimmy sees me ..."

Try to capture the voice of who you once were, choosing the words, rhythms and attitudes you had at the time. Aim for immediacy by using lots of sensory data—sights, sounds, smells, touches, tastes, objects, other voices.

Now write about the same experience as an adult looking back.

Example: "How cocky I was in Mrs. Tan's class, as if I were Madonna and Superman all in one."

Reflect on why you felt that way, and why this memory still sticks with you. What was at stake then, and do you still feel that way today?

Read both out loud and decide which voice you like best for writing more. If both seem equally appealing, you might want to shift back and forth, the way Scott Russell Sanders does in "Under the Influence."

—Mimi Schwartz

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We all have many voices with which to tell our stories. All can be authentic in that they reveal honest responses to experience, but one usually feels more comfortable, truer.

Soon after I switched voices, my essay "My Father Always Said" (published in *Creative Nonfiction,* then in the *Fourth Genre* anthology) was finished. Why? Because the new voice offered me a perspective that, unconsciously, I'd been missing. My mature voice could make the connections between that 1950s trip, my father's Holocaust experience and me today that my bratty 13-year-old couldn't. And though I loved that kid voice (and plan to use her elsewhere), she alone could not tell this story. Forty drafts later, I figured that out.

Innocent or experienced. Memoirist Sue Silverman talks of two writing voices: the voice of innocence that, like my 13-year-old voice, responds to the moment; and the voice of experience that looks back and reflects on the past. One voice usually dominates, but both, especially in longer works, can be heard side by side. In fact, it's the tension between the two voices, Silverman says, that makes first-person nonfiction come alive.

You can see that tension at work in essayist Scott Russell Sanders' "Under the Influence" (in *Secrets of the Universe*), which explores the legacy of his father's drinking. In his opening paragraph he uses the adult voice, looking back with anger and sadness:

> My father drank. He drank as a gut-punched boxer gasps for breath, as a starving dog gobbles food—compulsively, secretly, in pain and trembling. I use the past tense not because he ever quit drinking but because he quit living. That is how the story ends for my father, age sixty-four, heart bursting, body cooling and forsaken on the linoleum of my brother's trailer. The story continues for my brother, my sister, my mother, and me, and will continue so long as memory holds.

But in paragraph 2, he becomes an innocent child again, showing us what it was like to live with an alcoholic father. Writing in present tense, he puts us back in time: "I slip into the garage or barn to see my father tipping back the flat green bottles of wine, the brown cylinders of whiskey. ..." We listen as father and son talk, pretending that everything is normal:

> "What's up, buddy?" he says, thick-tongued and edgy.
>
> "Sky's up," I answer, playing along.
>
> "And don't forget prices," he grumbles. "Prices are always up. And taxes."

The two voices—one of innocence, one of experience—work in tandem so that readers experience, with immediacy, what Sanders experienced and also understand the effects of his alcoholism over time. The two voices continue throughout the essay, back and forth, insisting on the truth of their duet.

2 Find your place in the story. If you draw a circular stage that represents one piece of writing and mark where the "I" stands, it could be in the center, telling personal stories like the doctors'. It could share the spotlight with others, as Sanders does with his father in "Under the Influence," or it could be near the edge, playing a small role as guide or emcee, as writing by many literary journalists illustrate.

Wherever the "I" stands, its voice must be right for the part. If readers think it too loud and self-centered, they get edgy, as in this opening paragraph about a college president:

> I have to admit I've always been a little afraid of Alice Chandler. Part of my fear came from her title—president of the State University of New York at New Paltz. ... I've always

> ... The bus changes when you are not looking. It is possible to fall asleep and wake up and everyone is different, all the scalps and haircuts accidentally memorized over miles are transmuted. Everyone reached their destination and got off except for you and it might be the case that all these new people will reach their destinations before you and only you will remain, in this seat, the lone fool sticking for the terminus. In one seat successively sit an infant, a small child, then a teenager and the next occupant will be the next stage older, he is sure of it. But then time is a funny thing on a bus.
>
> —*From "The Port Authority," an essay in* The Colossus of New York *by Colson Whitehead*

Colson Whitehead connects with the reader by using second person ("you" instead of "I") in his essay about traveling to a New York Port Authority bus station.

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> found it hard not to be intimidated by the president of anything. ...

A pleasant voice, appropriate *if* the essay is going to be about the writer. But as the opening of a profile of a college president, the "I" should relinquish center stage.

Sometimes the opposite is true. The "I" disappears when it shouldn't. The reader is handed information without interpretation. This often happens in travel essays, for example, when writers offer description without interpretation: "And then we saw this ... and this ... and this." Readers want someone reacting to the landscape, highlighting what's special, as Gretchen Legler does in "An Antarctic Quintet" (*Georgia Review*). She lets readers see the brightness of this new world through her eyes:

> At the peak of the antarctic summer season, it is light twenty-four hours a day. The light is bright, sterile, technical, like the light in a hospital operating room. It is this unavoidable light that actively seeks and annihilates corners of darkness and mystery.

It is also possible to have a strong voice with no overt "I." In *Among Schoolchildren*, literary journalist Tracy Kidder spends a year in a fifth-grade classroom and makes it come alive with his voice, even though he doesn't use "I."

> She was thirty-four. She wore a white skirt and yellow sweater and a thin gold necklace, which she held in her fingers, as if holding her own reins, while waiting for children to answer. Her hair was black with a hint of Irish red. It was cut short to the tops of her ears and ... she was short—the children's chairs would have fit her.

3 Use tried-and-true strategies to find the right voice. Sometimes we have to grapple with our subject for a while before we hear the right voice. The more emotionally loaded the subject, the more that early voice can mislead us. It may be too angry or too mild, too full of self-pity or too flip, too earnest or too know-it-all. We may need many drafts, over time, to write our way into a truer voice that, when it appears, makes us smile gratefully and write on.

I've found that these strategies quicken the arrival of that voice:

Individualize your voice. The more general your statements, the more they could be written by anyone. ("Being a doctor is a noble profession.") The more specific you are, the more distinctive your voice becomes. ("It is twelve years since I walked away from my beloved workbench in the operating room.")

Avoid the predictable. Find fresh language that surprises ("There is always the sharp and aching tooth of memory").

Be natural. A convincing voice trusts readers to "get it" without being hit over the head. A phrase like "in dark gloomy nights of weather full of torrential rain and snow" feels like overkill. Readers tend to lean away.

Ask open-ended questions. A voice smug with certainty is less compelling than one trying to sort out complexity. ("Would I be punished for sending myself into exile? Have nothing left to say? I needn't have worried.") Creative nonfiction is less about providing answers and more about posing questions.

Don't brag. Readers like to see the "I" struggle and show some vulnerability. As in real life, a fictional voice that brags (especially without realizing it) and is convinced that the rest of the world is wrong turns people off.

Write a first draft quickly. Remember, you can't consciously choose a voice; it chooses you. Trying too hard for voice will lead to a stilted self-consciousness.

Let your writing sit for awhile. Give yourself enough time to switch hats from writer to reader to gain the detachment needed to hear yourself as others do.

Read your work out loud. When your reading voice drops or flattens out, you know your written voice is off. Listen for rhythms that are often buried in an early draft.

In an article describing the move from gathering research to writing, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Donald Murray first created a dull opening. Reading it over, he heard a rhythm he liked, which he used in his revised, shorter draft.

First draft

> Unless I am completely controlled by a deadline and forced to write before I have completed my research, I am aware that it is time to think about writing when I know the answers to my questions before I ask them, when I know what my sources reveal before I read them.

Revised draft

> It is time to write when I know the answers to my questions before I ask them, when I know what my sources reveal before I read them.

If, after you've tried these techniques, you still don't trust your voice, try a new beginning—or two—using a new tone. If you were earnest the first time, try lightening up. If you wrote with anger, try more compassion. Don't be false. Just try to get in touch with other equally valid dimensions of feeling that may have been buried or silenced.

Keep in mind William Dean Howells' words: "It is the small voice that the soul heeds; not the deafening blasts." #

Mimi Schwartz

Among Mimi Schwartz's books are *Thoughts From a Queen-sized Bed* and *Writing True, the Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction* (with Sondra Perl). She is professor emeritus at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey and teaches writers workshops nationwide. Web: www.mimischwartz.net.

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