

THE WRITERS' 'VOICE'



The writer's 'voice' is an element in achieving a professional standard of competence in writing. It is shorthand for the phenomenon where the writer has thoroughly mastered what they do; where their specialist skills as a practitioner are those of a literate, cultured, sophisticated intellectual who understands their own routine and has a systematic, orderly, work-a-day approach to their writing; where they are clearly knowledgeable, resourceful, conscious and aware of what they are doing and the effects they are creating.

Carl Tighe

We often hear about 'the writer's voice', and many teachers speak of the writer 'finding their voice', but what does this phrase mean and how does it relate to the idea of being 'professional'? Here are some definitions of 'voice':

Voice has two meanings as far as it concerns creative writers:

- the author's style, the quality that makes his or her writing unique, and which conveys the author's attitude, personality, and character; or
- the characteristic speech and thought patterns of a first-person narrator; a persona. Because voice has so much to do with the reader's experience of a work of literature, it is one of the most important elements of a piece of writing. Also known as: persona. Examples: young writers are often urged to 'find their own voice' in fiction, but many teachers believe that voice is something that emerges naturally as a writer develops.

www.fictionwriting.about.com/od/glossary/g/voice

Writer's voice is the literary term used to describe the individual writing style of an author. Voice was generally considered to be a combination of a writer's use of syntax, diction, punctuation, character development, dialogue, etc., within a given body of text (or across several works). Voice can be thought of in terms of the uniqueness of a vocal voice machine. As a trumpet has a different voice than a tuba or a violin has a different voice than a cello, so the words of one author have a different sound than the words of another. One author may have a voice that is light and fast paced while another may have a dark voice. In creative writing, students are often encouraged to experiment with different literary styles and techniques in order to help them better develop their "voice". This aspect varies with the individual author, but, particularly in American culture, having this asset is considered positive and beneficial to both the writer and his or her audience.

'Voice', Wikipedia

Writer's Voice: the dominating ethos or tone of a literary work. The voice existing in a literary work is not always identifiable with the actual views of the author (c.f. narrator and persona).

www.courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellibst/lsl01-tm

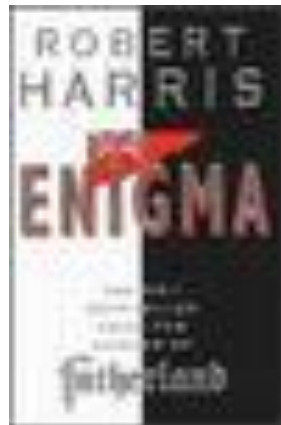
Voice is not completely separate from language. It refers to the creation and sustaining of an authorial style, which might be developed through a range of methods, including tone, idiom, point of view, dialogue, or observation. It also includes the range, depth and subtlety of characterisation in prose writings, and the use of dialogue in character creation and development.

A215 Creative Writing Assessment Guide,
The Open University (2012), p.38.

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In short, while it is very difficult to define 'the writer's voice' and even more difficult to identify 'a voice', it is clear that 'voice' – and this is my preferred definition - is the total effect of a piece of work, where the writer has learned to control and consciously manipulate every single element of the writing, from the personal style to the basics of punctuation, so that it all contributes to and, is an element of, the overall effect. The 'writer's voice' is not confined to 'literary writing' but is a feature of all effective writing and can be found in well written popular fiction too.

Robert Harris' novel *Enigma* (1995) is a good example. This novel contains a great many elements of the traditional thriller – male rivalry, a love story, betrayal, danger and misfortune, hardship, ironic reflection on life – all set against the thoroughly researched background of the little known code breaking war conducted by scientists, inventors, cryptanalysts, signals and cyphers experts and intelligence officers from Bletchley Park by the Allies during World War Two.



The novel weaves a great deal of technical and historical information into a tense and very tight story of warfare and love. The following extract, which skillfully integrates dialogue, the developing action and the world of work, comes towards the end of the book. Feiler's U-boat is shadowing a British convoy and he needs to send a message back to base using his Enigma machine to coordinate an attack by other U-boats. However, British cryptanalysts, whose job is to crack the Nazi codes, are waiting for just such a message...

He (Feiler) waited two hours, then surfaced.

The convoy was already so far ahead as to be barely visible in the faint dawn light – just the masts of the ships and a few smudges of smoke on the horizon, and then, occasionally, when a high wave lifted the U-boat, the ironwork of bridges and funnels.

Feiler's task, under Standing Orders, was not to attack – impossible in any case, given his lack of torpedoes – but to keep his quarry in site while drawing in every other U-boat within a radius of 100 miles.

'Convoy steering 070 degrees', said Feiler. 'Naval grid square BD 1491.'

The first officer made a scrawled note in pencil then dropped down the conning tower to collect the Short Signals Code Book. In his cubbyhole next to the captain's berth the radioman pressed his switches. The Enigma came on with a hum.

At 7 am Logie had sent Pinker, Proudfoot and Kingscome back to their digs to get some decent rest. 'Sod's Law will now proceed to operate', he predicted, as he watched them go, and sod's law duly did. Twenty-five minutes later, he was back in the Big Room with the queasy expression of guilty excitement which would characterise the whole of that day.

'It looks like it may have started.'

St Erith, Scarborough and Flowerden had all reported an E-ar signal followed by eight Morse letters, and within a minute one of the Wrens from the Registration Room was bringing in the first copies. Jericho placed his carefully in the centre of his trestle table.

RGHC DMIG> His heart began to accelerate.

'Hubertus net,' said Logie. '4601 kilocycles.'

Cave was listening to someone on the telephone. He put his hand over the mouthpiece.

'Direction finders have a fix.' He clicked his fingers. 'Pencil. Quick.' Baxter threw him one.

'49.4 degrees north,' he repeated. '38.8 degrees west. Got it. Well done.' He hung up.

Cave had spent all night plotting the convoy's courses on two large charts of the North Atlantic – one issued by the Admiralty, the other a captured German naval grid, on which the ocean was divided into thousands of tiny squares. The cryptoanalysts gathered round him.

Cave's finger came down on the spot almost exactly midway between Newfoundland and the British Isles. 'There she is. She's shadowing HX-229.'

He made a cross on the map and wrote 0725 beside it.

Jericho said: 'What grid square is that?'

'BD 1491.'

'And the convoy course?'

'070'

Jericho went back to his desk and in less than two minutes, using the Short Signal Code Book and the current Kriegsmarine address book for

encoding naval grid squares he had a five letter crib sheet to slide under the contact report.

RGHCDMIG

DDFGRX

The first four letters announced that convoy had been located steering 070 degrees, the next two gave the grid square, the final two represented the code name of the U-boat, which he didn't have. He circled R-D and D-R. A four letter loop on the first signal.

'I get D-R/R-D,' said Puck a few seconds later.

'So do I.'

'Me too.'

Jericho nodded and doodled his initials on the pad. 'A good omen.'

After that the pace began to quicken.¹

Further Reading

Alvarez, *The Writer's Voice* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005)

M. H. Abrams' *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (New York: Heinle & Heinle, 1999)

Roger Fowler (ed.), *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1987)

Follow-Up Work

- In what ways is this 'professional' writing?
- What do you think are the important elements that go to make up the 'writer's voice' in this piece?
- Why do you think Harris leaves a gap after the line: 'The Enigma came on with a hum'?
- What is the dramatic effect of - 'His heart began to accelerate.'?
- What is the dramatic effect of - 'At 7 am Logie had sent Pinker, Proudfoot and Kingscome back to their digs to get some decent rest.'?
- What is the dramatic effect of the three lines of dialogue beginning: 'I get D-R/R-D,' said Puck a few seconds later.'?
- Try your hand at writing a prose passage or short story of about 1500-2000 words focusing on the details of a work situation and the use of dialogue, blending them into a developing dramatic event.

¹ Robert Harris *Enigma* (London: Arrow, 1996), pp.295-98.