



The Singer and the Song

Teaching Voice in the Personal Essay

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THESE DAYS WHEN I THINK ABOUT voice in writing, I can't help but think about *The Voice*—yet another TV show that features the search for America's next great singing superstar. Like most other shows in the genre, *The Voice* features an eclectic collection of celebrity judges—R&B sensation and connoisseur of oversized sunglasses Cee Lo Green; platinum-haired powerhouse pop star Christina Aguilera; country music's bad boy Blake Shelton; and heavily tattooed, yet impeccably groomed rock star Adam Levine—who decide the fates of contestants based on their live performances. *The Voice* distinguishes itself from other televised talent searches by beginning with a process called the “blind audition.” Rather than *watching* performances and factoring the contestants' image, age, beauty, dance abilities, etc., into their decisions, the judges on *The Voice* make their choices strictly by *listening*. They select contestants to move on to future rounds based solely on the quality and distinctiveness of their voices. The judges have their backs to the contestants while they audi-

tion, and aren't permitted to turn around and see the person auditioning until they've extended an invitation to that contestant to join their “team.” This means that, on *The Voice*, a balding man in his mid-forties wearing high-waisted plaid pants and coke-bottle glasses has as good a chance of being selected as a Shakira look-alike wearing heavy eye makeup and a leather catsuit. As long as the voice is there.

What does this have to do with narrative voice? With words on a page? *A lot*, I discovered as I worked with high school students writing college essays.

I am often asked to visit schools to help students with their college essays because the essays they are writing are... well, *boring*. As college admissions have become increasingly competitive, admissions essays have become increasingly creative. With so many qualified students applying, the essay has become one of the chief means for applicants to distinguish themselves. Done right, these essays can allow students to present their unique mind, character, and personality, and this means that *how* students express themselves is as important as what they choose to write about. In fact, the two can't really be separated from one another. The relationship between form (how something is written) and content (what is being written about) is one of the things that makes talking about the concept of “voice” in

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writing so tricky. We tend to think that voice just has to do with how we say things, when, in fact, it also has a lot to do with what we’re writing about.

Which brings me back to, you guessed it, *The Voice*. The judges on *The Voice* usually comment on two things when giving a contestant feedback: song choice and performance. I see these two things as being synonymous with content and form, respectively.

Choosing a song to sing or a topic to write an essay about doesn’t seem like it would be a difficult thing, but it can actually be tougher than it seems. It’s an issue that plagues struggling writers in the classroom and unsuccessful contestants on *The Voice*.

Cee Lo peers out from behind a pair of enormous, peacock-feathered sunglasses, “You have a lovely voice,” he tells the teenage girl who has just sung her heart out to an old Def Leppard jam, “but that song didn’t really suit you.”

“It’s my dad’s favorite song,” the girl sobs, “I did this for him.”

“Well I hope it worked for him,” Blake drawls, “because it didn’t work for you.” Contestants who make poor song choices do so for many reasons: because other people like the songs, because other people tell them to sing them, because they have seen other people get spots on the show by singing them, and because they don’t know very many other songs. Students do the same thing.

“This is your big chance,” I announce to the roomful of eleventh-graders to whom I’ve just been introduced, “to finally write about YOU. You are going to write about the things that matter most to you. The things that make you who you are, that make you stand out, that make you different.” The classroom wall is covered in plot and character diagrams from *Macbeth*. I expect the students to be thrilled about what I am

telling them. Wouldn’t a group of 16-year-olds be happy to write about themselves, in their own voices? Won’t it be easier than reading and writing about Shakespeare?

The students shift in their seats. Avert their eyes. A few of them seem to take pity on my misguided enthusiasm and offer me sympathetic or encouraging looks. But no one seems very excited. I plow forward nonetheless. I’m going to start with the easiest part of the process, I think, figuring out *what* to write about. I do an exercise with the students based on Joe Brainard’s *I Remember*, a book composed entirely of a list of the author’s memories. Here are a few:

I remember the only time I ever saw my mother cry. I was eating apricot pie.

I remember when my father would say “Keep your hands out from under the covers” as he said goodnight. But he said it in a nice way.

I remember when I thought that if you did anything bad, policemen would put you in jail.

I remember when polio was the worst thing in the world.

I remember what I remember most about restaurants when I was very young: french fries, straws, and toothpicks.

I remember looking out of the windows, riding buses uptown, sudden fantasy flashes of everybody out there on the streets being naked.

After reading a longer list of these remembrances with the students, I ask a few simple, open-ended questions. “What sorts of thing does Brainard remember?” “What do you notice about these memories?” I want them to take note of the unique details he uses, and see how small things stay with us and can

be important to us. I also want them to list the types of things Brainard remembers—firsts, fears, people, places, dreams, fantasies, objects—because they are going to write their own lists of remembrances as a means of brainstorming ideas for their essays.

I give students time to write their own lists, and then I ask each student to share three items from the list they've composed. Mariela stands up to read hers. "I remember my grandmother's pink sponge curlers. I thought that they were her brains. I remember drinking Coke in Mexico, and wishing I could move back there. I remember how when I was watching the Twin Towers fall on TV, my dad kept going outside to see what was happening, but I stayed inside because I didn't want it to be true." Mariela's list is impressive and promising, and as the rest of the class reads, I feel good about what they've done.

"Now I'd like you to choose one memory from that list and expand it. Add details. Try to make that moment come alive again. Make the person reading the paragraph feel like they are experiencing that moment with you!"

Panic. Hands fly up immediately. Even Mariela looks scared. I call on a few students. "What if we don't remember all of the details?"

"You use your imagination and fill them in," I tell them.

"What if we can't think of anything?"

"Just do your best. Try."

"How long does this have to be?"

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"How many sentences do we have to write?"

I am confused by this question.

"As many as it takes to write out your memory."

The students aren't satisfied with this so I tell them, "At least five sentences."

Some of the paragraphs are thoughtful, lively, beautiful. But many are similar to this one by Brian:

I remember the first time I played football. I was seven years old and I played with my older brother. I wasn't very good. Finally, I learned to throw a spiral. I think it was at Corona Park.

Brian has written exactly five sentences, and while he gives some details about his experience, I don't get a sense of his attitude toward football or his brother. I can't tell how he feels about his triumph in learning to throw a spiral. I don't get a sense of who Brian is from reading the paragraph. There is no sense of his voice. It's possible that Brian has chosen the wrong song. I ask him some questions.

"What made you choose to write about this memory, Brian?"

"It was the first thing on my list," he tells me.

"Ok. Well, why did you write it down in the first place?"

"Because I remembered it."

I am beginning to think that perhaps Brian *has* chosen the wrong song. "Great. Do you enjoy playing football?"

"Not really," he says.

"Is there anything on this list that you like doing, or talking about, or thinking about?"

"Yeah. I like cooking with my grandmother. I like going to the movies. I like playing basketball..."

"Why don't you write about the thing on this list that means the most to you? Try to use as much specific detail as you can," I suggest.

Brian then wrote this paragraph:

Jurassic Park is the first movie I remember seeing in a movie theater. My mother took me and my older brother to a fancy movie theater in Times Square and bought us candy and soda. I remember this because we were poor and we never had any money for anything extra, but my mom bought us that stuff anyway. I think she wanted it to be special. That day is also the day I decided that

Mariela stands up to read. "I remember my grandmother's pink sponge curlers. I thought that they were her brains."

I wanted to make movies or get a job in special effects or animation when I got older.

While this paragraph isn't perfect, it shows much more promise, much more potential for Brian to express his unique point of view than his first paragraph. Brian's language is more comfortable and less robotic in this paragraph. He seems more interested in what he is saying, and he has presented some important, meaningful, potentially powerful details and ideas in it. It's a better song to work with than the previous one. It's also important to note that few topics are inherently meaningful or worth writing about. Not everyone would see their first memory of going to the movies as being meaningful in the same way that Brian does. Some writers might have had more interesting things to say about learning to play football. Choosing the right song is entirely dependent on the singer.

Once a great song is chosen, the singer brings it to life by singing it in a way that only (s)he can. Contestants who do well on *The Voice* are often given compliments like, "You made that song your own," or, "I have heard a dozen covers of 'Hallelujah,' but your rendition made me feel like I was hearing it for the first time." Contestants who don't do well might be confronted by an angry Adam Levine saying, "You better watch out because if I were Aretha Franklin I'd be suing you for libel or defamation of character for singing my song like that." Even great songs can be ruined by a bad cover. Even promising essays can have the life sucked out of them if they aren't well written.

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experiment with word choice, sentence construction, imagery, point of view, tone, and structure to convey their unique voice. Because the use of these techniques is a more subtle aspect of narrative voice, and because there are as many "voices" as there are writers, this is more difficult to teach. You can't tell students what their voice is or what it should be, but you can give them a sense of the possibilities by letting them hear what a powerful voice sounds like.

I read my students passages from a few books or stories that have strong voices in them—almost anything by Junot Diaz, Roddy Doyle, Zora Neale Hurston, Aimee Bender, J.D. Salinger, Sherman Alexie, or Lorrie Moore will work—and I ask students

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to identify what stands out about these voices. We identify attitudes, moods, linguistic tics, anything that distinguishes these voices. It's also great to find two people talking about the same thing in different ways to see more clearly what distinguishes one voice from another.

For my college essay writing workshop, I chose a passage from Sandra Cisneros' book *The House on Mango Street* as a model of how a writer talks in a unique way about a topic that is special and important to her, bringing form and content together. In it, a character named Esperanze talks about her name and it starts like this:

My Name

In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting. It is like the number nine. A muddy color. It is the Mexican records my father plays on Sunday mornings when he is shaving, songs like sobbing.

It was my great-grandmother's name and now it is mine.

I give each student a copy of the whole excerpt and ask for volunteers to read it aloud. It's always interesting to hear how students interpret this voice, so I'll often ask two or three students to read it all the way through. After these readings, I ask students to tell me what they noticed about the narrator's voice in this passage. How would they describe it? What specific words, phrases, and patterns could they point out to support their interpretation? When we have finished discussing Esperanza's voice, I have students write about their own names in their own voices. When students write about something that feels specific and familiar to them, like their own names, while under the influence of distinctive voices like Cisneros', the results can be as diverse and surprising as the students themselves. Here are some excerpts from the responses I received:

"My name is Christian, but my father is Jewish and my mother believes in healing crystals, so I guess you could say I was born to be confused."

"Liz, Lizzie, Lizzy, Beth, Betsy, Lizard, Eliza, Bizzie, Buzz. I've been called a lot of names in my life. The one I like best is the one I was born with. The one my grandfather used to call me: Elizabeth."

"Sometimes my name sounds like a prayer: Graaaaaah-ci-e-lah. And sometimes it sounds like a curse: Graciela!!!"

One of the best things about *The Voice* is the diversity in the judge's own voices and approaches to performance. Their voices are all distinct, and what they value in other people's voices varies as well. Each judge

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even seems to *listen* in his or her own way. Christina often closes her eyes, straining to listen harder, Adam dances in his chair when a voice excites him, Blake taps his feet or claps his hands, Cee Lo bobs his head or rubs his hands together in anticipation. At times, as they listen to contestants perform, not a single judge will turn his or her chair around, sometimes only one or two judges will turn. But the most magical moments on the show are the moments when someone with an undeniably good voice performs, and one by one, each judge turns to acknowledge what they are hearing. Each seems to hear something different, but they all agree that they've heard a powerful voice. Part of having a great voice seems to involve the ability to hear the greatness in others' voices.

On the last day of our essay writing workshops, I like to do an experiment with the students. I read one paragraph from each of their essays, and ask the other students to write down whose work they think they are hearing. The students are surprisingly good at identifying each other's work, not just through biographical details, but based on the character and sensibilities of the writer. They listen hard. They laugh at the jokes they hear, nod at touching moments, shake their heads at the embarrassing ones. "I knew that was Tony the minute he called his mom 'ridiculous!'" "No one but John would ever say that he was the daVinci of skateboarding." "Denae even talks about learning geometry likes she's writing a poem or something." Watching students recognize one another and see their own voices recognized can be magical. When students see that they actually have been able to translate some part of themselves onto the page, they feel as if they have truly spoken and been heard. They understand the power of their own voices. 🎧