



## **In Their Shoes: Finding Voice through Personal Narrative**

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Voice is the most important component in literature. It engages the writer in the act of writing, increases the reader's comprehension and brings life to an inanimate object, the written word. Voice should be taught at the beginning of the year as an introduction to all components of reading and writing. It is the connective tissue that unites and gives life to literature.

Traditionally, the teaching of voice is left to the end of the year as the least important step to becoming an excellent writer and one that is taught only if there is time. I myself taught voice this way. It is an abstract concept that is difficult to comprehend: thus, I avoided it. Studying the definition and importance of voice has knocked my understanding on its head. Teaching this unit will start the students' exploration of voice through the study and writing of personal narratives. This personal reflection allows students to write about a familiar subject and examine themselves as they explore their development of voice.

### **Rationale**

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Almost every one of my students struggles with writing in a well thought-out, personally-engaging manner. Their brains work faster than their hands, and their thoughts go in every direction assuming others know everything they themselves know. To overcome this scattered writing, I teach strong organizational strategies first. Unfortunately, the organizational techniques used often strangle students' newly burgeoning voices and produce formulaic writing. The students ultimately communicate what they had intended but not in a manner anyone is excited to read nor were the students enthusiastic to write. But how can students be expected to know their voice if they aren't sure who they are yet? My students are just beginning their teenage years and are playing personality dress-up, emulating those they revere. This copying of personality is a good thing. Students need a chance to walk in these shoes for a while to take what they identify with and try someone else's stride. This also applies to writing styles. When students have the chance to explore and emulate others' voices, they improve their own voice. Through reading and writing memoirs and personal statements of belief, the students will eventually end up with their own, individual, authentic voices.

## Objectives

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During this unit, students will be reading and emulating the styles of professional and nonprofessional writers, including selections from the autobiographies of Malcolm X, Sandra Cisneros and Jerry Spinelli; and belief statements from the radio program "This I Believe" on National Public Radio. They will identify and analyze the author's purpose for the use of certain literary techniques. Additionally during read alouds, students will explore the clues the authors left concerning the reading and intonation of the prose or poetry.

Ironically, to find their own voices, the students will then copy these strategies. Then the students continue the techniques with which they most identify. These techniques include choice of words, sentence format, and the use of standard and nonstandard written English <sup>1</sup> (see *Appendix B*). Students will comprehend text better and be more engaged to read and write because of the feeling of connection with the writer, the composition itself and the reader. "When readers hear a voice in a piece of writing, they are often more drawn to read it—and that audible voice often makes the words easier to understand." <sup>2</sup>

### Timing

This unit will take between four to five weeks at the very beginning of the year. The first week will excite the students about reading and writing as well as provide me with an initial assessment of their ability to create a voice in their writing before instruction starts. The second and third week will be the examination of the autobiographies and writing of the students' own memoirs. The final week the students will be writing a personal statement of belief to be submitted to National Public Radio program "This I Believe" using the techniques with which they most identified from the professional and nonprofessional writers. The personal statement is the summative assessment for the unit.

## Research

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So what is voice? This is a hotly debated question. Peter Elbow writes that voice is a distinct personality in the writing that makes it sound like the author is speaking. This is easily evidenced in Langston Hughes's "Thank You M'am" where he presents his voice through three different characters: the narrator, Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones, and Roger.

The woman said, "What did you want to do it for?" The boys said, "I didn't aim to." She said, "You a lie!" By the time two or three people passed, stopped, turned to look, and some stood watching. <sup>3</sup>

Hughes's voice is that of Mrs. Jones: you hear his grandmother's strength and his own through the words she says. He combines, with this authority, the beat and rhythm of the Harlem community to create his own jazz-like style in the sequence of actions Hughes describes on the street. His personality, a strong, proud African American deep in his community's roots, rings from the page because of his use of dialect and rhythm in his phrases.

Voice is more than the personality of the author, though; it is the tone of the words: the vocalization of that which is written. This sense of an individual voice, the expression of the sound of how an utterance was communicated on the page fascinated Robert Frost. In his letters to his friends John T. Barlett and Sydney Cox, he explained how the combinations and tensions of a string of words could give the impression of "voices behind a door." <sup>4</sup> The listener can hear the tone of the utterance and maybe even the underlying meaning of the communication, though the listener is not aware of the exact words. There is no question in the reader's mind how Roger said "I didn't aim to." or how Mrs. Jones replied. The exclamation point is not really needed to express the strength in her statement. Hughes's choice to add *a* is sufficient to carry his intended tone.

### **Origins of voice: the relationship between the writer, composition and audience**

Any piece of literature involves the connection between the writer, composition and audience. It is in these relationships that voice develops and is interpreted. Peter Elbow, Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Massachusetts, argues that voice has more to do with the communication between the literature and the reader than the literature and the writer. <sup>5</sup> But Elbow also maintains that the only way to write with a voice is to write without an audience in mind. <sup>6</sup> In this case the relationship between literature and the writer is more important than literature and the reader. I believe it can be either way.

#### *Relationship between Composition and Reader*

When a writer begins the writing process she has a purpose in mind. If he proposes to communicate an idea to an audience, he concentrates on what will cause the reader to fully understand his own intention. The focus is on the connection of the reader to the literature. In "Names/Nombres" Julia Alvarez wants natives of the United States to understand the internal struggle of an immigrant. She explains her teenage turmoil through vivid ellipses and asides.

I was *Hoo-lee-tah* only to Mami and Papi and uncles and aunts who came over to eat sancocho on Sunday afternoons - old world folk who I would just as soon go back to where they came from and leave me to pursue whatever mischief I wanted to in America. <sup>7</sup>

She distances herself from her family's traditions with references to her special name and food only served on Sunday afternoon. Then she forces the relatives away who are tying her to the Latino culture using words like "old world folk." Her understanding as an adolescent of American culture was mischief-making, while her family's traditions were restrained. It is ironic that these are the very people she identifies with as an adult and from whom she creates her voice. Her descriptions and asides are clear enough that I can feel her struggle. The voice is found in the connection between the composition and the reader.

#### *Relationship between Writer and Composition*

The focus on the connection between writer and literature often occurs when the writing is more for self-revelation and exploration. Not that the audience does not matter, but they are not the main purpose of composing the piece of literature. Sandra Cisneros does not define her images as Alvarez does. Her writing presents her ideas in impressions that the reader may not share, especially in her poetry. These broad images allow the reader to connect in a more general way to their own life: not share in the details of the event. Her work and her voice are between herself and the prose and poetry primarily, and I, the reader, get to come along for the ride.

In "Good Hot Dogs" there is a "we" throughout the piece that is only defined as Kiki and I. The reader knows

the relationship between these two girls is close, but it is never clarified. This allows the reader to connect the close feeling of friendship and family to Cisneros's eating of hot dogs, swinging feet and humming to any of their own personal memories. The voice of the writer is found in the relationship between the writer and the composition, primarily.

### *Relationship between Writer, Reader and Composition*

Walker Gibson places a nice bow on Elbow's discussion of the relationship between reader, writer and composition by contending that voice is the relationship between all three. <sup>8</sup> In confirmation, Steve Peha, president of Teaching that Makes Sense, Inc, claims literature with voice is writing that expresses what the writer intends and what she want her audience to understand. To do this he must be writing with enthusiasm for his topic and a belief that his work will be read. <sup>9</sup> This is most evident in Annie Dillard's *An American Childhood*; she utilizes clarifiers like Alvarez at times and brief personal images like Cisneros in other instances. Describing an incident from childhood in which she hit a car with a snowball, Dillard writes "Often, of course, we hit our target, but this time, the only time in all of life, the car pulled over and stopped. Its wide black door opened; a man got out of it, running." <sup>10</sup> The man remains mainly undescribed through the rest of the piece allowing the reader to share in the writer's reminiscences through impression and feeling instead of seeing and hearing. Earlier in the piece Dillard describes the whole environment, so much so that I, the reader, am there walking down the road with her.

The best hot dogs in town were sizzling right there in the front window, daring each passerby not to come in. ... I've had a lot of wimpy hot dogs since then, hot dogs so soft you can't feel your teeth go through them, so mushy with fat and cereal you could almost drink them with a straw. <sup>11</sup>

A similar balance of writing for self and audience is prevalent through her whole autobiography.

Peha also contends that it is the collective effect of the writer's choices on the reader that creates a voice. <sup>12</sup> In "Knots in my Yo-Yo String", Jerry Spinelli chooses short, abrupt sentences to create the tension in a conflict between him and his teacher.

I told Miss Busch there must be a mistake. She said there wasn't. I said I wouldn't be there for detention. It was the only time I ever talked back to a teacher. She said I'd be sorry. <sup>13</sup>

He continues his description of his perfectionist tendencies with neatly packaged sentences. "I loved routine, repeatedness. To do the same thing twice was to establish a personal tradition. In other words, where there were no lines, I drew my own." <sup>14</sup> Only when he learns of life's dynamic, chaotic nature do his sentences become longer and more dynamic as well. "I walked home along Markley Street, past the sweet-smelling Wonder Bread plant, the sidewalk dusty with flour, past the *Times Herald*, over the Markley Street bridge that spanned Stoney Creek." <sup>15</sup> The reader feels the tension and immovability in the first part of Spinelli's story and then the ease and flexibility at the end because of Spinelli's sentence formation choices. The writer affects the way the reader understands the piece through his techniques.

Thus far I understand voice to be personality and intonation in written and oral language that is produced through the relationship between the writer, the composition and the reader.

## Strategies

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Then how does one teach personality and intonation? Gradually and cumulatively. Start reading literature in which there is a definite voice. Identify how the writer accomplished this feat and try it. Listen to the voices around you. How does she portray her personality through communication? Experiment with the same strategies. Consider if that technique fit your personality and then try another strategy. Thus, writing with voice is taught through multiple exposures to good writing, the writing process, writing traits, and metacognition.

### **Guided Comprehension Modeling**

Learning to read and write takes little explicit instruction in the middle and upper grades. Instead students must be exposed to good literature and try to mimic the techniques with guidance until they feel proficient at performing them alone. This model of teaching is called guided comprehension. Initially, teachers model the desired skill. Then students assist the teacher through the process. Next, the teacher assists the students, but the students are initiating most of the action. Finally, the students work independently. In this manner, students are given a goal and accomplish it, supported through practice until they are skillful users of whatever is taught.

### **Reading Strategies**

Since I must teach both reading and writing in one period, I will combine my initial instruction of the six strategies that expert readers use with the examination and production of voice in writing. I have found most helpful in combining the instruction of reading and writing a method called "Read like a Reader; Read like a Writer." <sup>16</sup> This process helps analyze the production of voice in a piece of literature because students interact with the writing multiple times. Through this process students look at a piece of literature as a reader: connecting, predicting, inferring, questioning, and evaluating the piece. Then students reexamine the writing through the eyes of a fellow author. In order to do this, Peha recommends that the composition to be analyzed be in the middle of the page with the left margin delineated for the students' reflections acting as a reader and the right margin for the students' reflections acting as a writer. Because I don't like wasting paper and the students each have a textbook of their own, we forgo the middle column and just use our textbook and a piece of notebook paper. To adapt the method, students fold their paper in half lengthwise and write the six reading strategies in the margin on the left (connecting, feeling, predicting, inferring, questioning and evaluation) and the six traits of writing (organization, details, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions and voice) in the right margin (*see Appendix A*).

During my instruction in September, I reintroduce the students to the six strategies of expert readers in steps. By the end of my first reading unit, students implement the six reading strategies proficiently and independently. The examination of the six traits of writing will similarly be in stages; however, for the first unit, the students only analyze voice techniques. Word choices, sentence formation, organization, development of ideas and use of conventions all create voice. It isn't a trait in isolation, but I will not give explicit instruction on the other traits. This will be an introduction to the other traits through the component voice. With this in mind, the unit seems to naturally fall into the first trimester.

## Writing Process

Peha indicates that voice comes into the writing process at the earliest stage. In the pre-writing phase, voice enters with "passion for topic, strong feelings, honesty, personality, [and] control." <sup>17</sup> The rest of the six traits of writing (i.e. organization, development, sentence fluency, word choice and conventions) Peha asserts, will flow naturally from there. <sup>18</sup>

Experts on writing and voice indicate later parts of the writing process are crucial. Elbow advocates writing the first draft without stopping to self-analyze: voice enters at the second stage. This decreases the likelihood of interrupting the unconscious flow of self. In this manner the first draft has the most authentic voice. He further recommends only revising for punctuation: punctuate only where it is necessary for natural breathing patterns. Read the piece aloud and hear the phrasing. <sup>19</sup>

In "Theme for English B," Langston Hughes's teacher makes the same assertion. "Go home and write/ a page tonight./ And let that page come out of you-/ Then, it will be true." <sup>20</sup> Hughes's student speaker disagrees and asserts that voice is the combination of all one comes in contact with in their life, even if the association is not altogether desired. "I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you:/ hear you, hear me - we two - you, me, talk on this page." <sup>21</sup> And a few lines farther:

So will my page be colored that I write? Being me, it will not be white. But it will be a part of you, instructor. You are white- yet a part of me, as I am a part of you. That's American. Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me. Nor do I often want to be a part of you. But we are, that's true! As I learn from you, I guess you learn from me- although you're older- and white- and somewhat more free.

This is my theme for English B. <sup>22</sup>

I believe that the trait of voice is crucial in all steps of the writing process, not just the prewriting and first draft stage. The difference is the relationship between writer, composition and audience at each stage. The relationship between the writer and the literature is prominent in the prewriting and first draft phases. The relationship between the writer and the reader is foremost in the revision and editing steps. And the reader and the composition relationship prevails in the publishing/presentation stage. This makes the process and instruction of writing with voice very difficult because each phase has a different focus.

## Six Traits of Writing

Various authors depict their own explorations for a distinct voice through their memoirs. As Julia Alvarez searched for her voice as a Latina American, she described reading and copying the masters and then feeling that this was inauthentic. She learned their techniques and used those that fit but actually found most of her own style in the women in her life. This supports Hughes's assertion that one's voice is a combination of all in whom one comes in contact. Piecing together the techniques of the masters and people who felt truest to herself, Alvarez discovered her own voice. <sup>23</sup>

I was reminded of the lessons I had learned in childhood: that my voice would not be found up in a tower, in those upper reaches or important places, but down in the kitchen among the women who first taught me about service, about passion, about singing as if my life depended on it. <sup>24</sup>

Have students listen to the voices around them and in literature. Have them copy the techniques and find what feels like their personality and keep using it. Allow them to write about things that are important and have meaning for them so that they might have enthusiasm and authority about the topic. Make them see that writing is a form of self-expression and communication with a reader. In this way students will find their voice.

## Metacognition

Crucial in the exploration of self and the production of a voice is the examination of what is and what is not true for an individual. The only way I know of being overt and thoughtful in this process is to use a written form of metacognition. <sup>25</sup> After each component of this unit, student will be writing in a journal about the techniques they used, how they used them and whether or not the strategy fit who they think they are. Since there are three distinct sections to my unit, I plan to use a tetra-tetra-flexagon: a book made of one folded piece of paper that opens and unfolds into three pairs of facing pages and a cover. <sup>26</sup> The first pair of pages will be used for the narrative piece, the second for the memoir and the final for the personal persuasive statement.

I highly encourage teachers to go through this process with their students and share with them some dimensions of how their own voice developed and changed through life's experiences. <sup>27</sup>

## Activities

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### Lesson 1: Walking in the shoes of personal acquaintances

Objective: At the beginning of the year, I have an engaging, expressive activity to get the students to tell me who they are. This assignment serves the purpose of getting to know the student as well as an assessment of their writing ability at the beginning of the unit and year. This unit works best at the start of the school year for that very reason. Students will create a book describing themselves through the voices closest to them: family, friends and inanimate objects. As a matter of academic philosophy, I always provide a model and scaffold assignments through the planning and first draft of unfamiliar activities. The Delaware State Standards for English Language Arts met are 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 2.4f & 4.2c.

Materials: *Who is Melvin Bubble?* by Nick Bruel, notebook paper with margin lines visible on both sides, overhead projector or chalkboard that will not be erased for the length of the unit, one 11x17 sheet of paper for each student, scissors for student use <sup>28</sup> and clear tape.

Model: Day 1 - *Who is Melvin Bubble?* by Nick Bruel is an excellent picture book demonstrating the art of voice. In this book, Bruel allows close, and not so close, acquaintances to describe Melvin Bubble. Each voice, description, and relationship to Melvin is distinct. It is easy to pull out the manner in which the author conveys the nature of the character and relationship to Melvin. Using a projection device, allows the students to see the book as I read, for the pictures are beneficial. I will not focus on them while dissecting Bruel's use of voice. I recommend to anyone trying this unit to focus on the written craft only, or, I have found, students count more on the pictures than the words for their understanding on how to create voice. This takes about half of my seventy minute period. It may be advantageous to create a list of the techniques on the board to help the students remember how Bruel created his masterpiece. I will leave this list up for the remainder of the unit,



adding to it while reading each piece of literature. At the end of the year, as kids were gauging the seconds till summer vacation and I was beginning to plan this unit, my classes volunteered to test out this activity. In its trial run, I quickly realized that a structured prewriting activity was necessary to help students find the voices they wanted to use.

**Prewriting:** To think through the process, I will start with a two column chart on paper with the pink margin line: this is essential. The students will title the left column persons/characters and the right column descriptions. The left column will be easy, but the right column will be a little more difficult to develop because it requires the student to think of the one or two personal traits they wish for that character to describe. Traits need to connect to the relationship they have with that person or thing. I will model this process. The descriptions will need to be only one or two word attributes. After the students have sufficient time to complete four or five different characters and the descriptions, I will stop them, and introduce and model the third column in the planner. Before the pink margin line, the students will write one or two words describing the character's attitude or personality. This was the step that I found most beneficial when I had the students write and revise when we did a trial run. It will be easy for them to write about themselves, but the characters will become indistinguishable without first helping the students see that the character has to have their own distinct personality. For some of my students with special needs we needed to come up with a list of personality describers first from which to choose. This planning process will be begun in class and finished as homework.

**Writing and Revising:** Day 2 & 3 - I recommend opening the class by reviewing the ways in which Brueel put voice into his composition and the task the students have before them. I suggest that they work on one character at a time so that they do not confuse the different voices of the characters. Since it is modeled after a picture book, the sections will be only three to five sentences long. I will remind them that each word is precious. The students will write it out in one go and then check if every word really did its purpose: showing the author's attribute and the character's voice.

Revision is crucial. The students will not place the name of the character on the page or anywhere in the piece. The students will pass their piece to a friend and have the peer figure out who the character was that was describing the author. If it is indistinguishable, then the author needs to revise. The exact person will not need to be stated, but the relationship should be obvious (e.g. parent, sibling, friend). Furthermore the peer reviser will indicate what techniques signified that relationship. In this way, the students will be reminded of ways to incorporate voice in the piece.

The process of writing and revising will be completed at least four times; thus four distinct characters describe the author. The final page of the book is the student's description of themselves detailing in their own voice the things their characters said about them using five or six sentences.

**Editing and Publication:** Day 4 - The final step of the writing process will be editing for conventions and publishing. At this time students who seem to master the techniques Brueel used may be introduced to how conventions can be altered to create voice. Since this is a hook for the rest of instruction, I did not and plan not to do this myself. But it is an option here.

The students will make books. I recommend that the books not be illustrated though the students may come back and illustrate them at the end of the unit. It takes too much time for an opening activity and does not increase the teacher's awareness of how well the student can create voice in their writing.

**Reflection:** Day 5 - Students will begin their metacognitive journal about the techniques they used and which



they feel work best for their personality. To make a tetra-tetra-flexagon book follow the directions on <http://www.artistbooks.com/flexagons/flexmake.html>. The students will title the cover "My Voice: how to write in *student's name* voice." Scaffolding their examination is critical. The students will label the first two inside pages in the middle "narrative." The left page will be titled "Techniques and examples from my work," and the right page titled "Is it me?" I will model the cognitive process using a think aloud. <sup>29</sup> I will allow the students at least thirty minutes to name their techniques and find examples of their use. If there is not enough time in class, I will allow the students to write their personal reflection on the right hand page for homework. The personal narrative book and metacognitive journal will become the pre- and formative assessment. (See *Appendix C for Adapted Six Point Rubric for Voice*.)

## **Lesson 2: Stepping into the "Masters' Shoes"**

Objective: After the students find parts of themselves in their familiars, they will read and analyze short memoirs in our anthology, *The Language of Literature*, to identify some of the techniques that the masters use and use these same techniques to create their own memoirs. This is the bulk of the unit. Delaware State Standards for English Language Arts met by this lesson are 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 2.4a, 2.4f, 4.2a, 4.2c & 4.3a.

Materials: One copy of *The Language of Literature Grade 7* for each student or a copy of "Names/Nombres," "An American Childhood," "Thank You, M'am," "The Autobiography of Malcolm X," "Bums in the Attic," "Good Hot Dog," and "Knots in my Yo-Yo String" (See *Annotated Bibliography for more information*.), notebook paper with margin lines visible on right and left side of the page, highlighters for every student, projector or chalkboard to add to the voice technique list, tetra-tetra-flexagon journals, and a copier.

Model & Prewriting: Day 1 & 2 - I will explain the change of focus from the students' closer acquaintances to professional writers. The pieces that the students will read during the writing process are culturally diverse, so some of the pieces may include voices with which students are unfamiliar. I will encourage them to try the techniques the authors used or to adapt the techniques to feel more like their home culture. At no point are they to criticize or demean a technique. Cultural sensitivity must be taught and practiced. Relating to the diversity presented is one of the objectives of this lesson.

The pieces listed above may be taught in any order, but I suggest starting with "Names/Nombres," "Bums in the Attic," and "Good Hot Dogs." Their style of imagery, development of ideas, and word choice are strikingly similar or different and help the students to identify the techniques if taught in tandem. In "Names/Nombres" I will pull out the use of ellipses. Julia Alvarez's development of ideas and word choice includes the reader in her world. I will contrast that with "Bums in the Attic" and "Good Hot Dogs." Sandra Cisneros uses many images, but they are more private. They hint at the feelings of the author, and the reader gains a sense of the author's intentions. These pieces are more open-ended with less development of idea, but still strong word choice. I will continue to keep the techniques the masters use on the list with the techniques from *Who is Melvin Bubble?* I will include examples from the writing in the list.

During the reading half of the period, I will teach the technique of connection and feeling. These are the easiest to master. In connection, students relate the events of the literature to their life, the world or other pieces of literature they have read. Usually the responses come in the form of "this part of the story reminds me of..." I suggest that this simple statement of connection be extended so that the students use the strategy to help their comprehension. "Thus I now understand that the character is..." or "Because of my connection, I get that..." The understanding should not be explicitly stated in the text but an extension, a new dimension. In this way, students will begin to relate not only to the story but also the author's voice and may start to feel

more comfortable attempting unfamiliar skills. I will complete the discussion by identifying the techniques the author used to share her personality and tone.

During the writing half of the period, I will talk about the format of a memoir. I will emphasize that this form of personal narrative neither spans a whole life, nor the whole character: it is a snapshot of one instance of life that shows one aspect of a person. I will review the struggle Alvarez shares about her identity in "Names/Nombres," the wish to be rich and compassionate in "Bums in the Attic," and the beauty of a simple life with a close friend in "Good Hot Dogs" by Cisneros. The students will brainstorm a list of the most important moments in their life that they might want to share with others. The students will then meet in groups up to four and in five minutes share their synopses of their ideas. The meetings are for two purposes: one, to begin to excite the students about the communication process and two, to flush out the one idea about which the students are most enthusiastic. I will make sure to keep strictly to the five minute limit. This is not the time to flush out the whole idea but just the one in Peha's words that elicits "passion for topic, strong feelings, honesty, personality, [and] control." <sup>30</sup>

Model & Writing: Day 3 & 4 - I will continue the modeling and strategy instruction during the reading half of the period. The students will add predicting and inferring. I will model both using "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" emphasizing that predicting is taking clues from the story to make an educated guess about what will happen and inferring is taking clues from the composition to make an educated guess about how the characters feel or think or behave, the significance of a plot point or component of the setting. It is critical that students not only write their educated guesses but also the clues that brought them to that conclusion. The students will complete the connection and feeling sections in the left column independently. Concerning the right column, I will help the students pull out use of Standard English conventions and textbook English dialect. I will ask the students why Malcolm X writes in this voice.

On day four for reading, the students will analyze "Thank You, M'am," contrasting the use of dialect and Standard English dialect in the two pieces. I will emphasize the way Hughes communicated the tone the reader should use for the dialogue of the characters. I will continue to add to the list of techniques on the board and examples from the piece of writing. At the same time, students will be completing the left column of the two column notes as independently as they can using connection, feeling, prediction and inferring.

For these two days during the writing half of the period, student should be writing about their topic without stopping to revise, share or edit. In this way, their voice can naturally flow from them.

Model & Revising: Day 5, 6, 7 & 8 - I will conclude the modeling and strategy instruction process with "Knots in my Yo-Yo String" and "An American Childhood." Both of these pieces are longer pieces and should take two days a piece. I will add questioning and evaluation to the reading strategies side. I will start with modeling questioning and evaluation of Spinelli's autobiography. Both of these processes seem to come naturally to my students, but they must be pushed to substantiate their judgments of the literature.

Voice in "Knots" and "Childhood" is developed through sentence fluency primarily. In Jerry Spinelli's autobiography, short sentences show his perfectionist, obedient side. They also indicate frustration between teacher and student in an argument. The style then switches mostly to longer, more flowing, almost meandering sentences as Spinelli realizes that chaos in his life brings creativity and imagination. Likewise, sentence fluency represents the unrestrained nature of Dillard as a young tomboy in "An American Childhood." The sentences pick up a staccato pace in a chase, but again become longer as she explores her feelings of joy and exhilaration at the danger and persistence of the pursuer. I will write these strategies on

the voice technique part of the board.

Revision is a very important process for these pieces. The first day, students will revise their own pieces, starting off by highlighting any voice they have in their piece. Next they will determine if their writing communicates what they had intended. Does it show a part of their personality, an important moment in their life or a lesson learned? In pencil the students will underline the parts that show their voice. Lastly, the student will read their piece aloud to themselves placing an empty circle face above any text they want to communicate an emotion. After this they will go back to every circle and check that their words express the intonation they intend - paying particular attention the possible uses of one of the voice techniques. I will collect the revised drafts and copy them for the next day so that each student has their original copy and the photocopy of their work.

The second day of revision, the student will pick a peer to read their piece. This day is designated for imagery and idea development. The peer will read silently to themselves to practice and clarify any illegible handwriting, and then read it aloud to the writer. The writer then can see where the reader did not vocalize the intonation correctly and discuss the clues the writer needed to give, to imply the intended inflection. The reader and the writer both have a copy of the work in front of them, but the writer is the only one allowed to write on the rough draft. This way the reader will be limited in his possibility of rewriting the piece for the writer. Lastly, the reader will go through and highlight all the ellipses and images that helped the reader hear the writer's voice and communicate with the composition. This is the only writing on the author's document that is allowed. The reader will use these highlights to discuss with the writer what the text communicated. If this does not match the writer's purpose, they will decide how to fix it. The writer will then become the reader of the other's piece and go through the whole process again. When half the time has elapsed, I will insist that students switch or one student may not get any help revising their piece. I will assign the students to create a new rough draft for the next day. If time and schedule allow, I will collect the new rough drafts and copy them.

Day three of revision will be similar, except the partner pair that worked together the previous day cannot work together again, and the focus of the day is dialect. Students will read the piece aloud to the author, discuss the intonation disparities, highlight and discuss dialect decisions. Then repeat the process switching roles.

Day four follows the same pattern apart from the voice technique of focus. Students will examine the use of various sentence lengths and patterns for a purpose. By the end of these four days, the writer will have conferenced with three separate peers and analyzed the writer's use of three voice techniques.

Editing, Publishing & Presenting: Day 9, 10 & 11 - The final step is editing the piece for conventions and creating a final copy. These three days reading instruction is put on the back burner, and students get the whole period to conference and write their final draft. Day ten and eleven, students will be given the chance to sit in an author's chair and read their work. Students are encouraged to give Alphas and Deltas to the author.

<sup>31</sup> Alphas are specific comments on good use of technique and deltas are positive suggestions for change.

Reflection: Day 12 - The students will retrieve their tetra-tetra-flexagon journals. The students will fold back the cover so the front and back touch and open the book the new inside, empty page. They will title the pair of pages "Memoirs." The students will title the left page "Techniques and examples from my work" and the right page "Is it me?" I will give students time to highlight the parts in their story where they used the various voice strategies and write them on the left page. I will model the cognitive process using a think aloud for any students still struggling with the process. <sup>32</sup> I will allow the students at least thirty minutes to name their

techniques and find examples of their use. If there is not enough time in class, I will allow the students to write their personal reflection on the right hand page for homework. The metacognitive journal and highlighted memoir will become formative assessments. (See Appendix C for Adapted Six Point Rubric for Voice.)

### **Lesson 3: Beginning to walk in their own shoes**

**Objectives:** Lastly, the students will explore statements of belief in *This I Believe*, searching for some of the techniques personally studied and discussing the voice of the authors. At this same time, the students will be exploring their own beliefs and identifying one they would like to share. In the format of submissions to the National Public Radio program "This I Believe," students will write their own essays of personal belief using techniques they feel best define their voice. Students old enough to meet the program's guidelines will be encouraged to submit. Others will be selected by the class to be read over the announcements in the morning as a school-wide "This I Believe." A copy of their final product with an appendix in which students describe what parts of the essay best denote their voice will be handed in and scored according to a district-sponsored rubric for voice. This lesson meets Delaware State Standards for English Language Arts 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 2.4f, 4.2c & 4.3a.

**Materials:** Computer with internet access, speakers connected to the computer, class copies of "I Will Take My Voice Back," "The Gift of Kindness," "Finding the Flexibility to Survive" and "Be Cool," the class list of strategies to create voice posted or written so that all students can see it, copies of *This I Believe* submission agreement, brochure and poster <sup>33</sup> or a projector to show the website, copies of the submission agreement forms for parent signature.

**Model & Prewrite:** Day 1 - Students will produce one final piece using voice. In this piece, unlike its predecessors, writers will be able to pick and choose the strategies they feel work best for their personality. For the reading half of the day, students will receive a copy of "The Gift of Kindness" and "Be Cool." They will read "The Gift" silently first and then aloud to a partner trying to determine what words the author intended to emphasize and the intonation of the piece. Students will volunteer to read the piece aloud with their own interpretation and explain what signals they deciphered from the composition. Then the students will hear the author read their own piece for the National Public Radio database. (See *Annotated Bibliography for website address*.) The students will discuss as a class how their versions compared to the authors and what signals were missing, misinterpreted or well used. The students will conclude the reading half of the period doing the same thing with "Be Cool."

For the writing half of the period, students will look at the format of the two *This I Believe* statements and review the directions for creating a statement that can be submitted to the website. I will emphasize the "be personal" aspect. National Public Radio wants to hear voice. I will allow the students to select any prewriting strategy with which they feel most comfortable. This essay is to be as independent as the students can handle.

**Model & Write:** Day 2 - I will read "I Will Take My Voice Back" and "Finding the Flexibility to Survive" with the students or listen to the authors read it. I will create the familiar two column notes sheet, but instead of the six strategies expert readers use, list the qualities National Public Radio expects in the brochure from the submissions (i.e. tell a story, be brief, name your belief, be positive, be personal). As a class we will discuss and document how well these two essays met the qualifications. On the right side of the two column notes, the students will continue to examine the techniques of voice used to express personality, clue the reader into intonation and show their passion for their topic.

For the writing half of the period, the students have the freedom to write their first draft and begin to revise if they wish.

Revision & Editing: Day 3 - I will give students the freedom to peer revise and edit as needed. I will encourage them to utilize the strategies from class of selective revising and using multiple peers to revise. Editing should be the final step before publishing.

Publishing & Presenting: Day 4 - The students will continue to have access to each other as they complete the final editing and publication. The students who wish to will present the fourth and part of the fifth day of this lesson. Furthermore, individuals who meet or are older than the thirteen age limit for submissions, may get the parental agreement signed and enter their essay online.

Presenting & Reflecting: Day 5 - The students will finish presentations during the reading half of the period and use the writing half to complete the tetra-tetra-flexagon journals. This last section will be titled "Belief Statements." The same titles from the previous two lessons apply. Students will go through the same procedure of highlighting techniques for voice and then documenting them in their journal and finally describing why the techniques they chose for this final essay represented them.

Assessment: I will collect the Reflection Journals and the highlighted belief statements for summative assessments. (See *Appendix C for Adapted Six Point Rubric for Voice.*) I will use the reflection journal to decipher the students' intentions and attempts at using strategies to promote voice.

## Annotated Bibliography

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They Can't" In *Teaching that Makes Sense* website at [www.ttms.org](http://www.ttms.org) [accessed 6/22/08]. Web-based article explaining what makes good writing and how to evaluate it.

—. "Organizers" in *Teaching that Makes Sense* at [www.ttms.org](http://www.ttms.org) [accessed 7/10/08]. Web-based compilation of reading and writing strategies and organizers.

—. "Read like a Reader; Read like a Writer." in *Teaching that Makes Sense* at [www.ttms.org](http://www.ttms.org) [accessed 7/10/08]. Web-based article explaining how to examine a piece of literature as a reader and a writer.

## Student Resources

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Aviles, Quique. "I Will Take My Voice Back." *This I Believe*, July 31, 2006, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5587766> (accessed July 8, 2008). Poet recognizes the saving grace of writing and the destructive nature of drugs. Technique creating voice is the images and sentence patterns of poetry.

Bruel, Nick. *Who is Melvin Bubble?* New Milford, CT: Roaring Brook Press, 2006. Humorous picture book describing Melvin Bubble from a number of perspectives using a number of voices.

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Spinelli, Jerry. "Knots in my Yo-Yo String." In *The Language of Literature*, edited by Applebee, Bermudez, Blau, Caplan, Elbow, Hynds, Langer & Marshall, 573-578. Boston, MA: McDougal Littell, 2001. Excerpt from an autobiography in which a perfectionist child is taught the by a yo-yo and a skipped detention that chaos is a gift that brings creativity and imagination.

## **Adapted version of "Read like a Reader; Read like a Writer"-Appendix A**

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Six Traits Expert Readers use Response

Connection

Response:

Questions

Response:

Inference

Response:

Prediction

Response:

Feeling

Response:

Evaluation

Response:

Analysis/Trait of Writing

Voice

Text:

Interpretation:

Interpretation:

Interpretation:



## Implementing State Standards- Appendix B

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1.1 "Writers will produce texts that exhibit the following text features, all of which are consistent with the genre and purpose of the writing: development, organization, style, and word choice." Students will write three pieces concentrating on word choice and style that demonstrate their personality and give the piece voice.

1.2 "Writers will produce texts that exhibit the following language conventions *at all grade levels*: sentence formation, conventions." Students will write three pieces intentionally selecting sentence forms and standard and nonstandard conventions to put voice in their writing.

1.3 "Writers will produce examples that illustrate the following discourse classifications: by the completion of the grade, writers will be able to write persuasive, informative, and expressive pieces." Students will write a personal narrative, a memoir and a persuasive statement of belief.

2.4f "Students will be able to demonstrate an overall understanding of printed texts by (f) identifying the author's purpose." Students will study the author's choices in creating voice and determine how and how well it was implemented in the work of the masters, each other and themselves.

4.2c "Interpret the impact of the author's decisions such as word choice, style, content, and literary elements;" Students will analyze the model texts for the author's voice and the techniques used to create the voice.

4.3a "Respond to literary texts and media representing the diversity of American cultural heritage inclusive of ages, genders, nationalities, races, religions, and disabilities; respond to literary text and media representative of various nations and cultures." Students will explore how dialect and nonstandard forms of English are used in text to create the author's unique voice, including their expression of cultural heritage and distinctive American experience.

Not explicitly connected to the unit's objectives but in conjunction because reading and writing are taught in the same period:

2.4a "Students will be able to demonstrate an overall understanding of printed texts by (a) making...predictions as needed." Using the six traits of an expert reader, students will make predictions about what will happen next in an autobiography.

4.2a "Respond to literary text by making inferences about content, events, characters, setting, and author's decisions" Using the six traits of an expert reader, student will infer the author's meaning in their autobiography.

## Adapted Six Point Rubric for Voice - Appendix C

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6: Exceptional use of techniques that communicate to the audience the personality of the writer and the intension of the text. Enthusiasm, honesty and passion for the topic flow through every word.

5: Strong use of techniques that communicate the personality of the writer to the audience and the intension of the text. Enthusiasm, honesty and passion for the topic are present in the piece through most of the words.

4: Techniques are used to communicate the personality of the writer to the audience and the intension of the text, inconsistently. The passion and liveliness for the text on the part of the writer was present in the piece, but in specific sections became insincere, too formal or too casual.

3: Attempts were made to communicate the personality of the writer to the audience and the intension of the text, but ineffectively. There is a rigid voice.

2: The text is casual or overly formal. It is difficult to make out any distinct voice or indications toward intonation from the lack of strategies even attempted.

1: The writer shows no sign of audience awareness or engagement in the topic. It feels as if this was a paper due for school. The student completed the project and was done with it.

## Notes

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1. Techniques to create a voice in writing also include organization; but this is covered so extensively in my next unit, it is not included in this unit.

2. Peter Elbow, "Voice in Writing Again: Embracing Controversy," 7.

3. Langston Hughes, "Thank You, M'am" in *The Language of Literature*, 31.

4. Robert Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose and Plays*, 664-666.

5. Peter Elbow, *Writing with Power*, 281-303.

6. Ibid., 304-313.

7. Julia Alveraz, "Names/Nombres" in *The Language of Literature*, 39.

8. Walker Gibson, "The 'Speaking Voice' and the Teaching of Composition," in Elbow, *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing*, 11-17.

9. Steve Peha, "The 'Teaching that Makes Sense' Organizer" in *The Organizers*, 20.

10. Annie Dillard, "An American Childhood" in *The Language of Literature*, 577.

11. Ibid., 574-575

12. Steve Peha, "Looking for Quality in Student Writing: Learning to See the Things Kids Can Do So We Can Teach Them to Do the Things They Can't" in *Teaching that Makes Sense website*.
13. Jerry Spinelli, "Knots in my Yo-Yo String" in *The Language of Literature*, 574
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 575
16. www.ttms.org. I highly recommend all of the pdf documents on his site and they are FREE. For more in depth explanations of each of the six strategies expert readers use, read "Read like a Reader; Read like a Writer."
17. Steve Peha, "The 'Teaching that Makes Sense' Organizer" in *The Organizes*, 20.
18. Ibid.
19. Peter Elbow, *Writing with Power*, 304-313.
20. Langston Hughes, "Theme for English B," lines 1-4.
21. Ibid., lines 17-18.
22. Ibid., lines 26-40.
23. Julia Alvarez, *Something to Declare*, 148, 159-160.
24. Ibid., 162.
25. Definition: Thinking about thinking
26. Fairly clear directions on how to make a tetra-tetra-flexagon are available at <http://www.artistbooks.com/flexagons/flexmake.html>
27. Using think alouds really helps students through this process. This is a practice by which the teacher makes their thought process overt by voicing their ideas as they complete a task. For more information visit <http://www.teachervision.fen.com/skill-builder/problem-solving/48546.html>.
28. There is no need to have a pair of scissors per child. They will only need them for two minutes at the most and can share them between four students.
29. A practice by which the teacher makes their thought process overt by voicing their ideas as they complete a task. For more information visit <http://www.teachervision.fen.com/skill-builder/problem-solving/48546.html>.
30. Steve Peha, "The 'Teaching that Makes Sense' Organizer" in *The Organizes*, 20.
31. Alpha, the first letter in the Greek alphabet and Delta, the letter symbolizing change in chemical reactions.
32. A practice by which the teacher makes their thought process overt by voicing their ideas as they complete a task. For more information visit <http://www.teachervision.fen.com/skill-builder/problem-solving/48546.html>.
33. Brochure, poster and submission agreement available at <http://thisibelieve.org/educationoutreach.html>

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