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The Emerging Shape of Voice

This article details research exploring which rhetorical elements are associated with statewide assessment scores and considers the role and occurrence of voice in student writing to inform teaching practice.

Picture a group of classroom teachers gathered around a table late one afternoon discussing the results of the statewide writing assessment, the returned scored papers scattered across the table top. "I don't understand the rationale behind these scores; just what is it they are looking for?" someone asks, perplexed. Someone else mentions that the highest scoring papers seem to include voice, though voice itself is not a part of the state rubric. So began our journey to discover precisely which rhetorical elements are most closely associated with the assessment scores (Swain, Graves, and Morse, "A Prominent"). Such knowledge, we believed, would provide teachers some direction for teaching practice.

Our research did not begin with a specific interest in voice, though voice emerged as a prominent feature. Voice, it should be noted, is a fairly recent phenomenon in the composition curriculum. We mark its birth with Walker Gibson's seminal essay, "The 'Speaking Voice' Approach and the Teaching of Composition," though the professional conception of voice has evolved significantly over the past 60 years. Even though many teachers of writing emphasize voice, it remains an elusive and shadowy construct. "Writer's 'Voice' is an at once vexing and enduring notion, both widely critiqued and persistently indispensible . . . . The notion lives wherever the craft of writing is prized" (DiPardo, Storms, and Selland 170). Rather than focus on definitions of voice or theoretical insights about voice, our study focuses on its occurrence in student writing. Some background information about our study is helpful to understand the context in which voice emerged as a prominent feature.

The Context

To realize our goal of correlating state assessment scores with specific features of writing, we collected 464 pieces of writing from a seventh-grade writing assessment, all from three schools in the rural south. Outside readers had previously scored the essays on a scale of 1 to 4, with 4 being the highest. To assist in examining the writing, we recruited a team of twelve experienced language arts teachers. All had National Writing Project affiliation, advanced degrees, and/or National Board certification.

Although we did not know the specific prompt, we deduced that it concerned students' favorite after-school activities. Our purpose was to see as clearly as possible what was in the writing, to come to the papers with fresh eyes, no rubrics, no guidelines, no preconceptions. We asked team members, "What stands out to you? What is prominent?" We coined the term *prominent feature* to describe the elements we saw. In all, we identified 32 prominent features in the papers, 22 positive and 10 negative. Voice was one of the 22 positive features (Swain, Graves, and Morse, "A Prominent" 84–85).

We did not attempt to define voice. We relied instead on the experience and the tacit wisdom of our readers to determine whether or not voice was present in the individual papers. Readers raised questions, shared problematic passages, and discussed what constitutes prominence. Sometimes

FIGURE 1. Prominent Features of the Seventh-Grade Writing

Positive Features	Negative Features
Elaborated details	Usage problems
Sensory language	Weak structural core
Metaphor	Garble
Alliteration	Weak organization
Vivid nouns/verbs	Redundancy
Hyperbole	List technique
Striking words	Faulty punctuation
Cumulative sentence	Faulty spelling
Verb cluster	Shifting point of view
Noun cluster	Illegible handwriting
Absolute	
Adverbial leads	
Balance and parallelism	
Repetition	
Sentence variety	
Effective organization	
Subordinate sequence	
Transitions	
Coherence/cohesion	
Voice	
Narrative storytelling	
Addresses reader	

they consulted with the principal investigators, sometimes with the whole group.

All the papers were read twice, first by the original reader and then by another team member. When a question arose, the two readers discussed it, sometimes conferring with principal investigators. There were three kinds of changes: (1) a feature that the first reader had missed, (2) a feature not found by the second reader, (3) a feature mis-identified. The principal investigators then read all 464 papers to confirm accuracy.

The percentage of agreement over all readings was established at 97 percent. The following passage, taken from the original research, describes the method for arriving at the level of agreement:

> There were 484 changes in the prominent features assigned . . . across multiple readings. The percentage of agreement in this case is 97%. . . . There was a possibility of 14,848 changes considering that there were 32 features and that each

of the features originally assigned to the writing could have been deleted and each feature not assigned could have been added. The judgments of presence or absence of prominent features are therefore considered to be both highly consistent across independent readers and to have yielded credible data for the analysis. (Swain, Graves, and Morse, "A Prominent" 7)

Voice as Prominent Feature

Among the positive features, voice was identified in 135 of the papers. Only elaborated details ranked higher with 136 occurrences.

Voice and Scoring Levels

Our original purpose was to identify the characteristics of writing at each of the four scoring levels of the statewide assessment. Voice occurred about twice as often in the higher scoring papers than it did in the lower scoring papers. Statistical analysis revealed a correlation of .21 (.001 level), suggesting that the teachers were correct about voice and higher scores.

Analysis of the papers led to another method of assessment that yielded a prominent feature score for each paper. Prominent feature scores ranged from 3 to 21, a more powerfully discriminating range than the state's holistic range of 1–4. Analysis of the relationship between voice and the prominent feature score revealed a coefficient correlation of .53 (.001 level), further confirming the accuracy of the teacher's intuition.

Voice and Other Prominent Features

We now turn to the question of how voice correlates with other rhetorical features. Of the 21 other positive prominent features in the study, voice correlated significantly with 14 of them. These are shown in Table 1 in order of statistical power. Whereas voice is nebulous, these features are concrete and specific, giving voice its rhetorical and grammatical shape. Metaphorically speaking, they may be seen as tools for expressing voice, or the building blocks of voice—with voice existing as negative space. Voice is situational and fluid, always in accordance with what is appropriate for the occasion. Voice then emerges when purpose, audience, content, perspective, and style come together.

TABLE 1. Significant Correlations of Voice with Positive Prominent Features

POSITIVE FEATURE	CORRELATION WITH VOICE
Elaborated Details	.26
Sensory Language	.22
Striking Words	.21
Adverbial Leads	.21
Repetition	.20
Sentence Variety	.20
Balance and Parallelism	.18
Metaphors	.17
Coherence and/or Cohesion	.17
Verb Clusters	.17
Cumulative Sentences	.15
Narrative Story Telling	.15
Effective Transitions	.14
Effective Organization	.13
Absolutes	.12

Note: All whole numbers are zero. Significance is at the .001 level.

TABLE 2. Significant Correlations of Voice with Negative Prominent Features

NEGATIVE FEATURE	CORRELATION WITH VOICE
Redundancy	− .38
Weak Organization	− .15
List Technique	− .15
Shifting Point of View	− .12
Weak Structural Core	− .11

Note: All whole numbers are zero. Significance is at the .001 level.

Perhaps the roots of redundancy can be traced back to the practice of "counting off" for errors. In a sense, redundancy is a strategy for avoiding errors, writing the same thing over and over "correctly," "playing it safe." But redundancy is itself an error.

Voice as Metaphor

In the Northwestern Educational Laboratory's *6+1 Traits Writing Model*, voice is included as one of the six traits of writing, defined as the "personal tone and flavor of the author's message." In 2005, when the National Writing Project (NWP) created its Analytic Writing Continuum, the notion of voice was re-envisioned as stance. The intention was to direct scorers to the textual features of writing. Rather than ask readers to imagine a writer behind the words or ask readers to gauge their own "gut" feeling, NWP envisioned descriptors of stance that would focus on the writing itself: "The stance attribute describes how effectively the writing communicates a perspective through an appropriate level of formality, elements of style, and tone appropriate for the audience and purpose" (National Writing Project).

Every occasion of voice is different, resistant to formula and imitation.

The correlations of voice with the negative prominent features are shown in Table 2. Most notable here is the strong, negative correlation between voice and redundancy. From the 254 papers exhibiting redundancy, we see generally that where redundancy is present, there is no voice; where voice, no redundancy. Clearly voice and redundancy are different, representing divergent ways of thinking. The redundant writer is locked into saying the same thing over and over, with few minor changes, until a page is filled, then two, and so on. One thought; many words. On the other hand, voice suggests an overall plan or pattern or purpose. Voice tells a story, puts forth an argument, presents a sequence, expresses appropriate details. Redundancy is dead; voice is full of life and energy.

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The concepts of voice and stance represent a progression from emphasis on the personal to emphasis on text. The association of voice with prominent features represents a still deeper intrusion into text. Voice and stance point roughly toward the same reality, though they are not exactly the same. Voice, it may be said, is a metaphor of sound, whereas stance is a metaphor of body awareness or position. Hypothetically, one might say that writing has *face*, a metaphor of sight, or *soul*, a metaphor

of spirit. In all this we see the metaphoric quality of voice, which may explain its resistance to definition.

What is the reality behind the metaphor of voice? The answer, in a nutshell, may be as simple as "well-written," but that would be vague at best and question-begging at worst. Going deeper, we come again to prominent features and rhetorical elements, the bedrock of style. Whereas the writer's control of these elements is not a sufficient condition for the emergence of voice, from our perspective it is a desirable condition.

Teaching Voice

Voice grows out of the rich soil of student writing, not from drills or lectures or admonitions, not from workbooks or textbooks. Voice emerges in the course of the composing process, a by-product of the writer's focus on content, purpose, diction, style, and audience. The key word is *emerge*. The creation of voice is not an end in itself but a by-product growing out of the process of writing. Pre-occupation with voice shifts the point of view from "you" to "I," from focus on audience to focus on self. Rhetorical features themselves are not voice. Voice is observed indirectly or intuitively through the rhetorical features. Since voice is observed indirectly, it follows then that the major teaching of voice should also be indirect.

Definitions of voice, plentiful as they are, do not give us clues about how to teach it. In the past, we've heard ourselves say, "Write like you talk"; or "Let the reader hear your voice." But now Common Core State Standards (CCSS) demand that students "establish and maintain formal style" for informational and argumentative writing and "style appropriate to task, purpose, and audience" for narrative writing (44–45). Now we are more concerned with audience than with the writer taking "a risk by the inclusion of personal details that reveal the person behind the words" (NWREL). In other words, classroom teachers need more ways to teach voice than merely admonishing students to use their oral language.

We don't presume that our 14 positive features demonstrate the complete range of rhetorical forms underlying voice. We realize, for example, that the informative nature of the prompt given to the students in our study likely preempted the use of dialogue, which we would argue also supports the quality of voice. Nevertheless, correlations from our study point to a wealth of tools that ultimately lead to voice in writing while simultaneously attending to the demands of CCSS.

Below we present excerpts from student writing that include some of the rhetorical forms that correlated significantly with the presence of voice. We also describe some techniques and strategies for teaching these.

> It is very thrilling to be out in the middle of a lake, reeling in a whopping five-pound catfish.

In this example of a cumulative sentence, a young writer makes a claim in the base clause (Christensen 156) that fishing is worthy of his free time and offers an evidentiary verb cluster that supports the thrill of fishing.

> As we approached, we could tell how decrepit the building really was. Its plywood frame was rotting, pale blue paint chipping, and corrugated tin roof sagging.

In both examples above, the major force occurs not in the base clause but in the free modifiers. To teach the cumulative sentence form, a teacher may provide a base clause such as *March rain comes down* or *Cigarette smoke filled the house* and ask students to call out appropriate verb clusters that might be added as support (Graves, Swain, and Morse). At another time, the teacher may ask students to work in pairs to identify sentences or claims that need supporting details. Students might then explore possibilities for final free modifiers as evidence for the ideas. In doing so, students enhance content, sentence variety, and voice.

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> Every spider web we walked through killed a little piece of our souls, and we walked through many spider webs. Sand, dirt, rocks, dead leaves, and who knows what else collected in our shoes. We wilted in the muggy Mississippi heat. What were we looking for? Ourselves, some might say.

This excerpt from a high school student includes effective repetition, along with balance and parallelism in the first sentence. It also includes

metaphor *killed our souls*, strong verbs *collected* and *wilted*, elaborated details (the debris in the shoe), and a well-executed rhetorical question.

> The umpires pause the game and my coach lets my mother in the softball cage. The cage of urine and broken dreams. Get me out. I have never felt so much like a child. My mother helps me stand up and I casually scoot sand over the wet spot in the dirt. I finally get to leave this evil field, leaving only my dignity and a wet spot in the batter's box.

Sensory images reign in this passage. Without using the word *embarrassed*, the writer paints a picture: *pause the game, lets my mother in, cage of urine and broken dreams*. Sentence variety adds to the voice: a fragment acting as an appositive, a very short sentence, as well as the longer sentences. Appropriate striking words add alliteration (*casually, scoot sand*) and contrast (*dignity and a wet spot*).

> On the coldest day of the year and the hottest day of the year, I like to go fishing with my grandfather. On those days, conditions such as water temperature are just right for the fish to bite.

This passage, given to us orally by a fourth grader in one of our workshops, began as "I like to go fishing" and expanded in response to two questions: "Who do you like to go fishing with?" and "When do you like to go fishing?" Simple questions, but powerful heuristics. We were delighted by the grammatical variety of the adverbials that came spontaneously from the students' linguistic repertoire. We've seen positive results from students working in pairs, using questions such as *When? Under what conditions? Where? How? How often?* to expand their ideas. Adverbial leads engender greater sentence variety, diction, modulation, and pleasing rhythm, all of which may give rise to voice.

> I know that everyone can visualize me with computers, but my classmates seem to have a problem visualizing me fishing.

This example effectively employs two forms of the same word, *visualize* and *visualizing*, which can be taught through minilessons on the four major form classes: noun–verb–adjective–adverb. Such lessons help students gain control of the fluid nature of syntax, especially how a word may be used in different positions of the sentence. Using dictionaries, students might work in pairs with concepts from their own or others' writing to explore sequences such as *visual/visualization* (noun), *visualize/visualizing* (verb), *visual* (adjective), and *visually* (adverb). Not only voice but also diction and cohesion may be enhanced with this strategy.

> Despite being a critical component of the environments that they live in, many bees are being wiped out (nearly 1/3 of the Nation's hives) by Colony Collapse Disorder. The causes of this disorder are things like modern agriculture practices and parasites. Practices such as plowing and tilling soil and pesticides as well as enemies of bees such as microscopic mites, diseases, and moths are the reasons for Colony Collapse Disorder.

In the above ninth-grade passage, we hear a voice of authority in the elaborated details that provide evidence of the claim that bees are *being wiped out*. Words specific to the life of bees (Tier 3 words, CCSS)—*plowing, tilling, pesticides, microscopic mites*—add to the authority of the writing.

> Some of the articles that I read made it seem that there is senseless killing of poor creatures. I would like to test the validity of these claims. In "Will We Save the Prairie Dog from Extinction?" they say that prairie dogs are on the "brink of extinction." If that is true, would they be so abundant that they need killing? Also the author states "Prairie dogs are small, social creatures, helpless before the human onslaught of bulldozers, high-powered rifles, and deadly poisons." First of all, a person isn't going to use a high-powered rifle to kill something the size of a squirrel. They would use a lower caliber for the task. These two of many (observations) question the validity of these articles.

This excerpt reveals a skeptical voice, evident in choice of words, *test the validity of these claims, brink of extinction, caliber*, and in the question, . . . *would they be so abundant they need killing?*

> I am high above the ground, perched on a branch of the magnolia. . . . I am joined in my reverie by a friend. We know what we must do; we climb higher and higher. We stop because the branches become thinner and thinner. We sit back and enjoy the sunset. Soon fireflies fill the air. We are not afraid of the darkness; we know this tree too

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well. We know the curves in the branches, the way they bend, the way they greet our bare feet with their smooth bark. In the trees, I feel free, though I am connected to a branch. I am free in the sky. A warm breeze connects with my face, bringing warmth to my body. I wish we could stay up here, perched on a branch, taking in the sounds of the darkness, a dog barking, crickets chirping, the leaves rustling.

Written by a sixth grader, this excerpt exhibits a reflective voice by presenting sensory memories in present tense *I am high above the ground . . ., I am joined in my reverie . . .* The effective use of repetition, *higher and higher . . . thinner and thinner*, creates another image, provides cohesion to the text, and lends a musical quality to the whole passage (*e* in *trees, feel, free*; *the way they, the way they*). Finally the three levels of subordination add rhetorical complexity and rhythm:

I wish we could stay up here,

　　—perched on a branch

　　—taking in the sounds of the darkness

　　　　—a dog barking

　　　　—crickets chirping

　　　　—the leaves rustling

We should not be afraid to encourage students to find within themselves moments of beauty,

moments of truth. Within this context, we can bring to the classroom the rhetorical resources young writers need. We can help them recognize effective forms in newspapers, online, in literature and informative books. We can celebrate effective writing and name the features within that writing, expanding the repertoire of options for expression.

We have described voice as negative space, not directly visible as, say, a direct object or a verb or an adjective, but a quality that is inferred from the text. Voice occurs through a richness of content, an awareness of audience, and a repertoire of rhetorical features, all of which allow it to seep in and present itself. We believe features are the hooks, the heuristics that probe the depths of the writer's understanding and experience, bringing voice to the writing.

Voice will likely remain a valuable component of the composition curriculum, despite its metaphoric quality that defies rational definition. Teachers will likely continue to say, "I can't define it, but I know it when I see it." One of the most valuable attributes of voice is its holistic quality. We have argued that voice is associated with certain concrete rhetorical features, but we would also argue that voice is more than the sum of its parts. If that's a paradox, then so be it. We have not said the last word about voice. Our best hope may be that we have brought another dimension to the conversation, that others will join in, extend our ideas, and, where appropriate, correct them. *EJ*

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION   Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

The concept of voice is often difficult for middle school students to incorporate into their writing. This lesson from ReadWriteThink.org provides a clear example of an author who created four specific voices. By reading and discussing the characters in Anthony Browne's picture book, *Voices in the Park,* students will gain a clear understanding of how to use voice in their own writing. Students begin by giving a readers' theater performance of the book and then discuss and analyze the voices heard. They then discuss the characters' personalities and find supporting evidence from the text and illustrations. Finally, students apply their knowledge by writing about a situation in a specific voice, making their character's voice clear to the reader. http://bit.ly/1FxwtD5