

Part II

THINKING ABOUT VOICE

The Hierarchy of Voice

In our years of studying craft, we were both often frustrated with the elusive definitions and discussions around Voice.

We're always trying to put our fingers on what makes our favorite reads so powerful.

After looking at our own writing, and that of our favorite authors, we brought certain assertions to our critiquing and editing that allowed us to formulate a framework to approach and hone Voice—both in our own writing and when working with others.

It became clear to us that all writing could be split into three levels: Emerging, Core, and Signature Voices.

In this book, we're going to discuss the definitions of each level and how to progress through and beyond each level to reach the peak of your craft. Remember, no one thing will be the magic bullet for Voice. But working through the building blocks and the corresponding exercises, each of you will climb the levels as you discover



your strengths and how your own work fits into that.

For now, let's look at the basic definitions of the three levels of our Voice Hierarchy.

Emerging Voice

This is where all writers start. This is a necessary step and should be where the exciting experimentation begins. Usually we find ourselves putting words together that sound good to our untrained ears. Often we begin the learning process through imitation of things we respect and admire. Another first attempt at honing your Voice could lead to overworking the draft. Or Voice may not be on your radar, so it isn't being crafted yet at this point.

Your Emerging Voice is dominant at this stage in your writing craft.

Core Voice

This is the Voice level that is distinctly yours. Once you find it, it's going to stay with you as the basis of your work through your career. Here is where you've taken your experiments and sharpened them into something that flows more naturally. Most of the work for our journey together will be reaching for and honing this Core Voice.

Signature Voice

Your Signature Voice is the final, most specific level. This is *how* you use your Core Voice. This type goes beyond the basics to take your Core Voice and build upon it to

construct an elevated Voice that is part of your story, brand, and author identity. Authors who have harnessed their Core Voice and have focused it into a branded Signature Voice are the ones who make an impact on their readers. These authors have voices that are immediately identifiable from small snippets and have achieved that special *something* that readers seek out because they can't find it anywhere else.

This is our goal for you: to develop your Core Voice and build up your writer's toolbox. Once there, you'll move on to exploring and refining your Signature Voice with a solid foundation to build on. Your "voice work" becomes more focused and targeted as you pinpoint what uniquely makes you a standout voice in the crowd.

Every writer will have exciting times of growth, comfortable plateaus, challenging struggles, and moments of brilliance. If you're serious about bettering your craft, you'll understand that growing and getting better is a continuous effort—not only because self-improvement is a lifelong journey, but because writing and publishing keep changing as well.

With that in mind, this book will provide a guide as well as leave you with tools that will sustain your future efforts. At the end of our material, you will understand Emerging Voice (which we'll be referring to as simply Voice from now on), discover your Core Voice, and begin shaping your Signature Voice for the greatest impact.

Style Versus Voice

Often when we talk about voice we partner it with discussions about style.

This can be confusing because so often the words are erroneously used interchangeably. It's easy to see how this could happen since style is a familiar word. We talk about style in so many parts of our lives: clothing, décor, how we live our lives. Style isn't a word we struggle with. It's a comfortable place.

But style is not voice.

Style is the surface manifestation of Voice. It's the pretty exterior that lies over the sturdy construct of Voice beneath it.

Let's pretend! Let's say that your manuscript is a nice, comfortable house constructed and decorated exactly how you want it to be.

Voice is the foundation of that house, the frame and studs and drywall.

Style is the layout and the color you paint on that drywall and even the paintings you hang on the walls.

Together these two elements create a rich

environment, built from the ground up. How does style fit into the Voice hierarchy? Style is what readers see or sense on the surface. It is their initial impression.

Voice, however, is all the elements a casual observer doesn't notice: the combination, the balance, and the composition of all the components that are essential to how the entire look comes together. It goes down to what specific accessories were chosen and the quality of the items.

Let's try this: picture dressing for a big event. (Gentlemen, bear with us. You'll get the point even with dresses as our example. We promise.)

Style in the first level (Voice) would be like going into the store and telling the salesgirl you want a black, knee-length dress with short sleeves, letting her bring you one, and then buying it.

Style on the second level (Core Voice) would mean picking out a dress that is exactly what you want. It has lace across the top, with little cap sleeves and a flounce hem that flips exactly how you want it to when you walk. When your friends see it, they say, "Oh that's *so* you."

But what about Signature Voice? What could the third level bring that isn't covered in that Core Voice level?

Style at the third level would be getting that perfect dress, then finding something unique as an accessory. Something no one else would pair with the perfect dress. Something that makes people think of you.



It's not just that the "dress is so you," but that you've brought something together that would make people think of you even if they saw it in the store without you. It's that pin no one else would buy, but you rock it. That special way you do your hair that would look crazy on someone else, but looks stylish and fun on you. And not only does it look perfect on you, but you are the one known for creating that look and making it a "thing."

VOICE: Your Best Friend or Worst Enemy

And the answer is...both.

Finding the right way to utilize your voice will bring you to a better place as an author. But finding your voice doesn't mean all your problems are solved. Both of us found out the hard way that Voice can be your best friend...or your worst enemy.

Once we both found our voices, we were fairly quick in getting agents and heading out on submissions. And that's where the next Voice barrier appeared.

BRIA

For me, my voice was my worst enemy with editors. Teen issue books by a writer with a background of working with teens *and* that have a romance? GREAT!

Unfortunately, every time we had editorial interest, the answer came back, "What is this? It's funny? Issue



books aren't funny. Where would we shelve this?"

That last question always seemed annoyingly amusing since at the time YA was still just one shelf that said YOUNG ADULT. I finally strongly suggested to my long-suffering agent that we tell them to just "freaking put it under 'Q' and be done with it."

Long-Suffering Agent said this might not help us win friends and influence people.

After a particularly stupid rejection, I called Long-Suffering Agent. She answered the phone with, "We're pulling everything and you're self-publishing, right?"

Yes. That's what happened. Now the market gets that not all teens deal with issues by going dark and are looking for more books like mine.

Sometimes it's not your voice. It's your timing.

JEANNIE

For me, my voice was absolutely my best friend, guardian angel, and fairy godmother—or rather it helped me find my fairy godmother.

When I was starting out, everyone used to say that editors were looking for a great Voice. If you have a great Voice, readers will follow you. Voice. Voice. Voice.

I had no idea what that meant.

I also had no idea that no one was looking for a Chinese historical romance set in the eighth century with elements of martial arts drama.

The problem was that as soon as I finished and started querying, it became very clear I had a manuscript that was a very hard sell. But I was still so shiny that I couldn't be discouraged. Sure, there wasn't really anything like this out there...but what if? What if I could convince them this was exactly what they wanted?

I went through close to a hundred rejections, never even scratching the surface. A few partial requests turned into requests for the complete manuscript, but the rejections always came back with, "Interesting story, but not quite right."

I knew something was missing. I knew I didn't have that *It Factor*, because people were not finishing the book. So I kept at it, trying everything under the sun (I was living in my Emerging Voice period).

The first time an agent called to offer representation, she told me, "You have a voice."

That word again.

A few days later, another agent called. "Every editor out there is hoping to find the new Voice in romance. When I read this, I thought, this is it. This is the new Voice."

I sat there, blinking and stunned.

This was a historical romance between a Chinese princess and a Western barbarian set in the Tang Dynasty with *sword fights*. No one in the romance industry was looking for this book. No one even knew something like

this existed.

But something had changed. I had gone from a year of hearing nothing but “No” to “Your voice is going to sell this.”

And it did.

One Thing is Not Like the Other

One thing we’ve found when discussing Voice with newer writers is that they’re far too close to their own writing to be able to hear their own voice.

Hand them a book by someone they idolize and, of course, they know they’d love to *write like that*. But ask them what makes that specific author’s voice strong and unique, and they lose the ability to define the nuts and bolts of it.

At first glance, something like “rich description” might be a good place to start. And it is, but it’s also a ten-thousand-foot view.

Let’s dive in and look at some examples to clarify. Here’s a sample of a descriptive passage from Lily Dane’s *Kiss of a Stranger*:

The town’s sign was rough and weathered, its edges warped. It wasn’t one of those new modern

signs with laser-printed white letters. This was aged wood, the once rich cedar now a dull gray. The letters were burned into the surface and coated with paint, most of which had faded long ago.

Welcome to Lost Coast Harbor, it said.

Gabe's tight-lipped smile was brutal as he stepped across the town line. For six years, he'd pored over maps, memorizing the names of every street, from the main highway to the smallest alley. He didn't hesitate when he hit first one fork in the road, then another.

Whoever named the town hadn't been joking. The town wasn't in the middle of nowhere. It was on the very edge of nowhere, pressed up against the enormous swell of the Pacific Ocean. It perched on the ragged cliffs of the Northern California coast, as though it hadn't quite decided whether or not to jump into the churning water below.

The passage begins with details before transitioning into character development and introspection. The sentences during the initial observation and subsequent introspection are directly stated.

And now take a look at Rachel Grant's *Covert Evidence*:

A drink would dampen his reflexes, and he needed to stay on guard. He poured a splash of scotch into a glass. A taste. That was all he could have.

Story of his life.

He could view, and at times even sample, the pleasures other men took for granted, but the comforts of American life weren't for him. He'd given his life over to his country, and lived—and deep down believed he'd someday die—for that service. When he finished a job, he moved to the next one, never pausing to enjoy the very liberty he sacrificed for.

He replaced the stopper and turned to face the balcony, avoiding Zack's interested gaze for the moment. Ian had known Zack was listening to every moment of his "date" with Cressida. It was necessary and expedient that his backup on this op be fully informed.

But that didn't mean he liked it. The idea of Cressida's vulnerable flirtation being witnessed, even mocked, by another agent left a bitter taste in his mouth that even the scotch couldn't burn away.

Lake Van glistened in the darkness beyond the window. Something about this sleepy, underdeveloped part of Turkey called to him, but was another pleasure he could sample but never fully enjoy.

As was the woman he would tail for the next few days.

If he were Hindu, he'd wonder who he'd pissed off in a

previous life to find himself in this situation. But he wasn't Hindu. He wasn't Muslim. He was a secular warrior in the midst of a holy war, and his primary goal was to protect his country from being targeted or drawn into the battle.

The passage opens immediately with the narrator's state of mind. Grant's sentences draw out longer, bringing more of the hero's emotions into view.

Both of these are descriptions of a place seen through the male lead's eyes.

The best part of each of these passages is that they tell us not just where he is and what he thinks of the place, but something about him.

Both passages move beyond a basic description. They both use details in a way that *marks* the character even more than the setting.

Both are examples of rich description. Both are distinctive voices. The problem is, they're nothing alike. Saying "rich description" doesn't tell us about *Voice* as much as it informs on the *style* being used.

Both get us to a great understanding of where we are and what the hero is thinking and feeling, but with such different voice, style, pace, tone, and word choice that you'd never confuse one for the other.

If I asked you explain the passages to me in five words or less, I'm betting those five words would be a variation of

the following: descriptive introductory passage, male POV.

So let's move up a step. Away from the overview of these two vivid descriptions and see how to build beyond that five-word tip of the iceberg. At the Core Voice stage, you might say, "Bria writes light and fluid description, and Jeannie writes rich, story-expanding description." This is slightly better. Moving away from genre classifications as a way of defining your voice allows you to attack Voice from as many angles as possible. It's like seeing a prism with the light coming in from another side. Keep taking steps around it and you'll eventually get the whole picture.

To find another way to look at things, let's put a new spin on this. Let's move away from books to music and use a different part of our creative minds.

Everyone has heard a Frank Sinatra song or two. There are many imitators and too many replicators, but there's only one Ol' Blue Eyes. The tone, cadence, word choice and play, how he uses the band...Everything about his technique beyond the physical sound of his voice is the Signature Voice of his music.

He was a pro at playing with all the elements to accentuate each one and hold tight to his listeners. Love him or hate him, there's a flavor to his work that makes it clear it's him each and every time. He was so in touch with "his thing" that he reached the ultimate artistic goal: making it look easy. You know when you hear him.

Not a music person? That's okay. Let's look at movies.

Authors love to look at movies, right?

Director Baz Luhrmann (*Romeo + Juliet*, *Strictly Ballroom*, *Moulin Rouge*) has a directorial approach that's incredibly easy to identify. If he were an author, we'd look at that as his voice. You open to any page (or any shot, in this example), and you know you're looking at a Baz picture. The texture, the angles, the use of light and color, the whimsicalness of handling even the ugliest things.

Spielberg, Lucas, Ephron, whoever...Pick another famous director. They would each take the same script and turn it into a completely different movie. You'd know it was their work.

Imagine if Michael Bay directed *Star Wars*. First off, there'd be even more explosions. Instead of the plot pushing the action, the action would push (or drag) the plot. Ah-ha moments would happen during huge sequences instead of those subtle, quiet moments that Lucas found inside the action.

Same story, plot, characters, and script, directed by famous, talented people in the same subgenre (action)...different Voice.

Below is the first of many Brain Flexes throughout the book. Each exercise is built specifically for that section, but usually the work we do there will be built upon in future chapters.

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BRAIN FLEX

Identify three writers you love who have distinctive voices.

What are the qualities that make them different from one another? What feelings do those differences leave you with as a reader? When you think of their author voice, what emotional response do you have?

* * *

CHECK IN

Now you have a baseline for your views on Voice. Remember, we're not looking to copy or mimic—but we do want to have a collection of works to learn from.

Keep that list nearby for easy reference. You'll want to refer to it later.

