

The Right Voice for the Job

Writing a set of directions for building a patio is not at all like writing a scary mystery story. Directions call for a different kind of voice. How does the writer know which sort of voice will be right for the task? Well, some writers “audition” different voices by reading and writing to see which voice matches a particular task best.

Sharing an Example: *Castle Diary*

Here’s a short sample from *Castle Diary*, the fictional medieval diary of Tobias Burgess, who has gone to live at his uncle’s castle to learn to be a page and, possibly, a knight. Read the passage carefully. Notice the voice of the author’s first-person narrator as he describes one of his first days in his new home.

January 14th, The Lord’s Day

This noon ’twas my task to serve my aunt at table, though I fear that through the nervous shaking of my hand as much food fell to the floor as was placed before her.

The Hall was crowded, for there are many servants here, and it will be some days before I will properly know one from t’other. Only two of them are women, and one is constantly at my aunt’s side. This woman, whose name is Isbel, dresses finely in clothes quite like my aunt’s. The other is Isbel’s maid. She wears clothes of red and blue, the same colors as the uniforms of many of the men servants.

name date

I found it very odd that my aunt's servant should herself have a servant. But when I asked my aunt to explain she answered me sharply, saying, "Watch your tongue! Though she does my bidding, Isabel is no peasant girl. She is as much my companion as my servant. Like you and many others who serve your uncle and me, she comes from a good family and is used to soft clothes and being waited upon." Then my aunt said, "Why, even a servant's servants sometimes need servants!"

Richard Platt, *Castle Diary: The Journal of Tobias Burgess, Page* (Cambridge: Candlewick Press, 1999), p. 10.

Voice and Purpose

How would you describe the voice the author has chosen to use? Circle any word that you think describes the voice.

nervous	inexperienced	angry	excited	confident
respectful	sad	curious	bored	terrified

Was this the right voice for the purpose? Did the voice match what you expected from a journal about medieval times?

- Not what I expected
- A perfect match
- A little of both

Using Voice as a Clue to Purpose

Voice can help explain why a writer is writing. The voice in a complaint letter, for instance, may have an angry yet polite tone. Read the next sample carefully. Then, list your own descriptive words to tell what kind of voice the writer uses. Look closely at your list of words to see whether the kind of voice the author uses offers a clue about that author's purpose.

We are going to Grandma's house, as we often do, Mom, Dad, my brother, my sister, and me. It's a long drive, but I don't mind the car. I'm used to beauty on this drive, a splendid, moving beauty. First the volcanic plain, undulant with empty hills. By daylight they run for miles, without a single sharp edge in them. In moonlight their bare skins look like the hides of rhinoceroses, rough and warm. Lonely rock walls climb the hills and disappear without reason, and here and there I see a scatter of white beehives and the polka-dots of sheep. Then lush carpets of pine and fir, full and dark, with spiky teeth of enormous granite towers rising out of the trees, like dragon lands in unmapped places. In the middle is the mountain, immense and solitary, covered in snow, visible from every turn.

Sallie Tisdale, "The Basement," in *Home*, edited by Sharon Fiffer and Steve Fiffer (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), p. 81.

What words best describe this voice? Write at least four words.

What's the writer's main purpose? Check only one.

- to persuade the reader that volcanoes are not dangerous
- to describe her grandmother's house
- to help readers picture the beauty of the land
- to explain what sheep ranching is like

A Good Match?

Following is a sample newspaper article on an electrical blackout. Read it carefully to see whether the voice is a good match with the purpose. Explain your thinking.

"What a Blackout!"

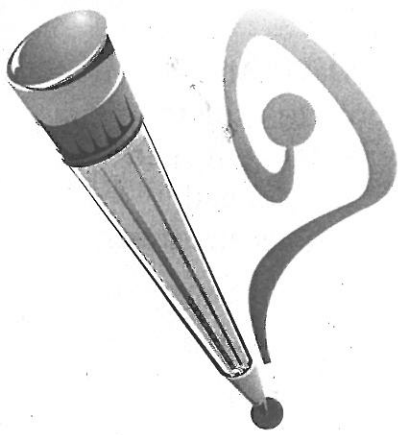
Wow! That was some blackout we experienced here in Woodville last Tuesday the 18th, wasn't it? Were you in town? If you were, you might have noticed (unless you were asleep or something! Ha, ha!) that the whole east side of the city from First Avenue up to Biloxi Boulevard was dark, dark, *dark!* We're talking no lights, no TV, no microwave, no power! One fallen tree and kapow! It was totally inconvenient—and even kind of creepy! Even the streetlights were out. The whole thing lasted for three hours, but it felt like days while people stumbled around in the dark. Probably some stubbed toes and bruised heads out there from bumping into things. Whoa! That's a blackout for you!

name: date:

Can you make a better match? Try it! Pretend you're the reporter on the Biloxi Boulevard beat who got this story of the blackout. Rewrite the article—using the same basic information—to make it appropriate for the local newspaper.



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A Writer's Question

Why is it important to match the voice to the purpose?