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## Finding your Voice

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*Write to express, not to impress!*

Developing writers often assume that writing for college should be hyper-formal and too complex, that professors are just looking for inflated language and a lot of words. There is, though, more to writing than just putting words on a page. It is the ideas behind the words and the way the words are used that are important.

I'm not saying that you shouldn't learn new vocabulary, but you should always be careful with it. Make sure to use your words correctly. Use them incorrectly, and you'll distract and confuse your reader, making your *ideas* unclear. This is why it's best to try and find your own *voice*, your own unique and comfortable way to communicate with people.

**What is most important in writing is to be clear and to be concise.** Make sure that your *ideas* are strong, not just your words. Good writing doesn't try to *impress* readers with inflated and pompous language -- it should *express* clear and well-thought out ideas that are easy to understand.

*Read the following passage, and feel the boredom creeping in with each passing word:*

The U.S. Strategic and Economic Dialogue consists of meetings among four high-ranking officials from China and the United States -- U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, U.S. Treasury Secretary Jack Lew, Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi, and Chinese Vice Premier Wang Yang -- and their staff. "It represents the highest-level bilateral forum to discuss a broad range of issues between the two nations," explains the Treasury Department. On Wednesday Kerry and Yang will participate in "the Strategic Track Small Working Lunch," while on Thursday Kerry and Yang will participate in the "Ecopartnership Event," according to a press release outlining the event schedule. "We come to this dialogue, in particular, with a new set of opportunities and challenges," said a senior Obama administration official at a background briefing on July 8.

*[http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/07/09/most\\_boring\\_dialogue\\_ever](http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/07/09/most_boring_dialogue_ever)*

Still awake? The writing is dry, boring, very mechanical and difficult to get through. This is the kind of writing used in form letters and contracts, and it is the type of writing to avoid when writing an essay. Instead, put yourself into your writing. Let your voice be evident. Use your unique style of communicating, of stringing words together. Of course, you should avoid using slang and overly informal speech, but remember that academic writing is often argumentative or expository. As such, your voice needs to be there. You need to be evident on the page.

*Complete the following exercise:*

Part 1: Write a letter to a congressman, a judge, or a mayor. Discuss any problem you had with the city or in your neighborhood and what you want done about it. Use formal language.

*Spend 10-15 minutes on part 1, and then return to this page.*

Part 2: Now write the same letter about the same issue, but this time write it to a close friend. Use the language you would normally use when talking to your friend. Use informal language.

*Spend 10-15 minutes on that, and then write 100-150 words in response to the following:*

Part 3: Did you notice a difference in both exercises? What differences did you notice in drafting part 1 vs. part 2? What differences do you notice in the finished product?

Also, don't just limit this concept to words alone: think of how you construct your sentences, how you combine ideas together and how ideas relate to one another in your normal speech patterns. Try to use similar structures in your academic writing.

In the exercise given above, Part 1 is usually more stilted, more uncomfortable. Part 2, though, often feels easier to write and usually makes more sense and is more clear. This helps both the writer and the reader. It makes the ideas sound like they are coming from a human being and not from a robot. It makes things easier *on* the writer and easier *for* the reader.

*Take the following points into consideration when trying to find your voice. Writing with no voice often has:*

- **No individual human being behind the page.** The page could have been written by anyone. A Machine. A computer. The author is anonymous. The draft was not created by a human animal, but by a machine.
- **No intellectual challenge.** The page does not make contact with the reader's mind. It does not stimulate, challenge, inform, surprise the reader, inspiring the mind-to-mind combat that marks good writing.
- **No emotional challenge.** The page does not engage the reader's emotions, encouraging the reader to feel as well as think. The reader is emotionally and intellectually bored.
- **No flow.** The reader is not carried forward by the energy of the voice that connects all the elements of writing into a powerful river of language that makes it hard for the reader to escape the page.

*Murray, Donald. The Craft of Revision. Australia: Thomson, 2001.*