

Introduction to the Power of Voice

Finding Voice is a teacher resource book designed to help upper elementary school students read closely and carefully and write powerfully, expressing their own distinctive personalities. It is a collection of lessons and activities to teach students to understand voice in reading and to use the elements of voice effectively in their own writing. So what exactly is voice?

Voice is what makes reading interesting. It's what makes us say, "I'll bet that book is by J. K. Rowling or Lemony Snicket." Voice gives color and texture to writing. It is the expression of personality. Voice can be strong and distinctive or reserved and generic, but all writing has voice of some kind. The study of voice helps students appreciate the power of language and teaches them to use the effective techniques that experienced authors use.

Voice comes from **conscious choices**. Every good author **intentionally** chooses to produce a certain effect. Good writing is no accident! As you help students examine the conscious choices authors make, encourage them to answer some fundamental questions:

1. What is the author saying? (What does the work mean?)
2. How do you know? (What evidence can you find in the work that reveals the author's meaning?)
3. How does the author do that? (What specific tools does the author choose to construct meaning, and how does he/she use these tools?)

Learning to answer these questions will help students make their own effective choices as young authors. Just as visual artists must master tools such as color, perspective, light, and texture, authors must master the tools they use to create the effect they want: **the elements of voice**. The elements of voice that we explore in this book are

- word choice,
- detail,
- imagery,
- figurative language, and
- tone.

Word choice refers to the selection of words that are clear, concrete, and exact. Word choice is the foundation of all good writing. **Detail** refers to the facts, observations, and incidents that develop a topic. Writing without detail is flat and boring. **Imagery** is the use of words to convey a sensory experience (what you hear, see, smell, taste, or touch). Imagery brings life to writing and makes it seem real. **Figurative language** is the use of words in unusual ways to reveal meaning that is not literal and makes the reader think. Finally, **tone** is the expression of attitude in writing. Writers convey tone through the use of word choice, detail, imagery, and figurative language. *Finding Voice* explores each element of voice separately in the five chapters that follow.

The lessons in *Finding Voice* have a consistent format. Each lesson begins with a passage for students (or you) to read and discuss ("Consider the text"). Then you guide your students through a conversation based on two questions about the passage ("Take a deeper look"). These are not comprehension questions (we assume students will understand the passages; but if they don't, guide and support them through the passage).

The two questions direct students' attention to the aspect of voice considered in the specific lesson. Lastly, students will try creating their own clear voice in writing, using the specific text in the lesson as a model ("Now you try it").

Students may find some of the passages quite challenging. If so, it might be useful to modify the approach. Here are some suggestions:

1. Preview difficult vocabulary before reading the text.
2. Slow down and read the text aloud several times, discussing difficult parts with students.
3. Differentiate for struggling readers. That might mean cutting the passage or focusing on one sentence or phrase that models the purpose of the lesson.

Although it may take some time, it is important for students to tackle passages that are complex. To help students become more comfortable with difficult text, the passages in *Finding Voice* are short, thus not overwhelming, making these lessons a good place to start with the close reading of complex text.

Finding Voice is not a complete curriculum. It is designed to strengthen the regular language arts or reading curriculum. We recommend using the lessons two or three times a week to stimulate interest in the critical reading of complex text, the understanding of how great writers use voice, and the development of personal voice in writing. Of course, students won't master everything at once, but they will learn to think about reading and writing differently as you help them work through the lessons and activities of this book.

You may run off copies of the lessons and activities for classes of students, as specified in the copyright agreement; or you may project the quotations and have students complete the exercises on their own paper. However you decide to use the lessons, it is important to remember that students need each lesson's text in front of them for analysis and as a model for their own writing.

Each lesson will take between 10 and 20 minutes, depending on the lesson's difficulty and student interest. The lessons are complete in themselves, and the order of lessons is flexible. We do recommend, however, that you go through at least one cycle of lessons from the word choice, detail, imagery, and figurative language chapters before you tackle tone. Understanding tone requires a prior knowledge of the other voice elements.

We have included a section called "Commentary and Suggestions for Teachers" with each lesson. These are our suggestions only and by no means exhaust the possible responses to the text, questions, and activities. The intent is to spark discussion and encourage thinking. We fully acknowledge and recognize you, the classroom teacher, as the expert, and we honor your ideas and insights.

We hope that *Finding Voice* is helpful, interesting, and challenging for you and your students. We wish you well as you help shape your students' voices.

Nancy and Natalie