

ENHANCING AUTHOR'S VOICE THROUGH SCRIPTING

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No feeling is greater than enjoying a story that has a strong voice. This is especially true when the author of the story is one of your students. Voice is one of the critical features that define good writing (Culham, 2003). Important as it is, voice in writing can be challenging for teachers to teach and difficult for students to learn. Therefore, as teachers, we must make it a point to infuse voice into our instruction as early as possible. Unfortunately, adding voice to writing is much easier said than done. Perhaps you can relate to the following anecdote.

"It would be great if you added your voice to this story." Confused eyes stare blankly in response to the teacher's request. "You have to add voice!" The request is now a demand. A moment of reflection may benefit the discouraged teacher. Although the teacher uses the term voice freely, it can be quite ambiguous for students, and repeating the term might give it a negative connotation. There has to be a better way.

Infusing voice in writing is an excellent way to capture a reader. When writing lacks voice, it can

be dull, regardless of the subject matter. To avoid sounding contrived, authors write like they talk, thus producing work that contains voice (Culham, 2003).



For example, a reader might assume Jon Scieszka would be no less sarcastic and humorous in person than the narrator, Jack, in *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*. Scieszka's voice radiates from cover to cover as Jack takes the reader on an irreverent journey through bean problems and permanent ugliness. Along the journey, a

transfer of literate energy occurs from the writer to the reader.

Enhancing Author's Voice

Voice in writing adds to the meaningfulness and engagement quality of the reading experience.

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Writing with voice, then, improves the overall quality of one's writing. That premise is the reason we developed this strategy—to engage writers in authentic exploration of voice in writing. Voice in writing (hearing the voice of the author when reading a text) is more easily manifested in texts meant to be read aloud. Having students develop such texts provides an avenue for exploring voice.

We give students the opportunity to explore voice by re-creating their favorite stories in the form of Readers Theatre scripts, a text form that is meant to be performed orally. The same scripts then become the material for developing fluency in reading. Readers Theatre is an effective instructional strategy used to increase reading fluency (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004; Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998; Rasinski, 2010; Worthy, 2005; Worthy & Prater, 2002; Young & Rasinski, 2009). Thus the use of the scripts in reading demonstrates the reciprocity of reading and writing and, perhaps more specifically, the relationship between voice in writing and prosody in reading.

Although no formal research has been done using this strategy, the authors have employed the strategy with a variety of grade levels and observed the positive influences on student writing. In addition to observation, consider the following sentence from *Jaws* (Brown, Zanuck, & Spielberg, 1975). "That's some bad hat, Harry." Without the insight a reader would have from developing a voice for the character, he would not be able to effectively parse the sentence. Therefore, one might



find not only a relationship between voice and prosody, but also between voice and overall comprehension.

Modeling the Strategy

The first step in the strategy is the read-aloud. It is important to choose children's literature that exemplifies strong voice (see Table 1 for suggestions). We begin by calling attention to how the writing pulls the reader in and characters develop unique ways of speaking or thinking in the story. We make the concept meaningful by connecting it to the lives of the students.

For example, we discuss the uniqueness of each child's manner of speaking. The current diverse classrooms of today are perfect places to find differing examples of voice (Lovejoy, 2009). You might ask, "How might Stephanie react to missing recess?" "What would Johnny say if his pencil broke?" The students find they already possess the ability to discern voice in speaking; the difficult task is transferring this knowledge to print. We facilitate the transfer to writing by analyzing voice as we read

quality children's literature. During the read-aloud, we continue the discussion of voice. Now, instead of referring to students, we analyze the voice in the story.

The next step is converting the literature into a script. We use an interactive writing lesson to model the transformation from story to script. Although there are many suitable texts, we will walk you through the process using Paul Galdone's (1983) *The Gingerbread Boy*, because it demonstrates good voice through a variety of characters (see Table 1 for other suggestions). After we familiarize students with literature through a read-aloud, partner reading, or independent reading, students can focus on restructuring the text as a script.

Through discussion and thinking aloud, we create the script as a class. Students know we will perform the script later, so they strive for a quality product. This can lead to very intense negotiations. The first decision we make is whether to script the entire story or a portion of it. Because *The Gingerbread Boy* is relatively short, we decided to script it completely.

The next debate includes the designation of parts. Searching the text for dialogue helps begin this process. We list all the speaking characters so we

Table 1 Suggested Books for Scripting

Brett, J. (2000). <i>Hedgie's surprise</i> . New York: Penguin Group.
Carpenter, S. (1998). <i>The three billy goats gruff</i> . New York: HarperFestival.
Cronin, D. (2000). <i>Click, clack, moo: Cows that type</i> . New York: Simon and Schuster.
Kellogg, S. (1987). <i>Chicken little</i> . New York: HarperCollins.
Lester, H. (1990). <i>Tacky the penguin</i> . New York: Sandpiper.
Lobel, A. (1970). <i>Frog and toad are friends</i> . New York: Harper Trophy.
Martin, B. (1983). <i>Brown bear, brown bear</i> . New York: Henry Holt.
Schachner, J. (2003). <i>Skippyjon Jones</i> . New York: Scholastic.
Seuss, D. (1960). <i>Green eggs and ham</i> . New York: Random House.
Trivizas, E. (1993). <i>The three little wolves and the big bad pig</i> . New York: Scholastic.

“After the script is complete, the group practices the script for performance. We encourage prosodic reading to demonstrate the voice in the writing.”

can include them in our script. This step is comparatively simple. The class must now determine the number of narrators needed to vocalize the nonspeaking parts. We usually deliver some facts before the discussion of narrators.

The first fact is the amount of narration present in the text. We can classify this as a lot, some, or a little. The author has included some narration in *The Gingerbread Boy*, so we tell the students to keep this in mind while making decisions. Another fact is that we need to include everyone in the class, or group. Sometimes the number of narrators depends on the students included in the Readers Theatre. In the case of *The Gingerbread Boy*, we decided on three narrators. In the end, we successfully designated nine parts: The three narrators, the Gingerbread Boy, the Old

Woman, the Old Man, The Cow, The Horse, and the Fox.

Next, we work together to separate the narration into parts and make sure the dialogue is assigned to the proper characters. We continue to think aloud and include the students in the process because eventually we expect them to use the strategy independently. The class must decide on the number of students to involve in the script. If the class is only scripting a single text, then we suggest creating the same number of parts as students in the class. However, we also have scripted multiple texts and allowed students to choose which Readers Theatre group they would like to join. Having multiple groups often solves the problem of finding an audience, because students perform for each other.

Finally, we examine the script and discuss any necessary deletions or additions. Because the original story acts as a scaffold for students, adding to or elaborating on the original text is not difficult for students who may otherwise be overwhelmed by having to create one from scratch. An example follows of a script developed by second graders based on the folktale *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*. The students felt that the little and middle-sized billy goats were too meek and mild in their interactions with the Troll in the original story. So they embedded in their script a bit of

attitude in the goats' response when the Troll allowed them to cross the bridge:

Troll: Grrrr. Who is that walking on my bridge? Arrrgh.

Middle Billy

Goat Gruff: It is I, Middle-Size Billy Goat Gruff.

Troll: Grrrr. I'm a big, bad troll and you are on my bridge. I'm going to eat you for my lunch. Snort Snort.

Middle Billy

Goat Gruff: I just want to eat some green, green grass and apples in the meadow. Please don't eat me Mister Troll. I'm just a middle-size billy goat. Wait until my brother comes along. He is much bigger and much much tastier than I am.

Troll: Bigger? Tastier? Hmmmm. All right, I guess I will. Go ahead and cross the bridge.

Middle Billy

Goat Gruff: Thank you very much, you great big, ugly, and dirty old troll.

Troll: What did you call me? Grrrr. You come back here right this very instant!

Middle Billy

Goat Gruff: Oh, nothing. See ya!

All: [a bit louder] Trip, trap, trip, trap, trip, trap.

After the script is complete, the group practices the script for performance. We encourage prosodic reading to demonstrate the voice in the writing. In the performance, the readers reveal the excitement of the Old Woman, the anticipation of the Old Man, or the craftiness of the Fox. We follow up with



a discussion regarding the voice “heard” in the writing.

Working Toward Independence

Once the students have sufficient experience with the strategy, the goal is for them to use it independently. As an intermediate step, we advise students to work with partners or in small groups. Although partnerships are helpful, it is still important to allow students to select only books that are easily scripted. Texts that are more difficult may come later once the strategy is well rehearsed. Students use peer coaching similar to a whole-group discussion to identify key dialogue. Students can assume parts before the writing process and read aloud to hear the voice in the writing. This voice from the authentic literature is now captured in their writing.

During this time, the teacher needs to coach and monitor the groups. We provide descriptive feedback to the students, such as acknowledging their strengths and encouraging risk taking, and allow the combination of those to eliminate weaknesses. We increase intensity and frequency of coaching with students experiencing difficulties. Once the students are comfortable scripting with peer support, they begin to script on their own.

Independence

With independence comes more responsibility, and with responsibility comes more choices. Because students have had ample experience with the teacher and peer coaching, it is now time for them to tackle the responsibility on their own. We encourage students to first script another fiction book that lends itself to scripting. After we see the students become increasingly comfortable,

we encourage them to explore new possibilities.

The first possibility is using expository text. This tends to be more difficult because the texts do not often contain dialogue, although some historical pieces do. Students often need to increase the number of narrators to make up for the lack of character interaction. Regardless, the process is much the same, and the voice is easily captured in the script. For example, students can write scripts to share what they learned about an important historical figure (see Figure 1).

Another fun possibility is creating a parody of a script. For example, two students in Chase’s second-grade class that we researched (Young & Rasinski, 2009) read the script *The Hula Hoop Champion* (retrieved from www.timelessteacherstuff.com/readerstheater/HulaHoopChamp.pdf). The two students cleverly conjured a parody entitled the *Burp Champion*. The script was quite similar and largely paralleled the original, but dealt with a different type of competition. Students were using *The Hula Hoop Champion* as a scaffold for developing their own text, one that was embedded with strong voices.

Poetry is another great source for scripts. Students can either script their own poetry, which already possesses their unique voice, or existing poems. Poetry works great because it is often broken into stanzas that make perfect transitions to other narrators (see Figure 2). Poetry is meant to be performed; therefore, scripting poems is a great way to bring back orality to the classroom.

Finally, research projects are well received when scripted. We usually give the option of creating a script for the final product in most research projects. The presentations, especially for younger students, come alive once they

Figure 1 Excerpt From Sam Houston Script

Narrator 1: Texas has not always been a state.
 ALL: No?
 Narrator 2: Texas was a country.
 ALL: Really?
 Narrator 3: It was called the Republic of Texas.
 ALL: When?
 Narrator 4: Texas was a country from 1836 to 1845.
 ALL: Why?
 Narrator 5: Sam Houston said,
 Sam Houston: “Let’s have a revolution!”

Figure 2 Newfangled Yankee Doodle

Narrator 1: Yankee Doodle went to town
 Narrator 2: riding on a creature.
 Narrator 3: Then he failed the second grade
 Narrator 4: because it ate his teacher.

have added their voice and planned their words carefully. In addition, it gives them another opportunity to get on the stage and show off their fluency.

TAKE ACTION!

1. First, write a Readers Theatre script as a class.
2. After your students become more comfortable, allow them to work in small groups or as partners to create their own. The students can script an existing text, create a parody, report content learning, or produce a script from scratch.
3. Eventually, let your students independently create Readers Theatre scripts. It is all about infusing voice and entertaining classmates.

Helping Students Evaluate Voice Through Collaboration

Listening to stories read aloud is an effective way to evaluate voice in writing. We suggest a collaborative method to help students evaluate whether they captured the intended voice in their writing by entering into a recursive relationship with another grade

level (or class). For example, we recently made this suggestion to a fourth-grade team. Once the fourth graders complete a script, the work is passed down to the second-grade classes. The second graders use the five-day format for reading Readers Theatre as outlined in *Implementing Readers Theatre as an Approach to Classroom Fluency Instruction* (Young & Rasinski, 2009) and practice the scripts written by the fourth graders.

After the second graders rehearse the scripts accurately and prosodically while being coached by their teacher Monday through Thursday, they perform the scripts for the fourth-grade authors on Friday in a Readers Theatre festival. During the performance, the authors evaluate the voice in their scripts. This strategy helps fourth graders evaluate their work based on the performance, enables them to see their work used authentically, and provides Readers Theatre scripts and reading opportunities for other students.

Final Thoughts

We often hear people say, "You have to find your voice." Well the truth is, you already have a voice, you only need to unlock it and transfer it into your writing. This does not come easy for some; therefore, telling others to use voice is definitely not as effective as modeling, mentoring, coaching, and practicing

using voice in writing. Not only does Readers Theatre increase fluency, but it can also be a creative way to explore voice in writing. After all, none of us would know the true power of voice had we not heard it first.

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MORE TO EXPLORE

ReadWriteThink.org Lesson Plans

- "Readers Theatre" by Laurie A. Henry
- "This Is My Story: Encouraging Students to Use a Unique Voice" by Sarah Starr

IRA Books

- *A Comprehensive Guide to Readers Theatre: Enhancing Fluency and Comprehension in Middle School and Beyond* by Alison Black and Anna M. Stave
- *Dramatizing the Content With Curriculum-Based Readers Theatre, Grades 6–12* by Rosalind M. Flynn
- *Essential Readings on Fluency* edited by Timothy V. Rasinski
- *Marvelous Minilessons for Teaching Beginning Writing, K–3* by Lori Jamison Rog

IRA Journal Article

- "Extending Readers Theatre: A Powerful and Purposeful Match With Podcasting" by Sheri Vasinda and Julie McLeod, *The Reading Teacher*, April 2011