

pointed out to me, I tried to work against it. When I write, I try to indulge my weaknesses, but I also try to avoid playing to my strengths. It forces me to stretch and makes the story bigger.

Writers must give themselves that freedom to fail. As a dancer I learned that unless I jumped as hard and as high as I could until I fell, I hadn't found out how hard or high I could jump. Risk-taking and failure are important. When an editor says to me, "You know, that sentence is awful," I don't say, "Oh, my editor is so terrible." I say, "Oh, that sentence *is* awful. Let's take it out. It's only words."

On Voice

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Developing a writer's voice is almost a process of unlearning, one analogous to children's painting. Young children often create fabulous paintings, only to be told after they start school that real houses don't look that way. At that point, most people lose their ability to be visually creative. Truly great painting retains some element of a child's emotional authenticity. Great writing does, too.

Self-analysis is crucial to developing a strong voice. *Who am I? Why do I write?* Your identity and your self-understanding become subliminal parts of your writer's voice—especially in long-form narrative writing. Imagine yourself telling friends about a story that excites you. Your friends follow the story even though it's not linear but circles back as you tell it. The way you tell a story over dinner is true to who you are, whether that is deeply analytical or extremely witty. At such moments you aren't self-conscious, and you aren't thinking about your editor.

You can't invent a voice. And you can't imitate someone else's voice, though trying to can be a good exercise. It can lead you to begin to understand the *mechanisms* that convey the voice. Read your stories out loud so you can *hear* how you tell stories. As you read, ask yourself: *Does it sound real? Would I have said it that way?* If the answer to either question is no, you have done something wrong. I find that sometimes when I give readings of my published work, I skip parts that seem boring to me. Then I wonder, would it have been better to edit that out in the first place? When you read aloud, extraneous material falls away.

Voice is—as the word itself tells us—the way a writer *talks*. You are *speaking* to your readers. Sometimes we think we have to come up with something clever, but cleverness for its own sake is rarely powerful.

Pace, the sense of timing in a piece, is linked to voice. Pace determines whether attempts at humor will succeed. Change your story's pace to change the mood. Long sentences can slow down the reader. Short sentences race the reader through a scene. As you read your piece aloud, you hear how your readers will make their way through it. Then you can control that movement.

Word choice is another element of voice. When you make an analogy, it's not just to give the reader an image but to advance a larger idea or theme. Once I had a fight with an editor because I wanted to describe a basketball player's feet as "banana-shaped." My editor argued that feet can't really be banana-shaped. And, further, thinking about bananas takes the reader away from the subject: a person playing basketball. "You're giving the reader a ticket to the tropics," he said. I spent hours trying to find the right image to replace *banana*. Suddenly, it came to me: *pontoon*. His feet were pontoon-shaped; he floated over the basketball court. Analogies like these don't usually come as I am reporting. I have to sit at my desk and really work at finding the strongest image possible.

Another aspect of voice is taking on your characters' voices. Sometimes, immersed in my reporting, I find myself thinking in the same rhythm as someone I'm writing about. This is part of my temperament; I tend to become caught up in other worlds. As long as I don't slide into mimicry, it can help a piece of writing. You don't want to hijack someone's voice but draw inspiration from it. It is often a sign that you have submerged yourself deeply in a story, inhabiting it. I wrote half of "The American Man at Age Ten" in the voice of a boy. I stepped in and out of that persona throughout the story.

Soon after I started writing, I realized that I was crafty and could come up with gimmicks to make my work look jazzy. As I matured as a writer and gained more confidence, I began losing what I had mistakenly understood to be my style. I returned to something simpler. One watershed moment was the realization that my writing voice had circled back to something natural, intuitive, and instinctive.