



Speak
for
Yourself
Writing with Voice

Susanne Rubenstein

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Manuscript Editor: The Charlesworth Group

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Introduction

When I pronounce the word Silence, / I destroy it.

—WISLAWA SZYMBORSKA, “*The Three Oddest Words*”

My students have grown quiet lately. Oh, they still chatter in the halls, and I do have to remind them to quiet down as morning announcements sound over the PA system. They ask questions when I give an assignment, and they gather around my desk before and after class, jockeying for my attention. So they haven’t lost the ability to speak aloud, but, on paper, they barely whisper. The words are there, loopy lines across the page or well-ordered blocks of type, so I know they still have language. What they have lost is *voice*, that which fills silence not with sound or symbol but with self. And when I think about this, I realize that my students have lost their voice in part because their teacher—me—has done the same. This book is an attempt to rectify that.

Years ago, when I was a young teacher, I was drawn to teaching writing because it so quickly and deeply connected me to my students. Shy, often self-conscious teenagers revealed themselves in their written words. The cockiest of adolescent boys exposed his vulnerability when he wrote about the girl who broke his heart. The silent, sullen teenager in the back row played out the drama of divorce on paper, and she made me hear who she was before her world collapsed. Students caused me to laugh with their edgy humor and surprised me with their angry rants. And it wasn’t just the content, the truthfulness of experience that made their words so powerful. It was the voice behind their words, the way in which they shaped and shared experience to produce writing that was arresting and original. I knew my students better years ago. I knew them as people because I knew them as writers who spoke in voices loud and blustery, cool and composed, comic or callous, soft or serious, and above all authentic. Through their writing, I *heard* them, as loud and clear as that cliché I’ve taught

them to avoid proclaims. I always used to tell my students that my goal in any English course was to help them grow as writers, so much so that if, at the end of the semester, I asked each student to write a paper and hand it in typed with the name removed, I would know immediately who the author was because each individual voice would be so strong. That voice, I told them, is like a fingerprint. It is your identity. I'm not sure when I stopped telling my students this. I don't know when it seemed to have become an unattainable goal. But what I do know is that it's not my students' fault; it's mine, because I too have grown quiet in the face of an educational system that has come to value proficiency and efficiency over artistry and individuality.

This is not a book that rails against a system that places test results above everything else—or maybe it is. It is definitely not a book that envisions a world without testing, or that seeks to defeat the forces that have made assessment the center of the educational universe. That is a political battle, which some of us are game to fight—and I applaud that. But, in the meantime, while we hope for the proverbial pendulum to swing back to student-centered classrooms, our students now are being silenced, and that is a battle each one of us must fight.

This is a book that asks teachers to be honest with themselves when they try to justify what has happened to our writing classrooms. For many of us, the writing classroom was once a space that fostered creativity, a corner free of the absolute rights and wrongs, corrects and incorrects that mark too many high school classrooms and disciplines. I used to liken my writing classroom to the art rooms on the other side of the building. Certainly, there were basic foundations we could build on and techniques that we could master, but we were artists, and, as such, we found our way by expressing and experimenting, and of course struggling. There was no one way to write, no easy approach, no tidy template. Like the visual artist, our job—and our joy—was to create. These days, the distance between my writing classroom and the art classrooms seems infinite. While the art rooms still buzz with energy and the thrill that comes with a creative challenge, the English classrooms grow steadily more quiet as students fixedly follow directions, adhere to rigid rubrics, and silently conform to a writing curriculum that leaves little room for risk-taking. In these classrooms, voice—that almost indefinable something that gives life to language—has been stilled. I suspect few young teachers have ever really heard it, and I fear that even those veteran teachers who can remember the cacophony of voices that once filled not only the classroom but also the papers they carried home to read have almost stopped listening because there is so little left to hear.

I know there are many teachers who lament the changes we've seen in our writing programs in recent years. I hear colleagues talk about projects they *used* to do, perhaps a memoir or maybe a full-fledged piece of fiction. I hear them talk

about publishing opportunities they *used* to foster through the creation of class literary magazines and the posting of writing contests on the bulletin board. They remember when students had fat writing folders full of work that they loved to pore over. I hear these same colleagues reminisce about students from years ago whose work they still remember and can maybe even quote. For me, that piece belongs to Tawny, whose wrenching narrative began “Daddy gave me roses.” Of course, not all of this strong writing practice has vanished, but I imagine every veteran English teacher would admit to letting a personal narrative, journal assignment, or poetry piece disappear while a practice test prompt, district-wide writing sample, or machine-graded quiz takes its place. None of us means for this to happen, but there’s only so much time, and there’s always so much pressure.

If the pressure is great on veteran teachers, it is even weightier on those new to the profession. I work with student teachers, both in their English methods class and in the classroom, and I know they are anxious when it comes to teaching writing. It’s no wonder, for many of them are of the generation that was raised on testing. As young children, they didn’t sit in an author’s chair; they sat for a test. When I talk about the writing process, they often look quizzical. Even those somewhat familiar with this approach frequently view response as peer editing, with the emphasis on editing and the focus on correction. Writing, for many of these young teachers, has never been an artistic pursuit but rather an academic challenge, and now they feel it is their responsibility to challenge their own students in much the same way as they have been taught. Even new teachers who have had experience with the writing process as young writers or who have been fortunate enough to study Donald Graves, Nancie Atwell, Peter Elbow, Donald Murray, and other masters of good writing practice in their college classrooms find it difficult—and perhaps imprudent in the first years of employment—to oppose the often predetermined writing curricula complete with templates, rubrics, and assessments that many schools adopt. And so they, like us veterans, keep quiet.

I’m sure that there are those teachers who believe that the development of voice is high on the hierarchy of writing skills and not within the purview of K–12 teachers or students, or that voice is a component of *creative* writing and not relevant to the analytical writing we are primarily expected to teach. For those who espouse the former, I’d suggest reflecting on the originality and exuberance we applaud in young children’s writing—and then to ask themselves, “Why does that disappear?” For those who agree with the latter, I recommend reading John McPhee, Joan Didion, or any *New Yorker* writer. Though I sympathize—and in fact empathize—with any teacher who feels she *should* be encouraging the development of voice but is overwhelmed by the assessments, the

evaluations, and the scripted expectations, I frankly decry the teacher who says, “That’s not important.” And here is why.

Tom Romano, in his book *Crafting Authentic Voice*, defines *voice* as “the writer’s presence on the page” (5), and it is that definition that for me best argues why we must insist on the development of voice. *Presence*—a word we define as attendance, being there. Those words—*presence, attendance, being there*—have two levels of meaning. We take attendance, mark students as being present, and note that they are there. Yet we all know that every seat in the classroom can be filled and it can still seem that virtually no one is present. What we see are blank eyes, blank faces, and blank stares, and it is then that we realize that, on a deeper level, those words—*presence, attendance, being there*—speak to engagement, connection, and participation. It’s one thing to show up, to be a physical body in physical space; it’s another to be mentally in the moment, to be a part of what’s going on. I need my students to *be there*, not just at their desks but also in the chaos and commitment that is learning. I need to feel each unique presence in that classroom through their individual words, spoken and on paper. In a chorus of voices, harmony is beautiful, but it is the solos that we remember. Unless I hear a student’s own voice, I don’t know he is there, participating with his heart and with his mind.

As teachers, we know that writing is really about thinking. Muddled thought leads to muddled writing, while clarity of mind produces clear prose. In a learning environment where students have neither need nor opportunity to develop a distinct voice, they also have no need to think. When I read a student paper devoid of voice, I inevitably find that it is empty of thought, and, as one such paper follows another, I know that my students have not connected to the material. This is something I explore in depth throughout this book, but here I’ll just ask teachers to answer one question honestly: How are class discussions going lately? In my classroom, I see them falter, with fewer hands waving and the quality of student comments declining. Apparently, I’m not alone, as recent research indicates. In her book *iGen*, Jean M. Twenge discusses students born in 1995 and after as follows:

iGen’ers are more hesitant to talk in class and ask questions—they are scared of saying the wrong thing and not as sure of their opinions. (When McGraw-Hill Education polled more than six hundred college faculty in 2017, 70% said students were less willing to ask questions and to participate in class than they were five years ago.) (307)

My students make pronouncements, and then stumble when asked, “So why do you believe this?” They seem to be waiting for me to cue them, either because

they don't have their own ideas or because they don't trust their ideas to be "right"—and, sadly, they have come to believe that there always is a "right." I see this situation in all high school grades and academic levels, even in my Honors classes, and I attribute it to the fact that my students don't know what *they* think, because, for ten, eleven, twelve years of schooling, they've been told what to think and how to think it. It's as if even their brains have been template trained, and only the bravest—or curiously, I'm finding, often those who have been homeschooled for years—will venture an opinion and support it. If this is a problem in classrooms across America, it is an even bigger problem in society as a whole, and perhaps this is one of the reasons why we are hearing arguments in the public arena reduced to crude generalities and invective. That is the voice of an angry mob, not of a thoughtful individual. While I certainly want my students to do well in English 10 or American Literature, to score highly on state-mandated tests, and to get into the college of their choice, I want even more for them to grow into articulate adults who know what they believe and why they believe it. I want them to possess the ability to speak—whether on paper or aloud—with passion backed by rational thought. If that is what I want for them in the future, then I believe it is my responsibility now to encourage the development of voice on paper. Though the ability to verbally share an idea or opinion intersects and overlaps with the capacity to do so in writing, I suspect that many adolescents gain the courage to speak aloud through experimentation on paper and through the feedback that they receive. Words on a page come with a sort of curtain of privacy until the writer chooses to make them public. As one of my students wrote in a reflection on his thoughts about the meaning of regret:

I'm surprised how open I was willing to be on this. I think I was more open because I wrote about it. If you asked me to say these words to another person or read it aloud, I don't think I could have.

We need to give our students true "freedom of expression" through writing as they learn to shape their thoughts and to trust in their own voices.

For the past few years, I've asked all my students to write about learning to write. This is an exercise I'd encourage all English teachers to try. It is eye opening. I ask my students to simply reflect on the ten to twelve years they have been in school as writers. I offer no other instructions. This is a freewrite, so the writing is neither polished nor graded, and I suggest students write anonymously if they prefer. Their comments are telling, sometimes heartbreaking, and I've chosen to include many of their observations in this book, as well as ending each chapter with a student's words. One very articulate comment continues to haunt me, and guide me, as I write:

So in the end our pieces of writing aren't even our own. They're just doctored papers that we want to get a good grade on. We lose a lot of our own voice because teachers want our writing to be what they want.

This book is an acknowledgment of that young writer's frustration—and it is an apology. As writing teachers pressured by educational reform and all the directives that entails, we *have* silenced our students' voices by allowing ourselves to believe they are not worth listening to. Where once we nurtured nuance in student writing, honing each distinct voice, we now deliver formats and formulas that produce conformity and commonness, writing on demand in the most literal sense. Yet I believe that, even as we teach by template and rate by rubric, focused on assignments and assessments to produce data, we all recognize that something, a spark we may say, is missing in our students' work, and we continue to bemoan their inability to write well, knowing in our hearts that *well* isn't always measured by points on a scale. The sad reality is that, in our well-meaning attempt to do what the powers-that-be have told us to do, we have stifled our students' voices. The time has come to give those voices back, and that means we as teachers must speak up too and find ways within our classrooms to encourage voice—and to listen to it. Until we acknowledge that *we* have been silenced by an educational culture that devalues an individual's voice, we can't expect our students to speak up, nor can we expect them to understand just how very powerful one's voice can be.

In the early stages of this book, when the writing was difficult and the television could easily pull me from my work, I succumbed to an episode of *Grey's Anatomy*, ironically titled "The Sound of Silence." It did not serve as a distraction; instead, it served as inspiration. I listened to Meredith Grey's well-modulated voice-over highlight the episode:

Don't let fear keep you quiet. You have a voice, so use it. Speak up, raise your hands, shout your answers, make yourself heard. Whatever it takes, just find your voice. And when you do, fill the damn silence. ("The Sound of Silence")

I agree, and I couldn't say it better. My hope is that this book will offer inspiration, motivation, and concrete teaching activities that will give both teachers and students a voice and the power to destroy—and fill—the silence.

That Elusive Thing Called “Voice”

Speak your mind, even if your voice shakes.

—MAGGIE KUHN

As I begin this book, my voice feels rusty. That’s not entirely from disuse. It would be rare for an English teacher in a large public high school to sit quiet for long. English teachers have much to say, whether it be in department meetings, in class discussion, in student conferences, or on paper in the comments they pen on their students’ work. But I think my voice feels rusty because, for a long time, it hasn’t spoken the words it *needs* to say, and so, as I clear my throat and prepare to speak up in these pages, I worry that it will shake. But, I tell myself firmly, even a shaky voice is better than no voice at all.

I was lucky. I came to teaching before the emphasis on testing, assessing, and evaluating dramatically changed the way we teach writing. I started teaching at a time when English teachers encouraged students in the *process* of writing and believed that their students had powerful stories to tell. As a fledgling teacher, I was not faced with the specter of standardized tests and the emphasis on “doing it right,” when *right* has a very narrow definition. Instead, I had the pleasure of celebrating and cultivating the vast variety of voices that I heard in my students’ writing, and, because of that, I learned to love the teaching of writing.

As a young teacher, through workshops, conferences, and collegial connections, I came to appreciate the voices of strong teachers/writers. In those days, I devoured books by teacher-writers like Peter Elbow, Ken Macrorie, Donald Murray, and James Moffett, and I attribute all my best lessons to their inspiration. The truth is, I still devour these books, and I push them on the student teachers with whom I work. My copies of Elbow’s *Writing with Power* and *Writing without Teachers*, Moffett’s *Active Voice*, Murray’s *A Writer Teaches Writing*, and Macrorie’s *Writing to Be Read* are dog-eared and tattered, as the best-loved books

should be. I may know the material in them now, after decades of teaching, but I still turn to these pages when I need encouragement and, maybe even more important, reassurance that the way I'm teaching, the way the wise "gurus" of writing taught me, works—and that you cannot teach to the test, you must teach to the child.

There are those who might say that it's time to move on, that students, education, and the world have changed so much that the philosophy of and approach to writing touted by Murray, Moffett, Graves, and others of their time won't work in the twenty-first century. I think that depends on how you define *work*. For me and so many of us who have taught writing for years, writing instruction *works* when our students grow as thinkers and writers who have something to say and a desire to say it well. Those of us who have been in the profession for years, along with noteworthy groups like the National Writing Project (see www.nwp.org) and the National Council of Teachers of English (www.ncte.org), can attest to the fact that the work of these scholar-teachers has had enormous positive impact on generations of student writers, and so deserves to be an essential part of writing instruction today. But, as recent research reveals, many teachers today, particularly those in elementary and middle school, struggle with the teaching of writing. In her 2017 *New York Times* article "Why Kids Can't Write," Dana Goldstein notes:

A separate 2016 study of nearly 500 teachers in grades three through eight across the country, conducted by Gary Troia of Michigan State University and Steve Graham of Arizona State University, found that fewer than half had taken a college class that devoted significant time to the teaching of writing, while fewer than a third had taken a class solely devoted to how children learn to write. Unsurprisingly, given their lack of preparation, only 55 percent of respondents said they enjoyed teaching the subject.

I feel this frustration when I work with eager student teachers. These new teachers, entering the English classroom for the first time, want so much to reach their students. They've come to teaching out of a love of literature and language but also out of a desire to have an impact on young people's lives. They recognize the power of writing to reach and teach adolescents, but they're not always confident in their own ability to teach writing, and they question the methods they have learned. Products themselves of recent years of testing and "templating," few bring to the classroom personal experience with process writing—the prewriting, drafting, responding, revising, reflecting, and publishing process that good writing demands. Yet those who want to teach English do bring to

the classroom a passion and a desire to develop their skills as writing teachers. Many of the student teaching candidates with whom I work arrive clutching a newly revised edition of *Inside Out: Strategies for Teaching Writing*, a book by Dan Kirby, Dawn Latta Kirby, and Tom Liner that their professor has recommended, and it is evident that this volume is their bible when it comes to teaching writing. This is the book they turn to for ideas and inspiration because it is a book that tells them that “all kids have unique and worthwhile thoughts and language in their heads” (2). I own that book. Mine is a 1981 edition and it still inspires me. So, this is what I know: the passion and motivation for teaching writing well is there in a new generation of teachers, and I believe it still exists in a corps of veteran teachers who, like me, remember what it was like to teach writing when we nurtured each voice—and when we weren’t afraid to use our own.

As education has changed, as rigorous and rigid assessments, evaluations, and standards, along with a dizzying array of acronyms (NCLB, CSSS, NECAP, PARCC . . .), have crept into our classrooms, so too has our teaching changed. I don’t think any English teacher would deny it. You find yourself swapping a story writing assignment that you and your students have always loved for a standards-based assessment. You start to count correctness more than content on a rubric. You offer sample test questions for a statewide testing program and ask students to discuss the scripted responses instead of offering feedback on their classmates’ draft work. Though each change feels small and insignificant in the moment, and you tell yourself that these are the necessary compromises you must make, one day you realize that the accumulation of changes has steamrolled you, that you’ve stopped apologizing for all the adjustments you’ve made in your writing instruction, that you’ve given in and grown silent. And so, you realize, have your students. This seems to be the moment when you have to make a choice: Will you stay silent, or will you speak—for yourself and for your students? Will you find your voice, and will you give theirs back to them?

I am imagining that the reader of this book is someone who is wrestling with these questions. I am imagining too that he or she is the teacher who knows that the writing his or her students do is not the writing it could be. He is the teacher who has read too many flat papers, papers that are technically correct but woe-fully boring. She is the teacher who knows her students have something to say but can’t get them to care enough to say it. I am trusting that these are teachers who believe in the “thoughts and language” (Kirby et al. 2) in their students’ heads and who are looking for ways to bring that out. They are teachers who appreciate the individuality of each of the students they teach, and who want to hear that individuality in every word the student writes.

But I'm hoping for other readers as well. I'm hoping for readers who are not as open to all that this book espouses, teachers who are perhaps comfortable with the direction writing instruction has taken. These are the teachers who believe that, if we give our students clear directions, well-defined blueprints, and strict standards, they will thrive as writers. I'd ask those readers to consider the following key findings concerning writing instruction today:

The actual writing that goes on in typical classrooms across the United States remains dominated by tasks in which the teacher does all the composing, and students are left only to fill in missing information, whether copying directly from a teacher's presentation, completing worksheets and chapter summaries, replicating highly formulaic essay structures keyed to high-stakes tests, or writing to "show they know" the particular information the teacher is seeking. Writing as a way to study, learn, and go beyond—as a way to construct knowledge or generate new networks of understandings—is rare. (Applebee and Langer, *Writing Instruction That Works* 27)

Overall, typical practice in the teaching of writing in English language arts seems constrained by the pressures to prepare students for the limited genres of writing featured on high-stakes tests, on the one hand, and the wide range of potential audiences and purposes for writing, on the other. The result in many classrooms is an overemphasis on formulaic approaches and a movement away from writing tasks that extend over days or weeks, as well as from imaginative writing that might otherwise play a more important role. (Applebee and Langer, *Writing Instruction That Works* 31)

One such practice is the continued overreliance on standardized tests as the basis of school reform. As we evidenced earlier, despite hundreds of years of testing that has little to show in the way of improved learning, we persist in using them as a primary measure and motivator. Recently, this practice has shown great potential to be even more detrimental to reform efforts due to the growing insistence on machine-graded scoring of writing. Current machine-graded scoring of standardized tests of writing is purported to be aligned with [the Common Core State Standards Initiative], but in fact is rooted in simplified prompts and short answer essays that can be measured by machines on the most basic levels. (Addison and McGee 114)

and finally:

Three-quarters of both 12th and 8th graders lack proficiency in writing, according to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress. And 40 percent of those who took the ACT writing exam in the high school class of 2016 lacked the reading and writing skills necessary to complete successfully a college-level English composition class, according to the company's data. (Goldstein)

As I said in the introduction, this is not a book that seeks to do battle with the culture of standardized testing. It is, rather, one that seeks to offer teachers ways to improve student writing and thinking by honoring and enhancing the writer's voice. This is not an either/or approach. Honoring voice does not mean the abandonment of standards, nor does it mean that a teacher must defy a standardized curriculum or instructional direction. The simple fact is that voice *is* a part of writing, as I'm sure every English teacher would agree. Yet, in our attempt to improve student writing, with improvement *defined by test-based criteria*, we have come either to ignore the concept of voice or to relegate it to the lowest priority. The goal of this book is to remind teachers that voice is *integral* to good writing and that an awareness of it inspires good writing. Though I, and many other teachers and writers like me, might struggle to define that elusive thing called *voice*, one thing I am quite certain of is that no grading machine will ever truly understand it. That is our responsibility as teachers, human beings who appreciate our students as individuals and who recognize that each has something to say and a singular voice to say it in. As a chapter title in Mary Karr's *The Art of Memoir* reads, "A Voice Conjures the Human Who Utters It" (35).

Voice in writing *is* a very difficult concept to explain. We've all heard the old saw about pornography and the idea that, while one maybe can't define it, one surely recognizes it when one sees it. I'm sure that all English teachers—and most readers—could say the same about voice. We know the voice of the authors we love—and hate—as well as we know the voices of the people in our lives. When we write, we cringe when we hear ourselves sounding stilted or phony. In an early review of this book proposal, one reviewer speculated that my voice might be too folksy, and that comment has troubled me ever since. I have to keep reminding myself that this voice *is* my voice, one that reflects the passion I feel about encouraging voice in student writing, and it is a voice that I hope will reach teachers and remind them of the importance of voice in their students' writing. This is what voice is about; it is about the writer's feelings toward her subject as well as her sense of her audience. This is perhaps where the difficulty for our students begins, because the question then arises of whether they have feelings for either. Do the topics they write about matter to them? Do they believe there is a real audience out there interested in their words? For

most students in our middle and secondary schools today, I suspect the answer to each question is “no.” But I believe that, as teachers, we can change that. We need to teach our students about the value of voice, and we need to listen and applaud the sound we hear when their voices speak.

Not long ago, I attended a professional development day with K–12 colleagues across my district. Happily, we were able to choose the workshops that we wanted to attend, and so I opted for a writing workshop, one that advertised a “proven methodology” for teaching writing. I can’t pretend I wasn’t skeptical from the start, but all techniques for teaching writing interest me, and this particular workshop opened auspiciously when the presenter asked participants about their needs. A hand shot up.

“Voice,” the woman said. “I teach third grade, and I want my kids to be authentic and find their voice when they write. Can you give us some suggestions?” I scanned the room and noted other heads nodding.

The presenter smiled. “Of course,” she said smoothly. “We’ll get to that a little later.”

Two and a half hours later, there was still no mention of voice. What was mentioned was that the way to write well is through imitation, that writing skills are practiced best in isolation, and that every student can write well if given a list of useful verbs, sentence starters, and an essay diagram. There was little audience participation, and, as the clock ticked toward the conclusion of the workshop, teachers around me began stuffing into their book bags the many handouts we’d been given, full of fill-in lines and printed boxes. I had the sense that no one, not even the presenter, wanted to prolong this, but I had resolved to speak up. I waved my hand.

“Voice?” I said. “You mentioned earlier that you would talk about how we can help our students develop voice in their writing.”

“Oh, well,” she began, glancing at her watch, “we really don’t have much time for that, but here’s the thing.” She smiled conspiratorially as if she were about to tell us a marvelous secret. “Once students get the form down, then they can just inject voice!”

Far better writers than I have attempted to define voice. None has ever described it as an intravenous transfusion. I caught the eye of the teacher who had asked the original question about voice, and she shrugged hopelessly. It made me sad. Here was a teacher who valued voice and who was sincerely seeking ways to help her students find their true voices, and whose question had reminded all of us that even third graders have somehow lost—or been robbed of—their natural voice. Yet the “expert” in writing instruction was telling us that voice is little more than an afterthought. I concede that it is a difficult term to explain, but it should never be an afterthought.

When my students and I begin to talk about voice, I share with them some thoughts that other writers have expressed about voice. I'm well aware that there is always something almost ephemeral in these writers' explanations. The playwright Sam Shepard speaks of voice as being "almost without words . . . it's something in the spaces, in between" (qtd. in Safire and Safir 261), and his definition makes my students crazy.

"What's that supposed to mean?" they grumble, and I shrug and let them stew.

I read them Anne Lamott's words in *Bird by Bird* about finding your own voice through the truth of your experience:

Your anger and damage and grief are the way to truth. We don't have much truth to express unless we have gone into those rooms and closets and woods and abysses that we were told not to go into. When we have gone in and looked round for a long while, just breathing and finally taking it in—then we will be able to speak in our own voice and to stay in the present moment. And that moment is home. (201)

My students shake their heads, but some of them look intrigued. Teenagers recognize the lure of the forbidden.

"What about this?" I ask as I read them Eudora Welty's words from "Listening" in *One Writer's Beginnings*:

Ever since I was first read to, then started reading to myself, there has never been a line read that I didn't *hear*. As my eyes followed the sentence, a voice was saying it silently to me. It isn't my mother's voice, or the voice of any person I can identify, certainly not my own. It is human, but inward, and it is inwardly that I listen to it. It is to me the voice of the story or the poem itself. The cadence, whatever it is that asks you to believe, the feeling that resides in the printed word, reaches me through the reader-voice. I have supposed, but never found out, that this is the case with all readers—to read as listeners—and with all writers, to write as listeners. It may be part of the desire to write. The sound of what falls on the page begins the process of testing it for truth, for me. (11–12)

Some students understand exactly what Welty is saying. They are the readers, the ones who know what it is to fall into a book, so beguiled by the writer's voice that it almost feels like he or she is speaking to them. But others continue to look at me quizzically.

All of this is purposeful on my part. I *want* my students to feel a bit baffled and bemused by the concept of voice, because, in fact, it is baffling and bemus-

ing to all writers. There's a mystery to voice, to how it happens on a page, and, if students are to fully embrace the idea of experimenting with voice, they need to accept that mystery. They need to understand that voice is not something I can explicitly teach them through a worksheet, a PowerPoint, or series of practice prompts. It is something they will discover on their own if given the freedom to put their thoughts on paper.

They do, however, need to understand that voice is well within their purview. They shouldn't decide that voice is "too hard," that voice equals innate talent, or that voice is something real writers, not students, have. So, early on in our discussion, I read to them some excerpts from pieces my students have written in previous years, in previous classes, and let them listen to the voices of students like themselves.

12 a.m. The car windows shake to the beat of Sia and the sound of my own voice as my foot presses down on the gas pedal. Twenty minutes left, I chant to myself, and then I see him. Nothing is visible through the thick shrubbery of the emergency route apart from the push-bar on the front of his car. I look down at my speedometer. @\$%&! I pivot my foot to the brake, pressing it in intervals to lower my car's velocity. I pass him, and he pulls over and follows behind me. For a minute, I think I got lucky. I am wrong. So very wrong.

—Desiree K.

One of my greatest fears is of failing. Often, I'm too afraid to challenge myself because there's a chance I could fail. So last year when we had to pick our classes for sophomore year, I was planning to play it safe. Although I'm obsessed with world and ancient history, and my only chance to take World History was AP [Advanced Placement], I wasn't going to because, goodness gracious, AP would be crazy hard. My parents told me to take Honors U.S. instead of AP World so that I'd be more likely to get an A. Normally I would have agreed. After all, was taking a class that interested me worth the risk of getting, goodness forbid, a B?

—Grace A.

Some say I get it from my mom; others say it's a mixture of lack of sleep, teenage rebellion, and use of excessive sarcasm. Either way, he was the face of innocence and I was the opposite.

I was with someone when I met him, which neither of them knew. Both weren't regrets. I kissed them both that night, which led to a hint of guilt and an unsettling feeling of satisfaction. Still, no regrets. I tossed my blonde head. . . .

—Mackenzie W.

Three young women are telling three different stories in three unique voices, and yet each reveals an authentic voice that is oh-so-impossible to resist. Inevitably, after listening to each excerpt, my students say, “Read the rest of it!” and that, I tell them, is the acid test of a strong voice.

“How many stories do you think have been written about getting stopped by the police, worrying about failure, or cheating on a boyfriend?” I ask them.

We briefly consider impossible numbers, and then I ask, “So what makes you want to read the rest of these stories?”

“I want know what she did, when the cop came. She sounds like someone who’d try to get out of the ticket,” one boy says.

“Yeah, and what about that other girl? I want to know if she got caught by both guys,” another adds.

A girl in the front tosses her hair in what seems to be an unconscious imitation of the blonde writer. “She wouldn’t care if she did,” she says confidently. “That girl’s cool.”

What they don’t immediately realize is that they, as readers, are responding more to the voice of these writers than to the plot of the pieces. They’re reacting to the tone, to what is almost a vocal quality in Desiree’s self-deprecating lines, “I was wrong. So very wrong,” and to Mackenzie’s bravery, or maybe it’s bravado. They’re noting the difference in the personalities of two writers, one who uses @#\$%&! and another who writes “goodness gracious.” They’re feeling the difference in the rhythm and flow of the pieces based on the length of sentences and use of fragments. They are drawn in by the “humanness” of the writing, and they are beginning to realize that, if these three student writers can do this on a page, then so can they.

“But,” one student interjects, and I am always glad when someone in the room takes issue with this writing, “if you turned stuff like this in to most teachers, you’d flunk!”

Most students laugh, but they agree.

“So why would you flunk?” I ask. “What would some of your teachers say you did wrong?”

There’s a burst of fervent response.

“You can’t swear in a paper!” someone calls out.

“You can’t use any slang. Like ‘crazy hard’.”

“And no fragments. Like ‘So very wrong’.”

“What about the contractions?”

“And can you start a paragraph with 12 a.m.? It’s not really a topic sentence.”

“OK,” I tell them, “then here’s the challenge. Take one of the excerpts and ‘fix’ it. Make it follow the rules.” Though many of my students, in their own

writing, typically would try to do precisely that, conforming to the rules by creating paragraphs with clear topic sentences, using three and only three good details, rejecting informal language, and turning fragments into complete sentences, they often hesitate when they have to transform these vibrant pieces of writing into something that becomes stilted and stiff, albeit correct.

Desiree's opening might be transformed into something like this: "My first encounter with police happened last summer. It was 12 a.m. and I was coming home from work," while the ending of that paragraph now might read, "For a minute, I think I might be lucky. Then I discover I am very wrong." Recognizing Grace's use of colloquial language, students are often quick to remove the "offending" words "goodness gracious," "goodness forbid," and "crazy hard" from the paragraph, and a new line becomes "I had decided not to take Advanced Placement World History because I knew that it would be very difficult." And what about Mackenzie's piece? Students are apt to toss down their pens in frustration because her voice and her commitment to her own style permeate every line and they don't know how to begin to change it—nor do they want to. This exercise makes them see that rules are made to be broken sometimes, especially when that decision contributes to good writing and to the sound of the writer's voice.

Of course, as English teachers, we certainly don't reject voice in our students' writing, and I dare say it is the paper rich with voice that catches our attention and delights us when we're immersed in a long session of grading. I am not trying to say that writing instruction today is anti-voice or that we purposely set out to destroy our students' voices in the name of "good writing." But I do believe that, in our attempt to shape our writing instruction according to the priorities defined by a testing culture, we have relegated voice to the bottom of our list of priorities, and I fear we often ignore it entirely in our rubrics—a clear message to students that voice is not a quality their writing needs to have. We've come to believe that everything else—the grammar, the mechanics, the organization, the spelling, the examples, the evidence—is of greater importance, and so much more "teachable." If you can't do it all, you do what you can, we think, and how do you "teach" a student to have voice anyway? Though this book offers suggestions for developing voice, the truth is, you don't "teach" it. You recognize it, you respect it, and you nurture it, because—and here's another truth—every one of us *has* a voice, and it wasn't given to us by a teacher.

In *Inside Out: Strategies for Teaching Writing*, the authors state:

Voice is at the heart of the act of writing. As the writer moves from talking into writing, she tries to clearly hear the flow of language in her head and capture it

on the page, hoping you will hear her talking to you and be moved by what she has to say. (Kirby et al. 76)

Voice comes from within us, and, though each of us can temper the voice in our head as we make our words public, it is difficult to silence that voice—unless you are a student. Too often these days, a “good” student learns to stifle the sound of her own voice and to listen instead to the litany of rules and recommendations that have come to define good writing. The voice inside your head says “my goodness,” but you know your teacher will cross that out. The voice in your head feels bold and brash, but your teacher tells you to tamp it down and suggests restraint and a forced formality. The voice in your head says, “I matter,” but the rubric doesn’t even know that voice exists. And so you tell that voice to stop bothering you, and you write like you’ve been taught—but then sometimes you wonder whose words those are beneath your name.

This problem is exacerbated for students whose first language is not English or whose home language does not adhere to the rules of Standard English. A student’s language is linked to his personal identity. When a teacher appreciates voice in a student’s work and so encourages him to incorporate aspects of his home language into his writing, she honors that student’s identity and culture, and, in the process, fosters that student’s development as a writer and a learner. As Peter Elbow states in *Writing with Power*, “Searching for more voice starts them on a journey—a path towards new thoughts, feelings, memories, and new modes of seeing and writing” (284).

One of my favorite—and most revealing—writing activities is borrowed from Kirby et al. and is described in the chapter titled “Different Voices, Different Speakers.” “Talking Back to Yourself” challenges students to write a dialogue in which two sides of one’s own voice argue with each other (83–85). The authors offer a compelling list of situations in which students might find themselves feeling torn, trying to determine a course of action, with two inner voices pushing against each other. This is an excellent exercise to use to encourage students to get in touch with their true voice. But I’ve also used this design to prompt students to acknowledge the conflicts they find themselves in as they write a paper, trying to navigate the tension between what they want to say and how they’ve been taught to say it. As the two sides spar, I ask them to consider the following question: Is one voice that of a writer and the other that of a student?

I know she said we need three examples, one per paragraph. I have four.
So have four. You need four. They all prove your thesis. And that last one is really original.

I don't know. She said three. Plus, if I use four, my paper might be too long.
So what's "too long"? Does it really have to be only three pages?
Yeah, as least I think so. And, besides, the more I write, the more I'll write wrong.
That sounds dumb, but OK, so use four examples, and just cut some of the stuff you wrote in the other three paragraphs.
Yeah, maybe I'll get rid of one of the quotes I used and find a short one instead.
That's not what I meant! That's a great quote. I meant, maybe you don't need all the explanation you have. Maybe it's filler.
No. I don't want to cut that. She said we need enough of our own words to balance out the quotes. I counted my sentences, and I have more of them than sentences in the quotes.
That sounds stupid too, but . . . well, what about the conclusion? It's almost exactly what you wrote in the opening paragraph. Don't you have something else to say?
I don't think so. Besides, she liked my opening, so that means the conclusion will be good too. . . . Anyway, it's just the conclusion. Conclusions are always boring.

This is the kind of thing that goes on when students write. Often, they hear two voices, one telling them to do what they believe is right—and will therefore earn them a good grade—and one that urges them to say what they truly want to say. And that is in the best scenario. In other instances, there is only one voice because the student's true voice has already gone mute. It is dead.

This is the polar opposite of what Ken Macrorie, in his introduction to *Writing to Be Read*, calls "live writing" (2). He describes a seminar in which he and his students:

. . . tried to pin down the characteristics of writings that delighted, informed, and moved us—whether they were done by professionals or us. . . . One of the characteristics of live writing was that the writers had something to say that had counted for them, and was still counting for them as they wrote. Another characteristic was that this caring about it, and often being moved by it, got into their words, which then took on rhythms that in turn moved us. (2)

When I read Macrorie's words, I think of live writing as being that which not only makes us feel that the writer is a living, breathing human being but which also brings us to life as readers. He continues by observing: "I could go on for pages analyzing what makes that writing alive, but I think you can hear that above all it possesses a *voice*, and commands our attention the way a person speaking to us forcefully commands it" (3).

I believe that our students *do* still possess a true speaking voice, and it is one that can at times be commanding—and, as we all know, sometimes disruptive!

For the most part, I think we all recognize the unique way each of our individual students speaks in social situations, and I tell my students this is why I can tell a particular student to stop his chatter even when my back is turned. In the same way, our students quite easily recognize the distinct voices of the friends who gather around their lockers in the morning. This attention to one's speaking voice is a very concrete way to begin to explain the concept of a writing voice to students who are not familiar with it. When students are learning about voice, it is helpful to encourage them to talk about those qualities that do differentiate the voices of people they know. It is also useful to play audio clips of different speakers and to ask students to highlight distinctive qualities of each speaker's voice. By noting that one person talks more quickly than another, that one uses a sophisticated vocabulary while another relies on slang, or that the rhythm of one's voice is soothing while another's is jarring, students become attuned to the qualities that create a speaking voice, and they can then begin to consider how to capture those qualities on a page.

Often, I share with students a poem by Katharyn Howd Machan that vividly shows how written language can capture a person's unique voice. "Hazel Tells Laverne" is a dramatic monologue written in the voice of a working woman of the lower socioeconomic class. In the course of her night's work as a cleaning woman, Hazel encounters a frog who offers her a better life in exchange for a kiss. Her language, as seen in lines like "but sohhelpmegod he starts talkin / bout a golden ball / an how i can be a princess / me a princess" (Machan), allows the reader to know Hazel and to understand her life and her spirit. It is a poem that my students love, and, as they listen to it read aloud while following the words on the page, they begin to identify specific aspects of voice.

I encourage students to place particular characteristics into categories in order to help them see how voice is created. The following is a list of categories that I ask students to consider when they're analyzing speaking voices and the voices they "hear" on paper. I present these as separate elements simply because that seems to make it easier for students, but I repeatedly remind them that each is like a puzzle piece contributing to the whole picture of voice, and, as in a challenging puzzle, the borders blur and one element depends upon another.

- *Pace*—Pace is intimately connected to sentence structure. Are the sentences long or short? Are they thick with clauses and commas, or are they simple subject–predicate sentences? Is there rich description and detail that slows the voice, or is the style stripped down and clipped and quick in movement?

- *Word choice*—Is the vocabulary simple and straightforward, language that an elementary school student could read, or is it more sophisticated and intellectual? Do you need a dictionary to understand it? Do the words convey a sense of formality or informality? Is colloquial language, jargon, or vernacular used?
- *Figurative language*—Are there similes and metaphors? Are there examples of personification or onomatopoeia? Do you hear alliteration and assonance? Do you hear the sound of poetry?
- *Attitude*—How does the speaker/writer feel about his subject? How does he feel about his audience? Is he laughing? Is he deadly serious? Do you hear a sarcastic edge? Is there a sense of optimism or does he sound defeated? How do the words of the speaker/writer make *you* feel?
- *Sound*—If the speaker/writer's words were set to music, what kind of music would you hear? Hip-hop? Jazz? Classical? Pop? Is there a rhythm or a beat? Is there a clear consistent flow, or are there stops and starts? Do you hear repetition in words or sentences that seem almost a refrain? Is the sound loud or soft?

While each of these categories is important to the creation of voice, I'd emphasize again that it is impossible to truly "dissect" a speaker/writer's voice in an attempt to explain how the particular elements combine to produce that voice. As Karr explains in *The Art of Memoir*:

Unfortunately, nobody tells a writer how hard cobbling together a voice is. Look under "voice" in a writing textbook, and they talk about things that seem mechanical—tone, diction, syntax. "Doh," the writer says with a forehead smack. Diction is merely word choice, what variety of vocabulary you favor. Syntax is whether sentences are long or short, how they're shaped, with or without dependent clauses, etc. Some sentences meander, others fire off like machine-gun runs. Tone is the emotional tenor of the sentences; it's how the narrator feels about the subject. . . . For me psyche equals voice, so your own psyche—how you think and see and wonder and scudge and suffer—also determines such factors as pacing and what you write about when. (45–46)

Frankly, I'm glad there is no easy formula for creating voice. Voice is part of the artistry in writing, and art springs from a mysterious source. Just as each of us is a unique individual, so too are our speaking and writing voices unique and difficult to duplicate—*when they are authentic*. But, for students in a classroom, authenticity is not always the norm, and I wonder if perhaps that is why my

classroom has grown quiet lately. A question that would have once produced a torrent of opinions—“Is Ethan Frome a hero or a coward? Why?,” “If you had the power, what’s the first change you’d make in the way high school is run? Why?,” “What’s the best piece of writing we’ve read this year? Why?”—now produces little more than a tepid response and always from two or three predictably outspoken students. We all know strategies to coax response. Think–pair–share. Concentric circles. And of course that designated wait time, knowing that most students can bear silence and a teacher’s stare only so long. But, though we might succeed in producing some sort of limited response, I think this overall reticence is a reflection of something more significant than it may on the surface appear. Our students aren’t lazy, or mindless, or disinterested. They have opinions, just as generations of students before them have had. And, if I were to remove that three-letter word *Why?* from my query, I would likely get a flurry of responses. It seems that it is only when a student has to put into words *why* he holds a particular opinion that he chokes and grows still.

What I’m seeing these days are students who simply can’t *articulate* why they believe what they do. I think that is a direct result of the fact that they have had too little experience wrestling with the challenge of defending their beliefs without the support of a template or blueprint. Consider that word *articulate* in both its verb and adjective forms. As a verb, to articulate is to express, to verbalize, to convey and communicate. As an adjective, articulate is defined as clear, coherent, lucid, and eloquent. Sadly, I don’t believe many of my students are able either to articulate their ideas or to be articulate, and I think they themselves are aware of their inability to convey in clear, coherent language all that they want to express and all that they genuinely feel and believe. This perhaps explains why they are so hesitant to enter into class discussion. In a world where social interactions have become stunted conversations on a screen, where demonstrations of learning have been reduced to scripted response, and where thoughtful, measured debate is rare, it is no surprise that young people seem to grapple for words. For an adolescent, surrounded by his peers, to articulate why *Siddhartha* had such an impact on him is a difficult task, and for the student across the room to explain why she considers August Wilson’s *Fences* a more powerful work is equally daunting.

As teachers, we use the phrase “class discussion” so often and so easily that I don’t think we really reflect on what that concept entails. I admit to entering my classroom eagerly poised for a class discussion, maybe a debate on whether *The Catcher in the Rye* should be banned in public schools or a conversation about the changing roles of women as seen in *A Raisin in the Sun*. I’ve planned such a “class discussion” rather blithely, never really acknowledging how miraculous it would be if twenty-eight teenagers crammed in a room actually did listen

intently to one another, processed the words they heard, and then entered into a dialogue in which one idea or opinion provoked the next to create a growing body of knowledge. It's not that great discussions never happen or that I've come to think such an activity is beyond my students' capability. But I am increasingly recognizing that the dynamics of a class discussion are complicated and complex, and, if we are to help our students learn to express their ideas in such a situation and so grow into *articulate* adults, we need to offer more guidance. Though we've all heard that "practice makes perfect," in this case, I don't believe that the solution is simply to engage in more class discussions. If we want our students to be able to communicate their ideas aloud in careful, well-considered language, if we want them to speak deliberately and in words that are precise and that clearly express their beliefs, and if we want them to ultimately have an impact on those who listen, then we must give our students the opportunity to first work out their ideas and words in the quiet of their minds. The best class discussions I've witnessed are those that have been preceded by some writing time.

"What do you think? Is Ethan Frome a coward or a hero?" I ask my sophomores.

They're Honors students, and so it's likely that a few hands will shoot up before the last word is out of my mouth. At the same time, many other students are looking down, no doubt hoping that they have become invisible to me.

"But no comments yet," I tell them. "All of you, grab a piece of paper and write down what you're thinking. Write down why you think Ethan is a hero, or why you see him as a coward. If you're not sure, try both sides. See what you think."

"Can we bullet it?" a student asks. My students are huge fans of bulleting, another manifestation of their fast-paced lives.

"Not this time," I reply. "I want you to write out your ideas, but just like you'd say them in class."

"Do we need an introductory paragraph?" someone asks. Remember, they are Honors students, compelled to do this "right."

"Would you start with an introduction if you were speaking in class?" I ask. I turn to Catherine whose hand went up at the start. "Were you about to say, 'In the novel *Ethan Frome* by Edith Wharton, Ethan proves himself to be . . .'" I trail off amid their laughter. "No, no opening paragraphs. You're not writing a paper. You're preparing to share your ideas with the class. But I want you to share them well. I want you think about what it is you want to say before you try to tell us."

So they write for a matter of minutes, and then the discussion begins. I don't expect miracles or imagine that every student will speak his mind in polished prose. But I do know good things will happen. First, I know every student

has had the time to think about the topic and has written something on paper. Though I'm not a proponent of "cold calling," of putting students on the spot, I think it's reasonable now to ask even the quiet students to share something they have written. As a result, more students speak and fewer dominate. It becomes easier to keep the discussion on track because students can refer to specific points they have written down and connect to an idea a classmate is expressing, instead of jumping from random idea to random idea depending on whatever pops into each head at a particular second. Even when the overall discussion falters, as inevitably happens, I know to take advantage of that pause and ask them to write again, perhaps steering their comments toward a particular aspect of the topic that we have not yet covered.

This is a technique for promoting successful class discussion, but, at the same time, it is also a technique for promoting authentic voice, and for me the two are interconnected. If I were to collect the responses my students have written, which sometimes I do and other times I don't, I'd read quite heartfelt lines, words students would be willing to share in discussion. In these pre-discussion freewrites, they write what they feel in their own voices, knowing these are the words they will speak aloud, and that ownership gives their words, both oral and written, a real power.

Ethan is a hero. Who else could stand to be with Zeena and Mattie all those years?
Two awful women? I'd take off.

Ethan always tried hard to do the right thing. He took care of his parents when they were sick and he took care of Zeena, and she probably wasn't even really sick. Then he had to take care of Mattie too. That shows he was a good man.

Ethan's definitely a coward. He shouldn't have let Zeena boss him around. And he didn't even kiss Mattie the night they were alone. If he had, everything could have been different. And what's with him kissing her sewing?

As these excerpts indicate, the students are beginning to really think about Ethan Frome as a human being, someone who made important decisions, good or bad, and they are demonstrating an almost visceral reaction to him and to the choices that he made. That sort of connection to a character is a powerful motivator when it comes to engaging in discussion and to eventually writing a formal paper. We all know that thinking and writing are inextricably linked and that clarity of thought produces good writing, while, at the same time, putting words on a page can help a writer discover what she truly thinks. I'd add to that connection the notion of voice. When a writer is released from the constraints

of a prescribed form and is able to freely express views held in her heart as well as her head, her writing comes to life and resonates with the sound of her voice. Just as it is difficult, if not impossible, to express something you truly believe in a voice that is flat and artificial, so is it equally difficult to profess ideas you do not truly believe in a voice that is impassioned and real.

Voice is perspective. It comes from the place you stand and is an expression of your unique “angle” on the world. When a student’s voice is respected, she realizes that her views and perceptions—her way of regarding the world—have value. That is an important realization for an adolescent. But also important, and in these days maybe even more critical, is that fact that, as each voice in the classroom is acknowledged as having worth, students come to understand that *every* individual voice has value. This, I think, is a reminder to students that we are a country and a people who appreciate diversity in all spheres and who welcome the varied views and perspectives such diversity offers. Perhaps if we honor every voice in our classroom, we will help to raise a generation that will also honor and truly listen to the wide array of voices they will hear in the world.

In her book *The 9 Rights of Every Writer*, Vicki Spandel offers a sensible and straightforward explanation of why we must give students the freedom to find their own way on the page:

Formula advocates argue that a structured approach is a way of helping writers who will not make it otherwise. I disagree. It can have the opposite effect. Struggling writers who follow a formulaic approach may seem to improve significantly at first, but in fact it is very hard for them to rise above a level we might call functional. That’s because they can only go as far as the formula will take them, and formulas are, by definition, restrictive. Instead of lifting students up, as they purport to do, they effectively keep them in place. (121)

Keep them in place. When I first read this paragraph, those words jumped out at me. Throughout history, we have seen too often those in power rob others of their voice, and for one intended purpose—to keep them in their place. Voice is power, whether in a political or an educational sphere. I tell my students about nineteen-year-old Amanda Gorman, named in 2017 the first National Youth Poet Laureate, whose work confronts the social injustice our students live with every day. On the internet, we watch her deliver commanding poetry on race, feminism, and the need for social change, and my students see what it means to truly have a voice. I read to them, as quoted in *Poets and Writers*, an excerpt from Gorman’s acceptance speech:

I am so grateful to be part of this cohort of young creatives who are taking up their pens to have a voice for what is right and what is just....I don't just want to write—I want to do right as well. (Millner)

As teachers, we also must strive to do right, and urge our students to speak up. When we suppress our students' voices, we are keeping them in their place and hindering their growth as writers and as human beings. I wonder sometimes if we are afraid of our students' voices, not because of what they might say, but because we don't know what to do with those voices anymore. So restrictive have our teaching techniques become that we have no place or space for the student voices we might hear, and so we silence them. And why have we become so prescribed in our teaching of writing? Because *our* voices too have been stilled. Today's educational culture is designed to keep classroom teachers in their place, and that place is not one of power or influence. Drowned out by bureaucrats and businesspeople, politicians and pundits, all those who stand outside the classroom but profess to know what should be done within, we have lost the will to speak. But that is a power we can reclaim. What English teacher has not quoted to her students the adage "The pen is mightier than the sword"? We need to remind ourselves—and teach our students—that writers have always broken the bounds of silence. Though they may not always rally in the streets, their words of protest and rebellion have had enormous power to change society. Our voices can do the same. If we, as teachers of writing, speak up and demand that our students' voices be recognized, encouraged, and validated in *all* the writing they do, we can begin to change the climate of our classrooms and of the educational culture. I think of Barack Obama's celebrated "One Voice Can Change a Room" speech in 2008 in which he declared:

That one voice can change a room. And if a voice can change a room, it can change a city, and if it can change a city, it can change a state, and if it can change a state, it can change a nation, and if it can change a nation, it can change the world.

I don't think that is too big an expectation for the young people who will inherit the world that we are living in. In fact, we have seen them, in the face of the horror of school shootings, raise powerful voices and demand to be heard. As their teachers, we need to applaud their willingness to speak, in the classroom and outside of it, as they learn and as they lead. Silence supports the status quo. With voice comes power and the potential for positive change.



Since I've been in school, everyone in each class was expected to write the same way, not only in format but ideas too. Every piece of writing seemed very uniform to me and not interesting or exciting. This year I feel that we were able to really grow as writers because new, creative outlooks were welcomed in writing, allowing students to write in their own voice and style. I really liked that because it made writing feel more individual and it made discussion in class much more interesting. Also I felt that we weren't writing to be perfect for standardized testing but were really writing to learn—and speak.

As writing instruction has become more standardized and structured, student voices have grown silent. Kids still chatter in the halls and socialize at the start of class, but on paper, their individual voices have vanished as they conform to the immutable structure of prescribed formats and strive solely for the grade, not expecting to be heard. *Speak for Yourself: Writing with Voice* places a new—or renewed—emphasis on voice in the teaching of writing, an emphasis on thinking and on articulating that thinking, the foundations of authentic voice. Armed with the philosophy and concrete teaching ideas offered in this book, teachers can find the courage to speak up in order to create writing classrooms where students take ownership of their work, enjoy what they’re writing, and produce writing that shows depth of thought and originality of expression.

Veteran high school English teacher Susanne Rubenstein acknowledges the pressures English teachers face in today’s educational climate, but she challenges her colleagues to rally their expertise and enthusiasm so that student writers develop voice and speak for themselves.

Susanne Rubenstein, an English teacher at Wachusett Regional High School in Holden, Massachusetts, is the author of *Raymond Carver in the Classroom: “A Small, Good Thing”* and *Go Public! Encouraging Student Writers to Publish*.



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