

All Writing is Creative Writing: Revising for an Engaging & Credible Voice

The truth is that student essays are quite boring. They begin with what students have identified as a “hook”—which in the early stages is taught as “ask a question!” or “quote someone famous!” or, the worst yet, “Webster’s Dictionary defines ‘social commentary’ as...”

They might be five-paragraph-essays. Vomit-in-my-mouth.

But you’re beyond that. It’s time to get creative and engaging. It’s time to *write*, not to *type*.

In a commentary, you are exploring how humans and society function: in doing so, you are *also* a human communicating to a greater audience. You are responsible for many layers of many things. This is why you revise your essays until they die and then resurrect as red, fiery Phoenixes. (Phoenixi? That should be the plural. It sounds *way* fancier.)

When you have voice—personality—in your writing, it immediately tells your reader *I have passion about this! Listen to me! I’m the best! I am so seriously smart and cool! Follow me on Twitter!*

Know this as you write¹:

- You have a distinct personality, passions, opinions, prejudices, and information.
- The words you choose capture that personality: careful diction, punctuation, syntax, phrasing, paragraphing, and style strengthen your voice. You must diction so hard.

- When you have strong voice, you capture the reader’s attention with individuality, liveliness, and energy.
- Voice is natural, but it really comes with revision, like a fashion makeover with an unlimited budget. Or, to paraphrase Coco Chanel, put on all the bling and then take off the last thing you put on.

Okay, I have “personality,” I know, because I’m remarkable and enchanting, but how do I show that?

It’s not as easy to “be yourself” as all your parents and teachers and counselors tell you. It’s like, Who Am I?, even? Here are some tips to “be yourself” in your writing. Ask questions:

- What do I normally do when I engage in interesting conversation?
- Who is my intended audience? (Hint: it’s not just your teacher or your friends.) What’s their general demographic?
- Where would this paper exist beyond this class? Graffiti on the bathroom stall? A school newspaper? An obituary?
- How can I keep myself in check and be aware of my audience as I write—how do I not fall into the “I am a robot who only does what the teacher asks” void?
- Now that I’ve answered the above: what’s the appropriate voice for this audience? Can it be funny? Can it be formal? Can it be another genre? If my paper exists on the internet, is it going to make me look bad, or is it going to make me look badass?
- How do I keep it relevant *and* interesting?

Note: You have to convince your reader that you’re a credible source (ethos), so be trustworthy in your prose. That is, you are striving to be engaging and fluent, but also an authority. Use appropriate vocabulary (sometimes slang works—but if you’re swearing every sentence we probably won’t take you seriously), meaty verbs, imagery, and figurative language. Avoid filler words, vague words (“things,” “stuff,” “society,” “people”), qualifiers and adverbs (“really,” “very”).

¹ Lorcher, Trent. “Teaching Students to Maintain a Personal Voice in Writing.” *How Do You Teach Voice in Writing: It’s Easier Than You Think*. Brighthubeducation, 2 April 2012.

Why does my paper even matter? Why should anyone care?

Good question, you tell me. I only have more questions for you to ask and then to consider within your essay:

- What is happening in our world that should draw a reader to this topic? What can I say about it that is *new*?
- Why does this topic warrant discussion? Why do you care, why should I? What are you illuminating about humanity, human nature, or human values?
- Why is your voice worth listening to? What's your credibility? (Remember that you are the wise person in this essay, someone who is imparting some wisdom of existence on to your reader.)

Writing Intros That Are #onfleek

Oh, almighty introduction, that sweaty handshake and awkward eye contact and realization that you just said your name but I already forgot it.

Is there an “intro”? Maybe we should call it an “opening” instead. Do you need a “thesis”? Which approach will pull your reader in? A story? A description?

- Think of every intro you've ever written ever and then do something else.
- For the love of all, do not start with a quotation or a statistic.
- SET CONTEXT and purpose without being overt. Your opening should “match” the rest of the essay in tone and topic.
- Maybe you save the above ^ for later in the essay. Your call.
 - Sometimes we write the beginning last.
- Common student error: [writes voice-driven interesting opening] HARD STOP [jumps to incredibly academic thesis/language with no transition between the two and I'm like what just happened]

Writing Conclusions That Are #nofilter

Time to write a conclusion! Better just copy and paste my opening and change like five words.

Nope.

Man, conclusions are hard. (Nah, let's call them “closings” for this essay.) But they're easier when you've written a paper with passion and have a clear objective. Your reader should put down your essay thinking *ah, yes! Hmmm! Holy crap, totally!* Think of how a wonderful poem might end.

Here are some pro tips:

- Don't *tell* your reader what to *get out of* the essay.
- Don't command your reader *to feel something*.
- End on a reaction.
- Consider an anecdote or a little story: yours or history's, or someone else's.
- Question: (*use with caution*)—but a closing question leaves readers unresolved, calling them to an active role by giving their own answers (rhetoric!).
- Speculation: spinning out of possibilities. What will happen if [this] happens? Oh, man, what if [this] happened?!
- A strong image: if you end on something the reader can picture, smell, or hear, he or she is more likely to remember that feeling associated with your writing. Also, ending on an image automatically makes it metaphorical or symbolic to the bigger picture/issue.
- End on a final thought that isn't overly sentimental or Hallmark-y.
- Authenticity.
- Tone, consistency of voice, should match the rest of the essay.
- A “call to action” is fine, but I think one of the above methods is more effective.

Taking Risks and Taking Names: Some Exercises to Get You Started

- See sample essays from class—the published ones, and the student ones. Consider which ones set up interesting models for you to explore.

Remember that all writing is creative writing. Even your math textbook. Even tweets.

Go through your draft and try some of this:

- ✓ Circle the first word of each paragraph (and maybe even each sentence). They shouldn't be the same.
- ✓ Underline the ends and beginnings of each paragraph. Are they interesting? Are they *different*, or repetitive and boring?
- ✓ Cut the last line.
- ✓ Cut the first line.
- ✓ Take the last line and write it as the first line.
- ✓ Take the first line and write it as the last line.
- ✓ Take any problematic sentence in your paper and rewrite it at least five ways. Don't just substitute one word for another (e.g., "asserts" for "says")—though that might be part of it. But change, as well, the syntax of the sentence.
- ✓ Even after you've read your essay multiple times, you still may struggle to find the sentence-level problems with your writing. You might have all of your commas in the right spot, you might have strong topic sentences—but is your language tight? Are you using extra words when you don't need them? Slowly comb through each paragraph, asking: *which words make up the meat of the sentence or contribute to voice? Which just get in the way?* (For example, often the word *that* can be cut from a sentence without changing meaning or making the sentence ungrammatical; the words "very" and "really" and "quite" are

kinda useless.)

- ✓ Write a question word in the margin of each paragraph where *answering* that question will help you develop.
- ✓ What if you just had, like, really short paragraphs every once in a while to reiterate a point or an image or a transition?
- ✓ What if you wrote an essay that was segmented by numbered sections or other separate parts?
- ✓ What if you broke the rules of grammar on purpose? What if you used fragments?! You know, for effect. Yes.
- ✓ What if there was a purposeful (literal) picture in your essay or a graph or a chart of some sort?
- ✓ What if you had a list in your essay?
- ✓ If you have a creative idea and a reason to do it, *take the risk*.
- ✓ Try *surgery*—the "amputation" method. You can also think of it as weeding the garden of your essay. Lop off the beginning or the end. Or cut a paragraph and see if you even need it. If it strays off topic, definitely cut it: Quality, not quantity.
- ✓ Look at your closing and then write a better one.
- ✓ As Donald Justice calmly and easily puts it, cut out the bad parts. Each line should live up to the next, and if not, it needs to go or needs to be re-written.