

***Writing With Atticus* Mini-Lecture: Finding Your Voice**

Lecture Notes

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When asked what they're looking for when they look for new talent, they often say they're looking for a unique voice.

We do have to distinguish between the voice of the writer and the voice of the narrator. "Finding your voice" doesn't mean that every narrator in every story you write will sound the same. But there are certain writers who just sound like themselves even when they're writing very different stories. Huck Finn's voice doesn't sound like the voice of the narrator of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, and yet both stories feel like Mark Twain stories. Flannery O'Connor sounds like Flannery O'Connor whether you read her stories, her essays, or her letters. (And from what I understand, she also sounded like Flannery O'Connor when she was visiting with people on her front porch.)

What, exactly, is a unique voice? Consider the truth that you have a voice that your friends recognize. I'm talking about your regular voice, the one you speak with. Everybody has a distinct and unique voice, and I'm not just talking about the actual timbre of your voice (which you can't replicate in writing), but also the way you approach things, the way you react to things, your particular style of humor (or perhaps your humorlessness!). Your close friends and family members have a pretty good idea of how you would speak in a particular situation. That's your voice.

When I teach writing to adults, a lot of the time I'm not helping them gain new skills so much as I'm helping them clear away all habits and "false notes" that accumulate on top of (and conceal) their real voice. Make it a goal to write in such a way that a friend who reads it would say, "Yeah, that sounds like you, only a little smarter than usual."

Here's a rule of thumb that has helped me—at least when I'm writing non-fiction: I try not to write any sentence that I couldn't imagine saying out loud. That keeps me from getting too high-falutin in my prose.

So, in a best-case scenario, your "real" voice is the foundation for all your writing, fiction and non-fiction, whatever genre. HOWEVER, as I mentioned above, there's still a difference between the writer's voice and the voice of the narrator, and especially a first-person narrator.

Let's turn to *To Kill A Mockingbird* to see how Harper Lee established the unique voice of Scout Finch...

“Out of the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks.”

An important aspect of a first-person narrator’s voice is his or her “heart.” What does this person want? What is this person interested in? Afraid of?

Consider how much we know about Scout Finch from these two paragraphs from the first page of *To Kill a Mockingbird*:

When enough years had gone by to enable us to look back on them, we sometimes discussed the events leading to his accident. I maintain that the Ewells started it all, but Jem, who was four years my senior, said it started long before that. He said it began the summer Dill came to us, when Dill first gave us the idea of making Boo Radley come out.

I said if he wanted to take a broad view of the thing, it really began with Andrew Jackson. If General Jackson hadn’t run the Creeks up the creek, Simon Finch would never have paddled up the Alabama, and where would we be if he hadn’t? We were far too old to settle an argument with a fist-fight, so we consulted Atticus. Our father said we were both right.

Consider how much we know about our narrator by the end of Page 1. And consider the extent to which we know what to expect from the rest of the book. Here are a few things we know (and I’m sure you see more than this):

- We know she’s given to a meandering style of storytelling. She’s going to follow a whole lot of rabbit trails.
- She’s not going to get straight to the point.
- We know she’s intelligent.
- We know something about her combative nature.

A Word About Sentence Structure

Scout Finch is a highly intelligent narrator. One supposes she would be fully capable of writing in very complex sentences. But she tends not to. Consider this first description of Calpurnia:

Calpurnia was something else again. She was all angles and bones; she was nearsighted; she squinted; her hand was side as a bed slat and twice as hard...Our battles were epic and one-sided. Calpurnia always won, mainly because Atticus always took her side. She had been with us ever since Jem was born, and I had felt her tyrannical presence as long as I could remember.

The grammar and sentence structure in this passage are a little simpler than the average for this book, but not a lot simpler. Scout’s sentences tend to be either simple or compound (rather than complex), and when they ARE complex, the subordinate clauses tend to be the more straightforward sequencing kind of clauses (*then* clauses, for instance).

This tendency to range widely but in simple (and compound) sentences creates a sense of chattiness. Scout sounds like a smart person who is talking, not a smart person who is writing.

Diction

While Scout's sentence structure tends to be simple and straightforward, her diction (word choice) can get pretty high-flown. Consider this passage:

The Radleys, welcome anywhere in town, kept to themselves, a predilection unforgiveable in Maycomb. They did not go to church, Maycomb's principal recreation, but worshiped at home.

Two things I want to point out here. One is grammatical: One of Scout's verbal tics is the liberal use of appositives, as in *church*, *Maycomb's principal recreation* and *The Radleys, welcome anywhere in town* (I don't suppose "welcome anywhere in town" is technically an appositive, but it feels like one). Appositives contribute to the "chatty" tone I have mentioned. They feel like little rabbit trails.

Secondly, notice those multisyllabic, Latinate words like *predilection*, *unforgiveable*, *principal*, *recreation*. Our narrator is chatty and informal, but she's also highly educated. These are matters of voice.

Bonus Reading (from my blog)

["On Finding Your Voice"](#)

["Out of the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks"](#)