

What They Hear When You Write



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Chapter 1: What is “voice”?

Voice is one of the most talked about yet most elusive parts of effective writing. You get an impression or feeling from a piece of content, but it's not always easy to tell why.

It's a lot like your handwriting. If 5 members of your family wrote out identical grocery lists, my bet is you'd be able to match them pretty quickly. But if I asked you what about the list revealed the writer, you'd have a hard time pinpointing specific unique strokes or letter formations.

That's not to say your handwriting doesn't vary in different situations (don't look at my notebook, please!), but even when you try to write neatly, subtle idiosyncrasies like the way you make your e's will give you away to anyone that knows you (even if they don't know why).

In a business, it's important to have consistent voice throughout all of your communications. Invisible shifts in your voice are off-putting to your customers. They won't be able to pinpoint it, something about you will feel inauthentic — which we all know means less trust... and less sales.

“I know it when I see it”

Have you ever read an article and thought... “that sounds like [insert author here]” or “this guy reminds me of [insert someone you know]”?

At the same time, have you ever received a customer service e-mail and could feel it was a form letter and not written by the person you emailed?

This is voice. It's difficult to identify but you “feel it” when it's off. The purpose of today's post is to break down where those feelings come from and what makes a voice.

What makes a voice?

Voice is made up of three main components

1. Tone
2. Cadence
3. Vocabulary

Tone

Tone is easy to understand and easy to recognize. You can usually find the tone by asking two questions: “how is the author feeling?” and “what is the author’s personality?” Answers include: frustrated, sarcastic, aggressive, empathetic, sad, impertinent, flippant, or joyful... among many, many others. Tone gives you the emotional backdrop to the voice. Tone can stay consistent through the piece or change depending on the subject or the character development.

Tone in writing is just like tone in speaking, but often more difficult to convey. We’ve all had those moments where we send a sarcastic text message that was lost in translation and misinterpreted by the receiver. It’s also easy to let your own emotions accidentally affect tone — like when we reply to a boss or a client that is irritating us that day. While our words may be professional, our tone can often cause problems.

It’s difficult to recognize tone in our own work because we are reading the text in our head as we would like it to sound. That’s why it always helps to have others review your work (even emails when they’re important ones) to make sure there isn’t an underlying tone you may be missing.

Cadence

Cadence is the rhythm of the writing, and the most subtle piece of the voice equation. Often, when you have group-work that requires multiple authors in one piece, it’s the cadence shifts that are the most noticeable. Dramatic shifts in cadence mimic riding in a stick-shift with a new driver — you’re riding along smoothly when suddenly you feel a violent jerk.

Cadence is created with a combination of sentence length and word choice. Some writers have a very staccato-type cadence with short, choppy sentences while others have more flowing, musical cadence with longer sentences. Shorter cadences can convey urgency, frustration, or aggressiveness, while longer cadences usually give a more peaceful, relaxed feeling.

Intentional shifts in cadence can create drama in a piece and also highlight important moments.

For example:

Today I was walking along the sunlit streets of Manhattan, enjoying the majestic shadows created by the towering structures overhead, when suddenly a clumsy man passing by brushed my arm causing my coffee to tumble.

Not cool, man. Not cool. At all.

However, I brushed off the moment and continued my stroll, determined to have a pleasant morning.

This is an example of a noticeable and intentional shift in cadence that illustrates the shift in the author's interrupted morning. The long, flowery opening sentence is interrupted by 3 short, choppy sentences. And then, she quickly shifts back to her original cadence. It paints the imagery of her strolling along, then stopping abruptly, then continuing again.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary is simply the words that you use. Often non-native English speakers are given away in their writing for failing to understand the subtle connotations between synonyms. "Said" vs. "Claimed" vs. "Uttered" all have similar meanings but different connotations. Often when you say someone "claimed" something, you are subtly implying they are lying or wrong. These subtle differences can make huge differences in voice.

Vocabulary also includes the readability of your writing. Are you using longer, more advanced words or simple vocabulary?

While [some articles](#) recommend that you always write for around a grade 7 reading level, I find it depends vastly on your market. If you are targeting customers for a one-off purchase like a supplement or an ebook, then maybe that will be most effective. But if you strive for a long-term relationship with a more advanced consumer, you might want to write more robustly.

For example, most of my readers are business owners and I want intelligent customers. If my writing is too comprehensive for you, then we're probably not the right fit. This doesn't mean you should write complex sentences for the hell of it... I've found even with an intelligent market, simple is always better. (FYI, I put this chapter through a [readability test](#) and ended up with a grade-level range between 9.34 and 11.38)

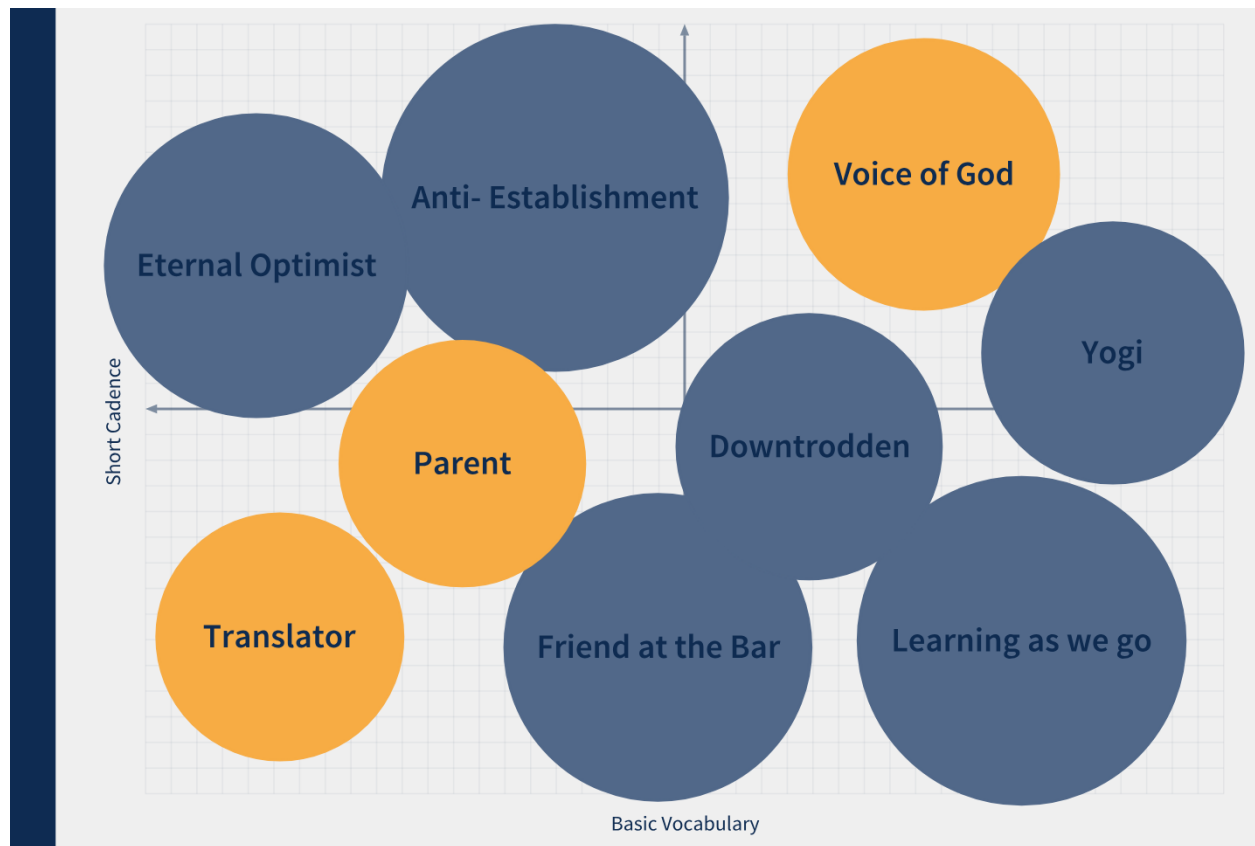
These three elements can be combined in countless different ways. Next, I'm going to cover the 9 Primary Voices that you'll find in online writing, with examples of each.

Chapter 2: The 9 Primary Voices in Online Writing

Voices of Authority

The first 3 voice types we'll cover are the "voices of authority." Often, it's important to be seen as an authority or expert on a topic. The authoritative voice is particularly appealing in industries that deal with complex or overwhelming information. People just want the answers. Authority can manifest itself many different ways.

Here's the 3 authority archetypes.



Voice Type 1: The Translator

The translator takes complex topics and breaks them down for laypeople to understand. Often the tone is empathetic, the cadence is short, and the vocabulary is basic.

A great example is Dr. Neil deGrasse Tyson, the astrophysicist. He has gained massive popularity by explaining complex scientific concepts in a simple way.

(Here's him explaining Gravitational Waves. And for fun, here's the [Theory of Relativity](#) and the [feasibility of time travel](#).)

Here's 3 more "Translators"

- Doctor Mike Varshavski – Medicine
- David Kadavy – Graphic Design
- BIG BRAND EXAMPLE: Tylenol

In its ads, Tylenol explains simply how and why the medicine is designed the way it is. Even children could "grasp the advantage" (this is a phrase I learned from Parris Lampropoulos meaning that they need to understand why what you're telling them is a benefit that's important).

Voice Type #2: The Parent

This authority acts as the voice of experience, saying "I've been where you are and don't want you to make the same mistakes I did." The tone is cautionary yet empathetic, the cadence is medium, and the vocabulary is basic. This is a favorite of bloggers in the relationship, health, and money-making spaces. They use their past mistakes as content, building trust. One example is this viral post by "[Single Dad Laughing](#)" on successful marriage (he's had two failed marriages).

Here's 3 more "Parents"

- Dan Martell – SaaS
- Mister Rogers – Mindset
- BIG BRAND EXAMPLE: Farmer's Insurance

Farmer's slogan practically defines the parental voice with the tagline "We know a thing or two because we've seen a thing or two."

Voice Type #3: The Voice of God

The voice of God is an authority who shows little vulnerability, but rather gives content in a "Ten Commandments" type of way. It can be very effective — if you have the credentials to back it up. The tone is often serious, the cadence longer, and the vocabulary more advanced. Unlike the Translator or the Parent, they aren't trying to make the complex simple. In fact, what they

teach remains complex on purpose. They don't give you the translation, they simply give you the rules to follow.

Copywriter [Bob Bly](#) is the first one that comes to mind for me. His emails give little room for doubt or argument.

Here's 3 more "Voice of God"

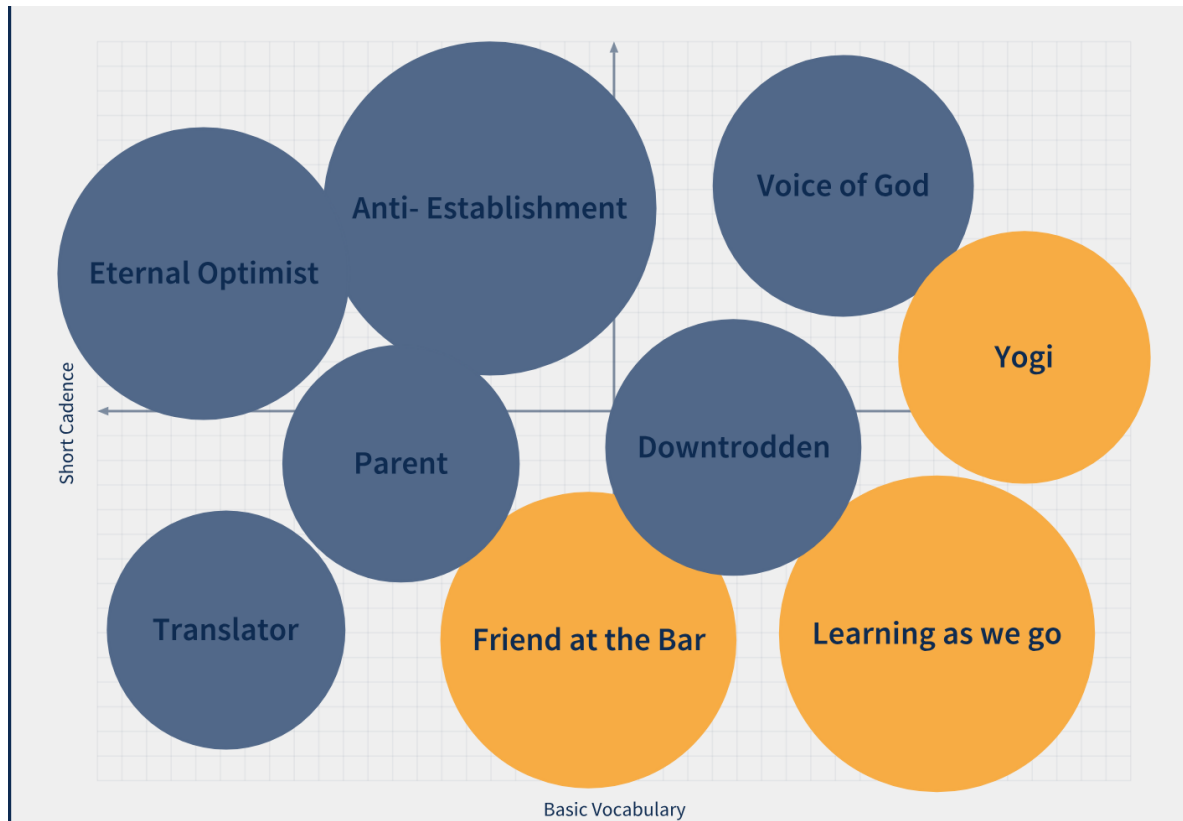
- Jordan Peterson – Religion and Politics
- BIG BRAND EXAMPLE: Enfamil

Enfamil doesn't translate the science. They want it to seem complex and overwhelming. That way, mom's have no choice but to go with Enfamil. The other options are too complex to evaluate.

Voices of Accessibility

The second 3 voice types are the "voices of accessibility." In contrast to the voices of authority who are successful by positioning above or ahead of their readers, the voices of accessibility get down to their readers' level. These are particularly effective in industries where the audience lacks confidence and wants to feel like they have someone "in their corner."

Here's the 3 voices we're talking about.



Notice how the “voices of accessibility” dominate the bottom right of the graph: basic vocabulary and long cadence. This is because these voices are the most calming.

Voice Type #4: Friend at the bar

The “friend at the bar” can be one of the easiest and most effective voices to use in copy. Basically, you speak to your audience like you’re talking to your friend. It comes across as “hey, here’s this cool thing I want to tell you about because I like you and figured you’d like cool things.” You don’t have to “work” at your voice as much because it’s how you actually talk to other humans.

The tone is casual, the cadence short to medium, and the vocabulary basic.

Fitness coach [John Romaniello](#) is the master at this. Look at [this post](#) to see what I mean — In it he gives you a free workout, supplement advice, and sells his coaching program... all the while you think you’re having a chat about the new Star Wars movie.

Here’s 3 more “Friends at the Bar”

- Kevin Rogers – Copywriting
- Joe Rogan – Podcasting

- BIG BRAND EXAMPLE: M&Ms
-

Voice Type #5: Learning as We Go

This is similar to the parental authority voice but instead of “I’ve learned this lesson” it’s “I’m in the middle of learning this thing and want you to watch.” It’s all about experimentation.

The tone is curious, the cadence can vary, and the vocabulary is basic. One person who’s built an empire around this is [AJ Jacobs](#). He wrote best selling books on religion, health, and genealogy — without being an expert in any of those fields.

In the business field, [Pat Flynn](#) takes his readers on his journey with him, interviewing experts, testing, and even reporting his earnings every month. The headline of his site shows his curious tone.



Here's 2 more “Learning as We Go”

- SortedFood- Cooking
- BIG BRAND EXAMPLE: Lay's

Lay's has tried over [204 different flavors](#) of potato chips. Some are amazing. Some... not so much. But by experimenting they discover (and help their customers discover) flavors that no one else can.

Voice Type #6: The Yogi

The last type of voice is most pervasive in the self-help and life coach field. The tone is gentle, the cadence is slow, and the vocabulary is unlike any other voice. I imagine many of these “Find your soul’s purpose” sites being read in a calming voice next to a babbling brook. This voice is not to be discredited, however.

There is a huge market of people that want to be gently coached rather than shouted to. Many of these writers speak from the heart, offering personal experiences and struggles. One writer that I really enjoy is [Alexis Neely](#). She coaches lawyers to create more authentic practices and gets very personal in the process.

Here's 2 more "Yogis"

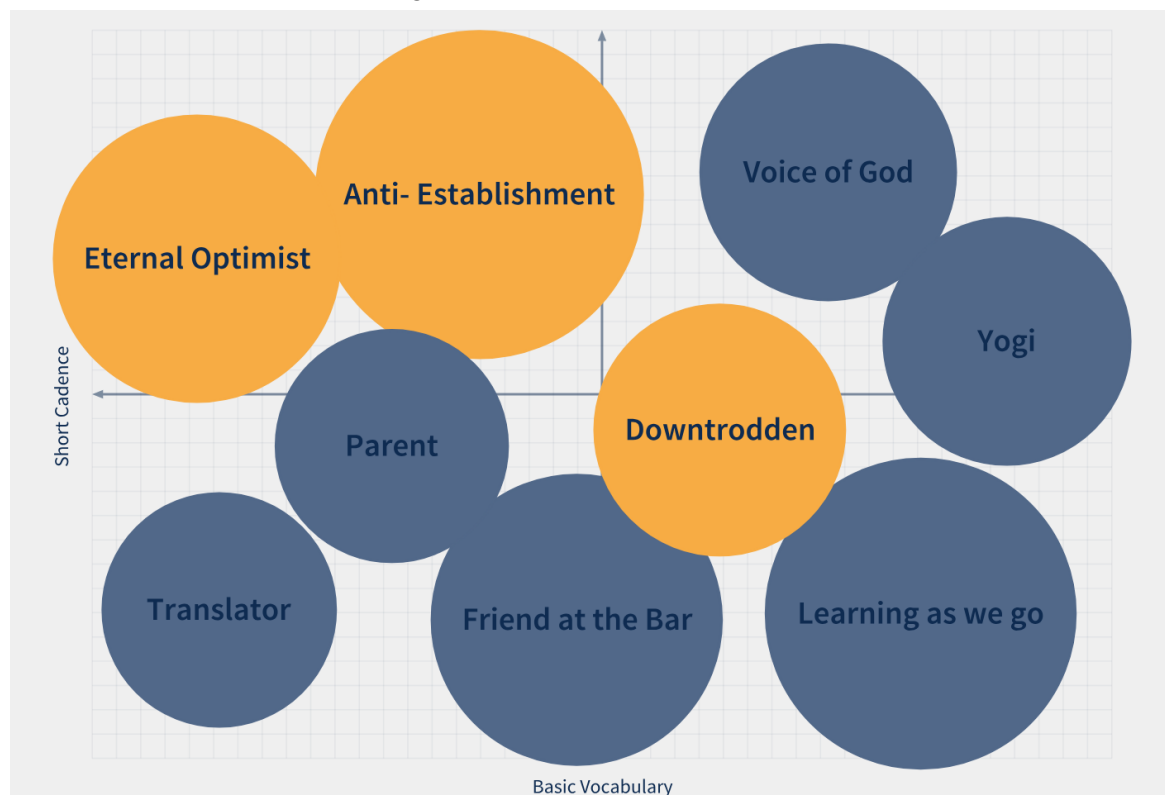
- Mastin Kipp- Business Building
- BIG BRAND EXAMPLE: Lincoln MKX

As a side note, if you've read many of the less meaningful life coaching sites, you'll enjoy this parodic "[New Age Bullshit Generator](#)" where a computer generates copy that rivals any sales page I've seen in the space.

Voices of Outlook

The last 3 voices of our series are the "Voices of Outlook"... these voices are not identified by how their audience views them, but rather how they view the world.

Here's the 3 voices we're talking about.



Let's dig in.

Voice Type #7: The Downtrodden

In stark contrast to the authoritative voice, the downtrodden seems to be often telling you, "I don't know anything about anything so let's work this out together." One of my favorites at this is [Chuck Wendig](#). His posts have an underlying tone of tragedy to them that make them compelling and funny to read while giving great advice. Another is [James Altucher](#), who has made his writing career about detailing the giant mistakes he's made in his life while readily admitting he hasn't quite got it right yet.

Louis CK is one very famous example of someone who uses a downtrodden voice. At 8:29 of this video fellow comedians talk about the vast difference in voice between Louis CK and Jerry Seinfeld (the part about voice is only about 2 minutes long from 8:29-10:30, but if you get the chance, watch the whole video. Great stuff on the creative process).

BIG BRAND EXAMPLE: Applebee's circa 2002-2009

Applebee's has a wide range of voices in their commercials. In the early 2000's, Applebee's settled on a sad tone, as seen by the 2002 ad, "Coach." My favorite from this era was an ad where a high school football team lost the "big game," and the coach decided to take them to Applebee's. The restaurant was closed and the team was downtrodden. But, the management turned the lights back on and welcomed the team in. All part of the "neighborhood." <— If anyone can find a link to that ad, I'd love to add it here.

Voice Type #8: The Eternal Optimist

If there's a downtrodden, there's an optimist. The optimist gives you a boost of sunshine every time you read it. One of my favorites is [Marie Forleo](#), who famously preaches "Everything is Figure-outable." Even when she's talking about big, [heavy topics like death](#) there's an underlying message that "it's all going to be ok." Often the tone is happy and fun, the cadence can be either in short, energetic bursts or longer, and the vocabulary varies wildly. The key to the optimist is the happy tone.

Here's 2 more "Eternal Optimists"

- JoJo Siwa – Music
- BIG BRAND EXAMPLE: Honey Bunches of Oats

Voice Type #9: Anti-Establishment

This is just how it sounds. No more status quo. Current advice is wrong. The tone is irreverent, and often snarky. Cadence is short. Vocabulary varies. These blogs are fun to read because they speak to the collective frustrations of the masses. They sympathize with people who have followed the current advice and failed.

One of the few blogs I read every time they hit my inbox is Ash Ambirge's [Middle Finger Project](#). Her about page exhibits her voice better than I could describe it:

"Because we're in the business of shunning cliché, overused language, business practices and lifestyle choices, in favor of originality, happiness & doing what feels good for you. Also, 'no rules, just right' was taken by Outback Steakhouse."

Here's 4 more "Anti-Establishment"

- Daniel DiPiazza- Business Building
- Jim Kramer- Stock Investing
- BIG BRAND EXAMPLE: Cheetos
- BIG BRAND EXAMPLE #2: Taco Bell

Of course, all of these voice types can and should appear on any given site. There should be a dominant and distinct voice, but often it's a hybrid of these types.

Even writers with very strong voices will slip into other categories when warranted. For example, Ramit Sethi is known for his brash, masculine voice (I'd consider him a authoritative/friend at the bar hybrid). Here's an excerpt from a [post about taking action](#):

DREAMS ARE CHEAP. Anyone can say what they want. Few will actually do something to get it.

Think about it — exactly a year ago, in January, how many of us read some motivational post telling us to reach for the stars, be all you can be, find your sisterhood, blah blah blah?

Maybe we said, “YES! THIS IS THE YEAR FOR ME!”

And what changed? Saying you want more is the EASY part! EVERYBODY wants more. What are you going to do about it?

But he’ll often talk about his parents and slip into a much more sentimental voice. Here’s a recent Instagram post:

Happy 40th anniversary to my amazing parents! They met and were married in 7 days. Then they moved to America, raised four successful children, and are still involved in their community. My mom taught me the value of kindness and that you don’t need a lot of money to lead a rich life. We didn’t have very much, but if we ever needed soccer uniforms or books for SAT prep, they’d find it somehow. My dad taught me how to stay calm and the value of hard work. An A- wasn’t good enough, and now I understand what he meant. Try to be the best every day, and one day it might actually happen.

When I asked my mom the secret of being married so long, she said, “You just don’t give yourself any choices. You’re in it forever.” So in honor of my parents, who moved across the world, raised four kids on one income, taught us enough to get into amazing colleges, and most importantly raised a family where we all love each other and love hanging out together...thank you and happy anniversary.

Just like your speaking voice varies in special circumstances like when you scold your children, talk to your boss, or greet your spouse, your writing voice should adapt to the situation when warranted.

Chapter 3: How to learn someone else's voice (and why you need this skill)

One day, at my 8-year-old son's request, I was Star Wars-ing a bedroom. To prevent being seduced by Darth and the Dark Side, I listened to [a podcast](#).



Awww... Isn't he cute? He can keep the Empire... I'm totally jealous of the slippers and rolltop desk.

29 minutes in, I sat amongst the Galactic Empire and snickered. To my surprise, the host ([Kevin Rogers](#)) and his interviewee ([Brian Kurtz](#)) started talking about me! Ok, they didn't mention me by name, but they talked about how one could get (and be successful at) a specific position with a specific client — the one I happened to hold for the last 3 years.

The question they were pondering was how would someone be able to write for a client so well that readers, even dedicated, long-term readers couldn't tell the difference. Essentially — how do you learn voice?

Knowing your own voice is important as a business owner (and we'll cover that in the next chapter).

For a copywriter, I'd argue knowing how to adapt to the voices of others is substantially more important. If you can write something that sounds like your client — only more effective — you'll never be lacking in work.

But, even if you're not a copywriter, this skill is essential for success in online business today.

Here's just a few examples when you'd need to know someone else's voice:

- Ghost-writing (books, publication, and blogs all hire industry experts to ghost write)
- Contributing a piece to a magazine or major publication
- Guest blogging
- Providing affiliate/JV copy
- Proposals (of all kinds)
- Job applications

While you don't always need to (nor shouldn't) forfeit your voice all together, it's crucial to understand the voice and style of your audience. You don't want to apply for a corporate job and use an anti-establishment voice — conversely, I know of one company that automatically passes over candidates that show up to the interview in a suit because it shows a lack of understanding of the company culture.

The same goes for guest blogging. Your voice is important and shouldn't be lost. But you should also adapt to the voice of the site just as you would change the clothes you wear depending on the event.

5 Steps to Perfecting Someone's Voice

1. Read everything you can.

When I first started at the job mentioned above, my first assignment was to create a database and write social media copy for every single blog post.

I ***hated*** it.

It felt like busywork. And the blog had 10 years worth of posts.

But, it turned out to be the single most valuable task for my growth. Suddenly, I knew his stance on everything — favorite college professors, book reviews, childhood stories, topics to explore, things that annoyed him. I became an encyclopedia of knowledge. (I even got an gag award for this at the company retreat. My coworkers laughed because I would constantly say things like “Actually, there's a post –January 2012 I think — where he covered this exact topic.”)

More than that though, I could recognize his writing (and writing that wasn't his) quickly.

2. Identify what their voice is

Using Chapter 1 as a guide, describe the elements of their voice— cadence, tone, and vocabulary.

Run a few posts through readability tests.

Which of the 9 Primary Voices do they most resemble? Or is it a hybrid? Do they switch into different voices at different times? When? What effect do you think this has on the copy?

3. Get their voice on repeat in your head

The best way to know if you “sound like” someone else is to imagine them saying the words you are typing. They need to move into your brain and build a little cabin so you can call them up whenever you need them.

Do you ever open your mouth and hear the words of your mother or father flow out?

It surprises you when it happens but it's easy to understand why it does. You lived with them for the first two decades of your life so their voice has moved in... creeping you out at every turn.

As a result, you could probably compose a blog post in the voice of your mother fairly easily. Too bad mom can't be an affiliate. (But it would be a fun writing exercise. Now that Downton Abbey is over, I may just make that tonight's evening activity).

Anyway, mom is probably not an affiliate, so you need to get that other person in your brain, too. You have two choices:

1. Move in with them.
2. Listen to every interview, podcast, TV segment, or video you can get your hands on.

Almost everyone doing business online has audio or video out there. If you can't find it, ask them. You should be doing this whenever you have downtime. In the car. When you're cooking. Doing dishing.

I do this so often, my children start to think of my clients as family. (is that weird?)

4. Write drafts and compare

Now that you understand the voice you want to use, and probably better than the original writer, you can start writing.

Write a post in their voice and then compare. Run it through the readability test — are you at around the same grade level? Check your words per sentences (most word-counters can do this). And then read it out loud. Can you “hear” the person in your head?

Keep practicing this. Like most efforts in writing (and life), the more you do it the better you’ll become — and the more natural it will feel.

5. Get feedback (and write it down)

If you’re working on a content team, this is built into the process.

But, if you’re not, bloggers and content creators are always excited when writers ask for specific feedback. Anything you can do to make their lives easier down the road, is work they’ll gladly do.

Either way, all feedback (giving and receiving) is not created equal.

First, you need to tell them what kind of feedback you’re looking for. “What do you think?” Does not elicit useful responses. If you are trying to learn their voice or match the voice of their publication or site, you might want to ask questions like:

- Does this sound like something you would write?
- Are there any words that I should avoid?
- Is this the tone I should be going for?
- Do you think the length is ok?
- Am I speaking to the right audience?
- How would you write this differently?

Then, the next part is taking that feedback and internalizing it. Nothing is more frustrating than correcting someone’s work to have them submit the next assignment with the same mistakes.

What I do is create a “Codex Persona” for my clients.

This came right out of my days as a newspaper editor. Every reporter has two books handy at all times — The AP Style Guide and their specific publication's Style Guide. The AP Style Guide covers universal topics like when to capitalize "President" or how to spell words with alternate spellings. The publication's guide is how they handle more local issues. In our newspaper we decided not to put periods in the high school "VVS" and which towns were included when we said "Eastern Suburbs."

When I started working online, I was shocked no blogger I could find had their own version of the style guide. So I made them. I included things like how they internally and publicly refer to their courses (abbreviations, official names, URLs, etc.), favorite sources of inspiration, words they never use, words they frequently use, colloquialisms, techniques they invented and named, how they credit testimonials (first and last name or just last initial), and any other feedback they'd given me.

Then, after I wrote something, I'd consult the style guide to make sure I followed all the "rules." It saves everyone a ton of time by creating a system.

BONUS: Even if you create these guides just for yourself, you can sell the process to your clients. They can give them to other writers and it makes you look like a real pro.

I've used this exact process many many times and it's how I get repeat business. Finding a writer that "gets" their voice is such a huge win for content creators. It saves them time, frustration, and money and frees them up to focus on other areas of their business. I also created a course on the process, The Codex Persona Workshop. Details are at the end of this book.

Chapter 4: How do you learn your own voice?

"I don't like to read very much because I don't want to contaminate my voice."

I'll never forget the look on Professor Eric Gansworth's face when my creative writing classmate announced his stand on the professor's suggestion that we read a wide variety of sources. It was actually a lot like this:



*Professor Gansworth does not approve.
(Yes, that's really him)*

Here's the simple fact about voice: **You are the collective product of what you read, what you see, and what you hear.**

And that's the cool part!

That's what makes your voice different than anyone else's.

So the short answer to "How do I develop my own voice," is simply:

Learn as much as you can about as much as you can.

The long answer is just a fancy deconstruction of the simple statement above — which we'll dig into in this chapter.

So here it is, the 5 Ways to Develop Voice:

1. Stop reading about writing. Read other stuff instead
2. Connect the random dots
3. Write. A lot. About everything
4. Write to a human (ONE human)

5. Learn the rules before you break them.

So let's dig in.

Stop reading about writing. Read other stuff instead

The best way to develop a memorable, unique voice is to read. And yes, there is value to reading about other people's processes. I love [On Writing](#) , [Bird by Bird](#) , and [The War of Art](#) .

But reading about writing (and especially reading blogs about blogging) can be like when a teenage girl asks her peers in the locker room a better way to do her hair. She gets a lot of ideas and most are completely irrelevant.

In the locker room: "OMG, Thanks you guys!!"

*At home: Feeling suddenly more overwhelmed and more self-consciousness, she falls back to her normal side-ponytail-that-was-supposed-to-be-a-regular-ponytail-but-she-can't-figure-out-how-to-get-it-straight
[Thanks for watching. This segment of the program was brought to you by... repressed memories!]*

Moving right along...

The point is, Google can't really help you here.

The articles out there are just plain bad. I found advice like "ask your friends how they would describe your voice!"

Please try that and let me know how it works out for you. The answer I would get is "deep" or "manly" because I was genetically blessed with a nice rich baritone voice. The boys like it... until they realize I'm a woman.

Here's a roundup of the shittiest internet advice about voice:

When your writing feels like work, that's an indication you're not being true to your voice

Do you know how long it took me to write this chapter? I'll tell you.

Over a month.

Why?

Because writing is work. And I didn't feel like it some days. There's kids, and naps, and puppies, and springtime, and chocolate, and Trader Joe's, and NAPS — all better options than writing. Don't listen to anyone tell you that once you find your voice, you don't have to work to write.

They lie. There is no work better than writing for this blog. But, it's still work.

Describe yourself and make sure your writing always sounds like that

I would describe myself as irrationally optimistic — but I'm not always sunshine and rainbows. Remember we covered in chapter 2 that your voice/tone will shift depending on the circumstance. If I always wrote about how great writing is, it wouldn't be honest. (See 2 paragraphs up for an example)

And my personal favorite brought to you by [Writer's Digest](#):

To set your voice free, set your words free. Set your characters free. Most important, set your heart free. It is from the unknowable shadows of your subconscious that your stories will find their drive and from which they will draw their meaning. No one can loan that or teach you that. Your voice is your self in the story.

All you need to know there, folks.

Voice really comes from ramming ideas and words together in ways that no one else does. And the way to do that is to get a bunch of ideas. That, my friend, comes from reading about weird stuff, meeting weird people, and even best of all, experiencing weird stuff.

Then connecting it all together.

Connect the random dots

Yes, this was shamelessly stolen from Steve Jobs. But I've seen the same thing spoken by successful people in every field. I was a super nerd in college (I am a super nerd now). I had this professor, Mel Schroeder. Now Mel had read every book ever at least a dozen times. He loved classic Irish lit, Greek Tragedies, and had a soft spot for The Simpsons TV show.

Because he had read and watched EVERYTHING.... He would make these random-ass connections cross-genre and cross-time (plus he taught me the Simpsons is way funnier when you get the literature jokes). It was amazing to watch him think and he always had a unique viewpoint -- built over decades book by book. I thought Mel was some sort of genius unicorn until I met Jay Abraham. Now Jay Abraham is one of those people that everyone cites as "That guy that taught them [how to make money, how to look at their business, how to find clients]" I

liked Jay's books and videos but I wasn't dying to meet him like some of my fervent friends. Jay did a live Q&A at an event... I'd watched a lot of speakers rehash their blog posts on stage so I never expected to be as impressed as I was when I saw him speak live. It was just like watching Mel.

Because of Jay's diverse range of experiences, he was able to pull his answers from such an eclectic source pool. He would answer Internet Marketing questions with experiences from the gold industry and stories from Japanese business practices to shed light on a San Franciscan founder's growth conundrum.

Both these people were able to make connections no one has ever made before. And it's beautiful to witness. There was a time I was ashamed of my non-linear career path. If you read this blog you'll see me incorporate tactics from healthcare, journalism, copywriting, telemarketing, and even disaster response.

From being a radio DJ, I learned that someone is always listening. When you speak, be careful.

From being a reporter, I learned how to write headlines, write quickly under a deadline, write using the inverted pyramid, and create a style guide.

From being a secretary at a hospital, I learned about customer service -- that even though you've seen 100 chest xrays this week and it's no big deal, it's that patient's first one and they are scared.

From being an appliance salesman, I learned about features vs. benefits and the art of improv.

From being a pharmaceutical telemarketer, I learned the importance of getting through the "gatekeepers" to the person making the decisions.

From being in disaster response, I learned the importance of scalable systems and how when everything around you is speeding up, it's critical to slow down your thinking.

These, and many, many other life experiences (divorce, daughter in critical condition at a hospital, rejection, etc, etc) are what make up my unique take on the world. You have one, too.

Write. A lot. About everything.

I write for myself every single day. Not for this blog, not for clients, for me.

My favorite "exercise" is one I made up a few years ago. I write stories about people I meet (or don't meet). That lady at the coffee shop — why is she so sad? That girl doing her hair in the car next to me — is she egotistical or is she on her way to a big date, or a job interview, or.... Did she just have a lunchtime rendezvous and is straightening up before she goes back to work?

What should you write about? Here's a list to get you started

- Write stories about your day.
- Write a lot of shitty copy.
- Write love letters
- Write hate letters
- Write journal entries
- Write about your past
- Write about your future
- Write poetically about your favorite ice cream
- Write cynically about love
- Write about your dreams for your kids
- Write about what your dog is thinking
- Write fan-fiction for your favorite Netflix series
- Write about your customer
- Write scathing reviews about things you hate

After writing pages and pages, you'll start to fall into a rhythm that's yours.

You'll find that you can't "pick" a voice, you have to find it.

Take that writing and analyze. What's the tone? What's the cadence? Run it through a [grade-level tool](#) and find your vocabulary level.

Compare it to people you love and people you hate and see where you fall.

Write to a human (ONE human)

A couple of years ago, I was working on copy for an online product -- a product that I loved. I kept submitting the copy and my client was not pleased. I rewrote and rewrote and wasn't happy with it myself.

At the same time, a friend of mine asked me what I was working on. He asked me to tell him about the product over gchat. I was telling him why I liked the product so much, just as a friend.

After quite some time, he said, "when does it launch? I'd buy that!" I realized that I'd written the sales copy I couldn't seem to find.

Because I wasn't trying to write "sales copy." I cut and pasted the chat into a doc, edited it and submitted. It was some of the best copy (and led to over \$5mil in sales in one week).

NOTE: This goes deeper than a “customer avatar.” Write to an ACTUAL human. Think of your best customer or someone you'd really like to read this post, and write it to them. It's better if it's a real person because as you write, you can almost “see” their reactions in your mind.

Learn the rules before you break them.

If you're an English teacher, you could probably put red ink all over this post. I use “who” instead of “whom.” I make up words.

I write run ons. And fragments.

In the last chapter, I accidentally wrote, “doing the dishing” instead of “doing the dishes” and I kinda liked the way it sounded, so I left it.

I just used the word “kinda.”

And that's ok. That's part of what makes my voice. But, at the same time, you need to have a basic understanding of the English language so you can be deliberate about those choices.

There's a huge difference between quirky and lazy. Don't be lazy with your grammar. Find out when you should use “lay” versus “laid” and that “irregardless” is not even a real word. Then use irregardless ironically for effect (not for “affect”).

Chapter 5: Case Studies on Voice

Mush cookies and maniacal villains... the power of voice

Last week I met two people who'd been on my "must meet" list for awhile.

[Ryan Lee](#) and Ben Settle.

When it comes to voice, these two couldn't be further apart.

From their [writing voice](#)...

Ryan is the eternally optimistic, friend at the bar.

Ben is the anti-establishment, authoritarian.

To the first meeting...

Ryan gave me a hug as soon as he met me and said he already felt like we were good friends because of our email exchanges.

Ben immediately asked me to try my best to impress him because he wanted to know if I was worth the hype.

And on stage...

Ryan teared up as he told us how his family is his "why" for building a successful business (completely with happy pictures on the beach).

Ben called Ryan a "mush cookie" and then handed out copies of his new book "[Persuasion Secrets of the World's Most Charismatic & Influential Villains](#)"



They were the Odd Couple of email.

But here's the strange part... this morning I was looking back over my notes from the event and these two... opposites in every way had the EXACT same business strategy.

They believed in the same things. They gave the same advice. And, the result was the same.

Both have raving fans.

Both have an extremely profitable business.

And, both live a lifestyle on their terms. Ryan spends time with his beautiful family and Ben—well, I'm not sure what Ben does there in Oregon, but he's quite happy with it.

There is no “right answer” to voice. There's no voice that works versus one that doesn't.

The right answer is owning it. What these two have in common is they are far from vanilla. And they are both authentic. Ryan's fans don't want him to be any other way. And, Ben's masochistic fans love the abuse.

So whether ye be a mush cookie or a maniacal villain... be it. And don't let anyone tell you to be anything else.

The dark side of voice: authenticity vs. sensitivity

The great part about the internet is that when companies mess up, they get the backlash and we get the lesson.

The internet marketing world was ablaze with an email from AppSumo – a well-respected company known for its compelling content and for its voice.

In selling a product called the “[Pocket Tripod](#),” AppSumo included the following line:

“We’ve all taken a photo or video that looks like Michael J. Fox was behind the lens.”

I’m not going to delve into the details of whether or not this was a “career-ending insensitive insult” or “political correctness gone awry” — both of which I’ve seen on various boards.

Instead, let’s look at how this might have happened.

The risk of using “Friend at the Bar” voice

I don’t have inside knowledge of the situation. But, I have worked at content companies similar in size and notoriety as AppSumo.

And the truth is, I’ve narrowly escaped and narrowly not-escaped similar issues (those are stories for another day).

Here’s one way this might have gone down:

1. Junior writer tries to get the flippant, fun tone of AppSumo and write memorable content. He makes a joke that in a vacuum or with friends might sound funny.
2. Editor misses the 8-word offensive part.
3. Tech person reads it the next day, notices, chuckles and thinks... “hmmm... that’s a little over the line, but what do I know, I’m not on the content team.”
4. Post goes live
5. Shitstorm ensues
6. Noah Kagan (AppSumo’s founder) and team are alerted and now have to do damage control.
7. Noah takes the biggest action he can think of... forfeit all profits from the debacle even though this product may have unusually high sales.

This is why a rock-solid editorial process is key. When you write alone (as I spoke about in the “tone” section [here](#)), no one catches those things that sound ok in your head, but not-so-great on paper.

“Friend at the Bar” is a very effective voice to use, but also poses a risk... you don’t want to be that jerk at the bar.

This is why newspaper articles get looked at by no less than 3 editors before going live.

Especially charged articles are reviewed by entire editorial boards or committees.

This was AppSumo’s first mistake. A forgivable one, I believe. And one to which they admitted.

What I want to talk about is the second mishap. The apology letter.

AppSumo’s over-correction: Why abandoning voice was a terrible idea

*“Hey Sumo-lings,
We need to sincerely apologize for our distasteful joke in yesterday’s email.*

Michael J. Fox has long been one of our favorite actors. We deeply admire his will to overcome Parkinson’s and have always respected his ability to bring awareness to his situation through humor.

In our poor attempt at imitative humor, we crossed the line and in the process offended many of you, our Sumo-ling family.

It was by no means in our intention to belittle a disease as serious as Parkinson’s – a condition that affects nearly 10 million people around the world. There were a thousand other ways to crack that particular joke and it’s unfortunate that we chose the one we did.

While we know this is only a first step, we are donating all the profits from the Pocket Tripod offer directly to [The Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson’s Research](#).

We are also updating our email review process to make sure this never happens again.

Once again, our deepest apologies, and we promise to do better next time.

*Sincerely,
Ayman and the AppSumo team”*

So how does this apology letter stack up. And was it effective?

The good:

1. They are putting their money where their mouth is by not profiting from the mishap.
2. They owned up to it and didn't try to defend themselves, make excuses, or further alienate the audience.

The not-so good:

They could have been a little less “corporate” with the language of the email. When you say “sincerely apologize...” it sounds insincere because companies use this term from everything from outages to overcharging. AppSumo has a very distinct voice and it may have been better received if they leveled with us. Even more so if it came straight from Noah or Ayman.

Something like:

Look, I'm sorry. I didn't think. We made a cheap shot at the expense of another person. Not cool. And we're going to try harder. Those of you that know me, know that sometimes my mouth moves faster than my brain. And that's exactly what happened. We're going to make up for it. I don't want to make a cent from the extra publicity this post is getting so every penny that would be made from AppSumo is going to further this cause.

Being real and authentic to your voice goes a long way in these situations.

Effective voice is a balancing act. You want to be real without being offensive, and self-aware without being inauthentic.

Chapter 6: Resources and Worksheets

TOOLKIT: ONLINE WRITING TOOLS FOR FINDING VOICE

A roundup of my favorite tools for analyzing voice. These tools are useful as aids, but don't depend on them as your sole means for determining voice. Remember these are robots, not people... context is everything.

THE HEMINGWAY EDITOR

The Hemingway App app highlights long, complex sentences and common errors and also gives you a readability rating. It highlights sentences that are complex so you can stay in your desired readability range. <http://www.hemingwayapp.com/>

CADENCE TEST

Analyze My Writing doesn't advertise as a "cadence test," but that's how I use it. It gives word and character counts, word and sentence lengths, detects passive voice, and a funky readability test called a Cloze test. <http://www.analyzemymywriting.com/index.html>

TONE ANALYZER

This Tone Analyzer uses linguistic analysis to detect and interpret emotional, social, and language cues found in text. Note: Make sure that you look at the sentence level to see what words it points out. <https://tone-analyzer-demo.mybluemix.net/>

WHO YOU WRITE LIKE

This little tool, I Write Like is pretty fun and gave me a big boost of confidence when it said I write like HP Lovecraft. It analyzes your word choice and writing style and compares them with those of famous writers. <https://iwl.me>