**Character Cue: Whose Line is it Anyway?**

An Easy Exercise to Strengthen Voice

By Katrina Kittle, 01 May 2015

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Voice is one of my favorite aspects of craft to play with and talk about. Voice was the subject of my very first post here at Writer Unboxed. Today’s post will be short and sweet—a nifty, easy peasy, so-simple-it-seems-stupid trick to strengthen voice in revision.

When I’m helping someone with a manuscript, I sometimes find that unique and distinctive character voices are inconsistent—the writer will create a memorable voice for her protagonist…but will then allow that voice to disappear for long passages of the story. Usually, the voice will be strong in passages containing dialogue, but will lose its edge at other times. Contemporary writers, for the most part, tell their stories using first person or third person subjective as their chosen style of narration—and in both of those cases, the narration should be filtered through the point of view character’s voice and should remain strong and present throughout. A helpful little trick I was taught along the way can help with those inconsistent, “voiceless” passages—infuse some “character cue.”

You infuse character cue by tweaking the passage so that it contains some flavor, some vestige of voice, through character attitude and tone.

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Look at it this way: you never want a line of narrative that could have been delivered by just any ol’ character in your novel, right? Ideally, you want every line to be imbued with that strong voice so the reader knows exactly who spoke it.

For example, perhaps you’ve hit a point in your story where you wish to convey to the reader that a horse trotted across a field. Your point of view character is going to tell the reader this. But if you write “The horse trotted across the field,”…well, anyone could have said that, right? There’s nothing in that line that cues up the character for us as readers. Now, I know, I know: that’s a mighty short phrase, and you might very well have a phrase like that and it would be just fine—as long as it was buried in context and in surrounding sentences that were loaded with distinctive character voice.

But if you write, “The damn horse trotted across the field like I was invisible,” well, then, that’s someone talking to us. That’s not just anybody—that’s a particular somebody with a specific tone and attitude.

And if you write, “Of course the horse trotted across the field—what else was the poor thing to do?” that’s an entirely different person, isn’t it? We still have the horse moving across a field, but now we also have voice and characterization. And isn’t that our goal—that everything we write does double (or triple) duty and fulfills more than one function?

If you comb through your manuscript seeking places where the narrative is journalistic or neutral, and then you rewrite it so that it is steeped in character cue, you can keep voice present and strong throughout.

I do that exercise with writers of all ages—I ask them to pore over two or three pages of their work and pull out the lines that—on their own—don’t sound like they belong to any specific character. If the writer finds a line that anyone could’ve said, they revise the line to contain character cue.

I find this stage of revision comforting. This is the kind of work that comes after the terrifying, crazy-making stage of deep revision—cutting and combining scenes, cutting and combining characters, writing new scenes. This is the kind of work to embrace when you’re certain (well, as certain as we ever are) that the story’s essential skeleton is assembled and will no longer change drastically. These may seem like small, inconsequential touches, but the accumulative effect of strengthening voice throughout your entire work will make your novel much more polished and professional.

I plan to offer a few more simple tricks as well as go much more in-depth into both Point of View and Voice in my upcoming online class beginning May 28th (details at www.onliten.com if you’re interested in joining me!).

Just for fun, rewrite that horse trotting sentence so that it’s imbued with character cue for one of your own characters.

*Katrina Kittle is the author of four novels for adults—Traveling Light, Two Truths and a Lie, The Kindness of Strangers, and The Blessings of the Animals— and one novel for tweens, Reasons to Be Happy. The Kindness of Strangers was the winner of the 2006 Great Lakes Book Award for Fiction. Katrina has an MFA in Creative Writing from Spalding University in Louisville and teaches creative writing workshops from the third grade to universities to retirement communities. She also teaches creative writing regularly for Word’s Worth Writing Connections (http://www.wordsworthdayton.com/ ) in the Dayton-Cincinnati area and to students across the country through OnLiten (http://onliten.com/workshops.htm#KKchar) Through Write Sisters Consulting (http://www.writesistersconsulting.com/, she offers manuscript consultations. Katrina has always loved the telling of stories in any medium, and because of her extensive background in dance and theatre, she is a firm believer in both honoring an apprenticeship and caring about craft. She lives in Dayton, OH with her odd cat Joey (he has anxiety issues, sucks on blankets, and is in love with a spatula) and her out-of-control garden; has a thing for goats, gardening, and going barefoot; and is totally addicted to coffee, dark chocolate, pedicures, and movies. If you’re on Facebook, she'd love for you to “like” her author page (https://www.facebook.com/KatrinaKittleAuthor). Learn more at www.katrinakittle.com*