

Make Your Narrative Voice Sing

Raymond Obstfeld March 11, 2008

writersdigest.com/qp7-migration-all-articles/qp7-migration-fiction/make_your_narrative_voice_sing

Imagine three singers - Tony Bennett, Willie Nelson and Janis Joplin - each singing Itsy-Bitsy Spider. Already you can hear how each would interpret the song, making it his or her own by imprinting it with his or her unique style. The plot doesn't change from singer to singer; we know that persistent little arachnid will get washed out the spout yet eventually triumph over adversity. The style then is determined by the singer's tone of voice, which notes are emphasized, the tempo, the background music. A writer has to do all the same things to establish style - but with words.

Although there are many subtle elements that combine to create a writer's style, you can greatly enhance your own style by focusing on narrative voice and descriptive texture.

Narrative Voice: Hit the High Notes

You meet someone for the first time, and he or she starts speaking. Instantly, you like or dislike the person. If someone asked you what that person said that made you like or dislike her, you might answer, "It isn't what she said, it's the way she said it." That's the narrative voice.

First-person POV.

If the story is written in the first-person point of view, the relationship you're developing is between the narrator and the reader. Whether you want the reader to like, dislike, admire or loathe the narrator, it is most important for the reader to be compelled by him. This is achieved by creating a very specific narrative voice through the tone.

For example, look at the opening lines of Tim Gautreaux's short story *Welding with Children*:

Tuesday was about typical. My four daughters - not one of them married, you understand - brought over their kids, one each, and explained to my wife how much fun she was going to have looking after them. But Tuesday was her day to go to the casino, so guess who got to tend the four babies. My oldest daughter also brought over a bed rail that the end broke off of. She wanted me to weld it. Now, what the hell you can do in a bed that'll cause the end of a iron rail to break off is beyond me, but she can't afford another one on her burger-flipping salary, she said, so I got to fix it with four little kids hanging on my coveralls.

The plot information is simple: Man has to baby-sit his four grandchildren while welding a bedrail. That's an interesting enough plot conflict, but what makes the story one you want to read is the personality that comes through the narrator's voice. Here's how the writer achieved that: 1. His attitude is that he's being put upon. But his sarcasm ("and explained to my wife how much fun she was going to have looking after them") reveals that he's also good-natured about it, not mean or bitter. Your basic grumpy old man. 2. Notice the intimacy he develops with the readers by directly addressing them ("you understand" and "so guess who got to tend"). 3. He has a sense of humor ("her burger - flipping salary"), which immediately makes us like him; we know that his tone will be entertaining. 4. The fact that his grammar is not perfect ("a iron rail") makes him more human; a highly educated man in this situation who was also grumpy would have been seen as less lovable and more prickly.

Narrative Voice Checklist

POV selection.

Determine what POV is best for your story. Don't be afraid to experiment. In at least half the novels I've written, I changed POV several times. In one novel, I had written 90 pages in first-person POV before changing to third-person-limited.

Dominating characteristic.

Ask yourself what it is about the narrator that the reader is supposed to like, care about or be compelled by. Pick one characteristic that will make us want to sit next to this person at a dinner party. Lorrie Moore begins her short story *Vissi D'Arte* by introducing the POV character's dominating characteristic:

Harry lived near Times Square, above the sex pavilion that advertised 25 CENT GIRLS. He had lived there for five years and had never gone in, a fact of which he was proud. In the land of perversities he had maintained the perversity of refusal.

That last line has a witty wisdom that distinguishes Moore's style.

Continuity.

Beginning writers often establish the narrative tone in the opening pages, then fail to maintain it. Look for opportunities to reaffirm her personality. For example, if the narrator has a sarcastic attitude, when she describes someone as having oily skin, she might think: "Someone should take a squeegee to his forehead."

Third-person-limited POV.

Third-person-limited POV (in which we're focused only on one character's perspective) is trickier because we're not inside a character's head, thereby removing some of the confessional intimacy. Then why use it? Because first person can be too intimate, its effect can be achieved by contrasting the way the narrator thinks about the world with the way the reader sees that the described world actually is. Third-person-limited gives us just enough distance that we can better trust the narrator's perspective. The following opening of Frederick Busch's novel, *Harry and Catherine*, demonstrates how to achieve intimacy despite the distance:

Her son was studying Catherine as she stood at their kitchen window. She felt him. He'd been doing it more and more often, idly and with no special intensity, she thought, but with a kind of dreamy stare. She knew that sort of study, when you sit with your chin on your palms, your elbows on the kitchen table, looking at something, at the thing itself, for certain, and also looking through it. She tipped the roasting chicken and looked down, considering her son behind her, the way he must have been looking at and into and past his mother. He's looking at the rest of his life, she thought. I'm a ghost at the center of the prospect.

This is a wonderful example of creating many effects through narrative voice: 1. The focus is on the connection between Catherine and her son ("She felt him."). 2. The conflict is her awareness of how his attitude toward her is changing, evolving ("He'd been doing it more and more often"). Such a change can be frightening, which establishes the stakes: mother losing the comforting intimacy of her relationship with her maturing son. 3. It indicates that what he's doing is something she's done herself ("She knew that sort of study"), either in a past relationship or recently. 4. She is an insightful and articulate woman ("He's looking at the rest of his life, she thought. I'm a ghost at the

center of the prospect.”). That phrase - “a ghost at the center of the prospect” - is poetic, a rich, yet scary image that distills her apprehension.

Third-person-omniscient POV.

This POV has no restrictions as to whose perspective we will view the fictional world. It could go back and forth between characters, or it could be a know-it-all voice outside the specific time of the story. A clear example is the opening of Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way - in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted upon being received, for good or evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

Here we have a narrative voice that has a wisdom about the world, and the reader trusts that this voice will continue to comment on events and put them in perspective. **In this POV, the intimacy is formed with a narrator who isn’t really part of the story, but whom we trust.**

Descriptive Texture: The Emperor’s New Clothes

Descriptive texture is what transforms mere information into a multi-dimensional world. It’s the difference between telling the reader about an event and creating the world so that the reader experiences the event for himself. There are different kinds of styles, some writers (such as Raymond Carver and Ann Beattie) prefer minimalism (which is highly selective about which details are included) and other writers (such as Stanley Elkin and Lorrie Moore) favor a rich, denser style (which uses sensual descriptions and lots of metaphors). Most writers fall somewhere between this spectrum. It’s important to select the style that you most enjoy reading yourself. This probably will be the one you’ll be most successful at.

Beginning writers often make the mistake of overdescribing or underdescribing.

Overdescribing can occur because the writer sees a descriptive passage as a chance to show off her talent, to dazzle the reader. But, the actual effect is to stop the story dead by distracting the reader from the characters. Description is a tool to enhance the story, the same as a frame enhances a painting. If the frame is too ornate or large, it overshadows the painting. What do you think of the following description:

The craggy, mist-shrouded mountains erupted out of the fetid jungle like the jagged tail of a slumbering dragon guarding the tropical paradise as if it were Eden itself.

If that made you gag, you have good instincts. There are so many adjectives in that description that the average reader can’t hold on to them all as he finally stumbles past the period of that sentence.

Underdescribing also can be detrimental to the story. Although Ernest Hemingway is known for his spare prose style, there’s a difference between spare and nonexistent. Here’s nonexistent:

Big mountains were on the other side of the jungle.

Snooze. Words like big are relative, so the reader doesn't have anything with which to compare the size of the mountains. The verb "were" is passive, making the mountains seem bland and diminutive.

How do you know when to elaborate on a description? When the person or object being described has an impact on the characters, affects them or affects how the reader is meant to perceive them, then you elaborate. For example, if the mountains described above are mentioned merely as a passing landmark and have no further role in the story, just tell us they're there and move on. But if they appear as a means of showing how insignificant the characters are in the larger natural world in order that the characters gain a new perspective on their lives, then elaborate.

Describing characters is another chance to define your style. But the same rules apply: Develop description only toward the end of achieving the desired impact. It's like stepping on the gas pedal of your car; only do so in relation to how fast you want the car to go. In his short story, *A Poetics for Bullies*, Stanley Elkin has the narrator, Push the Bully, describe a new kid in the neighborhood.

He was tall, tall even sitting down. His long legs comfortable in expensive wool, the trousers of a boy who had been on ships, jets; who owned a horse, perhaps; who knew Latin - what didn't he know? - somebody made up, like a kid in a play with a beautiful mother and a handsome father, who took his breakfast from a sideboard, and picked, even at fourteen and fifteen and sixteen, his mail from a silver plate. He would have hobbies - stamps, stars, things lovely dead. He wore a sport coat, brown as wood, thick as heavy bark. The buttons were leather buds. His shoes seemed carved from horses' saddles, gunstocks. His clothes had grown once in nature. ... His eyes had skies in them. His yellow hair swirled on his head like a crayoned sun.

What makes this descriptive passage so effective is not just the image of the boy being described. Those details are few: he's tall, has expensive clothes, blue eyes and blond hair. The rest is Push's projection. He sees the boy as some sort of god-figure, and so the description is filled with imagined characteristics to imply that. Elkin knows what style works for him. So do most great writers. Don't be afraid to try to tell your story a few different ways before you find the style that works for you.

Descriptive Texture Checklist

Be selective.

Not everything needs to be described. However, don't edit yourself on the first few drafts. If you feel like describing the setting sun for five pages, then do it. But when you're doing your final editing, think of the Big Picture. The hardest part of editing is not cutting out the bad stuff, but cutting out the good stuff that otherwise diminishes the story as a whole.

Similes and metaphors.

A good simile instantly elevates the style because it reveals the level of the writer's craft and intelligence. It announces to the reader that he can relax, he's in good hands. Go ahead, suspend disbelief, it says, you can trust that the story will be rewarding. Beginning writers are too fond of cliched similes; "She moved as gracefully as a cat," appeared in a student manuscript yesterday. In this excerpt from Stanley Elkin's *A Poetics for Bullies* (see below), Push comments on the effect the new kid is having on the girls at school:

Gradually his name began to appear on all their notebooks, in the margins of their texts. ... The big canvas books, with their careful, elaborate "J's" and "W's," took on the appearance of ancient, illuminated fables. It was the unconscious embroidery of love, hope's bright doodle.

Here Push is showing how the new kid has become mythologized, has become the icon for Hope. What phrase better reveals style than "hope's bright doodle." If I ever write a metaphor so simple and powerful, I will feel satisfied as a writer.

Word choice.

Go through and highlight every word that could be stronger, clearer or more active. Beginning writers often make the mistake of including several descriptive words rather than the single right word. Whenever I do this mine-sweep of my own manuscripts, I precede the task by reading poetry. Good poetry reminds you to focus on the words, not the story. A few poets to look over: Sharon Olds, Ann Sexton, Richard Wilbur, W.D. Snodgrass.

Raymond Obstfeld received an Edgar nomination for his novel *Dead Heat*. He is also the author of the Novelist's Essential Guide to Crafting Scenes and Fiction First Aid. He also wrote *Fundamentals of Fiction Writing* workshop for www.WritersOnlineWorkshops.com.