

“Writer’s Voice”

(A Middle School English Language Arts Unit Combining Understanding by Design and Differentiated Instruction)

John L. Brown, Vera Blake, and Carol O’Connor

Teacher: Rick Wormeli
Grade Level: Eight
Subject Area: English Language Arts

Summary:

This English Language Arts unit focuses upon the concept of writer’s voice. Through a series of whole-group, small-group, and independent activities, students extend and refine their understanding of such essential questions as the following: What is writer’s voice? What tools are available to us to express and sustain a writer’s voice? How can we develop our own voice when writing? The instructor models the significant role of diagnostic and formative assessment in the differentiated classroom, ensuring that every learner’s readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles are successfully accommodated. He also reinforces the benefits of continual scaffolding in a differentiated classroom, leading students toward growing levels of conceptual understanding and independent transfer. In addition, the instructor successfully models the Understanding by Design W.H.E.R.E.T.O. principles, assisting his students to:

1. W=Understand “where” they are going and “why” they are going there in relationship to writer’s voice;
2. H=Have their interests “hooked” and engaged, motivating them to internalize the concept of writer’s voice and apply it in their own writing;
3. E=Be “equipped” for success in using writer’s voice via experience-based inquiry and coaching-based investigations;
4. R=“Revisit, revise, rethink, and refine” their understanding of writer’s voice and related tools for expressing it;
5. E=Self-“express” their growing understanding of writer’s voice and self-“evaluate” as they grow in their ability to use voice as a writing tool;
6. T=Improve their understanding of writer’s voice via “tailoring” (i.e., adjustment of content, process, and product based upon assessment of students’ readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles); and
7. O=Move toward genuine understanding of writer’s voice through a classroom “organized” to help them transition from initial experience toward growing levels of conceptual knowledge and independent transfer.

Stage One: Desired Results

Established Goals: The learner will:

1. Define and apply the concept of writer's voice in a variety of writing tasks for a range of goals and purposes.
2. Analyze and evaluate the way authors use writer's voice in narrative and expository text.
3. Employ a range of writing tools to enhance their use of voice in their own writing.

Enduring Understandings:

1. Voice is the writer revealed.
2. There are definite tools that writers use to generate that voice.
3. Voice takes time to develop.
4. Good writers have strong voices.
5. As students, you are writers.

Essential Questions:

1. What is writer's voice?
2. How can we use the tools available to us to communicate a voice in our writing?
3. To what extent can we vary voice, depending upon our audience or task?
4. Why does voice take time to develop?
5. Why do good writers have strong voices?
6. How can we maximize the impact of voice in our own writing?

Know:

1. Operational definitions for key unit vocabulary: (e.g., voice, metaphor, simile, analogy, diction, tone, perspective)
2. Essential elements of voice in writing (e.g., attitude, personality, use of language, figurative devices, using background knowledge)

Do:

1. Apply tools (e.g., manipulating words, sentence structure, figurative language, becoming knowledgeable about the topic) to create a strong voice in narrative and expository writing.
2. Describe and analyze the writer's voice in selected pieces of literature.
3. Describe how the voice of a piece of literature might be changed using available tools.
4. Provide feedback and peer coaching advice to classmates, applying key tools related to writer's voice.

Stage Two: Assessment Evidence

Diagnostic Assessment(s):

1. Teacher observations will comprise initial diagnostic assessment, based upon the following key questions: (a) How well does each student demonstrate an understanding of writer’s voice at the beginning of this unit? (b) What misconceptions and misunderstandings do students express initially? (c) Which students begin the unit with an advanced level of understanding of writer’s voice? (d) Which students appear to have initial difficulty with this concept? (e) How can I accommodate students’ varying personality styles, interests, and learning profiles as I begin this unit with them—and as I continue their exploration of writer’s voice throughout the unit?

Tests/Quizzes (with constructed-response test items):

1. No formal test or quiz will be administered in this unit; all major assessment evidence will extend from students’ written and oral activities.

Reflective Assessments (reflective journals, think logs, interviews, peer discussions, peer review and coaching):

1. Throughout the unit, students will engage in small-group (i.e., paired, triad, quartet) debriefings and reflections related to various aspects of writer’s voice.
2. Closure activities (e.g., 3-2-1 summaries) will provide feedback concerning students’ growing understanding of writer’s voice and related tools as well as helping to identify students who need special coaching or intervention.
3. Interviews will be conducted periodically to provide individual students with feedback generated during teacher observations conducted during small group and independent work sessions.

Academic Prompts:

1. Students will engage in a series of writing tasks structured using the elements of the academic prompt (i.e., clearly-articulated role, format, topic/purpose, audience), including: (a) Rewrite an excerpt from a narrative poem with a powerful writer’s voice, revising its voice through the use of one specific tool or strategy; (b) Write a letter to a peer explaining how to survive in middle school; rewrite your letter, using only one-syllable words while maintaining the same writer’s voice.

Culminating Performance Task(s)/Project(s):

1. Select one of the following writer’s tasks and be prepared to share your writing with your classmates: (a) Design an expository essay analyzing the writer’s voice in a work of art with which you are familiar; (b) Write a narrative essay that communicates a powerful and sustained writer’s voice.

Stage Three: Teaching-Learning Activities

1. Start with “unpacking” your curriculum and communicating with students concerning where you are going, why you are going there, and ways in which they will be evaluated—and self-evaluate—in the process: Determine what is essential or core related to the concept of writer’s voice (e.g., What are the big ideas and essential questions for this unit on writer’s voice? What are secondary or subsidiary ideas and concepts?)
2. Complete a pre-assessment related to students’ knowledge of voice, continuously assessing where students are (starting with most advanced students): To what extent do students understand such questions as: (a) What is writer’s voice? (b) Give me an example of something written with strong writer’s voice; (c) What makes this an example of strong writer’s voice.
3. Create a sense of community (accommodating individual students’ needs, interests, and readiness levels), use flexible grouping, and use multiple instructional strategies.
4. Students begin by brainstorming what they think of when they think of voice, comparing four different pieces of writing (e.g., they show personality, they all show emotion, they all seem opinionated, writers understood what they were talking about).
5. Students are divided into smaller groups (based upon readiness levels relative to the concept of voice and related tools, developing interests, and learning preferences) (EXAMPLE: Students already interested in writer’s voice vs. students just beginning to develop the concept of voice).
6. Sub-groups: (a) Group One (Introductory): Open discussion of voice; (b) Group Two (Advanced): Independent seminar discussion of voice and the elements they associate with the concept.
7. Initial HOOK Activity: (a) Introductory Group: Think of an event and create a monologue involving three inanimate objects associated with the scene or event; use a full writer’s voice to make each object come alive: What did you have to do to make each object come alive? (b) Advanced Group: Select a personality and write a speech that “sounds like them” if they were to say it.
8. Continue to assess the range of abilities of students, including reading comprehension, passion for certain topics, capacity for independent application.
9. Use opportunities to debrief and reinforce students’ understanding of writer’s voice: esp. “Voice is the writer revealed” and “Writers have tools they use to create a voice in their writing.”
10. Lesson One Reflective Assessment Closure Activity: 3-2-1 Summary (Exit Card): Three things you’ve learned about writer’s voice today; Two comments about your

own voice as a writer (Do you have one?); One recommendation or change for future lessons. (How do you get voice in information writing? Do we have more than one voice? Do we use a different voice for different audiences?)

11. Revisit enduring understandings and essential questions: (a) There are specific tools to create strong voice; (b) Voice takes time to develop.
12. Warm-Up “HOOK” Activity: “You have to be clever to survive middle school”: Restate this as many possible ways as you can without changing its truth. Students respond individually and then form groups of two-three, selecting the best written response to the assignment.
13. Revisit key ideas in different forms: e.g., “Voice reflects attitude. A successful writer is someone who plays with the sentence to express an attitude.”
14. Reflective Assessment: Students share their written responses to assignment one: (a) three objects within a scene; (b) speech from a personality. Students discuss their analysis of how they used voice with follow-up small group peer review: What tools did you use to create writer’s voice?
15. Continue to dignify and communicate value for every student in the class, continuing to build a sense of community via collaboration: We’re all in this together: Students help each other, learn to get help when needed, and reinforce classroom rules and procedures. Overall, this process reinforces a sense of efficacy and responsibility.
16. Academic Prompt: Working with a partner, write about a moment in one of three areas: (a) sports, (b) a musical performance, or (c) a moment in school. “HOOK” twist: Write the entire piece (e.g., half a page) in one-syllable words. Students debrief at the conclusion of the writing process, discerning if the writer used only one-syllable words and still communicated a voice.
17. Use Flexible Grouping: Allow students choice at times; at other times, have students work in teacher-determined groupings (e.g., similar vs. dissimilar); determine if some occasions merit whole-group instruction or opportunities for independent investigation (e.g., the “one-syllable” assignment involved choice in student grouping, with students self-selecting their partners). Create a flow of students to achieve desired results, helping students to move within and across groups based upon formative (ongoing) assessment.
18. Students return to base groups: Instructor emphasizes that there are specific tools for creating strong voice, using a variety of instructional strategies. In addition to multiple configurations (i.e., flexible groupings), instructor uses a variety of ways to sub-group students to extend and refine their understanding of voice: (a) Advanced Group: Jack London’s poem, “Time” (Using Time to the Utmost)—a more complex, abstract poem requiring discussion; (b) Developing Group: Mary Tallmountain’s

“Last Wolf”—a more concrete and direct poem: In small groups, students select a tool (e.g., word choice) to change the voice in their assigned poem.

19. Coaching and interviewing to determine students’ growing movement toward independent application via culminating project: At key juncture points, students who demonstrate growing levels of independent understanding (e.g., a capacity for explanation, interpretation, application) have opportunities to work on their independent project/culminating performance task.
20. Continuing assessment, coaching, and observing as tools for extending and refining student understanding: Students read and discuss examples of powerful narrative poetry (e.g., “The Charge of the Light Brigade”), analyzing the voice in each poem. They then write a narrative poem with strong narrative voice. (Instructor continues to monitor and take professional action based upon: What is working? What is becoming clearer? Who can move to a more advanced level?) Instructor uses probe questions with small groups as they discuss the poems and plan their own writing, ensuring via ongoing conversations, encouragement, and instructions that each learner is progressing.
21. Teacher monitors student behaviors and uses sticky pads to write individual comments for students. Ongoing observations, interviews, and coaching activities help instructor to assess student progress and provide appropriate interventions.
22. Individual conferences: Instructor uses conference opportunities to provide individual coaching feedback and criterion-based praise as other students work on their analysis of poetry and writing their own narrative poems.
23. Presentation of Culminating Activities: Students wrote either narrative or expository essay to demonstrate their understanding of writer’s voice. At the conclusion of the unit, each student presents his or her narrative or essay (e.g., Jesse’s essay on Barbera’s “Adagio”; David’s monologue on riding roller coasters). (Note how the instructor reads the roller coaster essay for the student who is hesitant about oral presentation, reinforcing for the class David’s thoughtfulness and insight, with the objective of getting him to present himself in a future session.)
24. Teacher self-reflects on what he has learned: e.g., how he has gained insight from Jesse’s analysis of what the author does not say having equal importance to what the author states directly.
25. Closure Activity: Instructor engages students in identifying what worked in the unit—and how the unit might be modified next year. This end process continues to reinforce the ethos of the classroom as community, planning and working together in a collaborative way.