

# 3

# Finding Your Voice

## Introduction

This third module is about the search for an authentic way for you to express yourself in your writing – about ‘finding a voice’. For many writers, an important part of this search involves getting in touch with their inner feelings and gaining the confidence to express those feelings. This module includes exercises in exploring the hidden self and thinking about the tensions that can exist between the need to be true to ourselves and the need to be accepted.

This module also looks at some of the technical aspects of expressing yourself in fiction, such as the differences between first-person and third-person narrative, and the effects of adopting different personae and using different characters’ voices.

## Objectives

By the end of this module, you will have:

- assessed the importance to you of subjective feelings in your search for a voice
- seen how you can incorporate different points of view in your writing
- practised writing both first-person and third-person narratives
- considered using the subjective viewpoint.

## Three kinds of voice

Every successful author has a distinctive writing style, a blend of rhythm, vocabulary and subject matter which can be recognised as their ‘voice’. Sometimes authors forsake their own voice in order to write a story in someone else’s, taking on a made-up ‘voice’ or persona. Occasionally, ‘voice’ can be taken in a democratic sense, to mean ‘say’ or the power to voice an opinion.

So, there are three definitions of ‘voice’ in fiction:

- voice as writing style
- voice as fictional mouthpiece
- voice as right to speak.

These three uses of the word are not always independent of each other. An author’s main character (or fictional mouthpiece) may often be speaking in the author’s own writing voice, while at the same time expressing a minority point of view, i.e. giving a voice to an opinion too often ignored. A writer may discover a powerful

voice inside, hitherto forbidden for whatever reason, that is quite different from the voice used for speaking. Many of us, in fact, will have come to writing as a retreat from speech; we may have given up trying to get a spoken word in edgeways and have turned to literary expression instead. Different literary voices, like different clothes, bring out submerged aspects of the self.

Throughout this module, we shall hop back and forth between the three definitions, but we shall begin by looking in more detail at the third aspect, voice as the right to speak.

## Permission to speak

Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) opens with a dramatic confrontation between the 10-year-old Jane and Mrs Reed, her cold-hearted guardian.

Having provided her dead husband's niece with food and shelter (but not love), Mrs Reed is astonished to discover that the ungrateful Jane expects more. Outraged by the child's outspokenness, Mrs Reed utters the rebuke: *'Be seated somewhere; and until you can speak pleasantly, remain silent.'*

Nevertheless, Jane, who insists on the validity of her own truth, will not be silenced.

Had Charlotte Brontë wished, she could, no doubt, have turned this confrontation alone into a brilliant short story. It deals with the essence of what makes many short stories great: the conflict between accepted wisdom (or social demands) and an individual's subjective experience.

Above all, the short story can assert the validity of the dissenting point of view: in other words, our fundamental right not to *'speak pleasantly'*.

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## Activity 1

Have you ever found yourself in a situation where everybody except you was having a good time? Think about a recent group event that you have not enjoyed. It may have been a meal in a restaurant, a party, a meeting at work, a morning at mother-and-toddler club, a funeral.

Write an account of this event from your own point of view, in the first person. Concentrate on the smallest details that made you feel alienated. Write about 500 to 1000 words.

Having completed this piece of work, set it aside for at least an hour. Go away and do something completely different: washing, housework or a run round the block.

Then come back and read it through. Listen to 'your voice' as it emerges from your writing. How would you describe it? Is it bold, nervous, confused, witty, cynical, poetic, gentle, shy, strong, creepy, funny, unhappy, angry, relaxed, uptight, masculine, feminine?

Think of three adjectives to describe the voice of your writing:

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You may find, to your surprise, that the personality that emerges from your writing is quite different from the person you thought you were. A timid person may *write* in a 'loud' bold voice; an aggressive person may appear sensitive and shy on paper; a sad person may write in a voice full of hope; or a cheerful soul may uncover a sad centre. If your written voice surprises you in this way, that's very exciting.

## Your writing style

If you found it hard to identify a distinct voice, don't be too alarmed. Most, if not all, writers have to fight nervousness and self-doubt when starting to write. Most of us don't know exactly who we are, let alone what our voice says about us. It's not uncommon for a writer to take on somebody else's voice at the beginning – another author's whose way of writing is most admired.

“What is my voice? Woolfish, alas, but tough.” Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath (1932–63), the poet, wrote this line in her diary when she was 25 years old. When I first read it, I puzzled over the words, thinking 'woolfish' meant 'like a wolf'. In fact, of course, Sylvia Plath meant that her voice was like Virginia Woolf's – the cry of 'alas' suggests that she regretted being so heavily influenced by that towering twentieth-century literary figure, in whose shadow all women were writing at the time.

'Delicate', 'sharp', 'witty' are three adjectives one might use to describe Woolf's voice. To these, Plath wanted to add 'tough', to make the voice her own.

Sylvia Plath's published journals are definitely worth reading. They show the workings of an apprentice writer: one who died tragically young. It is interesting to contrast her diaries with the letters to her mother, written at the same time, which are also published, as *Letters Home*. There is a huge chasm between the two Sylvias presented, one in the letters and the other in the diaries.

The 'voice' of the letters is that of a cheerful, high-achieving daughter who always looks on the bright side. For example:

“We slept till noon on Sunday which was a lovely icy blue day, and went for a five-mile walk, which cheered us up no end.”

At the same time, in her diary Plath was writing an angry, frustrated outpouring of fury against some people she disliked:

“Jealous one I am, green-eyed, spite-seething...”

There is nothing unusual about a daughter censoring stories for her mother's ears, but the contrast between Sylvia Plath's 'false self' (the one promoted to please her Mom) and her 'other self' (the one only let out of its cage in the secrecy of the journal) is painfully marked.

## Activity 2

In the next exercise, I would like you to relax, sit down with your feet up, breathe deeply, shut your eyes and imagine that you are strolling through a zoo at night.

You find that you stop by a cage that intrigues you and peer inside to find a creature in the darkness staring back at you. It could be anything:

an impala	a lion	a reptile
a bat	a gorilla	a sloth.

Find an animal that catches your interest and try to imagine how it would feel to be that creature. Don't write anything until you have thoroughly explored being your particular animal in a cage in a zoo at night. When you're ready to write down how it feels, try to produce up to 500 words. Write a poem if you like.

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The object of this exercise is to encourage you to express difficult emotions. By 'becoming' an animal, you may find you are able to get in touch with hidden feelings.

At the end of her life, Sylvia Plath wrote the tremendous poems which are contained in the selection called *Ariel*. These are the poems by which her reputation was made. At the time, she wrote to a friend: *'I am producing free stuff locked in me for years.'*

In poems like 'Daddy', 'The Applicant' or 'Lady Lazarus' she was at last able to find voices for her angry, rageful, hurt self. It was as if all her buried feelings finally rose up and were recognised, at the same time being transformed by the redeeming power of poetry.

It would be a mistake to assume that the angry voice of Sylvia Plath was her 'real' voice. It was a hidden voice, more powerful because suppressed, but only one of many.

Many of the stories by women mentioned in this module are taken from *The Secret Self*, a selection of short stories by women, edited by Hermione Lee. In the introduction, she points out that what distinguishes many of the stories is:

“ a form of conflict between secret visions and unwelcome realities, between personal desires and family restrictions, between consolatory dreams and hostile circumstances. ”

In other words, the stories often deal with the struggle that ensues when we try to be who we are, in the face of how other people would like us to be.

### Family pressures

Allan Gurganus, the short-story writer, has identified the process by which a person (here a boy called Bryan) is forced to become something he's not, through the gradual moulding of family pressure:

“Without much accuracy, with strangely little love at all, your family will decide for you exactly who you are, and they'll keep nudging, coaxing, poking you until you've changed into that very simple shape. They'll choose it lazily. Only when it suits them. Maybe one summer morning. You could, for instance, be seated in a wicker chair that your mother, stirred up for six weeks by a crafts class, spray-painted a lurid apple green. Why? You could be slouched on the porch reading, at age ten, page sixty of some Tom Swifty adventure full of selflessness, abandoned lighthouses, adult crooks, plus one loyal and incredibly intelligent beagle puppy. And because you're curled up, engrossed, chewing on one index finger, book pressed near your face, because at just this moment your father, bringing home a business partner to lunch, trudges up the backstairs, nods toward you and boasts, 'Our family brain,' because of this one moment, you will go on labouring under that half-slandering heading for a lifetime. Bryan = Brain.”

Allan Gurganus, *Breathing Room* (1976)

It's not so much that Bryan is not a brain, but that 'brain' is not all that he is. But because of this one moment, he will go on *'labouring under that half-slandering heading for a lifetime'*.

Writing often starts as an attempt to express a self that has never seen the light of day because, for various reasons, we didn't even know that self existed.

### Lost for words

Many of us will have felt 'speechless' at times, perhaps unable to find the words we are groping for, or unable to speak loudly enough, to make ourselves heard. Other people may have voices that are bigger than ours, or speak fluently in a language we find difficult (using a foreign language – or simply a vocabulary – that we can't understand). They may drown us out.

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## Activity 3

Think back to a time when you remember feeling 'lost for words'. Was there ever a time when you felt that the things that were happening to you were outside your control? Can you remember feeling powerless – unable to argue your corner or put your point of view across? Write a brief account of your most vivid memory here.

It would be a good idea to think about what you would like to have been able to say on your speech-deprived occasion. However, for the moment just remember what it felt like to be dumb.

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### Acting out

It has been said that the genre of fantasy arose in fiction in the absence of an adequate vocabulary to express certain fears and frustrations. Sometimes a character's confusion arises from the need to express aspects of the self which society condemns and for which no language at all is currently available.

You may know Franz Kafka's famous short story *Metamorphosis* (or *The Transformation*) which he wrote in German in 1912. It tells of a young man, Gregor Samsa, who wakes up one morning to discover that he has turned into a large, verminous beetle.

When his mother knocks at his bedroom door to ask whether everything is all right. Gregor can only reply with an *'irrepressible painful squeaking'*.

“Gregor had intended to answer at length and explain everything, but in the circumstances he confined himself to saying: 'Yes, yes, thank you mother, I'm just getting up.'”

Franz Kafka, *The Transformation* (1912)

In a situation where there are no words available to express difference, acting out is the only option. Gregor's small, close-knit family are naturally horrified by the transformation, particularly his enraged, bourgeois dad. The story is told in painstaking, deadpan detail and is both funny and not funny.

Eventually, Gregor's father attacks his son with a bombardment of apples from the fruit bowl on the sideboard. One lodges in his back where it rots and sets up an infection which slowly kills Gregor. The night before he dies, Gregor – though ostracised from the family because of being a cockroach – struggles to share a musical family evening spent listening to his sister play the violin so beautifully:

“Her face was inclined to one side, with a searching and sorrowful look her eyes followed the notes of the music. Gregor crawled a little further forward, keeping his head close to the floor so that it might be possible for their eyes to meet. Was he an animal, that music could move him so? It seemed to him as if the way were opening towards the unknown nourishment he craved. He was determined to press on until he reached his sister, to pluck at her skirt and thus to indicate to her that she should come into his room with her violin...”

Franz Kafka, *The Transformation*

Sadly, Gregor is then locked in his bedroom by his sister and he dies in the early hours of the morning.

It has been said that in this tale Kafka embodies a sense of himself as a verminous insect – a feeling caused perhaps by his highly critical father or the anti-semitic atmosphere surrounding him in Prague, where he grew up in a Jewish family. In Prague, in 1912, this way may have been the only way available to express such feelings.

## Losing your voice

In a book called *Meeting at the Crossroads*, authors Carol Gilligan and Lyn Mikel Brown show how adolescent girls today also come to a place where language fails and words dry up. They describe a process of 'losing voice' which they claim these girls go through.

When they reach puberty and start to make relationships outside the family, the need to fit in, to be acceptable, compliant and ‘nice’ overrides the need to be true to oneself. Girls of this age lose touch with what they really want and retreat into confused inarticulacy. Parents will recognise the answer *‘I dunno’*.

“As the phrase ‘I don’t know’ enters our interviews with girls at this developmental juncture, we observe girls struggling over speaking and not speaking, knowing and not knowing, feeling and not feeling, and we see the makings of an inner division as girls come to a place where they cannot say or feel or know what they have experienced – what they have felt and known.”

Carol Gilligan and Lyn Mikel Brown, *Meeting at the Crossroads*

Think back to the memory of being lost for words that you described for the last activity. Whether you are male or female, the sensation of having no voice is a valuable one to experience, because it is the necessary precursor to finding a voice. For Gregor, as a cockroach, just before he died, it seemed to him as if *‘the way were opening towards the unknown nourishment he craved’*. And Bryan ‘the Brain’ in the Allan Gurganus extract above, knew that there was a whole side of himself that was not being acknowledged. Sylvia Plath, too, struggled to express an ‘unacceptable’ voice. The authors of *Meeting at the Crossroads* describe:

“the desire for authentic connection,  
the experience of disconnection,  
difficulties in speaking,  
the feeling of not being listened to or heard or responded to empathically,  
the feeling of not being able to convey or even believe in one’s own experience.”

Carol Gilligan and Lyn Mikel Brown, *Meeting at the Crossroads*

There is an arresting line towards the beginning of Nabokov’s famous novel *Lolita* which will illustrate the silence of the girls. The narrator, a nasty piece of work, is pleading his case, claiming that he is following an established precedent in indulging a passion for pre-pubescent girls.

“Marriage and co-habitation before the age of puberty are still not uncommon in certain East Indian provinces. Lepcha old men of eighty copulate with girls of eight and nobody minds.”

Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (1955)

Nobody minds? What about the eight-year-olds? Do they mind? Of course they do, but like the girls in *Meeting at the Crossroads* they have no voice.