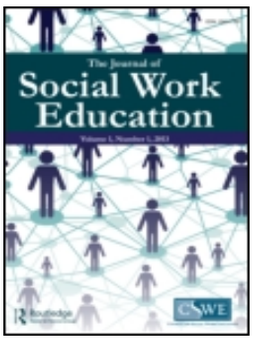

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Susan P. Robbins

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EDITORIAL

Finding Your Voice as an Academic Writer (and Writing Clearly)

One of the questions doctoral students and early-career faculty frequently ask is how they can find or develop their voice as a writer. As I think back to my early days in the academy, this is not necessarily a question that ever crossed my mind. However, in what seems a lifetime ago, I recall that one of the reviewers who evaluated my publications for tenure stated that one of the criteria he looked for was whether my voice was present in my articles. Thankfully, he concluded it was. Needless to say, I was grateful because writing did not come easily to me initially, and I certainly was not conscious of having a voice. Now, looking back, I attribute developing my voice in writing to a most unusual source. While chairing the university faculty grievance committee I was tasked with writing grievance findings that would be succinct, factually accurate, clear, convincing, and able to stand up in court in the event that a lawsuit was filed. It was in this extremely nontraditional arena for writing that I found and developed my voice as a writer.

What, exactly, is an academic voice? It turns out there is no standard definition. In its most basic form, some have proposed that voice "distinguishes between *your thoughts* and words, and those of *other authors*") (University of Melbourne, n.d., para 1). In a similar vein, Wendig (2012) called it "a creation of that writer and that writer *only*" (para 4). Others simply see it as a style of writing that is specific to academia (Everitt-Reynolds, Delahunt, & Maguire, 2012). Alternatively, Potgieter & Smit (2009) have characterized it as "our scholarly identity in our craft," which involves finding "knowledge and understanding that is blended into our identity" (pp. 215–216). However, as MacPhail (2014) has noted, there is simply no consensus about voice, despite the emphasis that is placed on it.

So, given the lack of consensus, how does one go about finding or developing a voice? In academic writing, it is important not only to present ideas, facts, and conclusions but to also have a point of view or stance. When you are able to consistently communicate that in your writing, you are using your voice. Or, as succinctly stated by literary agent and editor Rachel Gardner (2010), "Voice is all about your *originality* and having the *courage* to express it" (para 5). To establish credibility, it is necessary for your opinions to be based on evidence rather than unsupported conjecture, ideology, or unsubstantiated generalizations. In some ways I think it is easier to express one's voice in conceptual articles because, by their very nature, the writer is synthesizing literature, developing theories or conceptual frameworks, and perhaps most important, advancing a new perspective. However, voice can also be expressed in research papers, particularly in the discussion section as the writer makes the transition from the study's results to arguments and conclusions. In doing so, Brown (2014) has cautioned that it is important not to bury your voice in quotes from more well-established researchers. Although your ideas may be based on extant research, your conclusions should be based on your original thoughts, which clearly communicate your stance. It is also important to note that voice can also be expressed in one's choice of research topics.

Developing one's voice takes courage and practice. Courage is necessary because you will inevitably experience failure when your manuscripts are rejected or receive harsh comments from reviewers. It is extremely rare for new authors to have immediate success in publishing, and even after experiencing some success, you will likely fail again (Lisle, 2016). But even in the face of certain failure, courage requires us to allow ourselves to be vulnerable enough to continue trying, despite no guarantee of success (Brown, 2015). It takes courage not to quit! As Lisle reassuringly tells potential authors, "May you have the courage to fail, because it is the courage to succeed" (para. 19).

We all know that practice is necessary to achieve skill in any endeavor, and it is no exception in the quest to find and develop one's voice. MacPhail (2014) offers several concrete suggestions and exercises to help authors achieve this. The first is to *free write*, which is simply the process of starting with a blank page (or screen) and writing whatever comes to mind. This does not require (or use) notes, sources, quotes, or data of any kind. Think about an argument you'd like to make or a position you'd like to take, and write about it, unfiltered and uncensored. Write continuously for a predetermined amount of time without stopping, editing, or rearranging sentences. Just use your own words. McPhail also suggests writing every day, even if it's for a very short period of time. By doing so, you will be forming the habit of writing, and she proposes that one's voice emerges through continuous writing. Another suggestion is to record your thoughts and arguments or use voice recognition software. By literally hearing your own voice, you can begin to recognize it in your writing.

In addition to practicing writing, it is also important to read broadly, deeply, and critically. Read in depth within your academic field but also read outside your field. MacPhail suggests reading fiction, biographies, essays, blogs, and magazine articles and being cognizant of the different styles of writing used for each. Read passages from your favorite authors and analyze their writing styles. What is it that draws you to those particular authors? What makes their writing compelling? Read critically. Analyze the arguments and claims made by various authors and make connections between their ideas and your own (Fitzmaurice & O'Farrell, n.d.). As you critically assess others' writing in your field, think about how you will be able to use it in your work, and free write the ideas that emerge. Write first and revise later. As Silvia (2010) notes, "The goal of writing (text generation) is to "throw confused, wide eyed words on a page; the goal of text revision is to scrub the words clean so that they sound nice and make sense" (p. 75).

And above all else, write clearly. Academic writing is notoriously bad, and according to experimental psychologist and linguist Steven Pinker (2014a), it doesn't have to be that way. He decries the fact that "people who devote their lives to the world of ideas are so inept at conveying them" (para. 9), and he examines the potential explanations. Citing numerous examples, Pinker demonstrates the ways academic writing is most typically challenging, boring, and dense. By presenting complex ideas in stultifying, wordy, professional jargon, we make our writing inaccessible. This is largely because of bad habits, self-consciousness, and what Pinker calls the "curse of knowledge"—the inability to realize that the reader might not know what the writer knows (Pinker, 2014b).

Pinker, who is an uncommonly good writer, gives sage advice to academic authors. First and foremost, he advises us to write in plain English rather than academese or researchese. He promotes a classic style of writing that is conversational and clear. Although this style may not be appropriate for research journals, it will make your work accessible to a more general audience. In thinking about finding and developing an academic voice, we should strive to write with clarity and flair. After all, this is a skill that can be mastered, and if Pinker can do it, so can we.

Susan P. Robbins
University of Houston
Editor-in-Chief

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