

What Gives Writing a Voice?

SUGGESTED LEARNING STRATEGIES: Marking the Text, Think-Pair-Share, Word Map

Voice and Writing

Excerpted from *Pacesetter English: Voices of Modern Culture*

What gives writing a “voice”? The metaphor on which the term is built incorporates two things associated with the human voice—the articulation of personality, individuality, and the speaking out, the emerging from silence into speech.

“Voice” in writing seems to imply distinctive qualities, uniqueness, that which makes writing personal—not mainly in terms of content (though WHAT is said is believed to bring about writing with a “strong voice”) . . . but in terms of style. Writing “with a strong voice” characterizes the writer, both confirming and projecting his or her identity.

“Voice” also implies a speaking out, a refusal to be without language. Often, this quality is associated with the social voices of writers who are in some sense oppressed or who are denied the opportunity to speak their experiences by a dominating “mainstream,” but a writer’s connection to a social group can take other forms as well. This social aspect of “voice” is more than psychological; it presents itself within a cultural context, claims a space within a conversation. To do this, such writing needs to represent not just an individual but also a kind of experience that has resonance for some people besides the writer, members of some group whose identity AS A GROUP matters. That group could be any group: a recognized ethnic or racial population or a subgroup of the high school student population, such as female athletes, musicians, working students, etc.

These two shades of meaning in the word *voice* seem to be on a collision course: one looks for the qualities of an individual style, the other at how a piece of writing articulates a cultural **perspective** shared by more than one person. Our criteria need to account for writing that does both, that is both distinctive and culturally powerful.

Essential Question

How does voice function in and beyond the contexts of writing?

LITERARY TERMS

Style is the distinctive way a writer uses language. It is characterized by elements such as diction, syntax, imagery, and use of literary devices.



WORD CONNECTIONS

Psychological contains two roots, *-psych-* and *-logy-*, from the Greek words *psyche*, meaning “soul or breath,” and *logos*, meaning “word.” The roots also appear in *psychic*, *psychotic*, *biology*, and *logical*. The suffix *-al* indicates that the word is an adjective.

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

A **perspective** is one’s attitude or way of looking at the world.

Use these questions to guide your reading of the poem.

- What are the voices of the speaker? Highlight lines that indicate the speaker's identities.
- How does diction show identity? Highlight examples.
- Who is the audience?
- What is the author's purpose?
- What is the speaker's attitude or tone? Mark the text to show textual evidence.

GRAMMAR & USAGE

Every writer has a unique voice. It is achieved in part through word choice and syntax. Poet Pat Mora demonstrates a distinct voice in "Legal Alien" by mixing English and Spanish and repeating the phrase *able to . . .* in lines 2, 4, and 6. She sets up a parallel series with the verb *able* followed by an infinitive:

able to slip . . . , able to sit . . . , able to order . . .

Ask yourself how your own choices of words and phrases help express your unique voice.

P o e t r y

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pat Mora is a poet, writer, and social activist whose works explore issues of heritage and social inequality. An avid traveler, Mora wrote *Communion* (1991) about her experiences traveling in Cuba, India, and Pakistan. A year later, she published her first children's book about a beloved aunt who taught her to appreciate her own Mexican-American heritage.

Legal Alien

by Pat Mora

- Bi-lingual, Bi-cultural,
able to slip from "How's life?"
to "Me'stan volviendo loca,"
able to sit in a paneled office
5 drafting memos in smooth English,
able to order in fluent Spanish
at a Mexican restaurant,
American but hyphenated,
viewed by Anglos as perhaps exotic,
10 perhaps inferior, definitely different,
viewed by Mexicans as alien,
(their eyes say, "You may speak
Spanish but you're not like me")
an American to Mexicans
15 a Mexican to Americans
a handy token
sliding back and forth
between the fringes of both worlds
by smiling
20 by masking the discomfort
of being pre-judged
Bi-laterally.

