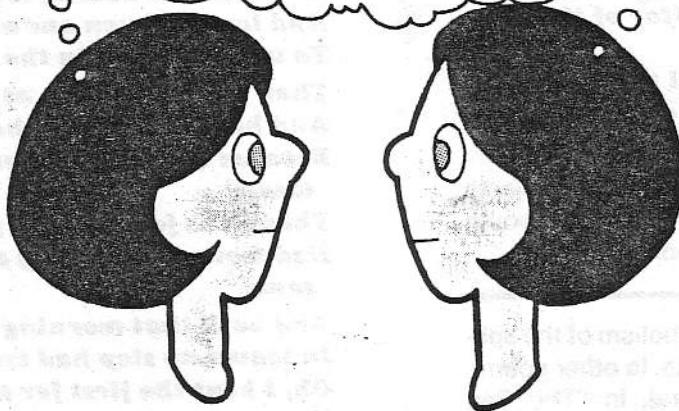


Finding Your Voice



by Robert Boone

Who's speaking? "Now, as you address the ball, start to waggle your driver. Next, start your backswing slowly, making sure to pivot. This will help you to avoid shanking.... Begin your pass briskly, opening your hips at the point of contact. Roll your wrists and follow through toward your target to avoid slicing or hooking. If you are using a high iron or a wedge, take a generous divot after the ball. . . ."

Waggle? Pivot? Shank? Slice? Wedge? Divot? What do these words mean, anyway? They mean plenty, if you play golf. These are instructional terms any golf teacher assumes the pupil understands. Golf—just like bowling, glass blowing, and ballet—has its own specialized language that the learner must quickly acquire.

Learning to write is no different. Your English teacher assumes that you know the meaning of certain terms: "topic sentence," "punctuation," and "paragraph."

Another writing term has gained prominence lately. The

word can be found in recent books, and now and then it pops up in the classroom. It may grow in popularity, or it may vanish. It could become overused, misused, or abused. But, for the young writer, the term is worth knowing because it could offer a fresh perspective on what it takes to write well.

The word is "voice." Perhaps you have already heard it:

"Cara, this writing is stiff and heavy. I want to hear *your* voice."

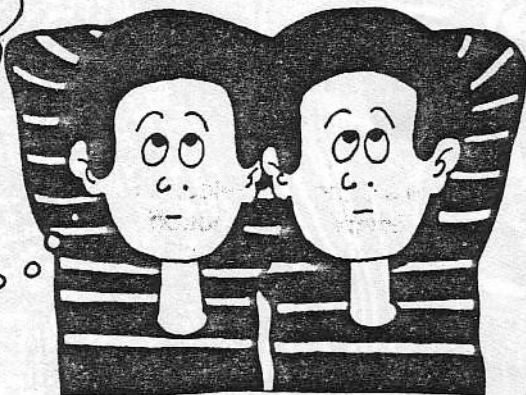
"Fanny, sometimes I recognize your voice; at other times I

hear someone else talking. I want to hear you all of the time."

"Good work, Clay, now I can hear you talking."

If you have not met the word, you have met teachers who emphasize clear and honest expression. They have helped you see that good writing consists of more than mere "error-free" writing. And they have told you that almost all great writers speak to their audiences in clear, simple, concrete language. Without actually using the word, teachers such as these are promoting "voice." Or at least they

My writing is stiff and heavy. I can't hear my voice.



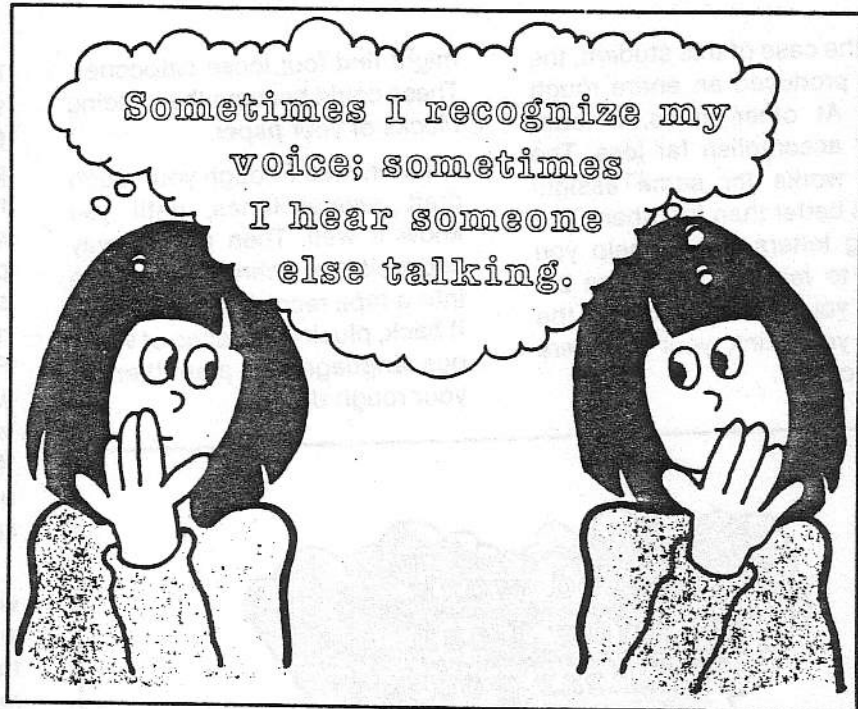
are looking for the same results as those who talk about voice.

Perhaps you have said something like this: "I wish I could write the way I talk. Last night, I described a movie to a few friends. They knew exactly what I wanted to say, and I said it! The listeners were completely captivated. When I write, though, I feel uncomfortable. The words don't come right, even if they are correct. That I finally hand the teacher a boring."

A writer who uses the "voice approach" would tell you to use these accomplished speaking skills in your writing. (Speaking and writing are not identical, but they do share many common qualities—good speech and good writing, for example, are fresh, honest, and clear.) Begin writing in the relaxed and natural voice you use when speaking to a friend. Later you will have to edit, but *begin* in your own voice.

How can you find your writing voice?

The first step is to understand the term. If our definition still seems obscure, think of it this way: acquiring voice in writing means acquiring those natural tendencies we associate with ordinary conversation. We look outside of ourselves for standards of technical correctness



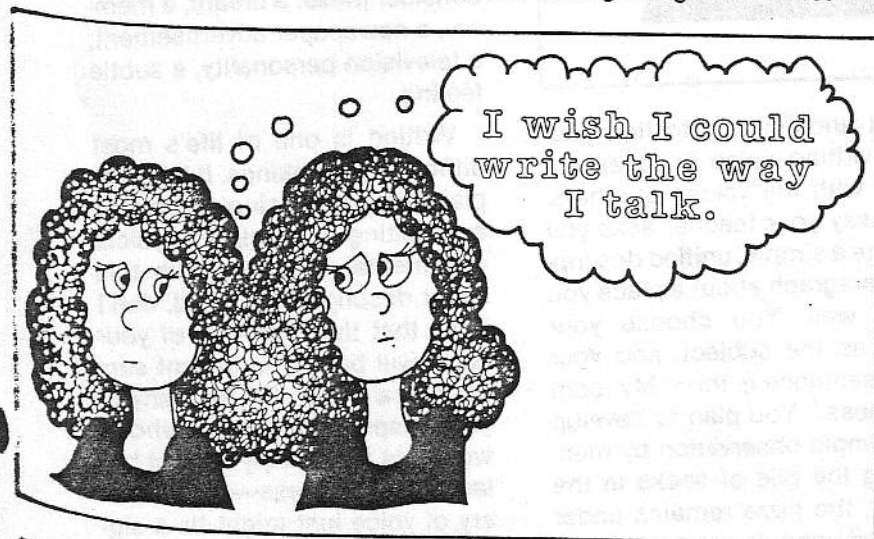
(spelling, punctuation, etc.), but we look inward for our voice.

A way to start recognizing your own voice is to write letters. You have probably observed that in letters to friends, you can communicate more effectively than in a term paper. Why is this? When you write a friendly letter, you address someone who knows your unique voice. In letters you deal directly with a subject; you need not worry about someone else's sense of correctness.

Why not, then, begin a formal school writing assignment in let-

ter form? In the end, you will have to strike out "Dear Barney," and make sure you have adhered to the rules of correctness. But by beginning in the personal voice of the letter writer, you should feel more confident.

Recently a high school student from New York approached a formal writing assignment by using the letter format. Her task was to write a four-page character analysis of Huckleberry Finn. She had read and reread the novel. She had underlined key passages and taken extensive notes in class. She had even made up study cards. But she could not get started. "The ideas all seemed like they came from someone else," she said. Finally, she sat down and wrote a letter to a friend describing Huck the way she might describe a new student at her high school. Immediately she found herself expressing her own ideas in her own way of speaking. As the paper grew more formal, she added many points from her notes, but she maintained her own voice and her own way of looking at the character.



In the case of this student, the letter produced an entire rough draft. At other times, a letter might accomplish far less. The letter works for some assignments better than for others. But writing letters should help you begin to feel the difference between your writing voice and the voice you think your teachers want to hear.

might find four loose categories. These could become the building blocks of your paper.

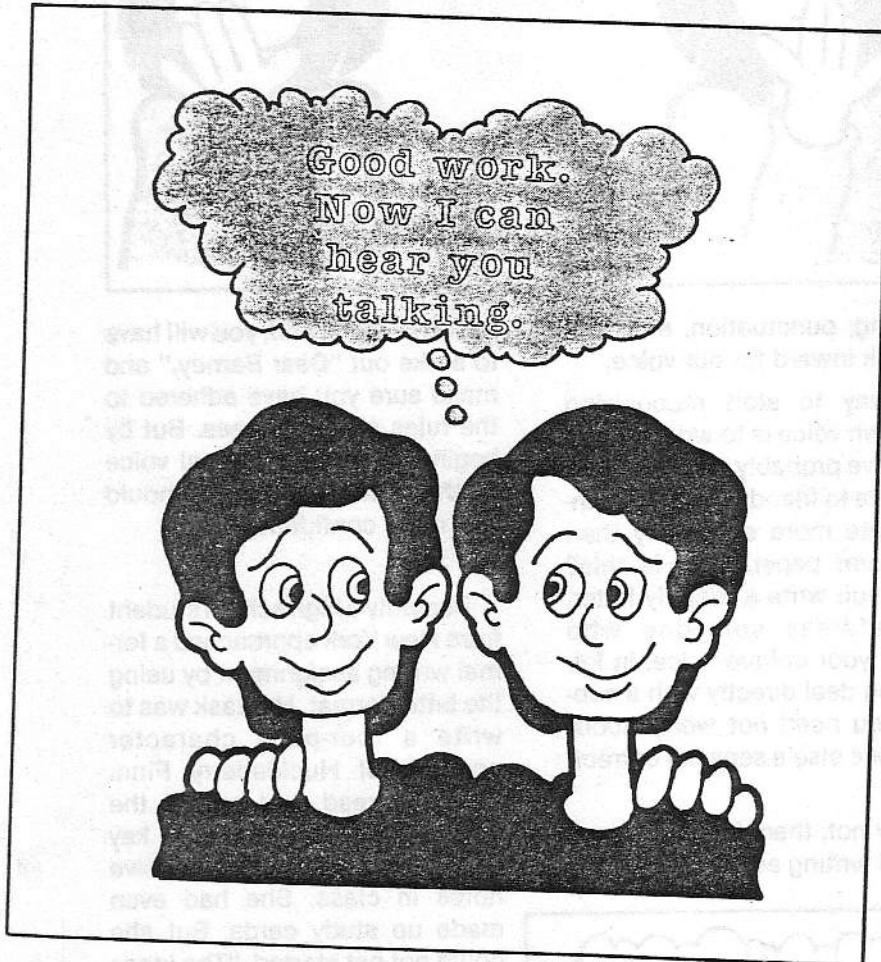
Later, read through your rough draft several times, until you know it well. Then put it away and recite the entire composition into a tape recorder. As you play it back, pluck out pieces of vigorous language, and plant them in your rough draft.

before you construct your own version, rewrite the paper several times in the voices of other people such as your mother, a Marine drill instructor, John Belushi, and the ant that inhabits a small plantation near your bed. Consider carefully what you do to make each voice recognizable. Finally, using the same material, write the paragraph entirely in your own voice. Try to heighten those qualities that you judge to be decidedly your own style of speaking.

Or you could try keeping a writer's journal. Most serious writers keep a journal to record thoughts, observations, memories and whatever else crosses their minds. A journal can be the storehouse for small ideas which later grow into large ones. It can also be a place where a writer experiments with his or her own voice.

No one else has to read the journal. By definition, it holds your own private view of the world. Devote a few minutes every day recording whatever it is you consider important. The only requirement is that you write in your own natural voice. As you acquire the journal habit, you will have no trouble coming up with subjects, but until then consider these: a dream, a memory, a newspaper advertisement, a television personality, a subtle feeling.

Writing is one of life's most difficult undertakings. It involves planning, composing, executing and editing. It requires physical and mental strength. With this sober description in mind, don't think that the discovery of your voice will bring you instant success as a writer. But for many of you—especially those whose writing is technically correct but lacking in liveliness—the discovery of voice just might be a significant breakthrough in your development as a writer. !



A tape recorder also can help you locate your authentic writing voice. Begin the Huck Finn composition, for instance, by chatting into a tape recorder. Be specific. What makes Huck unique? Would he be a good friend? How would your mother like him? What crowd would he hang around with? Once you have transcribed this tape, look for patterns in this apparently disorganized mess. Even though you might have made 82 separate observations about Huck, you

Yet another way to find your own writing voice is to experiment with the voices of others. Let's say your teacher asks you to write a simple, unified descriptive paragraph about a place you know well. You choose your room as the subject, and your topic sentence is this: "My room is a mess." You plan to develop this simple observation by mentioning the pile of socks in the corner, the pizza remains under the bed, and the mountain of record jackets on the desk. But