Voice Lessons
Consider the following quote:

*Your writing voice is the deepest possible reflection of who you are. The job of your voice is not to seduce or flatter or make well-shaped sentences. In your voice, your readers should be able to hear the contents of your mind, your heart, your soul.*

~Meg Rosoff, writer

What does the quote mean? Be prepared to share your thoughts.

We talk often about “voice” in writing. It is one of the measurable domains on your STAAR test. But what is it? And how do you improve it? Writer Meg Rosoff explains that “Your writing voice is the deepest possible reflection of who you are. The job of your voice is not to seduce or flatter or make well-shaped sentences. In your voice, your readers should be able to hear the contents of your mind, your heart, your soul.” What does this quote mean? What does Meg Rosoff define voice to be? What does she say it is not?
Claim #1: All writers have voice. What is “VOICE”? Nancy Dean explains voice as “the color and texture of communication.” But what do you think of when you are asked to add VOICE to your writing? (allow for responses)
Voice is defined as the author’s style; the quality that makes the writing unique. It shows the author’s character, personality, and attitude. It is the speech and thought patterns of a narrator. It develops a persona. It is VOICE that creates the experience for the reader, thus voice is one of the most important elements of writing.
All writers have VOICE.

There are five elements that make up voice. Voice is developed through diction, detail, imagery, syntax, and tone. Let’s take a look at each of these elements separately.
Diction is the foundation of voice.

- word choice
  - clear
  - concrete
  - exact
- reflects the writer’s vision
- steers the reader’s thought
- depends on topic, purpose, occasion
- rely on understanding connotation and denotation

Claim #2:
Diction is the foundation of voice. It contributes to all the other elements of voice. Diction is word choice, the author’s choice of words. To have strong voice, a writer should choose words that are clear, concrete, and exact. Strong words with meaning that invoke a specific effect on the reader.

Diction is important because which words the author chooses reflects the writer’s vision, but also steers the reader’s thoughts. How it is said says something ABOUT the author and does something TO the reader.

Diction depends on topic, purpose, and occasion. The more sophisticated the topic, the more sophisticated the diction. For example a business letter vs a friendly letter will change which words a writer will employ. Some topics even require specialized language.

The purpose of the writing also influences the diction. Is the writer trying to entertain, amuse, inform, persuade? Diction also depends on occasion. This is what teachers are referencing when we caution students about formal and informal writing. Formal diction, informal diction, colloquial diction and slang are all choices a writer has to make on diction that are based on occasion.

A good writer must also understand connotative and denotative meanings of words. What is connotation and denotation? (connotation is suggested meaning; denotation is literal - dictionary - meaning). Connotation and denotation give words power and can produce a strong reaction in the reader. So paying close attention to the connotative and denotative meanings of words will enhance the writer’s voice.

Thus, diction is the foundation of voice that ultimately shapes the reader’s thinking by giving insight into the author.
Details create a precise picture.

- facts, observations, and incidents
- develop a subject
- focuses the reader’s attention to particulars
  - topic
  - setting
  - narrator
  - author
- also powerful to have a lack of detail

Claim #3:
Details bring life, color, and description that a writer uses to create a precise mental picture for the reader. Details are facts, observations, and incidents that help develop a subject. When the subject is clear and the vision is precise, the reader’s attention will be more focused on the particulars like the topic, the setting, the narrator, and/or the author. But, believe it or not, there are times when a more focused description is not desirable. Sometimes it is the absence of details that is more powerful. For example, in *The Giver* when Father euthanizes the smaller of the twin infants, his lack of caring and his seemingly ambivalent behavior - the lack of emotional detail - made the scene that much more powerful and the idea of the Community being a Dystopia more realized. That lack of detail was more powerful than a very exact description. Either way - very precise detail or very imprecise detail - good writers choose detail with care, selecting only those details that add meaning and avoiding those that are distractions.
Imagery creates a sensory experience.

- verbal representation of sensory experience
  - visual imagery (sight)
  - auditory imagery (sound)
  - tactile imagery (touch)
  - olfactory imagery (smell)
  - gustatory imagery (taste)
- results from diction and detail
- imagery is not figurative
  - used to impart figurative meaning
  - some images have traditional figurative meaning

Claim #4:
Imagery is that part of writing that creates a sensory experience. Imagery is a verbal representation of the five senses. Imagery can be visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory. While visual imagery is the most common type of imagery, good writers will experiment with engaging all of the senses of a reader - and will even blend those senses where multiple senses are engaged.

Imagery is linked to diction and detail. A clear image is created with carefully chosen words (diction) and specificity of details. When a writer successfully contributes to voice with imagery, the reader will have a vivid experience, experience a specific emotion, and respond to a particular idea presented in the writing.

It is important to note that imagery in and of itself is NOT figurative. If I say “there stands a towering, mighty, aged oak”, the imagery gives a visual of a tall, strong, old tree. However, when I assign that imagery to something else - “there stands my grandfather, a towering, mighty, aged oak”, it gives the literal imagery figurative meaning. So although imagery is not figurative, it can be used to impart figurative meaning.

It is important that you note that some images have traditional figurative meanings. For example, a river is a symbol of life’s journey; and eagle is a symbol of freedom. Imagery and traditional figurative meanings can give the writer an opportunity to create a really impactful statement and experience for a reader.
Syntax is the way words are arranged in sentences.

- basic structure = must be a subject, verb, sensical word order
- manipulate word order (basic order = subject - verb - object/complement)
  - inverting subject and verb (Am I ever sorry!)
  - place a complement at the beginning (Hungry, without a doubt, he is.)
  - placing an object in front of a verb (Sara I like - not Susan.)
  - enhance writing, but don’t cause distraction

Claim #5:
Syntax is the way words are arranged in sentences. The basic structure for sentences is prescribed - a subject, a verb, and additional words to add clarity (sense), a gifted writer will play with word order, sentence length, sentence focus, and punctuation to impart personality on their writing. Manipulating and controlling sentences will add to the overall voice of a piece of writing. There are 4 ways to manipulate a sentence:

Manipulate the word order. The basic order of words in a sentence is subject, followed by a verb, followed by an object or complement. There are several ways to manipulate the order of the words in a sentence to draw attention to the sentence.

1) invert the subject and the verb (I am sorry s-v-complement)
2) place a complement at the beginning of the sentence instead of the end (Without a doubt, he is hungry s-v-complement)
3) place an object in front of the verb instead of behind it. (I like Sara, not Susan s-v-direct object)

A good writer will blend conventional order with more unconventional order to enhance the writing, but not so much as to cause distraction.
Syntax is the way words are arranged in sentences.

- vary sentence length
  - 6 - 15 words is average
  - same length simultaneously = rhythm
  - long sentence followed by short sentence = emphasis

Another way to control syntax for emphasis, affect, and personality is to vary the sentence length. The approximate length of an average sentence is between 6 and 15 words. Putting sentences of the same length side by side creates a singsong affect (rhythm). Whereas a long sentence followed by a shorter sentence places emphasis on the shorter sentence and shifts the reader’s attention to the content of the shorter sentence. Thus, many modern writers put key ideas in short sentences.
Syntax is the way words are arranged in sentences.

- change the focus within a sentence
  - syntactic tension - withholding the completion of a sentence
    - loose sentences
      - closure comes early = relieve tension
      - *You will fail this class as long as you don’t do your work.*
    - periodic sentences
      - delay closure = high tension
      - *As long as you don’t do your work, you will fail this class.*
  - repetition
    - purposeful
    - of words, phrases, clauses, and grammatical forms

Changing what the reader focuses on in a sentence will also add voice to your writing. Syntactic tension is withholding the completion of the grammatical structure of a sentence; you don’t allow the sentence to end right away and this causes tension (suspense). Loose sentences lack syntactic tension. Closure comes early, so there is no real tension. Look at this example “You will fail this class as long as you don’t do your work.” The emphasis in this sentence is the cause of the failure (it comes first in the sentence.) But periodic sentences delay closure and create high tension (suspense): As long as you don’t do your work, you will fail this class. In the second sentence the focus is on the problem.

Another way to change the focus within a sentence is through repetition. Purposeful repetition of a word, phrase, clause, and grammatical forms. Grammatical forms are things like the repetition of prepositional phrases or interjections. Repetition focuses the reader’s attention on specific elements of the writing.
Syntax is the way words are arranged in sentences.

- inject purposeful punctuation
  - semicolon ( ; )
    - equal weight to both parts
    - creates balance
    - reinforces parallel ideas
  - colon ( : )
    - focus attention to the words that follow
    - indicates the second summarizes or explains the first
    - expect closely related, but more important info to follow
  - dash ( -- )
    - sudden change in thought or tone
    - sets off a brief summary

Finally, you can manipulate syntax through purposeful punctuation, specifically using semicolons, colons, and dashes.

Semicolons are used when you want to give equal weight to both parts. Thus, a semicolon creates balance. It says that what comes before the semicolon is just as important as what comes after it. This creates balance and reinforces parallel ideas.

Colons are used to create imbalance because a colon indicates that focus should be on the words that follow the colon. The colon is an indicator that the second summarizes or explains the first. The expectation is that closely related, but more important information will follow the colon.

Finally, purposefully inject dashes into your writing. A dash indicates a sudden change in thought or tone. A dash is also used like a colon to set off a summary (a colon sets off a long summary, whereas a colon sets off a brief summary.)
Tone is the expression of attitude.

- implied attitude of writer toward subject and audience
  - emotion
  - hallmark of the writer’s personality
- the writer creates tone
  - diction
  - syntax
  - purposeful use of details
  - intentional imagery
- requires careful reading
- sets the relationship between the reader and the writer

Lastly is tone. Tone is the expression of attitude - the attitude of the writer toward the subject matter and/or the audience. Tone is all about emotion and it is the hallmark ( authenticity) of the writer’s personality. It always surprises me that so many of my students are interesting and full of life and joy and humor. Yet you write such boring, sad, and serious writing the majority of the time. Tone is the moment when the writer’s personality should really shine.

The writer creates tone, just like the other elements of voice. Tone, however is the effect of all the other elements of voice working together: tone is perceived when the reader carefully examines word choice (diction), syntactical structures (syntax), how the writer purposefully used details and the intentional imagery presented. Identifying tone requires careful reading of a text to recognize diction and syntax, and truly understand detail selection and imagery.

Tone establishes a relationship between the reader and the writer - if I don’t agree with, connect to, respond to the author’s tone, then I am less likely to continue to find the writer appealing. It also helps pave the way to understanding of the text - and the writer.
There are five elements of voice.

diction
detail
imagery
syntax
tone

Again, there are five elements that create voice in writing. Diction, detail, imagery, syntax, and tone. For the remainder of the week, we will be looking at these elements separately and evaluating how they work in writing to help create voice.