

October 3, 2003
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HEARING (THE RIGHT) VOICES

An effective piece of writing has a `voice.' That is, it gives readers the impression (true or false) that they know the author's personality. When you're trying to move legislators, the press, and the public, some voices work a lot better than others in

- [1] Web sites
- [2] OpEds
- [3] Speeches

1. The Web Voice: Short and [a little] Snappy

The things that make the Web majorly cool are all those splashy graphics and sound effects and squiggly animated things. But if you want to get your message across, you've got to put some words out there, too.

So what voice works best in cyber space? Web surfers want to get the info RIGHT NOW, and they really, really don't want to have to scroll down. That means Web writing is much more like writing a print ad than writing a press release, not to mention an op-ed. Short, punchy, to the point.

And then there's that attitude thing.

The Web started out as a free-wheeling, anarchic, youth-oriented place. It's changed a lot, but the voice that works best still has an edge to it - a little ironic, skewering, smart-alecky. It won't work all the time, of course, especially if you're dealing with a weighty issue. But in general you'll have more impact if you aim for a breezy informality.

And don't forget those hotlinks. They save space, and show the reader you know how to make the most out of the Web.

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2. The OpEd Voice: The Absolute Expert Who's Interesting

When you're writing an OpEd, your goal is pretty simple: get the reader to agree with your point of view. So you want to convey the impression you REALLY know what you're talking about. The voice you want therefore is that of the true expert—the kind you'd absolutely trust because they clearly know everything about the subject at hand.

One of the ways to do that is to barrage your readers with pieces of evidence, one right after the other, in the body of the OpEd. Statistics make good evidence bites. Quotes from experts are good. Analogies can be effective ("If you believe X, they clearly you must believe Y, as well.") The effect you want to create is a cascade of potent bits of information, all of which add up to an overwhelming case for your viewpoint.

Two notes of caution: mix up the kinds of evidence you use, otherwise it can get boring. And be sure each bit of "proof" you use is clearly linked to the point the OpEd is making. You never want the reader to ask, "What's this stuff doing here?"

2. The Speech Voice: Listen and Learn

The first lesson in Speechwriting 101 is: What you write has to suit the voice of the speaker. You never want to write a 'brilliant' speech that your speaker would feel awkward delivering.

The standard ways of capturing your speaker's voice is to interview him or her and to listen to the speaker's past speeches. What do you listen for in the interview and past speeches? Here are a few keys to getting the voice of the speech right.

In past speeches, where does the speaker really get rolling, and where are the rough spots and stumbles? How does the speaker sound when talking about personal stuff--anecdotes about family, upbringing, education? If he or she sounds awkward and forced, stay away from that material.

In the interview, ask about the speaker's best and worst experiences before an audience. That will help you get quickly to what makes him or her comfortable or nervous in a speech.