

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 453 551

CS 217 582

AUTHOR Williams, Robert Hillis  
TITLE What Is a Voice? (And Where Can I Buy One?)  
PUB DATE 2000-00-00  
NOTE 7p.  
AVAILABLE FROM Virginia Association of Teachers of English, Virginia English Bulletin, P.O. Box 6935, Radford, VA 24142.  
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Opinion Papers (120)  
JOURNAL CIT Virginia English Bulletin; v50 n1 Spr 2000  
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS \*Creative Writing; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; Personal Narratives; \*Writing Attitudes; \*Writing Difficulties  
IDENTIFIERS \*Personal Writing; \*Voice (Rhetoric); Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

This article tells the story of a writer for whom "voice" is an important element that he feels he once had but has lost in his writing. The article mostly places the blame on his trying to please teachers and professors and listening to their comments about his writing. It quotes many scholars (such as Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner) and authors (such as Truman Capote and T.S. Eliot) on just what "voice" is, but the writer's own definition does not exactly satisfy him. It concludes that perhaps "voice" can only be defined by living it, narrating it, writing it, and the writer hopes that he might find his voice again within the "fragments" he experiences in his life. (NKA)

# What is a Voice? (And Where Can I Buy One?)

by

Robert Hillis Williams

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
Office of Educational Research and Improvement  
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION  
CENTER (ERIC)

- This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

**BEST COPY AVAILABLE**

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND  
DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS  
BEEN GRANTED BY

R. H. Williams, Jr

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES  
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

## What is a Voice? (And Where Can I Buy One?)

There's a mountain of coal heaped in one corner of Mania and Daddy's basement. It towers above my four-year-old head in the half-dusk of one yellow light bulb. The floor boards overhead creak occasionally with somebody's tread. I must be beneath the kitchen--where Mania lives. Daddy, he lives in another place, someplace called a "shop." At least, that's where he's always been or where he's going I can smell the coal--it feels dusty and silky-- but looks like rocks. The coal dust slides under my feet, slithering like words..., like words. Now I remember.

---

The coal dust slides under my feet, slithering like words... like words. Now I remember.

---

I learned words from Grandma Williams--she read to us, to my older sister and me. She didn't teach, but we learned. I had a voice then, but I couldn't write. Later, after I'd carved the awkward ABC's on thin green paper, after I'd traced shaky cursive lines without lifting my pencil, after I'd listened to Dr. Seuss and Uncle Remus and Lewis Carroll, after I'd heard my elementary school and middle school and high school teachers, and after I'd tried to understand and write for all those college English professors, I lost that voice. Sometimes, I think I've almost found it again. Almost.

Truman Capote searched for a voice in *Other Voices, Other Rooms*; but he was searching for his own sexual voice, I think. T. S. Eliot said, "It is impossible to say just what I mean!" in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock;" but that was both a fearful and a sexual voice. Erasmus named all voices folly, and may have meant it, as lie assumed a clownish, contradictory voice in *The Praise of Folly*. Hemingway said he wrote only in pencil, in the morning, before reading other voices. He may have lied, but suggested a tentative arrogance--between the tentatively erasable pencil and the arrogant disdain of other voices-- with such a lie. Harold Bloom unintentionally named his voice and legions of others: *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973). And I guess Sylvia Plath lost her voice, along with innumerable other women, other marginalized writers beneath the weight, the anxiety, of that same influence. I'd like to think I'm trying to remember my own voice most of the time but may be foolishly afraid, or lying like Hemingway, or silenced by influences.

Lev Vygotsky says we all lie, if ingenuously. He says no one can create or remember a voice alone since a voice is "translated inner speech" and is formed by sociocultural and sociohistorical forces beyond the writer's control (1986). Vygotsky is probably right. The "anxiety of influence," indeed. All the "experts" think Vygotsky's right-- this week (If

only lie hadn't died so young, you know). Jerome Bruner says our voices, our very lives, are a story in our heads, waiting to be told every time we write, every time we read, every time we think (1986). He says the individual's mind—cognition, to be more specific—is a narrative in progress, only waiting to be told, to be written, to be read. I'd like to be read--perhaps sympathetically--sometimes.

---

I've been wondering for a long time now why my stories weren't good enough, why I had to write other people's cognition, other people's voices, other people's rooms.

---

Oh, I've been read by others since I learned to write but misplaced my voice. I've been read and graded and judged and even occasionally praised—perhaps foolishly. And I can do the literary essays, the literary criticism. I can do time scientific reports, time summaries, the comparison and contrast papers. I can prove I've read the story or studied the facts or learned the definitions or considered the position or researched the topic ... but there's no voice in "proving." There's no voice in writing for others, in writing for a teacher or administrator or committee. There's no creation or even remembrance in forms. Forms are to be filled, not written, even the forms that begin with a blank sheet of paper, with a teacher's thesis statement. It's like digging a ditch. Just fill and empty the shovel often enough and the ditch gets dug. Just fill and empty the paper often enough, (it's easier than it sounds, once the pages are filled) —even coin a pretty metaphor—and if it agrees with the teacher or administrator or committee's 'cognition,' if it reminds them of their voice or their story, it's good, it's finished. Like digging a ditch: If it starts where "they" want to start, goes where "they" want to go, and is deep enough for "them," it's a good ditch. Cynical? Perhaps. Some people call it experienced. I might even call it cognition, or narration, a vestige of voice, of "translated inner speech" from the time I wrote my own story, in my own voice, instead of the essay I was supposed to write—and got a "D." Or maybe a vestige of inner speech from the only other time I wrote a story for a high school teacher, the time Timmy Alderman thought my story was funny and the teacher let him read it to the class.

In *Inside Out* Tom Liner says he's been trying to please people with his writing ever since a teacher complimented him for a well-written paper (41, 1988). I understand. But I've been wondering why people weren't pleased with my writing—not what I handed in—but what I wrote before I wrote the paper I handed in. I've been wondering for a long time now why my stories weren't good enough, why I had to write other people's cognition, other people's voices, other people's rooms. Of course Professor Alley liked my essays in "Advanced Composition," but that was a class about writing. And I learned a lot about writing from her, about using personal examples, about reinforcing arguments, about buffing out the scratches left from previous buffings, even about voices. The student editors published one of my essays from that class—an essay about writing, of course, in *A Gallery of Writing*. Professor Alley and I were impressed, but no one else was. Or saw the irony of it all. But while Professor Alley encouraged me to remember my voice, Professor Smith said my essays weren't at the proper "level" in

"Medieval Literature," said I didn't quote the text enough—but he'd ignore the mid-term assignment if the final was greatly improved. It was. I took his advice, offered an argument, cited three passages to prove it, offered an argument, cited three passages to prove it, offered ... you get the idea. I lost some sleep, but he ignored the mid-term. He said the final essays were "excellent." I thought they were dry and formal, stuff nobody would read. But I said, "Thank you. I think I understand better now. I see what you mean. Thank you. About that recommendation for 'Creative Writing: Fiction ....'" Of course I also learned from Professor Smith. I learned about Medieval literature, about literary analysis, about literary criticism, even about others' voices; but despite the pages and pages of writing I produced for that class, I didn't learn anything about honest writing, about where I'd misplaced my voice and why it was absent from all those pages. Professor Smith was like most of my teachers; and they mostly tried, with too little time and too many students (and sometimes too little knowledge about writing), to help those of us who wanted to learn.

Later, after Professor Smith had given me the recommendation, Professor Maxwell didn't say much of anything in "Creative Writing: Fiction." He gave everybody an "A." He did send one of my stories to Madison Smartt Bell, who appeared for our annual Literary Festival in cowboy boots, a black cowboy hat, dark sunglasses, and a smug expression and who was writer-in-residence at Johns Hopkins University. Madison Smartt Bell said my story reminded him of Faulkner, but needed more character development. I thought it reminded me of me, but needed more voice. I guess his remark was a compliment and I accepted it as such (was actually quite smug, myself, to have been mentioned in the same breath with Faulkner). But none of the "little" magazines wanted that story. And I bought a lot of prizes for other people that cruel April with my entry fees in every contest I could find. Eventually, Professor Harding said "B" in "Milton," not enough depth of thought displayed. "Besides, I'd be doing you a disservice if my grade ['my grade,' he said] helped you into a graduate school in which you'd later be uncomfortable, or over your head." I said "Thanks for nothing," silently, in the remnants of my own voice, to him and several others. But I put enough of the little round words in the little round holes—after nine or ten pages thrown away for every one turned in—and I said, "Mail my diploma, with my B.A on it(in Latin) to Wytheville, Virginia.

I'd still like to be read. I can even live with being graded, being judged. But I'd like to write honestly, in my own voice. And I need to understand or at least remember that voice because I teach writing, because I even teach writing teachers. And because Lev Vygotsky's right, I guess, and because Jerome Bruner's also right, I think, I won't tell my students their writing's not at the proper level. I won't tell my students their thinking doesn't display enough depth. I won't tell my students their topics. I won't censure them if they want to write about what they know, not what I've told them I know or what they should know. I won't demand five paragraphs and an outline, or argument/citations, argument/citations, argument/citations, ad nauseam. I won't demand decontextualized, impersonal prose ("prose:" we like that word) precisely because I too often had to manufacture decontextualized, impersonal prose. Nobody reads those manufactured essays full of citations, anyway, except students and teachers

looking for citations. I won't I'm not even sure I can write them anymore. I know I don't want to.

---

I won't demand decontextualized, impersonal prose ... precisely because I too often had to manufacture decontextualized, impersonal prose.

---

Almost Sometimes I almost remember my voice; but it's usually just fragments... just fragments. There are fragments among the quiet sounds; it whistles a sibilant, 6,000 degree flame if there's too much oxygen in the mix (like the oxy/acetylene torch with which I learned to braze when I was twelve). There are fragments among the multiple sounds and multiple identities--the electric motor whining insistently beneath the wet roar of meshed gears and white splashing coolant; the dumb voice of a Warner & Swasey 3-A turret lathe, the machine I operated for my first full-time job, working for my father, second shift, pretending to be an adult my senior year at George Wythe High School. There are fragments within the almost intelligent voice--guttural at idle, but howling at high rpm, and always sweet through unmuffled headers--of a 351 H. O. engine in a '72 Mustang, the first engine I ever rebuilt There are fragments among the authors' voices in the books I've read--the fiction and nonfiction, the novels and short stories and essays and biographies and textbooks. There are fragments in the defiant voice-mumbling around town, but screaming into laurel-soaked Appalachian curves, at the red line--of an '83 Honda CB1100F, my last motorcycle, the one with which I dive-bombed that red Camaro. And there are fragments among the people's voices, some quiet and secure, some shrill and injured, some happy and playful, some silent but undeniable, the voices of my teachers and my students, my friends and my relatives, my wife and our children. I know that my own voice lies among those fragments, breathes within those experiences, joins those other voices.

---

I know that my own voice lies among those fragments, breathes within those experiences, joins those other voices.

---

I don't suppose I've defined "voice" very well; and I'm still looking for a place to buy one myself: Perhaps "voice" can only be defined by living it, narrating it, writing it. Perhaps. But I do know that whether I'm narrating the fragments of my own voice, or coaching young writers to develop the narratives that will become their voices, I cannot forget that too often my narrative--my voice--wasn't allowed, except when I stood in places like that basement, before that mountain of coal, alone, where nobody ever read what I wrote because I couldn't write yet, except in my head. And except Timmy Alderman, once...

## Works Cited

Bloom, H. *The Anxiety of Influence*. New York: Oxford U.P, 1973.

Bruner, J. *Acts of meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1986.

Kirby, D. and Liner, T. *Inside Out*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1988.

Vygotsky, L. S. *Thought and language*. (A. Kozulin, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986. (Original work published 1934).

---

*Robert Williams holds a Ph.D. in Education from Virginia Tech. He has taught welding, machine shop, 8th grade and secondary English, Composition and Advanced Composition, and a variety of courses for pre- and in-service public school teachers. He is currently an Assistant Professor of English Education at Radford University.*

---



**U.S. Department of Education**  
*Office of Educational Research and Improvement*  
 (OERI)  
*National Library of Education (NLE)*  
*Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)*



**Reproduction Release**

(Specific Document)

**I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:**

Title: What Is A Voice? (And Where Can I Buy One?)	
Author: Robert H. Williams, Jr., Ph.D.	
Corporate Source:	Publication Date: Spring 2000

**II. REPRODUCTION RELEASE:**

In order to disseminate as widely as possible timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community, documents announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, Resources in Education ( RIE), are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service ( EDRS). Credit is given to the source of each document, and, if reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

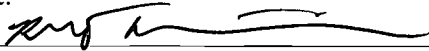
If permission is granted to reproduce and disseminate the identified document, please CHECK ONE of the following three options and sign in the indicated space following.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 1 documents	The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2A documents	The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2B documents
PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY <hr/> <hr/> TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)	PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE, AND IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR ERIC COLLECTION SUBSCRIBERS ONLY, HAS BEEN GRANTED BY <hr/> <hr/> TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)	PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED <hr/> <hr/> TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
<b>Level 1</b>	<b>Level 2A</b>	<b>Level 2B</b>
↑ <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	↑ <input type="checkbox"/>	↑ <input type="checkbox"/>
Check here for Level 1 release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche or other ERIC archival media (e.g. electronic) and paper copy.	Check here for Level 2A release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche and in electronic media for ERIC archival collection subscribers only	Check here for Level 2B release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche o
Documents will be processed as indicated provided reproduction quality permits. If permission to reproduce is granted, but no box is checked, documents will be processed at Level 1.		



## ERIC Reproduction Release Form

I hereby grant to the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) nonexclusive permission to reproduce and disseminate this document as indicated above. Reproduction from the ERIC microfiche, or electronic media by persons other than ERIC employees and its system contractors requires permission from the copyright holder. Exception is made for non-profit reproduction by libraries and other service agencies to satisfy information needs of educators in response to discrete inquiries.

Signature: 	Printed Name/Position/Title: Robert H. Williams, Jr., Assistant Professor	
Organization/Address: Radford University, P.O. Box 6935, Radford, VA, 24142	Telephone: 540-831-5745	Fax: 540-831-6800
	E-mail Address: rohwilli@radford.edu	Date: 7-9-2001

### III. DOCUMENT AVAILABILITY INFORMATION (FROM NON-ERIC SOURCE):

If permission to reproduce is not granted to ERIC, or, if you wish ERIC to cite the availability of the document from another source, please provide the following information regarding the availability of the document. (ERIC will not announce a document unless it is publicly available, and a dependable source can be specified. Contributors should also be aware that ERIC selection criteria are significantly more stringent for documents that cannot be made available through EDRS.)

Publisher/Distributor: <i>Virginia Association of Teachers of English</i>
Address: <i>Virginia English Bulletin, Attention Carolyn Mathews P.O. Box 6935 Radford VA 24142</i>
Price:

### IV. REFERRAL OF ERIC TO COPYRIGHT/REPRODUCTION RIGHTS HOLDER:

If the right to grant this reproduction release is held by someone other than the addressee, please provide the appropriate name and address:

Name:
Address:

### V. WHERE TO SEND THIS FORM:

Send this form to: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication (ERIC/ REC).

ERIC/REC Clearinghouse  
2805 E 10th St Suite 140  
Bloomington, IN 47408-2698