

Voice in Nonfiction Writing

At one time, children’s book editors rejected nonfiction manuscripts with a strong, distinct voice. They believed that the information, not the presentation, should be the major attraction. But today, voice is recognized as an important element of literary nonfiction.

Educators generally describe voice as the “personality of the writing” or “how the writing makes the reader feel.” These definitions may help readers gain a stronger sense of how to identify



voice in a text, but it doesn’t help writers as they’re trying to craft it. That’s why I love the astonishingly clear, simple definition developed by Newbery-award winning author Linda Sue Park:

voice = word choice + rhythm

Park defines “rhythm” in an equally clear and simple way:

rhythm = punctuation + sentence length

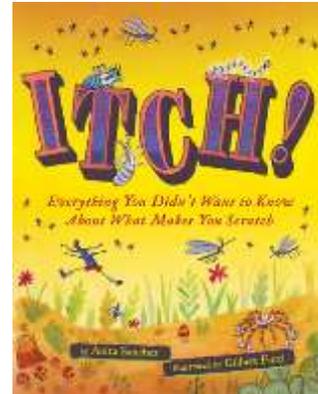
Not only do these brilliant equations apply to voice in both fiction and nonfiction, they also make a craft move that often seems mysterious and elusive instantly manageable. After all, word choice, punctuation, and sentence length are all easy to control, easy to vary, easy to play around with.

Nonfiction voice options span a continuum, from lively to lyrical, with plenty of options in between. For each manuscript, the writer selects a voice based on their topic and their purpose for writing.

The Nonfiction Voice Continuum		
Lively		Lyrical
	playful	light, lovely
irreverent		stately, respectful
	sassy	calm, cozy
	passionate, excited	soothing
goofy	confessional	wondrous
	conversational	descriptive
humorous	storyteller	

In *Itch! Everything You Didn't Want to Know About What Makes You Scratch*, author Anita Sanchez deftly employs a playful, conversational voice. Here's a short excerpt from a sidebar with the playful title "Lice Advice:"

If you do find out you're hosting lice, don't freak out! Hair lice don't spread disease or cause serious health problems. Still, you don't want insects using your head for a habitat. See your doctor to find out how to get rid of unwanted company.



By choosing fun word combinations like “freak out” and “unwanted company” and including the alliterative phrase “head for a habitat” as well as the exclamation point at the end of the first sentence, Sanchez crafts text that delights as well as informs. Even though all four sentences are about the same length, the author has varied the sentence structure to make the passage fast paced.

Now consider the opening lines of *Giant Squid* by Candace Fleming, which has a more wondrous, lyrical voice:



Down,
down,
in the depths
of the sunless sea
deep,
deep
in the cold,
cold dark,
creatures,
strange
and fearsome.
lurk.

This text may occupy twelve lines, but it's a single sentence. By inserting line breaks, the author carefully controls both the rhythm and the pacing. Alliteration, sensory details, and repetition create a mood of magic and mystery that hooks readers. It makes them want to turn the page and keep on reading. This is the kind of craftsmanship that makes Fleming one of my favorite nonfiction authors.

The best way to craft just the right voice for your own work in progress is to study and compare a wide variety of mentor texts, such as the books listed below. I recommend using the technique described in the See for Yourself sidebar.

Next, take a look at your manuscript. As you read it aloud, hunt for spots where varying the sentence length, word choice, and punctuation could strengthen the voice. Then try revising to see what happens. As Linda Sue Park likes to say, “Just play!”

Nonfiction Books with a Lively Voice

How They Choked: Failures, Flops, and Flaws of the Awfully Famous by Georgia Bragg, illus. Kevin O'Malley

Itch! Everything You Didn't Want to Know About What Makes You Scratch by Anita Sanchez, illus. Gilbert Ford

Pink Is for Blobfish: Discovering the World's Perfectly Pink Animals by Jess Keating, illus. David DeGrand

Pipsqueaks, Slowpokes, and Stinkers: Celebrating Animal Underdogs by Melissa Stewart, illus. Stephanie Laberis

Poison: Deadly Deeds, Perilous Professions, and Murderous Medicines by Sarah Albee
Something Rotten: A Fresh Look at Roadkill by Heather I. Montgomery, illus. Kevin O'Malley

Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You by Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi

What to Do About Alice?: How Alice Roosevelt Broke the Rules, Charmed the World, and Drove Her Father Teddy Crazy by Barbara Kerley, illus. Edwin Fotheringham

Nonfiction Books with a Lyrical Voice

Dave the Potter: Artist, Poet, Slave by Laban Carrick Hill, illus. Bryan Collier

An Egg is Quiet by Dianna Aston Hutts, illus. Sylvia Long

Giant Squid by Candace Fleming, illus. Eric Rohmann

Planting the Trees of Kenya: The Story of Wangari Maathai by Claire A. Nivola

The Secret World of Walter Anderson by Hester Bass, illus. E.B. Lewis

Seashells: More than a Home by Melissa Stewart, illus. Sarah S. Brannen

Step Gently Out by Helen Frost, illus. Rick Leider

We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga by Traci Sorell, illus. Frané Lessac

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