Is There a Human Being in This Text? Voice in English for Specific Purposes

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Fox explores several dimensions of "voice" in written ESP texts- an issue which he believes is "one of the most enigmatic and complex issues in language study." After defining voice as "the nature or quality of the person you hear and sense behind the words," Fox further distinguishes it from tone and persona. Fox provides several examples and analyses of appropriate and inappropriate voices. ESP writers, the author maintains, often focus so heavily on purpose, audience, and form, that they bury their human voice. Fox argues that this is a tragedy, since a human voice not only enhances clarity and coherence, but also helps writers gain their reader's acceptance and trust. Specific guidelines and assignments for helping writers achieve an "informative yet human" voice conclude the article.

Both of the following documents use English for the same very specific purpose. (All of the example documents in this article are authentic; however, the writers' names and other identifying information have been changed.)

Example 1

November 19, 1995

IntraStar International Airlines
Portland, Oregon

Mr. Pedro Morellos
Guadalajara Aircraft Maintenance
4414 Aeronca Avenue
Guadalajara, Mexico

Dear Mr. Morellos:

The company of IntraStar International Airlines, Inc., Portland, Oregon's largest independent air service, specializing in corporate executive services to destinations throughout the western United States, has authorization, throughout the period extending from January 1, 1992, through January 31, 1992, to operate one of its premier passenger crafts, a B727, out of your facility. This corporate

executive service will be in transit seven days weekly throughout this period, arriving and departing approximately twice per day. It is therefore the purpose of this communication to request that your facility provide appropriate ground services consisting of KVA ground power at 115v and 400 cycles; an air canister for initializing engine power surges; approximately 8,000 gallons of JETA each day; Biffy service; a mechanical engineer-technician to perform preflight inspections and evaluations; and ground-to-cockpit communication system for all flight departures.

Sincerely,

Lamar Loessing
Flight Operations

Example 2

November 19, 1995

IntraStar International Airlines
Portland, Oregon

Mr. Pedro Morellos
Line Service Manager
Guadalajara Aircraft Maintenance
4414 Aeronca Avenue
Guadalajara, Mexico

Dear Mr. Morellos:

My company will be operating a B727 out of your airport during all of this January. The plane will make two arrivals and departures each day, seven days a week during this period. I would like to know if you could provide our plane with these services:

1. KVA ground power at 115v and 400 cycles.
2. An air bottle for air starting the engines.

3. About 8,000 gallons of JETA per day.
4. Biffy service.
5. A mechanic for preflight inspections.
6. Ground-to-cockpit communication for departures.

Thanks for your help. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Lamar Loessing
Flight Operations

Voice in writing means the nature or quality of the person you hear and sense behind the words. Voice is one of the best means of clarifying (and making coherent) ESP texts, because it soaks into everything written, unifying the writer's points because they sound like they come from the same reasonable person.

Because voice operates in subtle ways and is so hard to define, it is also one of the hardest elements for writers to understand and control. Voice is best understood if it is divided into two overlapping elements--persona and tone.

Persona refers to those personal qualities of the writer that show through in each document. For example, when the writer of Example 1 requests "an air canister for initializing engine power surges," you may not be certain what this means, so you conclude that he has greater technical expertise than you do. Or, you may conclude that his phrasing means "air bottle" and that his choice of terms indicates he's trying to impress you, and is therefore more (or less) secure in his professional ability than you are. From such clues you form impressions or judgements about the nature of the person behind the words.

Tone refers to the writer's attitude toward subject and audience - the degree of friendliness or reasonableness that readers detect. Example 2 has a friendlier tone. The "distance" between writer and reader is much closer in the second document than in the first one, even though the writer does not personally know the audience.

The first letter's tone seems not to respect readers very much because its author makes regal demands (e.g., "it is therefore the purpose of this communication to request . . . ."). Nor does the writer consider his audience by trying to make the material easier to understand (e.g., listing the requests, as the second version does).

How writers *sound* to readers- reasonable, angry, casual, informative, persuasive- affects them in two major ways: 1) their *understanding* of the message, and 2) their *acceptance* of the message. The voice in the first letter sounds more distant and formal than the voice of the second version, which makes it harder to understand in a single reading. Therefore, it's harder for most readers to accept or "believe in." An appropriate and human voice can provide a kind of organic clarity and coherence to documents that cannot be achieved any other way.

Writers develop voice over time, as they write for a variety of purposes and readers. Even though there's no easy way to achieve voice, some elements, such as the use of "I," the use of contractions, and others discussed later, can help writers hear differences in voices. However, the best advice for developing good sense about voice is simply to become aware of it and more sensitive to it.

1. Voice and the ESP text

Voice is especially important in ESP texts. Harried professionals often only read a document once - and if the writer's persona or tone somehow interferes, readers have to stop and reconstruct what they *think* or *hope* the writer intended to say. If readers of Example 1 puzzle over the phrase, "an air canister for initializing engine power surges," then they waste time in becoming distracted from the writer's main purpose. Such readers will be less favorably inclined to act positively or quickly on the letter's request. In professional, technical, and scientific communication, the voice should often be friendly and inviting in a muted or subtle way. The writer's persona - without calling attention to itself - should cordially invite the reader to process the material.

Tone in written communication - the writer's attitudes toward subject and audience - is more complex. On the one hand, the writer's attitudes toward

subject and audience are mostly irrelevant. If the writer must produce written specifications for plumbing equipment - and she or he is not especially interested in augers - that attitude should not surface in the final document. And if the writer should happen to dislike the plumbing sales-people who make up the audience, then that attitude shouldn't surface either. In many respects, then, voice in ESP communication should be neutral--and approachable and friendly.

However, focusing on audience, purpose, and subject should *not* mean that writers must automatically sound like a committee or a machine or a committee of machines. Example 2 focuses on the subject, the purpose, and the audience, while maintaining an appropriate, effective voice. ESP communication should focus on the message, the audience, and the purpose - and *still* sound like an approachable, reasonable human being behind the words.

2. What are inappropriate voices?

Consider the documents in Examples 3-5 below. Example 3 is a memo from a vice-president to his assistant; Example 4 is a letter from an employee of the U.S. Department of Education to college professors (1988), and Example 5 is a letter from a job applicant to a corporation (a large photo of the applicant was included with her letter). Each document illustrates inappropriate and ineffective voices, but for different reasons.

Example 3

Date: August 23, 1993
To: tgd
From: Vice-President Blythe
cc: Morton Phipps, Lisa Raskew
Message ID: ZMAIL#
Subject: Pull all the stops

Tom, as you can tell by my earlier correspondence over the weekend, last week's performance was pathetic!

You should all schedule an early morning meeting for wednesday - like 5:00 AM so we can revise your plans for the upcoming week. you must make immediate changes in your department's Processing.

You and morton and lisa know what I expect. Why you cannot complete hancock's orders on time is beyond me! in you need to start working 20 hour days, 7 days a week, to keep on schedule - so be it!!

I demand better results! a good manager has to be on time!

Example 4

Dear Colleague:

The purpose of this report is to make available comprehensive tabulations on the enrollment and degree awards of higher education students by their racial/ethnic groups for academic year 1990-1991. These tabulations are based on special versions of Center for Education statistics tapes from surveys titled "1990 Fall Enrollment and Compliance Report" and "Degrees and Other Formal Awards Conferred Between July 1, 1990 and June 30, 1991." Data on race/ethnicity were collected for the Office for Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education, and missing racial/ethnic data were not imputed in the computer files released originally from these surveys. Data from these new tapes are suitable for use in trend studies and supersede preliminary data published in the 1989 Digest of Education Statistics and other publications. The tabulations are prefaced by a description of survey methodology, imputation procedure, and definitions of racial/ethnic groups. This report does not include interpretations or highlights, nor does it include trend data. A bulletin providing highlights and a brief analysis of these data will follow shortly, and a trend report with racial/ethnic data from 1980-1989 is planned for release in the fall of 1991. The data tapes for both survey files are available now and can be ordered by contacting Russell Durkin at (800) 466-1565 or (202) 357-6411.

Sincerely,

Norman G. Garrison
Statistical Records Coordinator

Example 5

My friends call me Annie (for Anna Louise Martindale).

And by the way, I *really* need a job interview.

I can't run your corporation. I don't want to be an instant vice-president. I am not an expert at anything, but I can do three things:

1. Show up for work every day and on time.
2. Work as hard if not harder than my brothers.*
3. Learn to do a job the way you want it done.

I am 22 and graduated this year, magna cum laude, from Boston University with a liberal arts degree and a major in Italian.

I spent my junior year at the University of Milan, Italy, studying advanced Italian, history, and political science.

In high school I was an exchange student in Venezuela.

At Skidmore College I had part-time jobs. Nothing fancy - just practical. I made the best sandwiches in the cafeteria and clerked in a store. In the summer I had a day job in an art gallery and a night job as a waitress. My first job, at 15, was in a farm produce store.

I know how to work.

I need a job interview.

Annie Martindale
12 Pottsdam Road
Geneva, New York 14534
(716) 3819675

* Bill: with IBM in Chicago
Mark: aide to a Massachusetts state senator
Dan: junior at Brown University and part-time coach at Madison High

The voices of all three documents are unsuitable for ESP communication. The first memo is too emotional, the second document is too impersonal, and the third document is too personal. The all-caps anger in the vice-president's electronic memo (Example 3) focuses too much on the writer's emotional response and not on the subject (neither problem nor solution). This memo indeed focuses on its readers ¡but only for purposes of berating them! not communicating with them. It shows no respect for its readers and will likely cause resentment. The memo *may* solve the immediate problem, but it is also likely to create additional, more severe problems in the future.

The writer of the letter about college enrollment statistics (Example 4) does not sound like a human being. Nor does this writer seem to believe that a real person is on the other end. Nothing is done to help the reader quickly understand the information: all sentences are long and contain words with many syllables, thus decreasing comprehension. Most readers would have to read this at least a couple of times to understand it.

The final letter applying for a job (Example 4) is too personal, too casual. The writer conveys too much of her own personality, crowding out her reader's needs for additional and more specific information. This focus on herself also muddles her purpose for writing: she tries to convince her reader that she is a good and unpretentious person, and in so doing communicates too little of exactly what she wants and exactly how she is qualified. Her tone is friendly, but too personal, too chatty.

3. What are appropriate voices?

Read the following documents and compare their voices with the voices of the previous examples. Example 6 is a memo from a computer technician to his manager, and Example 7 is a car Policy from an insurance Company to its customers.

Example 6

To: Susan Wakonda, Manager
From: Kangmo Takeda, Computing Technician, CSII
Re: Computer Hardware Update

I want to fill you in about our status with computer hardware. As always, things are more complicated than I'd like them to be, especially the following items:

1. The one-year system we intend to buy should be about $1000 (periodic updates should be less than that). This makes some assumptions about licensing agreement, but we'll just have to see how that pans out.

2. That big printer you saw that AT&T donated costs $59/month in maintenance. We also have one of the small, old AT&T computers on maintenance that we may have to use for dialup. Jackson swears that he'll handle dialup costs . . . guess we'll know about that soon. I'd appreciate your mentioning this to him. Over the last year, I've often asked him about this, and his attitude has been that as long as we can hack something together over here, it isn't necessary for him to do anything. (I've always been able to hack something together, but I would really like this item off my plate.)

3. In any event, Dick Smith would like the small 3B2, for about $200/month, so that would keep it in your bailiwick. It isn't clear how many peripherals he wants to keep on that thing. We can reduce this price if Bob Barstow can or will negotiate a lower maintenance charge for us. He mentioned this possibility to me, and I'll remind him of it as renewal time (the fiscal year) approaches. Dick may have a change of heart once he sees the maintenance bill for that thing.

Example 7

CANCELLATION

How You May Cancel

You may cancel your policy by written notice mailed or delivered to us. The notice must give us the date to cancel, which must be later than the date you mail or deliver it to us.

How and When We May Cancel

We may cancel your policy by written notice mailed to your last known address. The notice should have a date cancellation to be effective. It will be mailed to you at least

1. 10 days before the cancellation effective date if the cancellation is because you did not pay the premium; or

2.30 days before the cancellation effective date if the cancellation is for any other reason.

The mailing of it shall be sufficient proof of notice.

We cannot cancel this insurance unless:

1. you fail to pay the premium when due; or
2. the driver's license of:
    a. you;
    b. your relative; or
    c. any other person who usually drives your car was under suspension or revocation in the 12 months prior to the renewal date; or
3. you misrepresent a material fact to us; or
4. you defraud us. (Horace Mann Insurance Company, 4-5)

These voices are clear, direct, and informative. And they have achieved these qualities *without* sacrificing their human voice. These writers have enough confidence and professionalism to focus on the information *and* allow their voices to surface.

Writers can consciously control several elements that can help them become more aware of what voice is and the effects it can create. After showing students sample ESP documents, such as those discussed earlier, I ask *them* to describe the voices of the writers. After comparing texts which demonstrate effective and ineffective voices, we list our conclusions on the board or overhead projector. Then, I go one step further, and ask students to recast our conclusions into instructions about "how to sound" in final ESP documents. Below are some sample guidelines, which include further discussion of the previous two examples.

Guidelines for achieving an informative yet human voice

1. *Focus on your subject, audience, and purpose - not upon yourself, your emotions, or your attitudes - but stay human.* Professional and technical documents can effectively accomplish all objectives and *still* sound like real

people wrote them, not robots. Readers sense a real human being behind the documents in Examples 6 and 7. Because the computer engineer knows the person is writing to, his voice is more apparent than the writer of the insurance policy - *yet neither voice gets in the way* of the information.

2. *Adjust the following elements to alter your voice, making you sound distant, close, or somewhere in between.*

a) Format. Layout, or the way that blocks of text are arranged and spaced on a page, affects voice (see Chapters 9 and 10). Continuous text without subtitles, indented lists, or other variations is harder for readers to quickly understand and use.

Also, continuous text often makes the voice sound serious, if not ponderous, in effect saying to readers: "Golden nuggets are here, but find them yourself. I won't help." Notice how the car policy employs subtitles, indents text, assigns numbers, and uses white space to assist the reader - all of which help create a voice that says, "I really want you to understand this, so I'll lay it all out to make it as easy as possible."

b) Paragraph Length. Long paragraphs, like those in the memo from the computer science engineer above can make the page appear heavier and more scholarly, while brief paragraphs, like those in the insurance policy above, move readers along more quickly and lighten up the page, making it appear more casual.

c) Sentence Length. Many writers avoid very short sentences because they do not want to commit the sin of writing a "fragment." This has never made sense to me. Never. However, if very short, grammatically correct sentences (and even fragments) are used to achieve *emphasis*, most readers will accept them. Why? Because such "minor sentences" naturally fit in with the *context and meaning* of the whole message. Make sense? I hope so, because sentence length is related to sentence rhythm.

d) Sentence Rhythm. A writer's written voice should, ideally, reflect the way she or he talks. It should also reflect the content of the message. In the previous paragraph, I have some fairly long sentences and some very short ones. Very short. There are also a few medium-length sentences. Sentences or utterances in human speech are naturally varied in length: nobody speaks (honestly) in *all* long sentences. Not even in exclusively short sentences. The point is that too many consecutive sentences - of any length - deadens the reader to the human voice.

e) Word length. The longer the word, the more syllables it has, and usually, the more specialized or obscure it is. Longer words impose more distance between writer and reader than do shorter, more familiar ones. Neither of the above examples uses long words. The same holds true for jargon or obscure words, terms that are inappropriate for your audience. Obscure words aren't always long. The director who wrote the earlier memo to college professors uses "imputed" (and "imputation") a short but obscure word.

f) Conversational vs. precise words and phrases. The engineer uses informal words and phrases, such as "thing," "bailiwick," "pans out," "hack," and "I would really like this item off my plate." Such words come from the writer's natural and informal speaking voice and achieve much the same effect when used in print. On the other hand, using the precise referent for such words (e.g., "your college" or "your area of responsibility" instead of "your bailiwick") are more formal and impose more distance between writer and reader. Which you use depends upon your audience and purpose.

g) Use of "I." In most professional, technical, and scientific communication, the first person pronoun is irrelevant, a waste of readers' time. (Few people want to read, say, instructions for building a bookcase, which state, "I always prefer to turn screws with a manual screwdriver, no matter what, because I'm not used to automatic ones; I don't think I ever will be.") Overusing "I" makes writers focus too much upon themselves and not upon the subject, audience, or purpose.

However, sometimes writers have a choice about using "I." If "I" fits naturally, writers should use it. Using language that stumbles the long way around the barn just to avoid saying "I" is a bigger problem. Many disciplines, even in the reporting of research findings, now encourage the use of the first person singular. Maybe more than any other way, the use of "I" (and "me," "we," and "us") tells readers that a real person is behind the words, a person who isn't afraid of admitting it.

h) Use of "you." Both documents above employ the less formal second person, "you," instead of the more formal third person "one," "he," "she," or "they." This helps readers feel that the writer is speaking directly to them¡ not about a third (and less relevant) party. Using "you" also creates a less formal relationship between writer and reader. Finally, using "you" (and "they") also avoids gender bias.

i) Contractions. Using "we'll" instead of "we will" lessens the distance between writer and reader. Using "we will" instead of "we'll" is also more explicit and is therefore used in precise directions or "contractual" documents. Note that the computer technician's memo (Example 6) uses longer paragraphs and contractions, while the car policy (Example 7) uses shorter paragraphs, but no contractions.

j) Relax. The bugaboos of hesitation, uncertainty, and doubt weave themselves into writing more than we realize. Saying, "It appears that your vehicle may possibly be somewhat defective" is a voice smothering itself in uncertainty. A writer's clearest, most direct, most honest voice can speak only if he is at ease. The writers of both documents above seem relaxed and friendly, toward both their reader and subject. This helps them be clear and honest. Generally, the more relaxed and confident the writer, the more likely the voice (and the message) will be direct and authentic.

Finally, if students need some additional practice in focusing on voice, I offer them exercises such as the following:

4. Sample assignments for teaching voice

1. In a small group, read the excerpt below from a report intended for a general audience. Reach consensus in your group about the effectiveness of this document's voice. Take a stand. List and number your reasons. Select a spokesperson to report your group's decision and reasoning to the rest of the class.

Example 7

The Barcelona Wastewater Plant

In what seems contradictory, the waste stream will now be cleaned by forcing massive bacterial growth in it. The sewage will reside in a concrete tank (called an *aeration basin)* for seven to twenty days, with air being whipped into it continuously. This powerful influx of air allows oxygen-loving aerobic bacteria to thrive, and the graying wastewater becomes a foamy, chocolate-brown mass, with the consistency of a milkshake. This mass (now called, *mixed liquor*) and its formation is the crux of treatment.

The liquor's rapid settling rate will lead to nearly 90% water recovery after passing through another filter. Also the solids which separate out can be recycled to the aeration basin as food for the next cycle of bacterial growth. When too much solid accumulation occurs, the excess is simply stored, along with skimmings from the clarifier, in a W/RAS (waste/return activated sludge vault).

2. Select and photocopy a document from a publication in your major or field of interest, or use one of your own documents completed earlier. Change the document's "voice." (Your instructor may want you to revise only an excerpt.) Use the guidelines discussed earlier for modifying voice and whatever else you think will alter the way the person behind the words sounds. Next, exchange the original and altered-voice versions with a colleague. In a memo to your colleague, explain which voice is most appropriate, how the revised voice changed both the document itself and your response to it.

3. Conclusion

In ESP, the writer's purpose and audience are usually emphasized the most but often at the expense of voice (Fox, 1994). ESP writers can be so focused on

purpose and audience so intent on "sounding professional" or "sounding smart," that they drop armloads of jargon and technical terms all jammed into long, convoluted sentences and paragraphs. What happens? The person behind the prose smothers to death. This often occurs, of course, because writers lack confidence in their own level of professional expertise, so they strive to "impress" their readers by strutting around in big, fancy words and long sentences.

The death of the human voice also occurs when writers misdiagnose their audience as having more expertise or a different *type* of expertise--than they actually do. Let me explain. The technological information explosion (as well as other factors) has created a very fragmented information society: areas of professional expertise are more abundant, diverse, and specialized than ever before. Consequently, most writers cannot keep abreast of so many discourse structures, conventions, technical vocabulary, and "ways of knowing and communicating." The problem arises when writers *believe* that they are addressing a specialized area but really aren't. How does this happen? It happens because there are just too many sub-specialties "embedded" within the singe domain they are addressing.

For example, a university's English Department, contrary to popular belief, cannot be considered a single audience or discourse community. Rather, it is broken down into many sub-specialties, such as American Literature, Comparative Literature, World Literature, British Literature, Cultural Studies, Expository Writing, Technical Writing, Basic Writing, etc. Further, each of these areas has its own organizations, publications, and conferences which *also* means that they develop their own discourse structures, conventions, and "ways of knowing."

The point is that if I want to write a message for an English Department, I have to *aim it at a general audience*. The technical writing professional will not understand (or maybe not even appreciate) a reference to the "ancient mariner," any more than the British Literature scholar will respond favorably to the term, "document design." In many respects, then, an over-concern for purpose and audience can be misplaced and even harmful. ESP writers may, in fact, be more successful aiming at general audiences!

Voice, one of the most enigmatic and complex issues in language study, strongly affects every message, even though many readers are not consciously

aware of its powers. What is even more clear to me is this: regardless of the professional circumstances in which the communication occurs, most readers, most of the time, prefer to find a breathing human being at the center of any message - and a specific purpose or profession next. Especially in ESP texts, writers can too easily drown their human voice, obscuring their document's purpose. Few readers will care about a vague message from nobody.

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