Voice and Authority in College Writing
NVCC- Annandale
Reading and Writing Center
**VOICE**

- *Voice* is the sense that your audience gets as they read your prose. Voice goes hand and hand with style and strategy.
- Writing is nothing more than a series of choices. In order to have authority as a writer, your audience needs to feel as though your choices were conscious ones leading to something, not that you are meandering through the English language without purpose.
Rhetorical Strategies

- In ENGLISH 111, often the rhetorical strategy is assigned. Examples of rhetorical strategies include narration, description, comparison & contrast, classification, persuasion, cause & effect analysis and argumentation.

- The ways a narrative and an argument progresses are quite different. Your voice will also be different.
To understand voice, we have to go back...
and I mean **WAY BACK**…

to Aristotle. Aristotle’s *On Rhetoric*, ideas in which he articulated between the years 367-322 BC.
Aristotelian Appeals

On Rhetoric includes a description of the THREE Aristotelian appeals. These appeals include

a. LOGOS
b. PATHOS
c. ETHOS
LOGOS

- LOGOS (from the verb lego, meaning to count, tell, or say)

Logos is an appeal to your audience using logic.

Logos, reasoning from logic, can include reasoning from examples, comparisons, consequences, or authority, testimony, and statistics.
PATHOS

PATHOS (Greek for experience or suffering)

Pathos is emotional reasoning. When you appeal to pathos, you want the audience to identify with your point of view and feelings.

Examples of pathos are quotations or descriptions that aim to provoke an emotional response.
ETHOS (meaning character)

Ethos is reasoning from values or beliefs. This ethical appeal has to do with the trustworthiness or credibility of your writing and speaking.

You convey ethos through tone and style and by discussing the ethics, morals, and values of a situation.
While your audience reads your work, they will be asking themselves questions, consciously or subconsciously, including the following:

a. Is this writer credible?
b. Does he/she present an honest or trustworthy position?
c. Does his/her evidence prove the claim?
d. Does he/she distance or offend me?
Things College Students Do to Sabotage Their Authority in Writing

- Repeating phrases like “I think” or “I believe” in front of their positions

  Your professor knows the difference between a fact or an opinion, so she can recognize a position readily. She knows it is yours because your name appears at the top of the paper.

- Overusing “I” in general

  Be stingy with your “I”s if you are not writing a personal narrative. Use “I” only when it is rhetorically appropriate.
Switching point of view (POV)

Select one point of view and keep it consistent throughout your paper. If you change from “I” to “we” to “you” all in one paragraph, your voice loses credibility. Readers will get the sense you do not know who your audience is and what position you’re writing from (your position, a position of a few, or a position shared by the general population). This is the rhetorical move sure to thwart your good reader(s).
Here is an example of a hasty point of view switch:

When my father had a stoke, it was amazing to me how much he had to relearn. Initially, there was the simple act of swallowing. Then progress was defined by holding up the weight of his body and landing his first step. *You never know what you have until you lose it.*
They use language that is not appropriate to the rhetorical situation. Students who make this mistake often use language that is colloquial or too casual. Writing that is too casual often sounds like a speaking voice. Avoid writing in the ways you would type a text or chat with your best friend. Your professor may have asked you to avoid contractions in formal writing assignments. That has to do with trying to achieve a certain degree of formality.
• Make the assumption that what is true for them is true for everyone

Don’t forget that your audience is likely to vary in age, race, and background. This mistake is likely to occur subtly with the use of the 2nd person. Sometimes an audience member can feel “co-opted” by the second person.
Imagine if you reading the following statement in the newspaper. What assumptions can you make about the nature of the “you.” How would you feel as a reader?

Everyday you come home from working at the hardware store, open a drawer, and take out a spoon so that you can enjoy your favorite ice cream– Ben and Jerry’s Coffee Coffee Buzz Buzz Buzz.
Think of the introduction as a set of promises you make to a reader. In the intro, you will lay out where you’re going, when. It’s important you stick to that “plan” because you begin to build ethos with that paragraph. If you are unreliable or unfaithful to that plan, a skeptical reader will result.
Things College Students Do... (continued)

- They claim someone else’s thoughts and words as their own or they cite improperly.

Nothing will have your audience questioning your ethos as a writer more than if they suspect you of plagiarism.
They use language that they have no relationship with, phraseology that is not concise and precise, or “unchecked” suggestions from the thesaurus. William Zinsser, the author of *On Writing Well* calls this kind of writing “journalese” (32).

Here are some examples of what I mean from Michael Harvey’s *The Nuts and Bolts of College Writing*...
“To satisfy her hunger for nutrition, she ate bread” vs. “She ate bread because she was hungry” (Harvey 3).

“This scene is very important because it helps us understand Cleopatra early in the play” vs. “This early scene helps us understand Cleopatra” (Harvey 4).
• Watch out for words like very, especially, or great; clichés, which are sure to ring flat and disappoint; and for words that seem to mean the same thing but do not like less vs. fewer.
Checklist for Considering Voice

• Use precise language.
  Don’t say “exchange” or “discuss” when you mean “banter.” Don’t say “dismissed” when you mean “banished.”

• Be cognizant about logos, pathos, and ethos and select subsequent evidence that matches each appeal.

• Develop a relationship with language by reading regularly and reading critically.
Checklist for Considering Voice

- **Be you** while considering positions and perspectives in addition to your own. Your writing should not feel like litany of unrelated facts. Writing and rhetoric should be in conversation with your sources, it should anticipate the questions your audience, and it should respond to your opponents.
Avoid the passive voice and be concise.

Follow up with the promises you made in the introduction through the use of topic sentences throughout the body.

Read your writing aloud. Not only are you more likely to catch your grammatical mistakes, but you can find spots that a reader may find awkward or unclear.
“Writing is nothing more than a series of choices.”

- Writing should be empowering, not disarming. Give yourself enough time to articulate and prove your position.
- Consider the reader when making those choices.
- Choose ethically. Anyone can copy someone else’s opinion. Give yourself the opportunity to go beyond what’s been said before.
Questions?

For those of you looking for help with the specific choices involved in writing your research paper or essays, feel free to call (703) 323-3341, or come by to make an appointment to confer with a tutor.

Resource devised by Nicole Foreman Tong, 2008