

*sharon page*

## **Finding Your Voice**

**By Sharon Page**

"The most exciting new voice in romance" or a "fresh new voice" is a tagline that appears on many books. But what exactly is "voice"?

I discovered voice entirely by accident after I sacrificed several reams of paper to the production of several horrible novels. Five hundred page novels. Go wrong but go big was my motto.

My turning point came when I took a university creative writing class. In class was a student who had a powerful "voice". Her sentences resonated with imagery and beauty and she could evoke emotion with the simplest well-chosen words.

Okay, I thought, I must learn this skill. So I created a character whose voice I understood and wrote. And it worked. Except I had no plot, plan, or clue where to take the story. Back to the drawing board—this time for technique and plotting skills. I embarked on writing long historicals. I fell in love with the lush, sensual, and intelligent voice of a bestselling author. Emulate her, I decided. Wrong choice for me. I slipped back into all the bad habits I thought I had conquered, all the while believing I sounded just like her.

So how does a new writer develop that "fresh new voice in romance?"

There are two levels of voice at work in a book—the author's voice and character voice. Due to personal experience, I strongly believe in letting the character's voice rule when a writer is a beginner. But what defines character voice and what is author voice?

Megan Chance, historical author, describes author voice as the controlling consciousness of the work.<sup>1</sup> Voice is a product of the author's experience. Voice reflects the strength of the author's vision and the courage of you, the author, to tell the story the way *you* see it. Voice encompasses word choice, rhythm, pacing, style, tone and structure. While it reflects you, it doesn't come naturally! Experienced writers warn that finding your voice may take years.

Your characters' backgrounds and experiences provide the framework for character voice. Character voice will also govern word choice, rhythm, and pacing. These elements must be true to the type of character. The character's point of view provides the perspective through which the author's vision—plot and theme—is filtered. For example, a male construction worker might not know the brand names of ladies shoes but the heroine, an ambitious style-conscious lawyer, will. A southern belle will "sound" different than a Chicago cop.

Even now, with ten years of writing behind me, I still find my most secure method of creating a strong voice is to let my characters tell the story. As yet, I do not have confidence in my author voice. But my fingers still pause on the keys and I start to sweat when my plot places my characters in new situations. How will they react? What will they *say*? How would my experienced London madam describe a fight scene? What words would a

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Regency tightrope walker use when she is furious? The only solution is to write, re-write, and experiment, so here are a few tips on developing a voice:

1. Write a lot. Authors warn it may take several books to come into your voice. Experience allows you to mature as a writer. The more you write, the greater variety of scenes and situations you will challenge yourself to convey.
2. Don't resist editing. Your first choice of a sentence may not be the best. Re-write. Try different points of view. Even experienced authors write several drafts. Or discard hundreds of pages and start again. Don't feel like a failure if your first draft isn't perfect.
3. Experiment with form and genre. Try writing poetry to explore imagery. Also experiment with tone. You may love dark books yet find that you can't help but let irony creep into your writing. Try writing humor then work on intense, emotional stories. The added bonus: if you write in a variety of genres, you might want to use different voices, a skill you have already practiced.
4. Emulate with care. Emulating authors you admire can help but you must really work hard to understand what they do and why it works. And eventually, you will want to evolve on your own.
5. Watch for cliches, including your own. Be conscious of your own personal voice "flaws." Mine is "ing" words. I vigilantly delete these. Don't overuse powerful words, especially personal favorites. On a word processor, you can check for word frequency. The results can be astonishing.
6. Push yourself to understand your characters. Strive to find unique and strong details to convey your characters' experiences. Always ask yourself "why?".
7. Search for evocative and universal images. Movies, books, music, and painting are all resources for expanding your repertoire of imagery. Writers and editors recommend you ensure you use the five senses in your scenes.

What happens if you lose your voice? A new writer may start with a strong and unique voice. But once this writer starts to learn writing techniques such as conflict and point of view, the voice may suddenly, inexplicably be lost. When I learned about goals, motivation, and conflict, I was determined to ensure I explained my conflict to the reader right away. So I blurted out the detailed explanation of my hero and heroine's backstories in the first chapter. In long passages of narrative. Ouch! I forgot pacing, suspense and building tension. But eventually, I learned a valuable lesson—always put good story telling first.

### **Sources:**

<sup>1</sup> From Megan Chance's 1996 RWA National Conference workshop Voice, tape no. RW1037.