

Guidelines for Choosing Your Voice

Guideline 1: Find Out What's Expected

Effective voice is one that matches your readers' sense of what's appropriate. Three questions to ask yourself when determining how to match your voice to your readers' expectations are as follows:

How formal do my readers think my writing should be?

How subjective or objective do my readers believe my writing should be?

How much "distance" do my readers expect me to establish between them and me?

Expectations Are Different in Other Cultures

You should take special care to learn about your readers' expectations when you address people in a different country or culture. When writing to people in another country, learn and try to use the styles that are customary there.

Guideline 2: Consider the Roles Your Voice Creates for Your Readers and You

The voice you choose indicates not only the role you assign yourself but also the one you assign to your readers. If you assume the voice of an equal writing to respected peers, your readers will probably accept their implied role as your equals. But if you assume the voice of a superior, unerring authority, they may resent their implied role as error-prone inferiors.

Guideline 3: Consider How Your Attitude toward Your Subject Will Affect Your Readers

Your voice communicates an attitude toward your subject. Feelings are contagious, so if you write enthusiastically, your readers are prone to react enthusiastically to your writing. Keep in mind that the opposite is true, as well. If you seem indifferent, they may adopt the same attitude.

Guideline 4: Say Things in Your Own Words

Be sure to retain your own voice in your writing. Read your draft aloud, and if you notice a section seems awkward, change it to make it sound more comfortable. Now, there may be times when the "corporate voice" — or the voice of your company — will be appropriate. In that case, suppressing your own voice and personal style for the sake of the company is appropriate, and required.