

When people first approach writing, they think it's just a matter of having great material. If they've hiked Mt. Kilimanjaro or kept a family of badgers as pets, they figure they're all set. Conversely, people worry when they haven't done these kinds of things. "But my life is so boring!" they say. "I have nothing to write about."

In my role as a mentor to writers – at colleges and writing conferences – I often find myself addressing assumptions like these. People may not even realize they've made them. But these stubborn beliefs are certainly evident in the work that fledgling writers submit.

Unfortunately, no matter how interesting the badger family was in real life, the depiction of them on the page often plods or drones. Or both. If good writing were all about content, why would David Sedaris have a career? After all, his subjects include things like, *This airplane is crowded* and *This toilet is clogged*. On the face of it, why should this be interesting?

The appeal of particular works has less to do with content than people imagine. The key ingredient can be summed up in one word: Voice. The best writers craft sentences that allow us to "hear" them on the page. If the voice is, for example, wry and chatty and curious, as it is in the case of Sedaris, many readers will find the piece hard to resist, whether it's about clogged toilets or growing tomatoes or that one weird guy on the bus.

A piece of nonfiction isn't so much about what happens next as it is about what the writer will *say* next. What's this person's *take* on paint drying? If we find the writer's voice engaging and her perspective intriguing, we will genuinely want to know.

Voice is comprised of a couple of elements. First, there's the more literal "sound" of the person – the cadence of the "speech" on the page. Has the writer managed to replicate something that resembles human conversation? I always explain to people that writing an interesting piece of nonfiction has some similarities to composing a musical score. The punctuation creates pauses (or rests), as does the paragraphing. We can also use fragments. Like, on purpose.

Of course, the degree of informality depends on the publication for which one aspires to write. If one is guest blogging, for example, it may be appropriate to be the version of yourself you'd be with your friends – very casual. If the outlet is a daily newspaper, maybe the voice needs to be a little more formal. In our daily lives, we do this "code switching" all the time. When I part ways with a work acquaintance, I might say, "Hey, it was great to run into you." With a close friend, maybe I'll say, "Yo, smell you later!" In either case, I still sound like me – a person.

Whether the style is formal or informal, we want to avoid "the robot voice," as I've come to think of it. Sadly, years of writing essays in school seem to result in lifeless prose. People become accustomed to writing about topics that don't interest them for an audience (the teacher) that doesn't interest them. At some stage, I think

people stop imagining that writing is an actual transaction. Without the sense of an audience, they're like singers who have no monitors to project the sound back to them.

For this reason, I always have people read their work out loud. This exercise is most effective when the writer reads the work to an actual human being who is sitting in the room. Quite often, in the middle of reading the text, the novice writer will pause, lingering over a sentence, brow furrowed, pencil in hand. "Hmmm. I don't like the way that sounds." The writer will crouch over the text, scribbling some notes before continuing. This is one of my favorite moments during a session. The writer has started to hear how the prose might come across to an actual reader.

In addition to sentences that sound like they might come out of an actual human, writers must offer readers a unique perspective. That's another crucial element of voice. After all, that's why, as readers, we show up – to see something new or to see something familiar in a new way. We want to believe that this writer can be trusted to guide us on a journey. We want to believe the writer is taking us somewhere (not nowhere). We want to be excited, breathless even, about where that might be.

Quite often, new writers don't have the sense that writing should be urgent. We write because we want people to understand something. Maybe it's something we don't fully understand ourselves. We write because we seek, and maybe our readers might seek, too. It grows from generosity, not self-absorption (let me tell you what I ate for lunch on Mt. Kilimanjaro).

When a person mistakenly believes that the content alone will carry the day, we end up with the equivalent of security camera footage – description after description with no sense of why any of it matters. The good news here is that this situation really isn't so hard to avoid. Each of us has our own unique ways of understanding our lives, and this is what we can (must!) offer our readers.

For example, maybe I want to write about the five-year stint I spent living in England. It won't be enough to describe the fish and chips, the universal healthcare, the funny little refrigerators. I'm going to need to answer this question: *So what?* To answer that question, I'm going to offer a perspective on the differences between the US and the UK that is my own.

If I'm writing a memoir piece, these reflections might be directed inward. Maybe in the US, I was perceived as a fairly reserved person, but in England, I'm viewed as outgoing. How does that change my perception of myself? Am I influenced more than I thought by the ways that others see me? Can I be honest about that, even when it might reveal some things about me that aren't perfect? Readers appreciate these insights because none of us is perfect. We all struggle.

If I'm writing a culture/travel piece, maybe I'll discuss my observations about the differences in perspective in the two countries, if that's what has struck me. For

example, maybe I've observed that in the UK, people tend to convey their ideas via understatement. "That Donald Trump is a bit of a talky bloke." In the US, on the other hand, we like to use overstatement. "My reservation about Bernie Sanders is that he is, like, a *million* years old." These are my particular insights about the two places, and if I convey them clearly, people might become interested in my way of seeing the world.

My favorite thing about mentoring other writers is that I get to see that moment when they realize that they do, in fact, have something to offer to others. And it's not what they thought. They're not offering Mt Kilimanjaro or a family of badgers. They're offering something much better: themselves.