Letting Your Imagination Run Away With You: Style, Voice and Language in Creative Writing

with Natasha Lester
Welcome!

- Natasha Lester
- Award winning author of 3 novels - almost 4
- Do a lot of teaching of creative writing courses for schools, libraries, writers centres etc
Today’s Session

• On Writing for Joy

• Getting Rid of the Rubbish

• The Link Between Style, Voice and Language

• Atmospherics: Using Voice and Language to Create a Fictional World that Feels Real

• Writing Exercise & Discussion

• Visualisation and imagination exercise

• Wrap-up: The Link Between Imagination, Joy, Voice and Style
On Writing for Joy

• My story about finding the joy in writing and why it’s so crucial

• It’s hard to write well when it’s forced

• The idea of today is to try to remember the writing a story should make us feel as good as listening to/reading/watching a story
Getting Rid of the Rubbish

• Mostly the good stuff isn’t the first stuff we sit down to write

• But if we only let out the stuff on top (the sh***y first draft) then it’s hard to find the joy

• The key is to let out the stuff on top first as a warm-up so you can unearth the good stuff sitting underneath
Getting Rid of the Rubbish

• 2 methods:
  • Writing prompts
  • Diary method/free-writing
• Let’s try both
Getting Rid of the Rubbish

- Writing Prompt
  - The event that started it all …

- Free writing/diary method
  - Write down everything that is in your head right now, even if it’s just the colour of the carpet. The important thing is to keep going for 5 minutes.
We’ve Emptied the Rubbish

• This is an important method to encourage students to use

• I use it

• It can seem like a waste because the words might not be used

• But it helps make the first draft of the actual writing task much stronger
The Link Between Style, Voice, and Language

Diagram showing the relationship between Style, Voice, and Language.
Style and Voice

- Style - is the way in which a writer naturally expresses themselves, their instinctive tendencies when they put pen to paper. Style is usually consistent over a body of work.

- ie funny, present tense, dark, short sentences, poetic, descriptive

- you’ll probably see that your students have some stylistic tendencies that come naturally to them

- the trick is to help them discover those; to write like themselves rather than like someone else
For example

• Tim Winton’s style is down to earth, short sentences, spare/pared back, landscape, Australian accented, the sea, dry humour

• This is true no matter what he writes i.e. memoir and fiction

• It’s hard to imagine him writing something as rich and full as Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things - it’s not his style
Style and Voice

- Voice is the sound of a story. (story specific)

- It’s how your style comes out in that particular book

- Voice is when the story speaks and the page falls away. Language is the way in which this comes out.

- Voice is influenced by your natural style (it’s the way you express your style) - if you tend to be more lyrical in your style, the voice of each story you write is likely to be lyrical too

- Voice can change from book to book but your overall style remains relatively consistent

- ie the voice in Tim Winton’s memoir is more intimate and confessional than in his fiction
Style and Voice

- Your story won’t have a strong and distinctive voice if you don’t try to develop our style - it will just be a string of words on a page and won’t engage the reader.

- It’s hard to develop a style without reading.
  - We are natural imitators and this isn’t a bad thing.

- It’s hard to develop a style without writing lots of different things.

- Writers who don’t read and write and develop a style will find it hard to create a voice for their story.

- Then you’ll have words on a page, but no magic.
Style and Voice

- The keys to developing style and voice are:
  - reading widely
  - writing a lot
  - experimenting
  - being prepared to try something that doesn’t work out
  - having fun
In the Classroom

- Imitation exercises

- Try out different styles of writing without the pressure of having these marked - the prospect of succeeding/failing can stifle experimentation

- Get the students to seek out books with distinctive voices and ask them to bring them in and discuss (identifying voice helps you to write with a voice)
Imitation Exercise

- Dorothea Brande
- The Night Circus

Start an exercise with the following:

- The ….. arrives without warning

- What will you use? circus, season, person, bakery, baby

- Winter arrives without warning. No rains precede it, no cool evenings or breezy days, no predictions by weather forecasters. It is bitterly and suddenly there, when yesterday it was not.
Share

- Read aloud to a partner so they can hear it
- Which phrases/sentences/word choices do they like?
- Which parts “sing” to them?
Atmospherics

- Let’s work on the language elements of voice
- We’re going to build on what we’ve just done and play around with voice and language by trying to create a fictional world that, no matter how outrageous it is, feels real
What is Atmosphere?

- The quality in a work of art which produces a predominant mood or impression (Macquarie Dictionary)
- Dani Shapiro
- Atmospherics is about capturing astonishment, about capturing breathless wonder
Voice and Atmospherics

- The Night Circus and A Kiss from Mr Fitzgerald opening pages - these are both circuses of a kind

- Describe the voice in The Night Circus?
  - mystical, magical, mysterious, commanding, a little frightening even

- Describe the voice in A Kiss from Mr Fitzgerald?
  - confident, bold, lively
Voice and Atmospherics

- What draws you in?
- Voice, setting, character, something else?
Simile and Metaphor

• Working with similes and metaphor (any figurative language) is a great way to develop voice

• It’s also a great way to experiment

• And it can be fun
Similes and Metaphor

- The Night Circus:
  - A soft noise like a kettle about to boil for tea (the hiss of the lights)
  - small lights begin to flicker as though the entirety of the circus is covered in particularly bright fireflies
  - more firefly-like lights flicker to life
  - you can smell caramel wafting through the evening breeze like a subtle sweetness at the edges of the cold
  - a sea of shuffling feet
Similes and Metaphor

• the sound of the dollar bills that Ziegfeld would flick into her hand at the end of the night, like a baccarat dealers at a high stakes table

• the money was splashed around like whiskey

• she got a feeling like an itch at the corner of her eye

• a battalion of men

• transformed Thomas into the cat’s whiskers
What is Your Circus?

• A party
• A theatre
• An actual circus
• An office
• A house
• ???
What would your circus:

- Look like - men in dinner suits, girls in leotards, red velvet stage curtains
- Sound like - whistles, clapping, cheering, singing, music
- Smell like - whiskey, sex, hairspray
- Taste like - the chemical taste of 1920s lipstick, the whiskey shot from backstage
- Feel like - soft chairs, hot under stage lights, itchy sequins
Now …

- Choose 5 of the things from your senses list
- Try to craft a simile to describe them
- Try to write 3 similes for each (remember, you need to get rid of the rubbish first, your first idea is probably a cliche)
- ie the hot lights made her lipstick melt like candle wax, the theatre smelt like a Tenderloin nightclub on a date with a cheap hair salon
- be outrageous - have fun
- you should end up with at least 15 similes
- Share your favourite with us
Making a world feel real …

- A world feels real when it’s been described with figurative language in such a way that we can imagine it.
- The descriptions are fresh, unusual, concrete, able to be visualised by the reader.
- And the voice is a part of that; it draws you in.
- You might find that you’re beginning to express your voice in your similes.
- It’s a great exercise to get a feel for voice.
Making a world feel real

- Now you’re going to describe your circus from above

- So we’re doing it from the POV of an omniscient narrator, rather than a character. Try to leave he/she/I out of it. Just describe.

- If I took the roof off the theatre or off the big top, what would I see?

- You might like to incorporate some of your similes

- You might like to think about each of the 5 senses
Making a world feel real

• Consider:
  
  • who can you see, both performers and audience
  
  • what do they look like, what are they wearing, what are they doing
  
  • what do the surrounds look like, the theatre, the tent
  
  • what sounds can be heard, what aromas can be smelt
  
  • what’s the weather/temperature like
Share in partners

• Read out a section (or the whole thing) to somebody else - please read aloud for voice

• How would your partner describe the voice of the piece?

• How does the piece make them feel - scared, happy, excited, tense
Let’s really go deep

- Put down your pens
- Listen and imagine
A walk-through

• Now you need to write about what your person did and what they saw.

• Describe their walk-through of the circus

• But also, describe how what they see makes them feel - frightened, exhilarated, curious

• Start with the sentence: “how did I get here?”

• This sentence can imply fear, resignation, excitement, so many emotions.

• Use your similes.
• Share with the same partner

• Which one did they like best?
Pulling it all together

- You need to imagine so that you can write - the visualisation helps us enormously to be able to describe a scene.

- Imagine if I’d just come in at the start and asked you to write me a scene about a circus?

- Figurative language is one of the best ways to find our voice and our style.

- It’s also a fun thing to play around with - it makes us see the possibilities of language rather than the ordinary way we mostly use it.

- Imagining scenes from different perspectives i.e. up high versus a walk-through enables us to see differently.
Pulling it all together

• When the writing is fun, it shows to the reader

• Enjoyable writing makes for enjoyable reading

• Starting small i.e. a simile exercise builds confidence and creates a sense of playfulness

• Breaking a large task down i.e. write about a circus into smaller parts allows us to experiment

• In experimentation, we find our voice and, often, the joy of writing