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VOICE MAKES YOU UNMISTAKABLE FOR BETTER OR WORSE...

When ghostwriting, I try to write people's stories and opinions in their "voice." I listen for their distinctive vocabulary, sentence structures, and humor during our brainstorm sessions. When I succeed at this, the resulting piece feels like it belongs to them, not me.

Sometimes, clients reject their own voice. Once, a CEO unhappy with my attempt at his voice sent over an article authored by another CEO as an example of what I ought to do instead. Turns out I had ghostwritten that article, too (which was really satisfying).

Anyway, 11+ years of experimenting with voice has led me to a realization: People (and brands) can develop a voice that is unbearable for their audience.

I'll give you some examples: "Per my last email..." reeks of passive aggression and the accusation that the recipient didn't read that last email. "What do we think of ___?" supposes that the group should have reached an obvious consensus on a topic it hasn't discussed. People who say, "I don't mean to brag, but..." resign to do the annoying thing they intended not to do, for lack of effort or creativity.

Voice is not for the self-absorbed, identity-obsessed, precious artist (though they love talking about it). Rather, voice is a communication skill. Our voice affects the people we lead, the people we love, and the people with whom we must find common ground. For better or worse, voice can make you unmistakable from anyone else.

Over the long term, I believe our core voice is shaped by personality traits that move like tectonic plates—hardly at all then all at once, and only under tremendous pressure.

Short term, though, expressions of that core voice are more like ping pong balls. The audience changes its spin and direction. A call from mom spins the ball one way, a call from an irreverent childhood redirects it. Voice changes when you have to email bad news to your boss of three months, imported from another company to "turn things around here" (hear the boss's voice?).

The person who believes their voice is the same in every circumstance is wrong. The person who believes their voice should be the same in every circumstance is rubbing a lot of people the wrong way.

To be true to our values and get things done, our voice must adapt. If you try to convince a country club audience to donate to a charity using your rebellious, taboo-smashing voice, it'll come across as immature and in poor taste. If you talk to friends as if you were pitching a charity to a country club audience, they'll find you stiff and fake.

What makes a voice "authentic?"

In grade school, an artsy creative writing teacher may have tried to coax a voice out of you. Be yourself! Write whatever comes to mind! Give voice to that thing you've buried inside! Just write! Some of us need that encouragement to channel our voice. Oppositely, some people need to filter a rambling, anxious, unrelenting voice to find its essence.

When you "find", "discover", or "uncover" a voice of yours, it may resemble something







dug up at an archaeological site: dusty, musty, and a bit mysterious. After enough brushing, polishing, and comparison with other relics, it will start to make sense. When you use that voice, every word will feel effortless and right. When you forget that voice or lose it—and you will, even in the middle of writing a piece—every word will feel forced and strained. Lose it for too long and you might start to sound unbearable.

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