

TRAIT FOCUS: VOICE

Lesson Objective

Students write descriptive paragraphs using different variations of voice.

Tailoring the Writer's Voice

When writing for a specific audience and purpose, it is important for students to learn to tailor their voices for whom they are writing. If the student is writing a narrative letter to a family member, he or she will want to adopt a personable voice. If it is a persuasive letter to school faculty, it is best to sound formal and respectful.

Adjusting one's voice to suit the situation will likely be familiar to your students. They no doubt speak differently to their friends than to the school principle. Even so, it is advisable to accentuate the distinctions between writer voices through listening exercises.

The play *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams is an excellent mentor text with a strong narrative voice. Integrate the following Literature/Writing Connection lesson into your discussion of the play as a way of instructing your students on developing voice in their writing.

Story Overview

Williams's play centers on the home life of a small, unhappy southern family: the Wingfields. Tom is an artistic dreamer who hates his warehouse job and escapes through alcohol and movies. His mother Amanda is a wilted belle whose husband ran out on her long ago. Laura is painfully shy and wears a brace on her leg. Her prized possession is a set of glass animal figurines.

All three struggle with their failed prospects for the future. All three place dire emphasis on the gentleman suitor that Tom brings home for dinner. And all three long for rescue from a stranger.

Tell Me How You Really Feel

1. As part of your class discussion of the play, incorporate the following into your analysis of scene 6, in which Tom gives his monologue describing Jim O'Connor.
2. Explain to your students that the spoken dialogue in plays is an excellent example of capturing the trait of voice in writing. Williams has crafted a three-dimensional character in Tom, not through direct description, but through Tom's voice—the way he says things.
3. Read Tom's monologue to the class. What was his opinion of Jim in High School? [admiration, jealousy] How does Tom feel about Jim now? [they are friends] Tom does not state it outright, but what words and phrases does he use to reveal his feelings? [hero, spotlight, velocity]
4. Using Tom's voice as a model, have your students write a descriptive paragraph about a thing or an activity. This should be a purely physical description. They should not state their opinions outright, but rather show their attitudes through the voice they employ. They can be either positive or negative opinions, as long as your writers convey their feelings through voice.
5. Extend the lesson by choosing a few varied examples of texts to read aloud (e.g. children's book, newspaper editorial, love poem, speech). Have your students discuss the audience and what words and phrases the writer uses to tailor his or her voice to that audience.