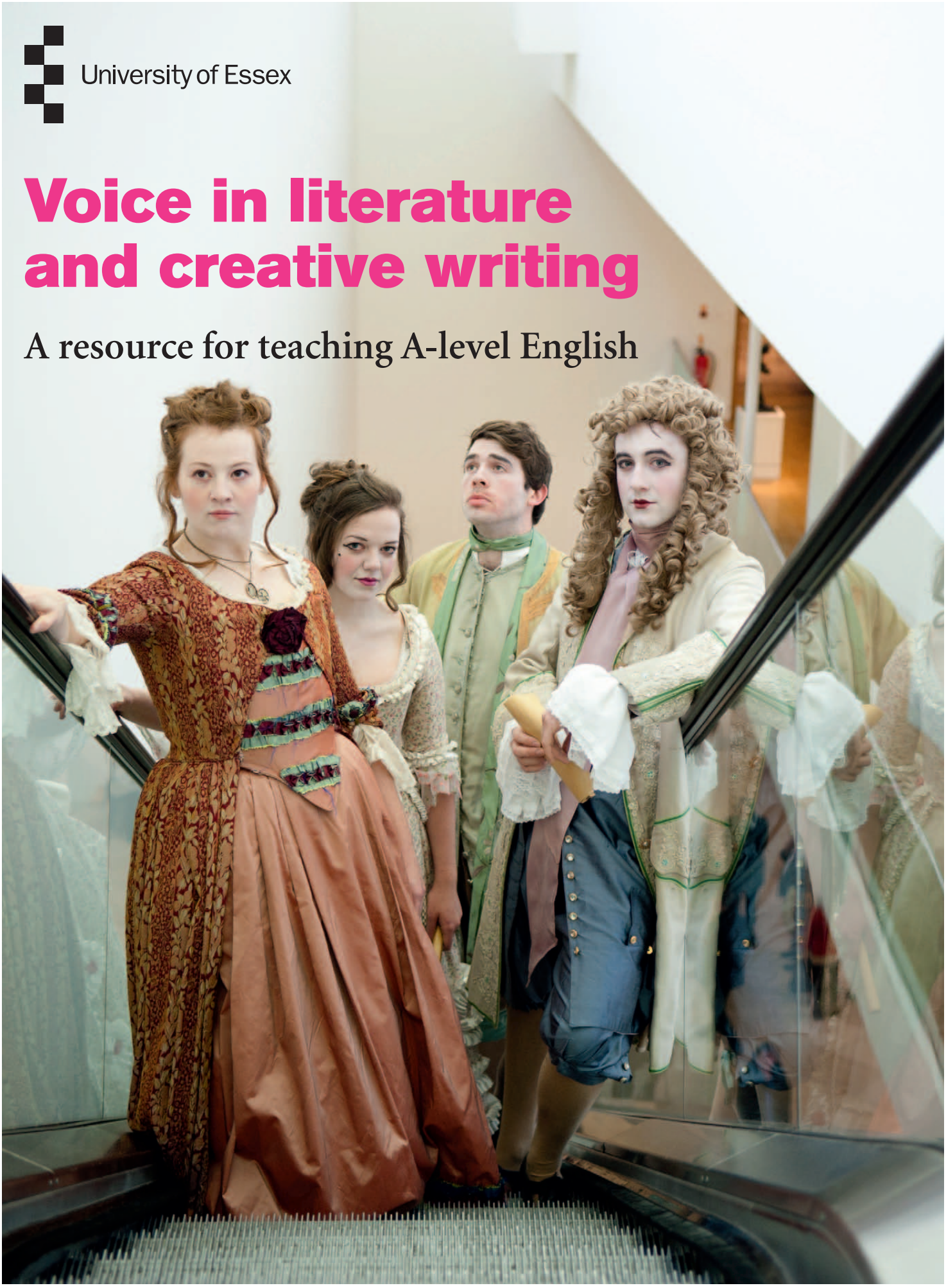
University of Essex

Voice in literature and creative writing

A resource for teaching A-level English



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About these resources

At the University of Essex we want to invest in the next generation of students to better prepare them for future university study. We recognise that the teaching they receive in school and college is a centrally important part of this preparation, and therefore we are committed to investing in this teaching process wherever we can. We hope that these teaching resources will help to get students thinking at a more in-depth level about their chosen subject, and will aid teachers in encouraging this level of engagement.

The resources are deliberately designed to be flexible so that teachers can choose the sections and exercises that they feel are most relevant and beneficial to their students and insert them into their own teaching plans as they see fit. Throughout the resources we have tried to include elements of the teaching carried out at the University of Essex whilst staying closely linked to A-level syllabi.

About the authors

These resources are based on the notes of Dr Chris McCully, who lectures in creative writing and literature at the University of Essex as well as being a freelance writer. Chris has thirty years of experience in academic writing and research spanning linguistics, philosophy, stylistics and literature. His current research interests surround the origins and development of poetic forms in English.

Dr McCully's work has been adapted for these resources by Mona Becker, a PhD student in the Department of Literature, Film and Theatre Studies at the University of Essex

You can find out more about the Department of Literature, Film and Theatre Studies and the courses they run at **www.essex.ac.uk/lifts**

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Voice

This class centres on the concept of 'Voice' What is 'voice' in literary terms? Before we try to define 'voice', note that voice is also used as a grammatical term – active voice and passive voice, thus The *crocodile bit the boy* (active) vs. *The boy was bitten by the crocodile* (passive). I'm not using the term voice in this sense in what follows.

1. 'VOICE' AS DISTINCTIVENESS

You're surrounded by the distinctive voices of other humans. Often, just by saying a word or two, e.g. in the opening of a phone conversation, someone will reveal their identity because of a distinctive expression, turn of phrase or accent. For example, an acquaintance who always uses the same phrase, like "It's only me". If you answered the phone and heard either "'Ello guvnor" or "Good afternoon, Sir…" you'd probably imagine two very different people – how and why?

Class activity

Working with a partner, try to collect instances of voice-as-distinctiveness. Then try to work out what the distinctiveness involves – choice of word (diction)? Word-order (syntax)? Accent? What else?

1.2. Distinctiveness – voice of characters

The following is an example of voice-as-distinctiveness from Austen's Emma (first published in 1815; the character is a Miss Bates).

Class activity

Looking at the text, highlight examples how Miss Bates reveals her nervousness. *Think about grammar and lexicon (choice of words).*

Can you guess what kind of 'nervousness' it is – social? Personal? Both?

Extract 1

Thank you, my mother is remarkably well. Gone to Mr. Woodhouse's. I made her take her shawl – for the evenings are not warm – her large new shawl – Mrs. Dixon's wedding present. So kind of her to think of my mother! Bought at Weymouth, you know – Mr. Dixon's choice. There were three others, Jane says, which they hesitated about some time. Colonel Campbell rather preferred an olive. My dear Jane, are you sure you did not wet your feet? – It was but a drop or two, but I am so afraid: but Mr. Frank Churchill was so extremely – and there was a mat to step upon – I shall never forget his extreme politeness. (…) Do we not often talk of Mr. Frank Churchill? – Ah, here's Miss Woodhouse – Dear Miss Woodhouse, how do you do? Very well, I thank you, quite well. This is a meeting quite in fairyland! Such a transformation! – Must not compliment, I know (...) – that would be rude, but upon my word, Miss Woodhouse, you do look – how do you like Jane's hair? (...)

Jane Austen, Emma (1815)

1.3. Distinctiveness of author's voice

Particular authors often have very distinctive voices – they tend to use recurrent word choices, syntax, particular bits of recognisable imagery, idiom, and rhythm. The following fragment, for example, is instantly recognisable as the work of a major 20th-21st century poet:

> She tightened her torc on him
> And opened her fen

Why is this so instantly recognisable as the work of….. ?
(Seamus Heaney)

The writer in question spent decades exploring how one could 'dig' with a pen. Digging implies a kind of archaeology, also growth, replanting, making new. What this writer does is 'make new' by investing many of the poems with a particular **diction**.

2. VOICE AND 'DICTION'

Class activity

1. Read the following extract carefully, examining the author's **diction**, tone of voice, use of syntax and idiom. Find and highlight distinctive examples of the author's diction and literary devices used in the text.

Can you guess who the author is? How and why?

Extract 1 Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, 1891
Extract 2 Derek Walcott, *Omeros*, 1990
Extract 3 George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 1949

Extract 1

"And by the way, Harry, talking about silly marriages, what is this humbug your father tells me about Dartmoor wanting to marry an American? Ain't English girls good enough for him?"
"It is rather fashionable to marry Americans just now, Uncle George."
"I'll back English women against the world, Harry," said Lord Fermor, striking the table with his fist.
"The betting is on the Americans."
"They don't last, I am told," muttered his uncle.
"A long engagement exhausts them, but they are capital at a steeplechase. They take things flying. I don't think Dartmoor has a chance."
"Who are her people?" grumbled the old gentleman. "Has she got any?"
Lord Henry shook his head. "American girls are as clever at concealing their parents as English women are at concealing their past," he said, rising to go.
"They are pork-packers, I suppose?"
"I hope so, Uncle George, for Dartmoor's sake. I am told that pork-packing is the most lucrative profession in America, after politics."
"Is she pretty?"
"She behaves as if she was beautiful. Most American women do. It is the secret of their charm."
"Why can't these American women stay in their own country? They are always telling us that it is the Paradise for women."
"It is. That is the reason why, like Eve, they are so excessively anxious to get out of it," said Lord Henry. "Good-bye Uncle George. (…) Thanks for giving me the information I wanted. I always like to know everything about my new friends and nothing about my old ones."

Extract 2

"Mais qui ca qui rivait-'ous, Philoctete?"
"Moin blessé."
"But what is wrong wif you, Philoctete?"
"I am blest
wif this wound, Ma Kilman, qui pas ka guérir pièce.

Which will never heal."
"Well, you must take it easy.
Go home and lie down, give the foot a lickle rest."
Philoctete, his trouser-legs rolled, stares out to sea.

from the worn rumshop window. The itch in the sore
tingles like the tendrils of the anemone,
and the puffed blister of Portugese man-o'-war.

He believed the swelling came from the chained ankles
of his grandfathers. Or else why was there no cure?

That the cross he carried was not the anchor's

but that of his race, for a village black and poor,
as the pigs that rooted in its burning garbage,
then were hooked on the anchors of the abattoir.

Extract 3

Parsons (…) greeted them both with a cheery "Hullo, hullo!" and sat down at the table. (…) Syme had produced a strip of paper on which there was a long column of words, and was studying it with an ink-pencil between his fingers.
"Look at him working away in the lunch hour," said Parsons, nudging Winston. "Keenness, eh? What's that you've got there, old boy? Something a bit too brainy for me, I expect. Smith, old boy, I'll tell you why I'm chasing you. It's that sub you forgot to give me."
"Which sub is that?" said Winston, automatically feeling for money. (…)
"For Hate Week. You know – the house-by-house fund. I'm treasurer for our block. We're making an all-out effort – going to be a tremendous show. (…) Two dollars you promised me." Winston found and handed over two creased and filthy notes, which Parsons entered in a small notebook, in the neat handwriting of the illiterate. "By the way, old boy," he said. I hear that little beggar of mine let fly at you with his catapult yesterday. (…)"
"I think he was a little upset at not going to the execution," said Winston.
"Ah, well – what I mean to say, shows the right spirit, doesn't it? Mischievous little beggars they are, both of them, but talk about keenness! All they think about is the Spies, and the war, of course. D'you know what that little girl of mine did last Saturday, when her troop was on a hike out Berkhamsted way? She got two other girls to go with her, slipped from the hike, and spent the whole afternoon following a strange man. They kept on his tail for two hours, (…) and then, when they got into Amersham, handed him over to the patrols."
"What did they do that for?" said Winston, somewhat taken aback.
Parsons went on triumphantly: "My kid made sure he was some kind of enemy agent (…). She spotted he was wearing a finny kind of shoes – said she'd never seen anyone wearing shoes like that before. So the chances were he was a foreigner. Pretty smart for a nipper of seven, eh?"
"What happened to the man?" said Winston.
"Ah, that I couldn't say, of course. But I wouldn't be altogether surprised if –" Parsons made the motion of aiming a rifle and clicked his tongue for the explosion.
"Good", said Syme abstractedly, without looking up from his strip of paper.
"Of course we can't afford to take chances," agreed Winston dutifully.
"What I mean to say, there is a war on," said Parsons.

Class activity

Each extract includes a dialogue between two characters. Highlighting examples in the text, find out as much as you can about the characters, their social background, time and situation they are in, their attitudes and relationship with the other character by their **voice**. Begin by highlighting one character's choice of adjectives and think about what they could tell you about the character. Then move on to other recognizable examples of distinctive diction that are revealing something about the character.

Compare your findings about the author's diction with what you just found out about the characters'. How do they differ, when are they similar?

Class activity

As we have seen, an author's diction often involves choice from within a lexical set. Here's a lexical set of terms, for instance – a set of synonyms:

expensive unaffordable dear exorbitant pricey costly

Although these words are roughly synonymous, different kinds of people might use these respective terms.

1. Thinking about the characters in the literary extract you've just read, which word would fit them?
For example, which of these words would Parsons or Lord Henry be most likely to use?

2. Pick three of these words and construct an image of a person who fits each respective term.
Think about their gender, social background, age, what time they live in…

3. In pairs, write a short prose scene in which two of your characters have a conversation in a shop. For their conversation: Think about the vocabulary, idioms, syntax these characters might use. How does this affect on their conversation and relationship? For the prose: Think also of your own diction, your own distinctive voice as authors, while you write the scene. Do the characters speak in a similar way to yours? Is your diction while writing similar to or different from how you speak as a private person? What choices with regards to your own **diction** can you back to influence your writing?
For example, do you choose to write in a mock 19th century style or in contemporary cockney?

3. VOICE AS FIRST-PERSON PERSONA

An author might choose to write in the first-person ('I', 'me').

Question: Why would an author decide to write in the first-person? How 'honest' is a poem or prose passage whose voice is the first-person? Can any writing, even the most apparently self-revealing, ever be 'honest'?

One conclusion might be that even the most first-person-centred poem or prose passage **reveals a persona that the author has chosen to reveal.**

3.1. First-person persona in autobiography / memoir

> When I look back on my childhood, I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while.
>
> Frank McCourt, Angela's Ashes: A Memoir of a Childhood, (New York: Scribner, 1996)

In a memoir (or autobiography), himself or herself, is the protagonist or the main character in a seemingly true story.

Class activity

Write three sentences concerning how you felt/still feel about your early life.
(We don't want a factual narrative, e.g. 'I was born in Bradford. My parents were called Frank and Norma….' The sort of thing we need is e.g. 'There was no hot water for years. I was one of ten children and for a treat we played with used coat-hangers at Christmas. Somebody has to be born in Bradford.')

What version of yourself do you choose to reveal in those three sentences?

Read out and discuss what has been written.

- Did you reveal 'truth' in your writing? If yes, how did this make you feel? If not, why not? How did you alter the 'truth' (did you state something outright wrong, or did you opt for a more 'poetic truth' to enhance the quality of your writing?)
- Would you be able to recognise your class mates / best friend from what they have written about themselves?
- Did you find it difficult to write about yourself in such a way? Why? Do you think other writers might find it difficult as well? Why do you think that might be? What could be possible solutions?

3.2. Voice as adopted first-person persona

One 'solution' is to adopt another person's voice as your own.

Borrowing a voice is one way for a writer to express and explore themes, without openly stating that or connecting it directly to the author. At the same time, adopting a persona allows the writer to explore different kinds of diction, environments, conflicts and desires different to their own.

Class activity

Read and discuss the text given to you. What is the theme of the text? Which, possibly controversial, feelings does the first-person narrator express? Why do you think the writer chose to adopt this persona?

This excerpt is taken from Madeline Miller's novel *The Song of Achilles*, written in 2011. In her novel, Miller, a 21st century female American, adopts the perspective of Patroclus, a young man, friend and lover of Achilles, before and during the Trojan War.

The second example is Ted Hughes' 'persona poem' "Hawk Roosting", in which the English poet adopts the perspective of a hawk.

Extract 1

I am five when it is my father's turn to host the games. (…) The runners are gathered before the dais where my father and I sit, surrounded by prizes we will give to the winners. (…) But the real prize is in my hands: a wreath of dusty green leaves, freshly clipped, rubbed to a shine by my thumb. My father has given it to me grudgingly. He reassures himself: all I have to do is hold it. The youngest boys are running first, and they wait, shuffling their feet in the sand for the nod from the priest. (…) My eye catches on a light head among dozens of dark, tousled crowns. I lean forward to see. Hair lit like honey in the sun, and within it, glints of gold – the circlet of a prince. (…) When the priest strikes the ground, he slips past the thickened bodies of the older boys. He moves easily, his heels flashing pink as licking tongues. He wins. I stare as my father lifts the garland from my lap and crowns him (…). His father, Peleus, comes to claim him, smiling and proud. (…) My own father watches with envy. His wife is stupid and his son too slow to race in even the youngest group. He turns to me. "That is what a son should be." My hands feel empty without the garland. I watch King Peleus embrace his son. I see the boy toss the garland in the air, and catch it again. He is laughing, and his face is bright with victory.

Madeline Miller, *The Song of Achilles,* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011)

Extract 2

I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.
Inaction, no falsifying dream
Between my hooked head and hooked feet:
Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat.

The convenience of the high trees!
The air's buoyancy and the sun's ray
Are of advantage to me;
And the earth's face upward for my inspection....

My feet are locked upon the rough bark.
It took the whole of Creation
To produce my foot, my each feather:
Now I hold Creation in my foot

Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly –
I kill where I please because it is all mine.
There is no sophistry in my body:
My manners are tearing off heads –

The allotment of death.
For the one path of my flight is direct
Through the bones of the living.
No arguments assert my right:

The sun is behind me.
Nothing has changed since I began.
My eye has permitted no change.
I am going to keep things like this.

Ted Hughes, "Hawk Roosting", (1960)

Class activity

Going back to your three-sentence text about your early life, think about the **theme** which you have been exploring in that short text. *In the example given, the theme could be urban poverty*. Imagine this theme is one you'd like to explore further in a first-person text. Which first-person persona or perspective could you adopt to explore this theme? *For example, with the theme urban poverty, one could choose to write the narrative from the perspective of a pigeon or a rat living in Bradford.*

Think of a persona you could adopt for your own text and write a short prose text using the persona and your three sentences.

4. VOICE IN CHARACTER

As we have already seen in 2, prose writers have further resources. They can (must) allow their characters to have distinctive voices, and these voices can be revealed in both the narrative and in dialogue (or monologue). We've already seen something of that in the presentation of Miss Bates (from *Emma*, above) and the texts discussed in 2.

Class activity

Look at the text excerpt given to you and discuss it in your group. Who is speaking, what situation are they in? Where could they be, what relationship do the characters have? What else can you learn from them through their manner of speaking?

Highlight possible examples.

Class activity

Continue the scene sketched out in the extract. Try to copy the style of writing and bring the scene to an end. Variation: Introduce a new character into the scene, whose voice is completely different to the one of the original characters.

Who would this affect the scene?

Extract 1

"My boss, I swear he keep grabbing my ass. Anyway," he continued, "I got married."
"You're married?!"
"That's it, man."
"Who did you marry???"
"Toys."
"Toys?"
"Toys."
"All of a sudden, they ask for my green cars, say they forgot to look when I apply, so I ask her, "Will you marry me for papers?"
"Flakey," they had all said, in the restaurant where they worked, he in the kitchen, she as a waitress. "She's a flake." (…) Now they were practicing for the INS interview:
"What kind of underwear does your husband war, what toothpaste does your wife favor?" (…)
Who buys the toilet paper?"
"I do, man, I do, Softy, and you should see how much she use. Every two days I am going to the Rite Aid."

Kiran Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* (London: Penguin, 2006)

Extract 2

"Let me look at you. (…) How you get here?" (…)
"Er… Bus N17. It was cold on the top deck. Maybe I caught a chill."
"I don' tink dere's any maybes about it, young lady. An' I'm sure I don' know why you come 'pon de bus, when it take tree hours to arrive an' leave you waitin' in the col' an' den' when you get pon it de windows are open anyway an' you freeze half to death. (…) Come 'ere."
"Why?" demanded Irie, immediately suspicious. "What's that?"
"Nuttin', come 'ere. Take off your spectacles."
Hortense approached with a cupped hand.
"Not in my eye! There's nothing wrong with my eye!"
"Stop fussin'. I'm not puttin' nuttin' in your eye."
"Just tell me what it is," pleaded Irie (…) "Aaagh! It burns!"

Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*, (London: Penguin, 2000)

Extract 3

"I was thinking, if you don't mind, that we ought to spend this evening in a business talk; there will be so much to settle."
"I think so too. Tell me, in the first place, how did you get on with Tibby?"
"Your brother?"
"Yes, during cigarettes."
"Oh, very well."
"I'm so glad," she answered, a little surprised. "What did you talk about? Me, presumably."
"About Greece too."
"Greece was a very good card, Henry. Tibby's only a boy still, and one has to pick and choose subjects a little. Well done."
"I was telling him I have shares in a currant farm near Calamata."
"What a delightful thing to have shares in! Can't we go there for our honeymoon?"
"What to do?"
"To eat the currants. And isn't there marvelous scenery?"
"Moderately, but it is not the kind of place one could possibly go to with a lady."
"Why not?"
"No hotels."

E.M. Forster, *Howard's End* (1910)

Extract 4

"Let me look at you. (…) How you get here?" (…)
"Er… Bus N17. It was cold on the top deck. Maybe I caught a chill."
"I don' tink dere's any maybes about it, young lady. An' I'm sure I don' know why you come 'pon de bus, when it take tree hours to arrive an' leave you waitin' in the col' an' den' when you get pon it de windows are open anyway an' you freeze half to death. (…) Come 'ere."
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Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*, (London: Penguin, 2000)

5. VOICE AND HIERARCHIES OF DISTANCE

The foregoing allows us to identify 'hierarchies of distance' in the presentation of voice.

At one end of the hierarchy is the memoirist or autobiographer, who is likely to be (= seem) closest to the person writing. Further along the scale are those characters who are masks deployed by the novelist or poet. And at the other end of the scale are the dramatist's characters (a dramatist never – theoretically - speaks in his/her own voice except through stage directions).

Class activity

Rate the texts you have read in this course according on a scale of distance. Which are closest, which are further away?

Discuss with class.

6. VOICE AND POINT OF VIEW

Point-of-view can be expressed by the person in which you choose to write – first-person, second-person, third person. Note that first-person writing includes first person singular ('I') and plural ('we'/ 'us').

6.1. First-person point of view

First-person plural points of view tend often to have a rather generalising effect:

(i) 'We hold these truths to be self-evident….'
(ii) Note the last line of the following:

Extract 1

....This is why they give

An air of baffled absence, trying to be there
Yet being here. For the rooms grow farther, leaving
Incompetent cold, the constant wear and tear
Of taken breath, and them crouching below
Extinction's alp, the old fools, never perceiving
How near it is. This must be what keeps them quiet:
The peak that stays in view wherever we go
For them is rising ground. Can they never tell
What is dragging them back, and how it will end? Not at night?
Not when the strangers come? Never, throughout
The whole hideous, inverted childhood? Well,
We shall find out.

Philip Larkin, "The Old Fools", (1973)

6.2. Second-person point of view

Second-person ('you') points of view can be a way of writer fairly directly addressing the reader ('you may think X….but you're wrong, you know'). Narrative can also be cast in the second person, but if so, the trick is to make the reader identify so closely with the 'you' that the 'you' becomes an 'I'.

Class activity

Take this sentence: ***The first time I saw you, you were standing at the edge of the street crying.***

Now continue the narrative. Try to make the reader identify closely with this 'you'.
(You aren't allowed to use the word 'I' as you complete this exercise.)

What you'll probably find is that this 'you' is in the first instance the reader, ***who turns into a character***.

6.3. Third-person points of view

I. **Omniscient** (all-knowing, all-seeing) narrator – He was, she was etc.
II. **Limited omniscient** – 'knows'/presents point of view of only one or two characters, whereas the author him/herself is an unvoiced presence
III. **Objective** – like journalism, where the writer report[s] only what may be seen, heard, smelled, touched and objectively known. This is a favourite stance of Ernest Hemingway.

Class activities/homework/ material for notebook

Find examples of 'omniscient', 'limited omniscient' and 'objective' narrative style/point of view and jot them down in your notebook. Note down how these various styles affect you as a reader.

Take any of the passages you have written in this class in the first person and recast it (a) in the second person and then (b) in an objective voice. Think about ways in which you can reveal the thoughts and feelings of your original first person narration through speech and gesture, action and image.