

The Courage to Hear Yourself Sing

5 takes on authentic writing

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5 takes on authentic writing

Why 5? Because authentic writing challenges you to:

1. work out for yourself what the words mean – not what the experts say, and not what we can read in the dictionary
2. learn from your writing as you go along - not just about your words but what they say about you, the writer, too
3. experiment with your writing until you recognise your own voice
4. write as a human being, not an expert - willing to learn, open to possibility
5. recognise that we won't always get it right first time, that sometimes we'll need more than one take

And I believe in taking my own medicine.

Where the words came from

There's a big question in there about the source of our writing... and who knows, that might just get to the heart of what it means to write with authenticity.

But for now it's a more practical point – the source of the words for this e-book.

The ideas, inspiration, words and some direct quotations come from a month long series of posts, comments and conversations at the Confident Writing blog.

We covered (1) the meaning of authentic writing (2) how to write like yourself (3) the benefits of authenticity (4) writing your way to a more authentic life and (5) the courage to hear yourself sing

Just the stuff that I'm writing about here, starting with:

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1: This thing we're aiming at

"Some writers confuse authenticity, which they ought always to aim at, with originality, which they should never bother about" (W H Auden)

But what is this thing called authenticity that we should always be aiming at? The dictionaries talk of a seal, a sign to prove you had the real thing. The genuine article. Later a brand to show consumers that they could trust a product, rely on it.

And there are things with can do with our words so that we start to sound more trustworthy, more reliable. Writing in a conversational style. Using shorter sentences and plain language so people can see where we're coming from and form their own opinions.



But that's not all that we mean by authenticity, or all we can do to write that way. Because we also talk about authenticity in terms of the way that we live our life. Being self-aware. Enjoying the good, simple things in life. Living life in line with your values. As Dolly Parton put it: "find out who you are and do it on purpose" (I love that quote –and see how much you can say in 10 simple words?)

And when we're talking about authenticity, about authentic writing – well we know it's about more than a conversational style. It's about tapping into our power, our source, our sense of self in order to tell things the way that they are. It's about the connections that follow – the way our words can sizzle and fly, make a searing connection with someone else who recognises something of themselves, their story, in your words.

And it's one of the things that we know when don't have. When we talk about ways of finding our voice again. When we know that somehow we've lost it.

Need to do something to find it again. Spend some time working out who we are, maybe. But maybe also to stop trying so hard. Learn to trust in the power of our words.

#2: The steps to authentic writing

There are things that we can do to change the way we **write**.
Things like:

- Using plain language – so you're not trying to be something you're not, and your readers can judge for themselves what they think
- Writing in your own words – so you're not relying on jargon or clichés but relating the thing you're talking about back to your own experience, making it real, specific, grounded
- Writing in a conversational style – so you're writing more like you'd talk, breaking some of the grammar rules you've remembered, and throwing in contractions that'll make you sound more natural, friendly and human
- Pacing your readers' experience – so they recognise some of their story in yours, and get to see that you're human with rough and smooth edges, just like them



But there's no one style to authentic writing – beyond doing it your way. It can be funny, sad, deep, emotional, simple, passionate, lively, short, witty, chatty, serious: it depends on your purpose, your readers, and most of all: on **you**.

Because authenticity is not just another way of spinning words – it's a reflection of who you are. It's not just using conversational language – although that can help. It's getting your words and your values lined up so that there's substance behind what you're saying – and people know it. Which takes us into different territory altogether. Things like:

- Being credible – so you don't over-promise, and you follow through on what you say you'll do
- Knowing your values – so the words you use reflect where you're coming from, not an external set of ideas
- Knowing who you are – so that's who you're being when you write

Which is kind of a big question to throw into the mix, isn't it?

3: What happens when we write like ourselves

Things start to change when we write like human beings – when we write like ourselves.

Writing with a human voice allows you to build rapport and develop trust with readers, colleagues, customers, peers.

Writing with your own words makes you feel more grounded, more connected to the people around you and the work that you're doing. It makes things seem more real. It helps you know and then express your values - and that can be a really powerful motivator.

Sometimes that's as far as you can take things at work. But there are other kinds of writing we do too – through books and novels and speeches and articles and blogs. Places where you get more room to experiment, to learn, to build up the courage to take off the mask.



And that's your chance to start writing it the way that it is, grounded in our experience, our emotions, our fears. Our shared experience of the human condition.

And when your writing voice starts to change – well other people will start to notice. You'll get a different, better quality of feedback – whether that's relationships with people at work or reactions to your on-line writing. People will notice and they'll tell you – and guess what? The things they say about your writing – about you – will be just the things that you were waiting to hear.

Which is a bit of a conundrum in a way.

Because authentic writing means writing just the way you are, no matter what anyone else thinks. Throwing yourself into the words and switching off that internal editor.

But oddly enough that's also when your words make a powerful impact on other people. You write it the way that it is and you strike a chord. The world shrinks and the words: resonate.

#4: The write way to find out who you are

You can boil authentic writing down to two simple steps:

1. Find out who you are
2. Write that way

I know, I know, it's breathtakingly simple and impossible at the same time (I have to thank Robert Hruzek* for the inspiration here. It's a blinder.)

But here's the thing – writing can help you to find out who you are. You don't have to wait until you've cracked that question before you start writing (and let's face it if you did, no-one would ever write a word).

You can learn as you go along.



Here are some ways that writing can help you find out who you are.

- Learn from what you write. You might be amazed what you find.
- Write your values, your way. Find your words for the stuff that really matters – the words that resonate, that cause a reaction when you read or write them – and learn from them
- Listen to other people's words for what you do. They can illuminate your sense of what you're about – so watch for them, capture them, learn from them
- Write a journal. Tried and tested, a journal creates a private space for you to work through your words, thoughts and feelings and start to write yourself into a clearer sense of who you are
- Write a blog. There's nothing like the buzz of readers, comments and feedback to build confidence in your voice, to find the words that make the strongest connection, that sizzle and swirl with energy and word power – because you're singing your song

After that – well after that you're free to start doing it on purpose... as Dolly would say.

5: The Courage to Hear Yourself Sing



Authentic writing requires a degree of courage. It means letting go of some of the stuff that you might have been holding onto – maybe for more than a little while. Stuff like:

Wanting to sound like others – to be as good a writer as other people are

Needing to get it right – to follow all the advice in the style guides, and never put a foot wrong

Being an expert – sounding like an authority, like you're someone who really knows what they're talking about

The fear of what others will think – getting frozen in the glare of a zillion pairs of eyes - when all you need to write for is one

These are blocks that it's good to get rid of – so why not try and:

- Make your focus more specific – write for just one person, for the possibility of connection with that one person who will find your words of interest and value
- Write for your own pleasure – forget what others will think
- Just... go ahead and express yourself
- Enjoy reading other people's writing – but not at the expense of losing confidence in your own. No-one else can tell it like you can
- Tell your version of the truth however inexpert it might be
- Commit to exploring and learning in a spirit of openness and curiosity – it'll keep you on remarkably sold (and fertile) ground

And sometimes. Well sometimes we just need to let go of all those defences and say it the way that it is. Because sometimes it's not a question of finding the right words.

Sometimes it's about finding the courage to hear yourself sing.

If you enjoyed this...

Pass it on! This is a free download with a Creative Commons Licence so feel to share it with anyone who might be looking for ideas – or their writing voice...

Come over to the Confident Writing Blog blog for more ideas on what it means to write with confidence – and how to do it.

Join me in thanking everyone who contributed to the September 2007 conversation and informed the words and ideas that you're reading here.

Get in touch! My name's Joanna Young, I work to get people writing with confidence, to realise the power of their own words.

*Inspiration from the Middle Zone: <http://middlezonemusings.com/>
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