

Voice in Nonfiction Writing

At one time, children’s book editors rejected nonfiction manuscripts with a strong, distinct voice. They believed that the information, not the presentation, should be the major attraction. But today, voice is recognized as an important element of literary nonfiction.

Educators generally describe voice as the “personality of the writing” or “how the writing makes the reader feel.” These definitions may help readers gain a stronger sense of how to identify voice in a text, but it



doesn’t help writers as they’re trying to craft it. That’s why I love the astonishingly clear, simple definition developed by Newbery-award winning author Linda Sue Park:

voice = word choice + rhythm

Park defines “rhythm” in an equally clear and simple way:

rhythm = punctuation + sentence length

Not only does this brilliant equation apply to voice in both fiction and nonfiction, it also makes a craft move that often seems mysterious and elusive instantly manageable. After all, word choice, punctuation, and sentence length are all easy to control, easy to vary, easy to play around with (Park, 2019).

Nonfiction voice options span a continuum, from lively to lyrical, with plenty of options in between. Writers choose a voice based on their topic and their purpose for writing.

The Nonfiction Voice Continuum		
Lively		Lyrical
	playful	light, lovely
irreverent		stately, respectful
	sassy	calm, cozy
	passionate, excited	soothing
goofy	confessional	wondrous
	conversational	descriptive
humorous	storyteller	

Nonfiction Books with a Lively Voice

A Black Hole Is Not a Hole by Carolyn Cinami DeCristofano

Bone by Bone: Comparing Animal Skeletons by Sarah Levine

How They Choked by Georgia Bragg

I Feel Better with a Frog in My Throat by Carlyn Beccia

Oh, Yikes! History's Grossest, Wackiest Moments by Joy Masoff

Pink Is for Blobfish: Discovering the World's Perfectly Pink Animals by Jess Keating

Pipsqueaks, Slowpokes, and Stinkers: Celebrating Animal Underdogs by Melissa Stewart

Poison: Deadly Deeds, Perilous Professions, and Murderous Medicines by Sarah Albee

What to Do About Alice? by Barbara Kerley

Nonfiction Books with a Lyrical Voice

Dave the Potter by Laban Carrick Hill

An Egg is Quiet by Dianna Aston Hutts

Giant Squid by Candace Fleming

On a Beam of Light by Jennifer Berne

Planting the Trees of Kenya: The Story of Wangari Maathai by Claire A. Nivola

The Secret World of Walter Anderson by Hester Bass

Seashells: More than a Home by Melissa Stewart

Step Gently Out by Helen Frost

We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga by Traci Sorell