

THE WRITER'S VOICE

A Guide to Finding and Cultivating Your Unique Voice

by Lissa M. Cowan



03

HI, I'M LISSA

Writer, teacher, and
gatherer of books,
notebooks, and
fancy pens.

04

INTRO

Welcome to The Writer's Voice,
a guide designed to help you
discover, nurture, and refine
your unique voice as a writer.

TOC

05

WHAT IS THE
WRITER'S VOICE

Your writer's voice
is the sum of your
choices.

06-08

EXERCISES

Get a feel for how to
develop your writer's
voice with these exercises.

09

AUDIO
CLIPS

Listen to these audio
clips to get a sense of
how different writers
express themselves in
their works.

Hi, I'm Lissa

I'm a writer, book editor, writing mentor, and teacher living high in the Gatineau Hills**, Quebec, Canada with my cat Toiyabe (Shoshone for "Great Mountain") who I rescued in Nevada near "The Loneliest Road in America."



I'm the author of *Milk Fever*, a historical fiction novel (Demeter Press) and co-translator from French of a book of poetic prose called *Words That Walk in the Night* (Véhicule Press). Publishers Weekly said of my novel:

"Cowan's...novel invokes powerful metaphors about devouring ideas, reading people, and cherishing books as if they were human...."

Kathy Page, British-Canadian writer and author of Giller-nominated *Paradise & Elsewhere*, called it "a sensuous and subversive novel, set at a time when printed books were beginning to change the world."

I wrote a children's book called *Adoptive Families Are Families for Keeps* that was published by Groundwork Press and illustrated by Stephanie Hill.

An MA in English Studies from the Université de Montréal and a post-graduate diploma in writing and editing from the University of Victoria set the foundation for me to work in publishing, communications, journalism, writing and editing.

My publishing experience at a Vancouver publishing house working with writers from concept to completed MS led me to develop three novel-writing courses for the University of Calgary's Creative Writing Certificate Program. I went on to teach hundreds of students and serve as a mentor at that university. I give in-person and online workshops and presentations on the writer's voice, writing richer stories through mindful writing, and novel writing. I recently gave a workshop for the Alexandra Writers' Centre Society in Calgary.

In 2025, I drew on my years of experience as a writer and writing coach and created The Unbearable Lightness of Novel Writing, an online course that guides people through the process of transforming a story idea into the foundation for a compelling novel.

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *The Writer's Voice*, a guide designed to help you discover, nurture, and refine your unique voice as a writer. Your voice is what sets you apart—it's your fingerprint, your sensibility, rhythm of language, and how you see the world. Whether you're writing fiction, memoir, or poetry, this guide will walk you through exercises and insights to help you connect with your voice and make your writing unforgettable.



The writer's voice is chiefly a mix of style, tone and POV, but voice is really the sum total of all a writer's choices and tendencies—the unique fingerprint that emerges when everything comes together. It's what makes a writer sound like themselves rather than someone else.

Your writer's voice is the sum of your choices: the words you use, the rhythm of your sentences, the themes you explore, and the way you engage with your reader. It's your preoccupations and your unique perspective. Even when you write in different genres or styles, your voice remains consistent—it's the river of words that ties all your work together.

Why Does Voice Matter?

- Sets you apart: In a sea of stories, your voice makes your work recognizable.
- Connects with readers: A strong voice builds intimacy and trust with your audience.
- Strengthens your writing: When you write in your true voice, your words flow more naturally and your stories resonate more deeply.

In a sea of stories, your voice makes your work recognizable.

Key Elements of the Writer's Voice

1. Style

- Sentence length and structure
- Vocabulary and word choice
- Use of metaphor and figurative language
- Punctuation and rhythm

2. Tone

- Your attitude toward your subject and reader
- Shifts based on context, but always carries your signature

3. Point of View (POV)

- First person, third person limited, or omniscient narrator
 - Each POV shapes how your voice is perceived
- #### 4. Diction and Vocabulary
- Literary turns of phrase or local/regional expressions
 - The words you gravitate

toward reveal your voice

5. Rhythm and Pacing

- How you move through time and information
- Do you linger on moments or rush through them?

6. Sensory Priorities

- Which senses dominate your writing?
- Visual, auditory, tactile, or something else?

7. Relationship to the Reader

- Do you get close and personal, or maintain distance?
- Is your writing confessional, challenging, or generous?

8. Use of Figurative Language

- Extended metaphors, quick similes, or scattered comparisons
- What do your comparisons reveal about your mental landscape?

EXERCISES TO DISCOVER YOUR WRITER'S VOICE





Exercise 1: Free writing (15–20 minutes)

Set your timer. Free write for 15 minutes .

If you're not sure what to write about, here are some topics to consider:

- Your happy place (could be a park, fav chair, mountaintop)
- A turning point in your life (a move, new job, new baby)
- A conversation you wish you could have (future self, historical figure, family member, celebrity)

Once the timer goes off, identify 3-5 elements in your writing:

- word choice patterns, word/phrase repetition
- sentence rhythm, what you focused on in terms of themes
- metaphor or imagery
- sense-based (which ones dominate)
- language, use of colloquialisms, sparse language
- adjectives
- short or long paragraphs
- fragments or run-on sentences
- internal vs. external observations (characters' inner landscape or their environment)
- humour, nostalgia
- detachment vs. emotional intensity
- storytelling (anecdotes, scenes)

Exercise 2: Writing from objects (30 minutes)

- Choose an object that holds meaning for you. It could be a photo, a favourite mug, an old sweater or piece of jewelry.
- Write about it without naming it, or let it trigger a memory.
- Reflect: What patterns or surprises emerged in your writing?



MY EXAMPLE

There's an old photo of my mother with her mother. Maybe they were going swimming or just horsing around in the backyard as families do. I wonder if my Nana really did wear those heels to the beach like in those old black and white movies where women seem carefree but are likely in pain from sore feet. Maybe she took them off in favour of beach sandals or espadrilles. I never really knew my Nana as she became ill when I was just a bit older than my mum in this photo. It's hard to reconcile this smile and lighthearted air with who she became later after my granddad returned from the war.

Examples of Writer's Voice

Listen to excerpts from authors like Suzette Mayr, Lemony Snicket, and Ocean Vuong. Notice how their voices are distinct yet unmistakably theirs. What elements stand out to you?

The Ambassadors, Henry James

Son of a Trickster, Eden Robinson

Like, Ali Smith

The Sleeping Car Porter, Suzette Mayr

The End (from A Series of Unfortunate Events), Lemony Snicket (AKA Daniel Handler)

The Temple of Gladness, Ocean Vuong

FINAL THOUGHTS

Your voice is your superpower. It's what makes your writing uniquely yours.

Embrace it, nurture it, and let it shine on every page!



Happy writing!

Lissa M. Cowan

BE IN TOUCH!

Website lissamcowan.com

Instagram [@lissamcowan](https://www.instagram.com/lissamcowan)

Facebook [lissamcowanwriter](https://www.facebook.com/lissamcowanwriter)

Email lc@lissamcowan.com

Writing school

