

## Voice Experiments

It's often said that what distinguishes "literature" is that it's *character-based*, or that it serves as a means of exploring the consciousness of human beings. If so, then how the story is told—the story's *voice*—is king. A voice might mimic a pattern of speech (e.g., *The Catcher In The Rye*), or a pattern of thought (anything by David Foster Wallace, or much of *Ulysses*), or any combination of the two. It can be transparent, taking the form of an authority whose judgements we are meant to trust. Or, it can merely appear to be transparent, as a means for *betraying* our trust. It is always active, and encompasses all the other elements of narrative.

Ithaca's own Paul West opens his novel *Terrestrials* with an author's note:

I had intended to keep secret the nature of *Terrestrials* until the book's end, but worldly counsel has persuaded me otherwise. This novel is a simulation of what a book from outer space might be like...it contains a number of carefully worked errors, falterings, feats of valiant incomprehension. The narrator, whose name is One Eighth Humbly, has particular trouble with the concept of seasons and with that of espionage...

And so on. The book's voice is, as you might imagine, very peculiar.

This assignment is intended to get us to try out different voices and see where they lead us. Pick one or two narrative tactics from the list below, and write a couple of pages based on your choices.

- 1) A narration that employs no independent clauses whatsoever.
- 2) A third-person narrator who is actually a first person narrator talking about herself in the third person.
- 3) A narrator who learned English by translating video game manuals into his native tongue.
- 4) A narrator who never makes a single true statement.
- 5) A narration delivered entirely while the narrator is scaling the face of a mountain. He may or may not actually mention that this is what he's doing.
- 6) A narration that consists entirely of the narrator talking to herself while breaking into her husband's office building in the middle of the night.
- 7) A first-person plural narration, wherein the "narrator" is a women's college volleyball team.
- 8) A narration consisting entirely of the thoughts of a short-order cook between the moment he flips a buckwheat pancake into the air and the moment it lands, face-down, on the grill.
- 9) A narration that is being composed by its "author" entirely on two-inch-square sticky notes.
- 10) A narration that is supposed to have been composed by a computer program.
- 11) A narrator who is stricken by a particular debilitating disease, which is never alluded to in the text.