PURPOSE OF WORKSHOP:

We are here to talk about voice. Editors regularly say that’s what they’re most looking for in fiction, nonfiction. What it is, what it isn’t Voice is the presence of self in your work. Which is different than making a piece of work specifically about you, or egocentric – you can’t help the presence of self in writing any more than you can separate the tonal quality of your voice from the words that come out of your mouth. But you can learn how to breathe. When to shout, when to whisper. How to flex the right muscles and relax the right muscles to take that natural sound you have as an intextricable part of who you are, and magnify it to the desired effect.

As such, the first 45 minutes of this workshop will be focused on helping you locate your truest voice – self. I’ll share a few tips to help you unlock that, inside yourself. It’s not a neatly bulleted list of techniques, it’s foundational, and probably the most important work of voice. The second half will focus on some specific ways to think about voice and use the rhythm, structure, and candence of your language to craft a character’s voice or authorial preence in your work.

When people want to learn how to sing, they are usually frustrated when they find out the first step is learning how to breathe. The second step is learning how to sing.

“People often ask me if I still get nervous when i speak in public. The answer is yes. I’m always nnervouse. Experience keeps me from being scared – people are offering me their most precious gift. Their time. Time is, hands down, our most coveted, most unrenewable resource.”

So I’ve taken it very seriously not to waste yours. If something comes across as superfluous or unnecessary, that was an accident. I purposefully don’t use classic handouts. There’s a great Pinceton study and meta-analysis which says that people are much more likely to remember what they hear if they connect the information through the conduit of their body, to paper, which is writing by hand. More effective than typing. Considerably more effective that not taking notes at all. Super old school – turns out, it works.

The first thing I want you to do is take this notecard and write down something personal about yourself that you would never share with a stranger during a conference icebreaker. Don’t worry, you don’t have to turn this in, and any sharing will be purely consensual. Okay: I’ll give one minute.

Find a partner. Just one. If you have to group into 3 fine.

Now listen carefully. I’m going to give you a choice. Do you share what’s on your card, or not? I’m going to 3. When I hit three, I want you to stick your card in the air if you are willing to share it with your partner or group – not the whole group. Or I want you to rip your card in half. Stick it in your purse, pocket, whatever.

We’ll do this first, then we’ll continue with the share.

Introcude yourself by name, then either read the card or share something else about yourself. I’ll give just a couple minutes.

With consent from your partner or group, is there something particularly interesting you’d like to share? I’ll show you how this works. I would say. Introduce the person, and share what you learned: EXAMPLE.

I did this for a few reasons.

1. We’re going to be doing some sharing. Even in a very limited time, it’s important to build community. Someone you meet in this room could be a support for you or inspiration for the rest of your life.
2. If you wrote something personal, really personal, there’s power in that. Right? I want to challeng you to do more of that. When you connect your vulnerability to words on the page with yourself, you are creating synaptic pathways from the subconscoius that can be used by your characters as well. There’s a rule in business, which is – if you own the business, don’t expect any of your employees to work harder than you’re willing to work yourself. That’s also true for writing. Don’t expect any of your characters to be more open or vulnerable that you’re willing to be yourself. Writing down your own secrets is really powerful. Opening that connection between brain and body is vital, because that’s where your best work will come from.
3. This one’s really important. You always have the option to tear it up. Write the scary shit. Write the things no one should ever, ever know about you. Then look it, and decide if you can live with sharing it. Maybe the answer is no. Maybe it’s not yet.

What I’m about to tell you is probably not what you came to this workshop to hear, but it might be the most important thing I say. Get the critics out of your life, and out of your head. They are not helping you.

I call these people hippos. The hippopautamous is territorial.

We don’t achieve greatness by being beat up, taught that we’re worthless. We succeed despite these things, but I don’t think any of us need more obstacles in our life. The reason you hear about the hardship persistent pepole overcome is because they were persistent. It was obstacles. The persistence is extraordinary. Obstacles and critics are not. So move them out of your way. Surround yourself with people who support you, and people you can learn from.

“The only MoFos in my crew are people I can learn from.”

Okay, let’s try a writing technique – we’re going to do this twice, the second time with a twist. Now what we’re all friends and we’ve ejected the hippos from the water, we should be feeling better, right?

This is one of the fastest exercizes to help you hit that flow state. I know some writers who do this every time beore they start writing:

It’s called A to Z. You will have one minute. I want you to write the first word that comes into your head. Any word. No matter the spelling. No matter how mundane or silly. I want you to go through A-Z.

1 MIN

Most surprising word you wrote – share.

This kind of flow is really great before you start working on another, more personal writing activity. Think about it like priming a pump before the water really gets flowing.

We’re going to do an old chestnut writing activity. If you’ve done it, you realize how amazing and powerful it is. If not, it’s probably the best thing you can steal from this workshop and use in your own teaching.

This can take an hour. Or days. But my purpose today is finding your personal flow state. So we’re simply going to read this poem, then we are going to do a focused, three minute write.

WHERE I’M FROM

STAND AND SHARE

Group share

A-Z PROFANE – not share. Just keep that all bottled inside.

\*\*\*Next – We’ve Learned to Breathe, Now Let’s Learn How to Sing\*\*\*

You can’t know what your full range is until you hear your voice crack. Even then, you can push past it.

R.L. Stine who wrote the Goosebumps started out trying to write humor. He thought children’s writers were supposed to be funny. Then he gave up and wrote a story he wanted to – a scary story.

I started singing trying to sound like Michael Stipe, then did this really cool online program about finding yoru singing voice and ended up trying country songs by Johnny Cash and Hank Williams and was way better at it. Who knew?

**STRUNK & WHITE**

**Strunk & White The Elements of Style
Do Not Affect A Breezy Manner**

The volume of writing is enormous, these days, and much of it has a sort of windiness about it, almost as though the author were in a state of euphoria. "Spontaneous me," sang Whitman, and, in his innocence, let loose the hordes of uninspired scribblers who would one day confuse spontaneity with genius.

The breezy style is often the work of an egocentric, the person who imagines that everything that comes to mind is of general interest and that uninhibited prose creates high spirits and carries the day. Open any alumni magazine, turn to the class notes, and you are quite likely to encounter old Spontaneous Me at work — an aging collegian who writes something like this:

Well, guys, here I am again dishing the dirt about your disorderly classmates, after pa$$ing a weekend in the Big Apple trying to catch the Columbia hoops tilt and then a cab-ride from hell through the West Side casbah. And speaking of news, howzabout tossing a few primo items this way?

This is an extreme example, but the same wind blows, at lesser velocities, across vast expanses of journalistic prose. The author in this case has managed in two sentences to commit most of the unpardonable sins: he obviously has nothing to say, he is showing off and directing the attention of the reader to himself, he is using slang with neither provocation nor ingenuity, he adopts a patronizing air by throwing in the word primo, he is humorless (though full of fun), dull, and empty. He has not done his work. Compare his opening remarks with the following — a plunge directly into the news:

Clyde Crawford, who stroked the varsity shell in 1958, is swinging an oar again after a lapse of forty years. Clyde resigned last spring as executive sales manager of the Indiana Flotex Company and is now a gondolier in Venice.

This, although conventional, is compact, informative, unpretentious.