

Pittsburg State University

Pittsburg State University Digital Commons

Essays

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg Collection

March 2023

[Untitled essay on young writers and their voice]

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/cm_g_essays

Recommended Citation

Mirriam-Goldberg, Caryn, "[Untitled essay on young writers and their voice]" (2023). *Essays*. 51.
https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/cm_g_essays/51

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg Collection at Pittsburg State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Essays by an authorized administrator of Pittsburg State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact lfthompson@pittstate.edu.

Dear writer,

Young writers often ask me, “Do I have a voice yet?” Obviously, there are no voices for sale on the internet or in your local book store, and yet you’ve probably heard that finding your voice is key to writing well.

When I started writing poetry at age 14, I had no idea what my voice was. All I knew is that I had to write, and luckily, to paraphrase writer Annie Dillard, the page taught me how. Writing itself teaches you how to put one word in front of another.

Finding your voice is like finding true love. It rarely shows up when you’re looking directly for it. So forget about your voice and instead write the next paragraph, the next poem, the next story, the next play. Research shows that the more we use certain parts of our brain, the more those parts actually grow. The more you write, the more your mind expands your ability to write. It’s like exercise. It’s like playing music. It’s like learning to be a good friend. You just show up.

Set aside time each day or week and write...at 6 a.m. every morning sitting in your bed or Sunday night at the kitchen table. Write in cafés while listening to heavy metal music, or while waiting at orthodontist’s offices. Find a time and place to regularly write – and carry paper and pen with you for those unexpected writing opportunities.

Approach your writing with an attitude of total tenderness and send away any critical voices in your head. Treat your writing like you would your best friend who just called you to say he is completely heartbroken. Don’t smash it on the floor – it’ll discourage other writing from showing itself. Tell yourself also what Anne Lamott says in her book *Bird by Bird*: that everyone writes \$^#&% first drafts. Then learn how to revise well.

What not to do? Many young writers have told me they don't read other writers because they want to find their own voice and not be influenced by others. NOT TRUE! We are influenced by other people's words constantly, and if you're a writer, even more than constantly. If you're writing poetry without having read Sharon Olds's breathless lines about her first love, or writing a story without knowing Sandra Cisneros's powerful rhythm, then you're missing out. Why just have your writing influenced by a friend's sappy love poems when you could be learning more about language from great writers residing in your local library? Other writers are your secret teachers, and if you end up imitating them, so what? Learning to write like J.K. Rowling or Mary Oliver expands your ability to write.

Write because you have to write, you love to write, you want to write. If you don't yet believe that you're good enough, pretend you do until you do. Writers aren't the ones with the most talent or brilliance: they're the ones who write. The more you write, the more you write in a way that sounds like you.