

# Writing *for* Rights



Patrice W. Glenn

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# Writing for Rights

BY

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## FROM THE AUTHOR

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One of the lasting memories from the year 2020 will undoubtedly be the protests sparked by the deaths of George Floyd and others at the hands of police. Throughout that year, incidents of excessive force and police brutality were heavily scrutinized, leaving a lasting impression on us all.

Alongside the protests, the COVID-19 pandemic and its resulting lockdowns dominated headlines and discussions. The effects of the pandemic will likely be discussed and studied for years to come, possibly overshadowing the social justice issues that also arose during the year.

Death, in its many forms, became a universal subject in 2020. Whether it was the loss of lives due to a microscopic virus or the killing of a loved one, the topic was real, immediate, and threatening. While these tragedies caught our attention for a time, unfortunately, the discussion often fades, and the names of victims like Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor are forgotten.

Furthermore, in 2020, there was a notable increase in violence against Black and Latinx individuals in the LGBTQ+ communities. The initial surge of outrage over these injustices often subsided, replaced by new incidents and forms of discrimination. Perhaps our emotions waned because we knew that something else would soon take its place—a new killing, a new injustice, a new senseless death.

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Yet, despite the ever-changing news cycle, the pursuit of social justice and fair solutions continues for many advocates. These people tirelessly protest and express their frustrations and passions, often through writing. As E.L. Doctorow noted, “Good writing is supposed to evoke sensation in the reader—not the fact that it is raining, but the feeling of being rained upon.”

In writing this book, my hope is to demonstrate the power of words. Writing is not just a means of expression; it’s a tool to communicate frustration, passion, and drive change. I hope this book helps you find your voice and use it to impact the communities and groups you care about, allowing you to be part of the ongoing conversation and movement towards justice.

## CHAPTER 1

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# FOCUS ON LEARNING

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Sometimes, I wish I could rid all classes of grades to create a more just and equitable learning environment. In a world committed to social justice, removing grades would alleviate the pressure on students from marginalized communities, who often face additional stress and societal expectations to earn an A, a B, or settle for a C. The problem, compounded by systemic inequalities in our world, is that many students are driven to complete their assignments primarily by grades. This system perpetuates the idea that a simple letter grade determines the value of education, ignoring the diverse backgrounds and learning needs of students.

However, education is a universal right, taking place everywhere, and its value transcends mere monetary measurements: composition book-\$1.99; 10-pack of blue ink pens—\$4.95; mathematics book-\$75.00; education—priceless. As Anatole France, the French author, wisely said, “An education isn’t how much you have committed to memory, or even how much you know. It’s being able to differentiate between what you do know and what you don’t.”

Nevertheless, in a world fraught with disparities, many learners do not enter classes with their energy focused on genuine learning. For some, driven by societal pressures and inequalities, earning a “good grade” becomes the sole focus. To build an educational system centered on justice and equality, we must challenge this way of thinking. We must focus on learning and make “earning” secondary.

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*Writing for Rights*, pages 1–2.

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This is particularly true for foundation courses, the classes that establish skills that the learner will use throughout their education. These foundation courses, such as basic writing, should be accessible and inclusive to all, reflecting the diverse backgrounds and needs of the learners.

**CHALLENGE**—Embrace a commitment to social justice in education, focusing on the same energy and spirit of survival that has brought you to this point. Think about creating a learning environment that is compassionate, fair, and inclusive, not just for a minute, but as a lasting legacy. Think about it just a minute.

Thinking?

Now, harness that energy and use it to propel yourself through this educational process. Enjoy the process; focus on learning, not earning. You can do it!

Are you ready?

### HOW TO USE THIS TEXT

Some books are novels that we read in sequential order. We experience them with emotion and engagement. This is not one of those books. This text is a resource for you to reference as needed. The content presented is not meant to be linear although that information is presented in a logical linear fashion. Therefore, it may prove best for you to jump around from one chapter to one that precedes it. Additionally, if you are like me, you may need to double check your thoughts. In such a case, I pick up text resources, flip to the information I seek, and verify my information or correct my misinformation. For all intents and purposes, this is how you should use this text.

You may also be guided through this text by a teacher or instructor. He or she knows best, so follow the direction provided.

## CHAPTER 2

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# FIGHTING TO BE HEARD

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I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept.

—*Angela Davis*

No matter your background or where you come from, you may have felt ignored and overlooked at times. Perhaps you've witnessed police brutality against people who resemble you or seen those in power remain silent in the face of anti-LG-BTQ+ harassment or bias.

These experiences can foster fear and anxiety, impacting your sense of safety, belonging, and overall well-being. Likewise, those who suffer such injustices may feel isolated and forsaken. Have you ever felt this way?

It's common to feel despair when faced with massive injustice. Sometimes, you might think that there's nothing you can say or do to improve the situation. Even worse, you may fear that your efforts or words will be disregarded simply because of who you are. This feeling, often referred to as "voicelessness," is familiar to many, especially those from marginalized or underrepresented groups. At our core, we all want our experiences and concerns to be recognized and heard. I know I do.

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Maybe you've wanted to stand up against issues like gender inequality, homophobia, or racial injustice, but were unsure how to proceed. It's understandable. As Elie Wiesel once said, "There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest." In this chapter, I use the terms "fight" and "protest" interchangeably to mean active objection. Regardless of the social issue that bothers you, you have the power to take action.

Not every act of protest or fight needs to be grand or public. Some of the most powerful and essential actions are small and communicated within small circles. These efforts can create a ripple effect that expands into larger groups. But to make a difference, we must first take a stand.

In his speech at the 2006 groundbreaking of the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial, President Barack Obama stated, "Through words, he gave voice to the voiceless. Through deeds, he gave courage to the faint of heart." Your words for social justice can take many forms, including writing opinion pieces, letters to politicians, policy recommendations, personal narratives, academic research, or creative works like poetry and fiction. You might also speak at public events. The power of our "words for social justice" is in the message, and at the core of those messages is your determination to fight.

Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not.

—*Dr. Seuss, The Lorax*

## CHAPTER 3

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# YOUR VOICE IN COMMUNICATION

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All speech, written or spoken, is a dead language, until it finds a willing and prepared hearer.

—*Robert Louis Stevenson [Scottish poet]*

### THE IMPACT OF STANDARDIZED COMMUNICATION IN PURSUIT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

In the U.S., communication's value often rests on the receiver's perceptions, subtly reinforcing social hierarchies. For instance, when someone uses standard American English, they may be perceived as intelligent and taken seriously. In contrast, those who speak differently might be unfairly viewed as less capable. This unjust bias is not just a matter of personal opinion; it's deeply interwoven into our social fabric, influencing employment, education, and even political advocacy.

It might be easy to dismiss how others view your communication style, but this attitude overlooks an essential truth: We don't live isolated from each other; we coexist and rely on one another. How we communicate, and how we're perceived,

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impacts our ability to evoke change. It can make a difference in a job interview, a promotion, or even a political debate, such as the rising cost of education.

Recognizing and embracing this importance of communication isn't just about personal gain. It's about empowering ourselves and others to promote social justice causes effectively. Embracing standard American English in the U.S. is not just a tool for personal advancement but a means to advocate for positive change.

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Understanding the history of the English language can help us comprehend the roots of these biases. Originating from West Germanic language and evolving through influences from Latin, French, and various dialects, English has undergone significant changes over centuries.

By the late 1300s, English became the judicial system's official language, solidifying its status. With the creation of standard American English in the 19th century, language became more than just a means of communication; it became a way to divide or unite people.

The way we communicate with others and ourselves ultimately determines the quality of our lives.

—Anthony Robbins (*American advisor to leaders*)

### RECOGNIZING AND ADDRESSING COMMUNICATION ERRORS

While standard American English has become the norm, many people naturally speak with variations. Some examples of these variations are:

1. Use of “ain’t”: *She ain’t my friend.*
2. Dropping the “g” in “ing”: *Where are we goin’?*
3. Using “gonna” instead of “going to”: *The event is gonna be exciting.*

Though these might be considered “errors,” it's important to recognize that they are part of our diverse linguistic heritage.

### IMPROVING VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Improving communication doesn't mean abandoning our unique voices but expanding our ability to communicate with different audiences. Some ways to achieve this include:

Listening to ourselves and standard American English speakers.

- Identifying strengths and weaknesses.
- Practicing daily.

- Improving our speech doesn't just make us more articulate; it enhances our ability to advocate for justice and equality.

## **SPEAKING, WRITING, AND SOCIAL CHANGE**

Writing is equally vital, often providing the first impression of us. Clear, effective writing can open doors and opportunities. Improving speech naturally leads to better writing, empowering us to use various forms of writing to promote social change.

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EFFECTIVE COMPOSITION**

An effective composition, whether aiming to persuade or entertain, must have:

- Clear grammar and sentence structure,
- A sense of purpose and organization, and
- An engaging style appropriate for the audience.

These characteristics enable us to reach our audience more effectively, supporting our pursuit of social justice.

## **COMMUNICATION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE**

Gaston Bachelard, a French philosopher, said, "A word is a bud attempting to become a twig. How can one not dream while writing? It is the pen which dreams. The blank page gives the right to dream." This poetic insight captures the potential of communication in shaping our world.

To harness this power, we must not only understand communication but also use it as a force for good. By recognizing the biases embedded in our language, working to improve our skills, and employing those skills in the pursuit of equality, we turn the act of communication into a profound tool for social change.

## **VOICE AND TONE: VESSELS OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION**

Communication's impact is regularly influenced by voice and tone. Just as Gaston Bachelard eloquently likened words to budding twigs, your voice and tone are the vessels through which your words take root and flourish.

## **VOICE**

Think of your voice as the unique heartbeat of your communication. It's the personality that shines through your words, shaping how your audience perceives your message. Just as individuals have distinct voices in conversations, your writing should carry a distinctive voice that sets you apart. Whether it's authoritative, empathetic, or conversational, your voice should resonate authentically with your intended audience.

It is understandable to ask, “Just what do you mean by voice?” In the passage that follows, read as the writer paints a vivid picture of a cityscape.

In the heart of the bustling city, where the neon lights paint the sky with a vibrant sympathy of colors, I found myself standing on the precipices of possibility. The streets, lie veins coursing with the energy of a million dreams, whispered secrets in the hushed language of midnight. The cacophony of honking horns and distant laughter was the backdrop to my urban odyssey, a journey into the soul of a metropolis that never slept.

How would you characterize the voice of this passage?

Evocative and descriptive are two words that come to mind. The language is poetic and emotional, capturing the essence of the bustling city at night. It conveys a sense of wonder, curiosity, and even a touch of romance, as if the narrator is inviting the reader to share in the awe and fascination.

In the pursuit of social justice, the voice of your writing is paramount importance. A compassionate and empathetic tone can inspire empathy and solidarity, while an assertive tone can convey a call to action. By mastering the art of voice, you can navigate sensitive topics, foster understanding, and catalyze change effectively. Read this second sample passage; try to characterize the writer’s voice:

A silent crisis is looming in our world. Climate change, an existential threat to our planet and all its inhabitants, requires not just scientific scrutiny but a deep understanding of the human impact it bears. It is a global challenge that reaches across borders, affecting communities, ecosystems, and future generations with unwavering persistence. Witnessing the consequences of a warming world, penetrates our hearts to act. The responses arises from acknowledging the vulnerable communities on the front lines, facing the brunt of extreme weather events, rising seas, and disrupted livelihoods.

Throughout this passage, the author uses phrases that are marked by emotional and that focus on understanding and caring for the people and ecosystems affected by climate change.

For example, the phrase “a silent crisis” suggests an understanding of the seriousness and the urgency of the situation. It conveys a sense of concern for the impending crisis and those who will be impacted by it. Likewise, the phrase “requires not just scientific scrutiny but a deep understanding of human impact it bears” emphasizes the need for empathy in addition to scientific analysis.

Take some time to identify other phrases in this passage that reflect the author’s voice, which we can easily describe as empathetic and compassionate.

## TONE

Voice and tone are allies. While voice refers to the writer’s style and personality the words convey, tone, on the other hand, is the attitude, disposition, or mood conveyed by the writer toward the subject. A tone can be described as serious,