



ASSOCIATION OF ESD PROFESSIONALS

HOW TO

FIND YOUR VOICE





TABLE OF CONTENTS

1

Intro

3

**What Is Your
Message?**

8

**What Is
Your Voice?**

11

**The Creative
Process**

14

**Five Key
Reminders**

17

**Getting
Started**

HOW TO FIND YOUR VOICE

FINE-TUNE YOUR VOICE TO DEVELOP YOUR ESD CONTENT & TEACHING STYLE



“WHEN THE WHOLE WORLD IS SILENT, EVEN ONE VOICE BECOMES POWERFUL.” —
MALALA YOUSAFZAI

Empowerment self-defense (ESD) is about promoting safety through personal agency, confidence, and power. As an ESD professional, you likely believe deeply that people of all ages and backgrounds must find their voices and use them fearlessly if they are to live lives of dignity and security. We know—both through personal experience and academic studies—that effective use of the voice can prevent, interrupt, or deescalate many cases of interpersonal violence.

But have you ever thought about finding your voice when it comes to developing your ESD project? How about finding your unique voice as an ESD instructor?

Whether you are writing a newsletter, posting on TikTok, giving a presentation on violence prevention, or teaching ESD to a roomful of teenagers, your voice (verbal or written or signed) is the medium that conveys your message to the people who need to receive it. That is powerful, especially if you work to develop it with intention and confidence.



However, even the most confident people can struggle with obstacles like imposter syndrome and insecurity or get overwhelmed when asked to do what they innately do best: be themselves. (See our How-To Guide, "[Overcoming Fear to Put Your ESD Out There](#)" for more tools to tear down those inner blockages.) Finding your voice, in the simplest terms, is about being yourself in your written, verbal, and signed communication, from the smallest Facebook post to the biggest conference stage, from Board presentation to ESD classroom.

Ready?

The best antidote to fear is action. So forget imposter syndrome (you are YOU after all!), and let's get started!

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO SAY?



“PASSION IS ENERGY. FEEL THE POWER THAT COMES FROM FOCUSING ON WHAT EXCITES YOU.” – OPRAH WINFREY

While some experts may suggest a different order of events, we think it is important to first become clear about what you wish to say (your message) before you worry about how you are going to say it (your voice). This clarity will keep you centered in your message as you find the right words, tone, or even colors and images to communicate it.

The following questions and exercises are a starting point for a lifetime of self-reflection and discovery. Don't worry if your final answers don't feel “complete,” as you have many years ahead of you to add greater depth and dimension to your inimitable voice.

Find a journal (or your laptop) and get ready to reflect.



Remember!

There are no wrong answers when it comes to finding and fine-tuning your genuine voice. Ultimately, whatever you do or say... that's you! So there is no need to feel nervous; you cannot get this wrong. That said, finding a quiet place to work through these exercises will help you to tune in to your “inner voice” with greater ease.

STEP 1 || WHAT ARE YOUR PASSIONS?

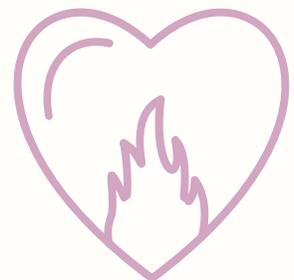
What brings you to life? What inspires you to speak or write for hours? What are your passions? Why?

Of course, as ESD professionals, many of us may have similar answers, but try to be as specific—and prolific—as possible. If “empowerment” is on your list of passions, what does that mean? Empowerment for whom? And how, exactly? If violence prevention is on your list, why? What is your personal connection to the field that drives you forward even on the hardest days? ESD brings together highly passionate people, so your list might be long. That is 100% okay! There is no need to be concise during these exercises; in fact, for once, more is more.

STEP 2 || WHAT ARE YOUR CORE THEMES?

Now that we have our passions down, we move on to the next step of organizing them and determining the core themes into which we can arrange our passions.

Think about these core themes as buckets into which you might place several or more of the passions you have already outlined. Or, if you prefer, as thematic threads weaving through your professional and personal life story. For instance, a core theme might be a longing for freedom—for yourself and for others. A core theme might be creating meaning from hardship, fostering healing, or nurturing harmonization with nature. These themes will ideally arise naturally from your list of passions, the threads becoming obvious as you re-read your first reflections. However, if you struggle to identify big-picture themes, you might read your list to a trusted friend or mentor and ask for their input.



STEP 3 || Can you create SHORT summaries of your core Theme?

Without a doubt, you could write or speak for hours about your core themes or passions. In fact, this is a reliable way to confirm that they are in fact your core themes. However, for Step 3, we are going to practice creating summaries of your core themes, synthesizing a mountain of information, or if you prefer, an ocean of ideas into a few short sentences. This exercise is especially helpful for those who tend to (intentionally or unintentionally) digress with lengthy tangents when asked about their work or who consistently struggle to stick to the word limit on grant applications and Twitter posts.

For each of your core themes, try to summarize the main message you would want to convey to the world about your core theme in a succinct sentence or two.



Remember!

You never have to share these exercises with anyone. The goal is not perfection, but rather reflection. Set aside concerns about creating something “audience-ready,” and focus on clarifying your passion for your own benefit.



STEP 4 || WHO IS THE UNFILTERED YOU?

Who are you when no one is watching or listening—when you are unfiltered? More specifically, what do you say when judgment and criticism are off the table? When you remove your social filters, what do you believe, think, and care about—the uncensored version?

If you keep a journal, you might revisit a few pages at random and re-read the thoughts you record only for yourself. If you script monologues in your head that you will never speak aloud, consider jotting a few of them down (again, only for yourself) to have as a point of reference. We often dilute our opinions or temper our passions in a conscious or unconscious effort to fulfill social expectations, avoid conflict, protect personal or professional relationships, or for any number of reasons. Filtering our public messages is not necessarily wrong, but it is edifying and a useful exercise to remember who we are without all the filters.



STEP 5 || WHO IS LISTENING?

In the early stages of a creative process and for the purpose of finding your voice, it is helpful to explore the unwitnessed voice. Especially in the early stages of a creative process, concern for other people's opinions can be paralyzing and considering your unfiltered voice is helpful. However, there also comes a time when thinking about who is listening (our listeners, readers, or students/participants—sometimes called our audience as a convenient shorthand) can propel us forward, rather than hold us back.

For a full step-by-step exploration of your audience or participant/student personas, check out our How-To guide, "How To Identify Your Target Audience" available on our [Resources page](#). For the purposes of this guide on how to find your voice as an ESD practitioner, it is sufficient to be aware of the people you want to reach with your words. Whether you are writing, speaking, or signing in online forums or in-person workshops, there is someone, or many people, looking back at you. What do you want to say to them, specifically? How can you best deliver your message so that the people who are listening to you can receive it? Take a moment to reflect on these questions, making notes if helpful. We recommend completing the exercises in the How To guide, "[Identify Your Target Audience](#)" as a complement to this process.



WHAT IS YOUR VOICE, ANYWAY?



“THE HARDEST PART OF FINDING MY VOICE WAS FINDING THE COURAGE TO BELIEVE MY VOICE COULD ACTUALLY MAKE AN IMPACT.”

—ROSALIE FISH



Now that we have a sense of what we want to say, we can start to think about how we are going to say it. This is the fun part of finding your voice!

How we convey the messages we want to convey, what those messages sound/look like, what we choose to emphasize, spotlight, and repeat—that is our voice.

Voice coaches, writing teachers, and motivational speakers the world over will each have their own particular take on how to find and use your voice. In fact, the advice on this topic can be overwhelming. Let's keep it simple and focus on three core truths about your voice.



CORE TRUTH 1 || NO ONE ELSE HAS IT.

No one else can be you. No one else thinks, sounds, or teaches exactly like you do. Comparison is anathema to the process of self-discovery. While it can be helpful to look to other writers or teachers for inspiration, stay focused on you without over emulating.

You can't be anyone else, and why would you want to try? Your voice, your style, and your personal way of conveying your personal message is exactly what builds trust and connection with your audience. As you continue your exploration of your voice, always remember that it is powerful because it is your own.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Your voice, like you, is not static. Your teaching, writing, speaking, or signing style is likely different today than it was 10 years ago and will almost certainly continue to change over the next 10 years. Rather than seeking an end point to the process, or falling into the trap of thinking you've already done this and know exactly what your voice is, try to maintain a perspective of "beginner's mind" and approach (and revisit) your inquiry with renewed curiosity and openness.



CORE TRUTH 2 || Take your time, and enjoy the process.

There is no rush. As we mentioned, finding your voice will be a journey. It's not about "finishing" a race, but rather mapping the vast territory of your potential as a facilitator, teacher, advisor, writer, speaker, advocate, and creator. Be curious about the many possibilities open to you as you try on different tones, vocabulary, and even colors for size. Pay attention to the pieces that feel like a perfect fit, and the experiments that feel inauthentic. These are clues that will lead you to your genuine expression.

Most importantly, enjoy it! Writing, creating designs for your website, or designing your curriculum is serious business ... and it can also be fun. Cultivate a sense of playful inquiry about finding your voice; just like with game-based learning in ESD, you can learn more about your voice through play.

CORE TRUTH 3 || IT'S OKAY TO BE PERSONAL.

For an insightful reflection on when and how much to open up as an ESD facilitator, read our blog, "[Vulnerability in ESD](#)". It is our shared humanity that brings us together and bridges differences in age, politics, education, culture, and more—through the screen or in the classroom. Opinions vary, but we believe that it is okay to be personal in our ESD teaching, speaking, and writing; storytelling fosters a sense of connection through shared experience and understanding.

Generally speaking, the right mix of personal anecdotes and rich detail along with hard data and direct information can generate trust and engage students, readers, and listeners alike. You will likely find yourself negotiating the line between a personal and professional tone; once again, striking that balance is an ongoing process and a personal one.

THE CREATIVE PROCESS



“YOU CAN’T WAIT FOR INSPIRATION.” — JACK LONDON

We’ve spoken a lot about creative process, but have not yet considered in depth what it is exactly and how it works. A creative process describes the minutes, hours, days, months, or even years of work that go into the creation of, well, anything. If you do not think you are a “creative person” because you do not paint or play an instrument, we invite you to shift your definition of “creative.”

Are you creative? IF YOU DO ANY OF THE FOLLOWING, YOU ARE CREATING, AND THIS SECTION DOES IN FACT APPLY TO YOU:



- Write posts on Instagram, Facebook, etc.
- Write blogs.
- Design curricula for your ESD classes.
- Create promotional posters for your ESD activities.
- Cook.
- Dance.
- Make presentations for school boards, investors, or the general public.
- Advocate.
- Advise.
- Speak.
- Build things.
- Garden.
- Design your website.

The creative process is not all fun and games. It implies a willingness to try and fail and try again, ad continuum. It carries an implicit commitment to learning, growing, and becoming, not perfect (never perfect), but better all the time. It demands time and regular attention, but the quantity and duration depends very much on you. Five minutes a day of creative process or five hours—either way, you can apply the same principles.

1 || IT'S PRACTICE, NOT INSPIRATION.

Most makers of any creative output will tell you the same thing: You cannot wait for inspiration to strike—not if you have deadlines, or a burning determination to fulfill your mission. Inspiration follows practice; very rarely do things happen the other way around. Set a time in your calendar every day, or once a week, for the creative work you need to do (writing, ESD class-planning, poster design, or anything else). Then, whether you feel “inspired” or not, tap into your well of self-discipline to honor that schedule and practice. Generally speaking, the more you train your mind to be creative, the less laborious that practice will become.

2 || DON'T SEEK PERFECTION.

Fact: You will never be perfect. You will never be done getting the plan or product or words “just right” before releasing them into the world. You may never feel like the expert you are, and you will probably always grapple with doubt.

Consider applying the 80/20 rule to your creative process. After you get “it” (whatever creative output “it” is today) 80% of the way to “perfection,” all additional work to achieve that final 20% of perfection will bring you diminishing returns. Therefore, when you think you are “almost there, but it’s not quite perfect,” consider taking a breath, reminding yourself you are human, and simply hit “send,” “print,” or “publish.”



3 || Embrace Failure.

Along with a desire to achieve perfection, the fear of failure is another top enemy of the creative process. Failure is inevitable, so embrace the inherent riskiness of using your voice. Someone, or many people, may not like it. Someone, or many people, may not listen. Or, they may listen, but they will not understand.

All of this is okay. Create anyway. Teach anyway. Pursue your mission no matter what. Learn from constructive feedback and plunge forward through the naysaying and criticisms. The ESD movement needs you to be fearless about using your voice and speaking your truth. So does the world.



A FEW WRITING-SPECIFIC TIPS:

- **Write First, Edit Later.** A first draft is only a step towards a final project. Rather than agonizing over every comma and choice of word, get your main idea down as quickly as you can. Then come back to add the furnishings and polish the silverware.
- **Write as if speaking to a friend.** Forget trying to impress, and see what happens if you jot down your ideas exactly as you would if you were speaking about them. You can even try recording yourself if you find it easier to speak than write. Again, you can always return to what you have drafted to do some editing.
- **If you don't know where to start, try "stream of consciousness" writing.** Grab a piece of paper and a pen, set a timer for two, five or even 10 minutes, and start writing. Anything. It can be total nonsense. No one else needs to see it. The only rule is: *Do not stop moving your hand.*

FIVE KEY REMINDERS



1 || LESS IS USUALLY MORE.

In writing, teaching, and so many other parts of life, less is often more. Seek the most effective word, anecdote, or instruction to drive your point home or keep your students, participants, or audience engaged, rather than throwing everything at the wall and seeing what sticks. The “less is more” principle reminds us to be selective and intentional about our choice of words, activities, stories, and even gestures. It keeps us focused on what is essential, clearing away the clutter so our message can shine through.

2 || COMPLEXITY INCREASES ACCORDING TO THE TIME AND SPACE AVAILABLE.

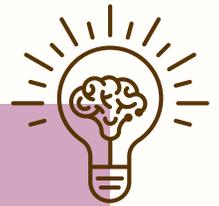
There is a law of productivity that states that a task grows to fill the time available to complete it. So too with complexity, but in this case, it's not a bad thing. If you only have 500 words or a one-hour demo to make your point, you will need to keep it simple and direct. An excess of complexity will detract from, rather than deepen your message.

On the other hand, if you have a whole book or a semester-long class, there is both time and headspace available to enter into a great deal of detail. Here you might have time for long anecdotes, fascinating tangents, or debates that would never fit into less space. Neither is necessarily “better” than the other; it is only important to be aware of how much time and space you have available, and to moderate your complexity accordingly.



3 || THE PERSONAL AND SPECIFIC TRUMP CLICHES AND GENERALIZATIONS.

The brain does not process cliches as information. Because we hear them so often, cliches do not register in the same way that other phrases do. In a similar vein, generalizations too often cross over the line into stereotype (“men are like that,” “women just can’t...” “It’s that x population is...”), which can cause your audience to tune out (or worse, be offended when you meant no offense). To avoid these hazards, keep it personal or keep it precise. Personal means speaking from your own experience. Precise means saying what you mean exactly, rather than defaulting to sweeping generalizations.



PRO-TIP

Use data (from research, surveys, etc.) to speak to a broader group’s experience. However, be careful not to overuse or misuse data (see below, “4 || If you don’t have proof, don’t make it up”).



4 || IF YOU DON'T HAVE PROOF, DON'T MAKE IT UP.

It is tempting to back up every claim with a statistic, but unfortunately not always possible. If you don't remember the exact numbers, don't make them up. If you think there is a study but are not certain, you can offer to send the research to your class in a few days. And if you want to speak to a large group's experience but only have your own history to go on, that's okay, just speak about your own experience.

Write, speak, or teach what you know. As always, it is also okay to simply say, "I don't know" when you do not have the answer.

5 || KEEP REVISING. KEEP EVOLVING.

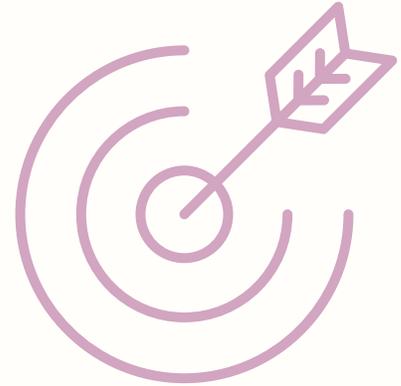
Unlike discrete projects, the creative process does not have an end point. There is no limit to how many times you can revise, recreate, or reimagine your voice—if that is what you wish to do.

Remember!

Perfection is the enemy of good. Do not fear failure!



GETTING STARTED: REMEMBER YOUR WHY



To conclude, along with your “what” (your message) and your “how” (your voice), we recommend that you always take a moment to remember your “why”—your mission. Before stepping onstage, into the classroom, or hitting “publish now,” take a moment to ground yourself—a single deep breath, or a couple minutes of meditation, depending on the scale of the task before you.

In this moment, you might ask yourself, “Why do I want to speak?” or “Why do I want to share this? What are my intentions?” And maybe also, “What is my call to action (CTA)? What action do I hope to elicit or what outcome do I hope to achieve for or with my audience?”

There are many correct answers to these questions.

READY TO GO?

We want to hear your voice, and so does the world! We will be right here cheering you on. Stay tuned for more how-to guides on making your craft known and telling your ESD story.

DISCLAIMER

The information provided in this article and on the Association website does not and is not intended to constitute legal advice, and the information and links are for general informational purposes only. It is possible that some of the information provided in this article and on the Association website is not the most up-to-date information or specific to your geographic location (for instance, please note that state laws vary). In addition, this article and the Association website contain links to third-party websites—these links are for the convenience of the reader and they do not indicate endorsement of the linked companies, their websites, or the information contained on their websites. Readers of this website should contact an attorney to obtain advice with respect to any particular legal matter, including choosing how to organize and structure their business, and should contact an attorney or accountant for information regarding federal and state taxes (note that state taxes vary from state to state). In addition, all the information provided in this article is intended to apply to companies formed in the United States.

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