**Finding Your Norse Voice**

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**Writing in Viking-Age Norse Voice  (Handout)**

c. 1997-2014  KLK  (handout only)

**What exactly is ‘voice’?**

“Voice” is what speaks to us within a song or a story that draws us in or pushes us away Voice is everything that goes into the structure of a piece that lends it authenticity. Or not. This is true whether the piece is being written by a modern writer working from translations or a native-speaker working from the original language, a person writing in a structured form or no form at all, or a person writing a Homeric ode or modern romance novel.

Ultimately, every culture known to humanity has/had an equivalent of, “Yo, dude. ‘S up?” The greatest challenge of writing authentically in voice resides in identifying the most believable way to say it in your piece of work. If the voice is convincing, the piece will ring true. If the voice is not, the piece will not.

**Some Components of Voice**

* Word choice/ Speech patterns--This includes who the speaker is; who the speaker is addressing and why; and the degree of formality and emotion involved.
* Content (cultural, spiritual, personal, experiential)
* Context (cultural, spiritual, personal, experiential)
* Point of view--Who is your speaker, really? Is he/she invested directly in the action? A neutral, omnipotent third-party describing a situation? Is he/she assertive, aggressive, or passive? Does this person choose to express him/herself metaphorically, or head-on? Is your speaker saying what he/she means, or are his/her words in reference to something completely different? How does the speaker feel about the subject matter he/she is speaking about? What is the speaker’s motivation for speaking?

Writing consistently and successfully in a convincing voice is largely dependent upon familiarity with the world you are going to be presenting to your reader. The more familiar you are with your subject matter, the more comfortable you are likely to be when writing about it—which, in turn, promotes greater focus and concentration, which reinforces your familiarity—and as far as writing is concerned, it is impossible to learn too much. Everything you know will be useful, whether you are conscious of it or not.

The following suggestions promote ongoing development of familiarity:

**Research**

Obviously, it is not realistic or fair to assume anyone can write convincingly about a subject one knows very narrowly or not at all!

Research and then study all facets of the culture (history, climate, society, laws, customs, values, political structure, etc.) from a historical/scientific/sociological perspective as well as from a literary standpoint. The more familiar you become with these parts of your target culture, the easier it will be to choose and write convincing voices.

**Read, Read, Read**

Read everything you can, as often as possible. Seek out multiple translations/versions/editions of the same material. This will not only familiarize you with the specific subject matter, it is a great way to experience the same original story told in different voices—some of which are sure to work, and some that simply will not.

Compare multiple translations from multiple origins and time periods; spend some time considering why one appeals to you more than another. This will provide the broadest spectrum of reference to enhance your own written voice.

Read the translators’ notes to identify what motivated him/her; for instance, a writer most interested in writing a good enjoyable story will certainly use a different voice that a writer reconstructing traditional form/speech patterns in modern language. Determine for yourself whether or not he/she was successful; this will also add depth to your own work.

Study the subject matter that was written about in the original. It becomes apparent that certain themes and subjects are more common than others. Knowing what they are on each end of the continuum and what lies between, and writing accordingly, will add credibility to your work.

Study how these subjects were written and talked about within period and modern Viking-Age styled works. Identify commonly expressed ideas, metaphors, structures, vernaculars; be aware that what is not talked about or mentioned is just as integral to convincing voice as what is.

Consider different writing styles and forms; the way sentences/stanzas are phrased and constructed; which structural forms are used. Kenning, consonance, assonance, internal rhyme, speech rhythms, repetition, motifs, degree of formality in terms of address are frequent characteristics of original material related to the Viking Age.

Identify the values assigned to different human qualities—knowing what was considered praiseworthy, despicable, respectful, embarrassing, etc. will enrich your writing. So will knowing how these qualities differ based upon gender, social class, age, location, family structure, job and legal status. Remember to notice clues to context and appropriateness within taboos, biases, common themes.

**Read Aloud**

Read passages of the works you are studying out loud, especially parts of verse. This is a highly effective way to hear all off the nuances that your eyes will not pick up; oral tradition—in the original language or in translation—can only be displayed in its full glory verbally. Training your ear to recognize and appreciate the components of convincing voice will also give you a basis of comparison for your own compositions.

So, then, read your own work aloud as well; frequently inconsistencies will sound louder than they will look. If you, who are aware of your intent and motives, are jarred by a voice-continuity break, be assured that someone who is not in your head with intent and motive will be thrown out of belief, too.

**Exercise Your Voice Skills Often and Regularly.**

This does not have to be dull to be extremely useful to effective voice development. In fact, it’s more effective if it isn’t. Here are a few suggestions to get started:

1) Tell a modern story in your persona’s voice.

* Romeo and Juliet.
* How you spent your last weekend.
* Why you were late to work last Wednesday.
* A funny thing happened on the way to Pennsic.
* Last time you went grocery shopping.
* Harry Potter
* Twilight
* Why my cat/dog is named...
* No s\*\*\*, there I was...

2) Take ten random sentences from a book, magazine or newspaper and restate them in voice.

3) Make up kennings for modern simple things:

* A bottle
* A McRib sandwich
* Lady Gaga
* sparrows
* the Internet
* Viggo Mortenson
* A vacuum cleaner
* A plastic bag
* A toothbrush
* Tequila

4) Think about the differences in the sounds of modern speech vs. voice, and play with it.

Modern: I went to the store with my husband to buy something for dinner.

“Voice”: Market-wise we wended, two true-trothed, for food-feast seeking!

Modern: That Arnulf is really a hottie!

“Voice”: Arnulf, comely, thewful helm-oak -- knows he well the weight of wenches’ white arms clasped close!

5) Dissect that passage!

In Lee M. Hollander’s translation of Þrymskviða (from The Poetic Edda) Freya, after the outrage of being told to put on a wedding dress and come with Loki and Thor to marry the giant-lord Thrym in order to ensure the return of Thor’s hammer, responds:

“Most mad after men thou mayst call me,

If I wend with thee to the world of etins.”

What is Freya saying, really? What does she mean? How might someone express the same sentiment in 2010, or in 1950 or in 1892?

Also in Lee M. Hollander’s translation of Hávamál (from The Poetic Edda):

“Not great things need give to a man:

Bringeth thanks oft a little thing;

With half a loaf and a half drained cup

I won me oft worthy friend.”

What is being imparted, here? How would you paraphrase this sentiment? How might Donald Trump paraphrase it? Paris Hilton? Martin Luther King, Jr.? Jimmy Kimmel? Don Quixote?

**Above all, give yourself permission to enjoy this process**.

We are all more likely to engage in activities we enjoy; learning and practicing effective written voice is no different than anything else. Enjoyment and enthusiasm are hard to separate once they form a bond. So remember that recognizing funny is an excellent experiential learning opportunity in context—what we find humorous depends on our internalization and understanding of many, many contextual factors. Approach any exercise with good humor and a willingness to let things become absurd, and you’ll enjoy what you are doing as you internalize and apply new information. Your “serious” writing will benefit from it, and you’ll have a good time in the process.

Be willing to make mistakes. Mistakes are exciting—they indicate growth! If we don’t make mistakes, we aren’t learning anything new. If we don’t make mistakes, we may be simply floundering around in a very narrow comfort zone we will inevitably outgrow or tire of. Try something new and if it doesn’t turn out the way you hoped use it as an opportunity to figure out why. Mistakes are not judgments; mistakes are part of the process that makes us all better at whatever we choose to do.

Get together with like-minded friends for impromptu or informal readings and pizza, or discussion of Grettirsaga over coffee at Perkins. Share useful resources.

Perform your work for someone you trust to understand the type of feedback most useful to you—whether that’s unconditional support and encouragement or a bluntly stated assessment.

Find out what techniques work for you; allow the process to be a process rather than an event in your creative development, and you are well on your way to developing a convincing authentic voice!

**Supplemental #1--Comparison Exercise**

***Hakonarmal* (The Death Song of Haakon the Good)**

1225 A.D., ,Snorri Sturluson.

English Translation: Lee M. Hollander.

Gondul and Skogul Gautatýr sent forth

to choose among kings’ kinsmen:

should with Óthin dwell, who of Yngvi’s offspring

and wend with him to Valholl.

his byrnie donning, They found Biorn’s brother

the stalwart leader— under standard standing

and spearshafts lowered; were darts uplifted

up the strife then started.

heroes and Horthaland’s swordsmen Called on Hálogaland’s

ere he fared to battle: the Northmen’s folkwarder,

of henchmen from Norway— a good host had he

donned his bronze-helm. the Danes’-terror

thrust off his byrnie Threw down his war-weeds,

ere began the battle— the great-hearted lord,

his land would he shield now, laughed with his liege-men;

’neath gold-helm standing. the gladsome hero

the king’s broadsword Cut then keenly

as though water it sundered. through foemen’s war-weeds,

cleft were war-shields; Clashed then spear-blades,

rattle on helmets. did ring-decked war-swords

by the Týr-of-shields, Were targes trodden

and heads eke of Northmen; by the hard-footed hilt-blade,

athelings reddened battle raged on the island,

with shedded life-blood, the shining shield-castles

in bloody gashes, Burned the wound-fires

against the life of warriors— were the long-beards lifted

around the swords’ edges, the sea-of-wounds surged high

on the strand of Storth-isle. ran the stream-of-arrows

rang ’gainst each other, Reddened war-shields

scar red targes; did Skogul’s-stormblasts

in the blast-of-Óthin— billowed blood-waves

mowed down in battle. was many a man’s son

with swords brandished, Sate then the liege-lords

and shredded byrnies: with shields shattered

was that host of men, not happy in their hearts

and to Valholl wended their way.

on spearshaft leaning: Spoke then Gondul,

“groweth now the gods’ following,

with host so goodly since Hákon hath been

hidden home by holy gods.”

what the valkyries spoke of, Heard the war-lord

high-hearted, on horsehack—

sitting war-helmeted, wisely they bore them,

and with shields them sheltering.

HÁKON said:

grudge us victory? “Why didst Geirskogul,

that the gods granted it.” Yet worthy were we

SKOGUL said:

that the issue was won “ ’Tis owing to us

and your foemen did flee.

said fierce Skogul, Ride forth now shall we,”

“to the green homes of the godheads,—

that the atheling will now there to tell Óthin

come to see him himself.”

called out Hróptatýr: “Hermóth and Bragi!”

“Go ye to greet the hero;

who hath keenly foughten, for a king cometh

to our halls hither.”

wending from battle— Said the war-worker,

was his byrnie all bloody:

Óthin meseemeth. “Angry-minded

Be we heedful of his hate!”

shall swear oaths to thee: “All einheriar

share thou the æsir’s ale,

Here within hast thou thou enemy-of-earls!

brethren eight,” said Bragi.

said the goodly king, “Our gear of war,”

“we mean to keep in our might.

one should heed right well: helmet and hauberk

’tis good to guard one’s spear.”

how that sea-king had Then was it seen

upheld the holy altars,

did hail with welcome, since Hákon all

both gods and heavenly hosts.

that great-souled lord On a good day is born

who hath a heart like his;

be told of on earth, aye will his times

and men will speak of his might.

the Fenriswolf, Unfettered will fare

and fall on the fields of men,

a kingly lord ere that there cometh

as good, to stand in his stead.

and kinsmen die, Cattle die

land and lieges are whelmed;

to the heathen gods fared since Hákon

many a host is harried.

***Hakonarmal* (The Death-Song of Haakon the Good)**

Originally written in Old Norse, app. 1225 A.D., by the poet and historian Snorri Sturluson.

English translation by Samuel Laing (London, 1844).

"In Odin's hall an empty place

Stands for a king of Yngve's race;

`Go, my valkyries,' Odin said,

`Go forth, my angels of the dead,

Gondul and Skogul, to the plain

Drenched with the battle's bloody rain,

And to the dying Hakon tell,

Here in Valhal shall he dwell.'

"At Stord, so late a lonely shore,

Was heard the battle's wild uproar;

The lightning of the flashing sword

Burned fiercely at the shore of Stord.

From levelled halberd and spearhead

Life-blood was dropping fast and red;

And the keen arrows' biting sleet

Upon the shore at Stord fast beat.

"Upon the thundering cloud of shield

Flashed bright the sword-storm o'er the field;

And on the plate-mail rattled loud

The arrow-shower's rushing cloud,

In Odin's tempest-weather, there

Swift whistling through the angry air;

And the spear-torrents swept away

Ranks of brave men from light of day.

"With batter'd shield, and blood-smear'd sword

Slits one beside the shore of Stord,

With armour crushed and gashed sits he,

A grim and ghastly sight to see;

And round about in sorrow stand

The warriors of his gallant band:

Because the king of Dags' old race

In Odin's hall must fill a place.

"Then up spake Gondul, standing near

Resting upon her long ash spear, --

`Hakon! the gods' cause prospers well,

And thou in Odin's halls shalt dwell!'

The king beside the shore of Stord

The speech of the valkyrie heard,

Who sat there on his coal-black steed,

With shield on arm and helm on head.

"Thoughtful, said Hakon, `Tell me why

Ruler of battles, victory

Is so dealt out on Stord's red plain?

Have we not well deserved to gain?'

`And is it not as well dealt out?'

Said Gondul. `Hearest thou not the shout?

The field is cleared -- the foemen run --

The day is ours -- the battle won!'

"Then Skogul said, `My coal-black steed,

Home to the gods I now must speed,

To their green home, to tell the tiding

That Hakon's self is thither riding.'

To Hermod and to Brage then

Said Odin, `Here, the first of men,

Brave Hakon comes, the Norsemen's king, --

Go forth, my welcome to him bring.'

"Fresh from the battle-field came in,

Dripping with blood, the Norsemen'a king.

`Methinks,' said he, great Odin's will

Is harsh, and bodes me further ill;

Thy son from off the field to-day

From victory to snatch away!'

But Odin said, `Be thine the joy

Valhal gives, my own brave boy!'

"And Brage said, `Eight brothers here

Welcome thee to Valhal's cheer,

To drain the cup, or fights repeat

Where Hakon Eirik's earls beat.'

Quoth the stout king, 'And shall my gear,

Helm, sword, and mail-coat, axe and spear,

Be still at hand! 'Tis good to hold

Fast by our trusty friends of old.'

"Well was it seen that Hakon still

Had saved the temples from all ill (1);

For the whole council of the gods

Welcomed the king to their abodes.

Happy the day when men are born

Like Hakon, who all base things scorn. --

Win from the brave and honoured name,

And die amidst an endless fame.

"Sooner shall Fenriswolf devour

The race of man from shore to shore,

Than such a grace to kingly crown

As gallant Hakon want renown.

Life, land, friends, riches, all will fly,

And we in slavery shall sigh.

But Hakon in the blessed abodes

For ever lives with the bright gods."

**Supplemental #2--Style example**

**Excerpt from 'Færeyinga saga' (The Saga of Thrond of Gate)**

**1896, English, transl. F. York Powell**

**Chapter 31**

One day in the spring, what time the races ran faster and men thought no ship could live on the main or between the islands, Sigmund set out from home in Scufey with thirty men and two ships, saying that he would run the risk and carry out the king's errand or else die. They ran for Eastrey and made the island; they got there at nightfall without being seen, made a ring round the homestead at Gate, drove a trunk of wood at the door of the house where Thrond slept, and broke it down, then laid hands on Thrond and led him out. Then said Sigmund, "It happens now, as it often does, Thrond, that things go by turns. Thou didst cow me last harvest-tide, and gave me two hard things to choose between; and now I will give thee two very unlike things to choose between: the one is good---that thou take the true faith and let thyself be baptized, or else thou shalt be slain here on the spot; and that is a bad choice for thee to make, for thereby thou shalt swiftly lose thy wealth and earthly bliss in this world, and get instead woe and the everlasting torments of hell in the other world. " But Thrond said, "I will not fail my old friends. " Then Sigmund sent a man to kill Thrond, and put a great axe in his hand; but as he went up to Thrond with the axe on high, Thrond looked at him and said, "Strike me not so quickly. I have something to say first. Where is my kinsman Sigmund?" "Here am I," said he. "Thou alone shalt settle between me and thee, and I will take thy faith as thou wilt. "Then said Thore, "Hew at him, man!"But Sigmund said, "He shall not be cut down this time. ""It will be thy bane and thy friends' as well if Thrond get off today!" said Thore. But Sigmund said that he would risk that. Then Thrond was baptized by the priest and all his household. Sigmund made Thrond come with him when he was baptized. And then he went through all the Færeys and stayed not till the whole people was christened. Then he gat his ship ready in the summer, and was minded to sail to Norway to take King Olave his scot and bring Thrond of Gate to him. Now, when Thrond was aware that Sigmund meant to take him to the king, he would fain have begged off going; but Sigmund would not have it, and struck the land-tents as soon as the wind was fair. But before they had gone far on the main they were met by a great swell and storm, and were driven back thereby to the Færeys, and their ship was wrecked and all their gear lost. But of the men most were saved. Sigmund saved Thrond and many others. Thrond said that they would never make a smooth run if they made him go with them against his will. Sigmund said he should go all the same, though he did take it ill. Then he took another ship and goods of his own to give the king instead of his scot, for he had no lack of gear. They put to the sea for the second time, and got a little farther on their way than before, when there met them a great wind blowing in their teeth that drove them back again to the Færeys and wrecked their ship. Then Sigmund said that he thought some stoppage must have been laid upon their cruise. Thrond said it would be so as often as they tried it if they took him with them against his will. So Sigmund let him loose on the understanding that he should swear a holy oath to have and hold the Christian faith, and to be trusty and true to King Olave and to Sigmund, not to hold back or hinder any man in the islands from keeping faith and homage to them, to forward and fulfil the bidding of King Olave, and any other thing that he should bid him do in the Færeys. And Thrond swore freely the fullest oaths that Sigmund could put to him. Then Thrond fared home to Gate, and Sigmund sat in Scufey at his homestead through the winter, and it was late in harvest-tide when they were driven back the second time. And he let mend the ship that was least hurt. And the winter was quiet and tidingless in the Færeys.

**Supplemental #3--Writing Exercise:  Titles**

**Choose a title from the ones below; write the story/poem that goes with it.**

The Best Advice Uncle Olaf Ever Gave Me

Brunhilde’s Wicked Broom

Thorgeir’s Really, Really Big Mistake

The Qualities of a Good Friend Are These:

So This Is Kwik-Trip

War: What Is It Good For?

Hjalmer, the Saddest Ghost

Oh, Those Guys From Finland

Thought and Memory

This Joke is Not Appropriate

The Ugliest Dog in Halogaland

Damn This Ice

Wolves of the Sea

Greenland, My Ass

Endless Wind

Vengeance Is Pretty Good Lukewarm, Too.

The Littlest Berserk

Who Made This Place?

Dark, Cold, and Cursed

Wearing Red

**Supplemental #4--Writing Exercise:  Kennings**

**Create a kenning for the following subjects.**

Light Beer

Justin Bieber

Chihuahua

Sunflower

Plastic Bag

Ketchup

Donald Trump

Sushi

Electricity

Metalocalypse

Television

Sewing needle

Starbucks

Canned tuna

Facebook

Hadron Collider

Desert

Cactus

Cotton Candy

Spinning Wheel

Polyester

**Supplemental #5--Writing Exercise:  Random Adjectives/Nouns**

1) Number your page 1-10.

2) Grab two completely unrelated books at random.

3)  Open book #1, and list the first ten adjectives you find.  **No cheating** by only looking for "cool adjectives."

4)  Open book #2, and list the first ten nouns you find, beside the adjectives you found in Step #3.  Again, **no cheating**by only looking for "cool nouns,"  or nouns that only "go" with your adjectives.

5) Read each line across--adjective + verb.  Pick a couple that make you think, or call to mind an inspiring image and write something about them.

\*The point of the exercise is to put together words we may never, ever think to put together--but once they're connected, evoke a response we can write about.  Let yourself see what happens.