



# FIND YOUR VOICE

A half-hour special from *IN THE MIX*, the Emmy award-winning weekly PBS teen series



This *IN THE MIX* special features the story of a unique workshop that helped a group of teens tackle common communication fears like speaking up in class, reading out loud, or even really listening to someone else. Their guide was an experienced communication coach, the founder of **Find Your Voice, Inc.**, who for 20 years has helped students learn to take risks speaking, listening, reading, and writing with some surprising results.

## DID YOU KNOW?

- Public speaking is the number one fear, cited above the fear of the dark, heights, spiders—even death!
- Even famous actors get stage fright.
- Most actors are very shy people.
- Even famous writers get writer’s block.
- Many teachers are afraid to speak in front of other adults.
- Listening can be just as hard as speaking.
- Poor listeners make bad actors.
- *Anyone* can overcome their communication fears.

## HOW TO USE THIS PROGRAM:

Studies conducted by RMC Research on previous *IN THE MIX* specials have shown that these programs engage the interest of teenagers, deliver information, catalyze discussion on critical issues, as well as promote analytic thinking and a greater sense of self-efficacy among teens. The aim is to encourage thought and allow teens to generate their own creative solution.

In this guide, we have outlined specific questions (with answers) based on the program’s content. Also included are in-class activities and longer-term projects. We suggest showing the entire program to the group, then presenting individual segments followed by discussion.

## IN THE MIX AWARDS

- CINE Golden Eagle Awards for: *Media Literacy: Get The News?; 9-11: Looking Back... Moving Forward; Financial Literacy: On the Money; Living With...Illness; Student Power: Organizing for School Reform*
- Young Adult Library Services Association’s “Selected DVD/Videos List” for: *Living With...Illness; Student Power: Organizing for School Reform; Arts Education: A+; ECSTASY; Live by the Gun, Die by the Gun; School Violence: Answers From the Inside; 9-11: Looking Back...Moving Forward*
- National Mental Health Association Media Awards for: *Depression: On the Edge; In the Mix website*
- National Emmy for Community Service Programming

Please visit [www.inthemix.org](http://www.inthemix.org) for full descriptions, video clips, transcripts, resources and more about this and other *In the Mix* programs.

# FIND YOUR VOICE

## GOALS:

1. To help students think about and discuss common communication problems like speaking in front of others, reading aloud, writing, and listening.
2. To help them strengthen communication skills through reading, writing, and acting exercises.

## PRE-VIEWING QUESTIONS:

1. What do you think is the number one fear? (*public speaking, which is cited above the fear of heights, the dark, snakes, even death*)
2. Why do you think this is so? (*People are very afraid of embarrassing themselves and being judged by others.*)
3. Can you think of other difficulties people have expressing themselves and connecting with others? (*writing, presenting, reading aloud, listening*)
4. Tell students they are about to see teens who took part in a theater workshop that helped them with different kinds of communication obstacles. Ask them to watch for the following:
  - *ways the coach helps them overcome problems*
  - *how the teens change*

## POST-VIEWING QUESTIONS:

### Segment #1: Orientation

1. The coach starts the training by saying “communication is based on **connection**.” What do you think she means? (*Communication is about both giving out and taking in information. The best communicators are the best listeners.*)
2. At the start of the training, the coach asks the teens to give themselves a name. What do you think is the reason for this exercise? (*This exercise is designed to give the students an opportunity to be seen the way they want to be seen: it also is a way to ease them into speaking in front of the others.*)
3. The coach dubs herself “Gail Listens with her Eyes.” How can someone do that? (*by not just listening to people’s words, but observing them closely to understand their intentions and reactions*)
4. Why do you think the coach says that Michael’s second name for himself “Gray Wolf” was a more authentic one? (*Michael says he gave himself that name because he is a survivor—an honest and revealing answer.*)

### Segment #2: Acting: Connecting with Another

1. What were some of the difficulties the teens were having when they first read their monologues? (*Many were nervous about being the center of attention; some had trouble pronouncing the words.*)
2. Why does the coach ask someone to sit with each actor as a listener? (*Good acting and effective communication are about connecting with another person...not just talking.*)

3. What do you think the coach meant when she commended Garvin during his monologue for talking *with* his partner instead of *at* her? (*Garvin stopped thinking about himself and focused his attention on the reactions of the person he was speaking with.*)
4. During her monologue from the play *Nuts*, Danielle is told by the coach to “empower” her character. What does she mean? (*The character must pursue her goals with strength as opposed to sweetness. She is fighting for her life: She does not have to be concerned with being nice, she just has to get her listener to see the truth.*)
5. Why do you think, as the coach says, it’s more interesting to watch actors grapple with their emotions rather than show them? (*The famous teacher Uta Hagan once told an actor: “If you would cry less, the audience would cry more!” An actor’s job is not to feel, but to evoke that feeling in the listener.*)

### Segment #3: Playwriting: Finding a Story

1. Why do you think the coach used a picture to get the group writing? (*The famous composer Stephen Sondheim once said, “If you asked me to write a love song, I couldn’t do it. But if you asked me to write a song about a woman at a bar, in a red dress, that I could do!” We all need help getting started.*)
2. In the “table work” segment, the teens are asked hard questions about their plays. Why do you think this step is important? (*It creates more trust among the group and helps the writer make revisions that clarify things that may not yet make sense to an audience.*)
3. To help them write a dialogue, the coach asks the students to consider who is “driving the scene.” What do you think she means? (*When two people are in conflict, one person is usually more actively seeking a solution.*)
4. Why do you think reading his writing aloud helped JB? (*Hearing how words sound when spoken helps writers correct their own grammar and usage.*)

### Segment #4: Rehearsal & Performance

1. During rehearsals, the coach urges the teens to “get into character.” What does this mean? (*An actor should understand what their character wants and “commit” to pursuing this by behaving the way that character would behave.*)
2. When she is having trouble focusing during rehearsal, the coach tells Natasha to “make us go away, and just listen to Bahati” (her scene partner). How can you make an audience go away? (*In theater, the opening at the front of the stage is called the fourth wall. When actors look out at the audience, it is referred to as “breaking the fourth wall.” One of the greatest antidotes to stage fright is to focus on the reactions of your scene partner, which helps you forget that you are being watched.*)
3. The coach tells Bahati to use energy without belligerence. What do you think she means? (*It’s important to fight for what you want as opposed to with the person you are trying to get it from. Once someone understands your need, you will end up with an ally, not an adversary.*)
4. In her opening night card to Esteban, the coach says that he should “come on stage knowing he owns the English language

now.” What does she mean? Does Esteban do this? (*Esteban now fully understands the words he’s speaking and can focus on using them to get what he wants, rather than on his pronunciation: He succeeds.*)

5. In Lisa’s card, what did the coach mean by “forget all the whistles and bells, and trust that you are enough?” (*She wants Lisa to trust her own behavior and understanding of the play, rather than put on a “mask” in order to act like someone else.*)
6. Based on the teens’ comments and what you saw, how do you think they changed? Why? (*They developed confidence and writing and acting (communication) skills, they bonded as a group, and they became more comfortable with themselves and others. This was all possible because the coach created a safe environment where they were comfortable taking risks.*)
7. Can you name something you learned that you could use to improve your own communication style? (*making eye contact, watching for a response from the person you are talking to, knowing what you want before you ask for it—and being energetic but not belligerent in fighting to get it, reading your writing out loud as you go, revising your writing to make it as clear as possible, taking yourself seriously, being true to who you are, remembering that everyone gets nervous before they share their thoughts*)

## ACTIVITIES

### NOTE TO TEACHERS:

The following activities are suggested for use when you begin working with a new group or for changing the poor communication style of an ongoing group. Before you begin, it is important to establish that no one in the class is to laugh at others’ attempts to share themselves. Explain to the students that expressing yourself publicly takes great courage, and though some of them may resort to silence or silliness, this is likely just a reflection of their own communication fears.

To create a safe environment for your students to take risks, it is strongly suggested that prior to these activities, you share a story or “secret” with the class about your own communication challenges (e.g., you never raised your hand in school, you get “dry mouth” before you have to give a presentation, you prefer to talk one-on-one with others rather than before a large group, you still get nervous before an exam, etc.).

### Activity #1: Personal Challenges

Ask students to think about one of their own communication challenges (i.e. solving a math problem publicly, speaking a new language with a poor accent, completing writing assignments, listening when others speak, reading aloud). Go around the room (sitting in a circle works best), and ask each of them to share one of their obstacles. Listen carefully to their answers. Explain that you will keep their answers in mind as you interact with them during your class and will try to help make them as comfortable as possible.

### Activity #2: The Name Game

Invite your students to play the “Name Game” like the teens did at the start of the program. Acknowledge that even this kind of sharing is scary because they will each be the center of attention for a moment. Go around the room and have students give themselves a descriptive name that highlights an authentic personal attribute of which they are proud. If someone can’t think of anything, ask them to share their favorite color, food, or sport, or their birth month. Reiterate that there are no “wrong” answers.

### Activity #3: Read a Play Aloud

Bring in a scene from a play in which there is a conflict between two characters. Have your students read it aloud in pairs. Make sure everyone understands the scene — what the characters want from each other and why there is a conflict. Encourage them to watch each other as closely as possible.

#### Scene Suggestions

1. *Hatful of Rain* by Michael Gazzo

Johnny has returned from Vietnam with a secret drug addiction; his wife Celia is pregnant and fears that he’s cheating on her.

**Characters/Wants:** Celia (the truth): Johnny (to hide the truth)

2. *A View from the Bridge* by Arthur Miller

Catherine’s uncle has convinced her that Rodolfo only wants to marry her to gain citizenship.

**Characters/Wants:** Catherine (him to prove his sincerity): Rodolfo (her to trust him)

Other scene suggestions can be found in Noppe-Brandon’s book, *Find Your Voice* (<http://books.heinemann.com/products/E00701.aspx>)

### Activity #4: Write about a Picture

Select a photograph—one without people that features some familiar object and a place that can serve as the setting for an emotional event (e.g. a used teabag on a table—Who made the tea? Why? Where are they now?) Have your students write a story about who is in that space and what happened or is about to happen.

OR

If you don’t have a photo to use as a trigger, just have your students think of two characters. One of them should want something that the other does not want to give. Have them draft a dialogue between these two characters and type it up. These dialogues can then be read aloud (enacted) by other members of the class. See if the class can answer the following questions after the scene is read: *Who are the people? What do they want and why? How is the conflict resolved?* If any of these questions can’t be answered, the writer should make revisions that fill in any information gaps. Then have the revised scene read again.

## FIND YOUR VOICE FAQ

### With organization founder Gail Noppe-Brandon

1. **What is a Communication Coach?**

*A communication coach is a guide who is trained to advocate for the clear expression of their students’ thoughts and ideas, through fear management and skill development.*

2. **How did “Find Your Voice” begin and what is its purpose?**

*I first developed this methodology when I was teaching freshmen English at New York University in the late 1980’s. Everyone was busy trying to improve the communication skills of high school graduates, and I was assigned to a program for “underachievers.” In an effort to bring reading and writing to life for them, I traded in the essay writing model, for a more dynamic creative writing model. Because I was a playwright and director, this eventually became a playwriting and acting model.*

*I was amazed to see how well even the most inarticulate kids responded to my coaching when it was individualized, and when I acknowledged the risks involved in sharing inner thoughts with others. Each of the 26*

students in my courses felt as though they had received my fullest attention, and each of them was able to override the inner censors that had previously prevented them from engaging. Since that time I have worked with thousands of teachers and students of all ages, and I have never encountered anyone (including those who struggled with stuttering, ADD, depression, second language interference, low literacy, and extreme giftedness) who could not overcome their obstacles to becoming more communicative.

### 3. Do you have any tips for overcoming the fear of public sharing? Writing? Speaking?

The best ways to guarantee successful communication are:

- Remember that **everyone** worries about how they will be received. It is normal. Don't be angry with yourself for being nervous; tell yourself you can say what you have to say **despite** being nervous.
- Be clear about what response you really want; if you want to make people laugh, you will communicate very differently than if you want to get someone to take your request seriously.
- If you are speaking, try to make the listener(s) comfortable with you, rather than focusing on your own discomfort.
- If you are writing, remember that it's not a one-shot deal; once you realize that you can re-write something as many times as you need to, it is the most liberating feeling in the world.

### 4. What have been Find Your Voice's greatest successes?

Every reluctant participant who began to participate was a great success; the more deeply they were stuck, the greater the triumph. I will consider it my greatest success when every student has an opportunity to be seen and heard because every teacher will know how to make it safe and possible for them to do so with skill and authenticity.

## RESOURCES

For more information about the *Find Your Voice* organization, and applications for general Workshops or Professional Development Workshops, visit their website at: [www.findyourvoice.us](http://www.findyourvoice.us)

### Books for Students and Teachers

- *Find Your Voice* by Gail Noppe-Brandon  
<http://books.heinemann.com/products/E00701.aspx>
- *The Inner Game of Tennis* by Timothy Gallwey
- *Respect for Acting* by Uta Hagan

### Books for Teachers and Other Aspiring Coaches

- *Leadership Is an Art* by Max Depree
- *The Myth of Laziness* by Mel Levine
- *Sense of Direction* by William Ball
- *On Directing* by Harold Clurman
- *Playwriting* by Louis Catron

### 5. If I'm not a theater or English teacher, how can I use the FYV technique?

If you give written assignments, or ask your students to speak in class, you can and should be using the FYV technique. Starting on the first day of class, you should establish yourself as a teacher who wishes to communicate with their students and in whose classroom they will be safe enough to do so. You should acknowledge how scary the sharing of written and spoken ideas is for **everyone** and how it is your job to help them to do so with confidence. If you are a math teacher, you can apply this to the epidemic fear of numbers and the probability of being "wrong" occasionally. If you are a foreign language teacher, you can apply it to the universal fear of sounding foolish, and if you are a social studies teacher, you can apply it to the all-too-real anxiety about memorizing data. The study of acting and writing are excellent vehicles for strengthening all of the above, but you can use your own curriculum to reinforce the same underlying principles. Every educator should be a communication coach.

### 6. Do you have any general tips for getting students to be more open in class?

Over the years I have done professional development work with teachers at every grade level and in every subject area. The Find Your Voice technique is being practiced in single academic classrooms, in whole school "advisory" periods, in graduate level teacher training programs, and in elementary school "club" periods. Even if you never teach your students to enact or write a play, you can help them to become better communicators. It starts with being the teacher you always wished you had:

- one who leads through empathy and advocacy, rather than intimidation and punishment
- one who wants to know and be known by their students and takes the time to connect with them
- one who creates a "safe" listening environment in their classroom
- one who acknowledges the courage required to risk the vulnerability of being "wrong" or appearing less skillful in front of peers
- one who is passionate about their subject and whose goal it is to infect others with their enthusiasm
- one who sets high goals and believes that everyone can be helped to reach them

## HOW TO REACH IN THE MIX:

Visit us online at [www.inthemix.org](http://www.inthemix.org) for guides, transcripts, video clips, schedules, lesson plans, and other resources.

*IN THE MIX* programs of interest to grades 6–12 are also available with performance rights on topics including: ecstasy/club drugs, fitness/nutrition, dealing with death, smoking prevention, sex and abstinence, school violence, cliques, drug abuse, teen immigrants, depression and suicide, gun violence, divorce/stepfamilies, self-image and the media, sports participation, media literacy, activism, alcohol/DWI, dating violence, getting into college, school to work transition, careers, relationships, AIDS, ethics/plagiarism, bullying and others.

For a complete catalog and ordering information: visit [www.inthemix.org](http://www.inthemix.org) (Educators), [www.castleworks.com](http://www.castleworks.com), call 800 597-9448 or email [mail@inthemix.org](mailto:mail@inthemix.org).

Some of the contents in this lesson plan were adapted from the Find Your Voice™ Teacher Training Manual © 1985.