

**Dr. Michael N. Compton Public Affairs Essay Contest**

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Bachelor of Arts in Intercultural Communication and Diversity

College of Arts and Letters

**Biography:** I am a junior pursuing a degree in Intercultural Communication with a minor in English and a certificate in Advocacy Writing. I am from Belleville, Illinois.

**Theme:** This essay will address the power of voice in its relation to the ability to actively listen.

**Non-profit Organization:** Harmony House

**Word Count:** 624

The concept of voice, especially in the reality of the current times, is a difficult one. People are constantly being asked to use it, whether in academic writing or in pleas from celebrity and political figures to go to the polls and vote. “Use your voice” and “make your voice heard” are phrases that are dominating tweets and Instagram stories and dinner-table conversations. At times it seems there are so many passionate voices saying drastically different things, it can feel impossible to discern what one’s own voice even means. Voice shapes our perception of reality, and our perception of reality dictates what we care about and what we communicate. If every phrase uttered and ideology felt is a reflection of the world around us, is our voice even ours? How do we use this tool, this powerful aspect of being, to promote unity and speak for others as well as ourselves? It can be exhausting. It has been exhausting.

Voices from loved ones, popular media, and elected officials can be loud. On social platforms, the voices of strangers can affect our mood or even our entire worldview. It is clear in the current state there are multitudes of opinions on how society can be better. Projecting opinions and perspectives often takes precedence over fully taking in an opposing perspective, leading to escalation of conflict. All individuals experience life in a unique way, and there is no possible way to entirely comprehend what someone else has gone through. Listening, though, can be a start.

It sounds simple and possibly cliché. The value of active listening, defined by Judy Willis of Edutopia as “a structured way of listening and responding such that the speaker knows you’re truly interested in their ideas, concerns, and opinions,” is commonly emphasized and practiced in the field of education (2018). It involves not only hearing what a person says, but being aware of nonverbal communication such as body language and tone, withholding judgement, reframing statements, and asking questions (Willis, 2018). It is a skill that must be worked at and honed to

do effectively, because it does not come naturally. It is hard work. Learning to put forth that effort is common in classrooms. In a year where we are all being exposed to new information and facing confusion, it is imperative to learn when to be a teacher and when it is time to become a student. The power of our voices comes with the power of knowing when to hold them back. We all have moments where our perspective needs to be discussed to teach others. Mastering the art of absorbing information and empathizing with lived experiences other than our own will make the true difference. A voice is louder, more impactful, and more powerful following fruitful silence.

This is not to say complete unity and understanding is possible, because that is not realistic. Humans are too complex. Anger in many instances is valid and justified; some conflicts are too deeply embedded to be resolved simply by listening. However, practicing active listening can remove the heat from the intense and quick anger that is characteristic of this era. It can boil fierce judgment down to a unified understanding of what we all need and the systemic issues that breed unequal opportunities for the majority of people. Listening and finding common ground with a new angle to attack problems paves a smoother path to solutions. I am not perfect at this nor is anyone. All progress takes is effort and the acceptance of nuanced conversation. What each person's voice can contribute and the message behind it is only as valuable as its comprehension. Purposeful exchange and collaboration, one step at a time, can allow each voice to be truly powerful.