



Voice Lessons:

Tone

Tone~1

Consider:

It's true. If you want to buy a spring suit, the choice selection occurs in February: a bathing suit, March: back to school clothes, July: a fur coat, August. Did I tell you about the week I gave in to a Mad-Mitty desire to buy a bathing suit in August?

The clerk, swathed in a long-sleeved woolen dress which made her look for the world like Teddy Snowcrop, was aghast. "Surely, you are putting me on," she said. "A bathing suit! In August!"

"That's right," I said firmly, "and I am not leaving this store until you show me one." She shrugged helplessly. "But surely you are aware of the fact that we haven't had a bathing suit in stock since the first of June. Our-no offense-White Elephant sale was June third and we unload-rather, disposed of all of our suits at that time."

Erma Bombeck, *At Wit's End*

Analysis:

What is the attitude of the writer toward the subject matter?

What diction and details does Bombeck use to express this attitude? In other words, what diction and details create the tone of the passage?

Apply:

Write down two words that describe the tone of this passage.

Tone~ 1

Analysis:

The subject matter of this passage is the seasonal buying of clothes. Bombeck explores the absurdity of the fashion industry, an industry which markets items long before they are needed and makes these items unavailable when they are needed. She makes it clear that this is silly, but not a serious and grave issue.

The tone of this passage is genial and satirical rather than harshly critical. Her desire to buy a bathing suit in August is a *mad-Mitty* desire, a reference/allusion to the Thurber story, “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty,” about a mild, mousy man with exotic and heroic fantasies. The clerk, *swathed in a long-sleeve woolen dress* in August, expresses her horror: “A bathing suit! In August!” There have been no bathing suits in the store since June: the White Elephant sale (a sale of useless items) was June 3rd. With a lighthearted barb about the narrator’s own appearance in a bathing suit (the clerk says, “Our~no~offense~White Elephant sale,” referring to her size), Bombeck keeps a consistent tone and assures the reader that her playful barbs are general and benign.

Tone~2

Consider:

But that is Cooper's way; frequently he will explain and justify little things that do not need it and then make up for this by as frequently failing to explain important ones that do not need it. For instance, he allowed that astute and cautious person, Deerslayer-Hawkeye, to throw his rifle heedlessly down and leave it lying on the ground where some hostile Indians would presently be sure to find it—a rifle prized by that person above all things else in the earth—and the reader gets no word of explanation of that strange act. There was no reason, but it wouldn't bear exposure. Cooper meant to get a fine dramatic effect out of the finding of the rifle by the Indians, and he accomplished this at the happy time; but all the same, Hawkeye could have hidden the rifle in a quarter of a minute where the Indians could not have found it. Cooper couldn't think of any way to explain why Hawkeye didn't do that, so he just shirked the difficulty and did not explain it at all.

Mark Twain, "Cooper's Prose Style" *Letters from the Earth*

Analysis:

What is the Twain's tone in this passage? What is central to the tone of this passage: the attitude toward the speaker, the subject, or the reader?

How does Twain create the tone?

Apply:

Write a paragraph about a movie you have recently seen. Create a critical, disparaging tone through your choice of details. Use Twain's paragraph as a model.

Tone~2

Analysis:

Twain's tone in this passage is contemptuous and sarcastic. Central to the tone is Twain's attitude toward the subject: Cooper's writing, which he finds inconsistent and irresponsible.

Twain creates his tone through diction and selection of detail. He criticizes Cooper and states, "but that is Cooper's way" generalizing the criticism. He accuses Cooper of "shirking" difficulties in writing. He calls Hawkeye that "astute and cautious person" then shows him to be "heedless." Through detail he contrasts Hawkeye's reputation as a character (astute and cautious) with Hawkeye's careless actions: "Hawkeye, throws his rifle heedlessly down and leaves it lying on the ground where some hostile Indians would presently be sure to find it—a rifle prized by that person above all things else in the earth." He supports the contrast with the contention that the carelessness has no cogent motivation: "Hawkeye could have hidden the rifle in a quarter of a minute where the Indians could not have found it." Further, Twain's contempt for Cooper's writing is underscored by direct criticism of Cooper's style. He states: "frequently he will explain and justify little things that do not need it and then make up for this by as frequently failing to explain important ones that do need it," and "Cooper couldn't think of any way to explain why Hawkeye didn't do that, so he just shirked the difficulty and did not explain it at all."

Tone~3

○ Consider:

It's his first exposure to Third World passion. He thought only Americans had informed political opinion-other people staged coups out of spite and misery. It's an unwelcome revelation to him that a reasonably educated and rational man like Ro would die for things that he, Brent, has never heard of and would rather laugh about. Ro was tortured in jail. Franny has taken off her earphones. Electrodes, canes, freezing tanks. He leaves nothing out. Something's gotten into Ro.

Dad looks sick. The meaning of Thanksgiving should not be so explicit.

Bharati Mukherjee, "Orbiting"

○ Analysis:

- What is the narrator's attitude toward Brent (Dad)? Cite your evidence.
- How does the syntax in this passage help create the tone?

○ Apply:

- Rewrite the last five sentences in the first paragraph, making the five short sentences into two longer sentences. How do the longer sentences affect the tone of the passage?

Tone~3

○ Analysis:

- The narrator's attitude is disparaging (to discredit or belittle) but not completely condemnatory. First, the narrator establishes Brent's narrow-mindedness through diction and detail. He thinks "only Americans have informed political opinion" and "other people stage coups out of spite and misery." He would rather "laugh" about things that Ro would "die" for. Further, it is "unwelcome" news that he might be wrong. Brent's prejudice is in sharp contrast to the images of Ro's torture: electrodes, canes, and freezing tanks. The simple concreteness of these images makes Brent's opinions and laughter hollow. The tone is not completely disparaging because he says it is Brent's "first exposure to Third World Passion" and Brent "looks sick" after the encounter which shows some built-in forgiveness for his narrow-mindedness.
- Syntax helps create the tone through the author's control of sentence length. Short sentences are used to emphasize the main ideas: Ro was tortured in jail. He leaves nothing out. Something's gotten into Ro. Dad looks sick. Longer sentences are used to build background and set-up Brent's provincialism (narrow-mindedness). The real horror of the passage is presented in a sentence fragment: electrodes, canes, freezing tanks. The sentence fragment carries the shock value. In addition, shorter sentences build tension and passion, as the conversation gets more and more one-sided and passionate.

Tone~4

○ Consider:

Microphone feedback kept blaring out of the speaker's words, but I got the outline. Withdrawal of our troops from Vietnam. Recognition of Cuba. Immediate commutation of student loans. Until all these demands were met, the speaker said he considered himself in a state of unconditional war with the United States government.

I laughed out loud.

~Tobias Wolff, "Civilian"

○ Analysis:

- What is the attitude of the narrator toward the political speaker in this passage? How do you know?
- How does the use of a short, direct sentence at the end of the passage (*I laughed out loud*) contribute to the tone?

○ Apply:

- Write down two words that describe the tone of this passage.

Tone~4

○ Analysis:

- The attitude of the narrator toward the political speaker is sardonic (bitter, scornful, mocking, cynical). The fact that microphone feedback was “blaring out the speaker’s words” but the narrator still “got the outline” indicates that it is not necessary to hear all of the speech to get the gist, that much of it is rant and rhetoric. The sentence fragments give the main ideas of the speech: slogans without substance. The speaker’s declaration that he is alone “in a state of unconditional war with the U.S. government” makes the speaker look pretentious (assumption of dignity or importance) and ridiculous.
- The short, direct sentence at the end of the passage makes a mockery of the political speech and fixes the sardonic tone of the passage. Not only does the narrator laugh at the speech, he laughs “out loud”, a clear dismissal of the rhetoric and a public acknowledgement of his scorn.

Tone~5

○ Consider:

What a thrill~

My thumb instead of an onion

The top quite gone

Except for a sort of hinge

Of skin,

A flat like a hat,

Dead white.

Then a red plush.

Sylvia Plath, “Cut: For Susan O’Neill Roe”

○ Analysis:

- What is the poet’s attitude toward the cut? What words, images, and details create the tone?
- In the second stanza, Plath uses colors to intensify the tone. The flap of skin is *dead white*, the blood is *a red plush*. What attitude toward the cut and, by implication, toward life itself, does this reveal?

○ Apply:

- Write a short description of an automobile accident. Create a tone of complete objectivity-as if you were from another planet and had absolutely no emotional reaction

Tone~5

○ Analysis:

The poet's attitude toward the cut is ironic, stating one thing and meaning quite another. Through the trivialization of the cut, the poet creates a scene of such sharp detail that she renders the cut horrific. She calls the cut a "thrill" and compares her thumb to an onion, "the top quite gone/except for a sort of hinge/of skin." Giving her thumb the same value as a slice of onion serves the opposite purpose: it affirms the value of her thumb and acknowledges the horror of the cut. The ironic tone works the same way with the image of the partially severed top of her thumb: "a flap like a hat." Comparing the partially severed skin to a hat increases the horror of cut by trivializing it through imagery and detail.

- "Dead white" modifies hat, and, by implication, "flap" and "skin." "White" is associated with death, dissolution, and the pallor (paleness) of corpses. It generalizes the cut and forces the reader to consider death itself. The 'red plush' of the blood indicates a luxurious lushness, almost seductive. The attitude revealed here is a dual one: fear of death and attraction to it.

Tone~6

○ Consider:

I perceived, as I read, how the collective white man had been actually nothing but a piratical opportunist who used Faustian machinations to make his own Christianity his initial wedge in criminal conquests. First, always “religiously,” he branded “heathen” and “pagan” labels upon ancient non-white cultures and civilizations. The stage thus set, he then turned upon his non-white victims his weapons of war. -Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

○ Analysis:

- What is the author’s attitude toward the “collective white man”?
- What is the tone of the passage? Write down words that reveal the tone of the passage.

○ Apply:

- Rewrite the first sentence of the passage to read like positive propaganda for “the collective white man.” Your sentence should have the same basic meaning as Malcolm X’s sentence, but the tone should be positive and non-critical.

Tone~6

○ Analysis:

The author's attitude toward the "collective white man" is one of virulence (extremely poisonous, hateful, hostile and bitter) and contempt.

The tone-the expression of attitude-is denunciatory (denouncing/accusing) and indignant (strong displeasure at something unjust or offensive). The white man is called a "piratical opportunist." He uses "Faustian machinations," going so far as to sell his soul for power. He uses Christianity as a wedge in criminal conquests to subjugate non-white cultures and civilizations. These non-white victims are called ancient and, by implication, cultured and civilized, in contrast to the collective white man who deals only in power and weapons of war.

Tone~7

○ Consider:

There is no drop of water in the ocean, not even in the deepest parts of the abyss, that does not know and respond to the mysterious forces that create the tide. No other force that affects the sea is so strong. Compared with the tide the wind-created waves are surface movements felt, at most, no more than a hundred fathoms below the surface. Rachel Carson, *The Sea Around Us*

○ Analysis:

- What is Carson's attitude toward the tide?
- Carson uses negative constructions several times in this paragraph (There is NO...NOT even...that does NOT...NO other force). Yet her tone is uniformly positive and reverential. How does the uses of negatives create a positive tone?

○ Apply:

- Rewrite the first sentence of the passage, changing all of the negative constructions to positive ones. What effect does it have on the tone?

Tone~7

○ Analysis:

Carson's attitude toward the tide goes beyond respect: she writes of the tide with reverence and veneration (a feeling of awe)

The negative constructions serve to reinforce the positive tone by underscoring the absolute power of the tide. There is no drop of water resistant to the tide. Not even the deepest parts of the ocean are resistant to the tide. No other force is so strong. By negating the possibility of freedom from the tide, Carson reinforces its absolute and ubiquitous (existing everywhere at the same time, being present everywhere at once) power.

Tone~8

○ Consider:

I can't forget

How she stood at the top of that long marble stair

Amazed, and then with a sleepy pirouette

Went dancing slowly down to the fountain-quieted square;

Nothing upon her face

But some impersonal loneliness, -not then a girl,

But as it were a reverie of the place,

A called-for falling glide and whirl;

As when a leaf, petal, or thin chip

Is drawn to the falls of a pool and, circling a moment above it,

Rides on over the lip-

Perfectly beautiful, perfectly ignorant of it.

Richard Wilber "Piazza Di Spagna, Early Morning"

○ Analysis:

- What is the speaker's attitude toward the woman he describes? List the images, diction, and details that support your position.
- Consider the last line of the poem. How does the repetition of the syntactical structure (adverb, adjective, adverb, adjective) support the tone of the poem?

Tone~8

○ Analysis:

The speaker's attitude is one of wonder and fascination. The author "can't forget" the image of the woman coming down the "long marble stair." The woman is "amazed," but the speaker is amazed as well and watches her in rapt attention. As she dances down to the square with a sleepy pirouette, it is as if the speaker dances with her, dancing through the lines of his poem. The speaker sees nothing on her face except a kind of impassivity, an impersonal loneliness that makes her as much a part of the place as the leaf, petal, or thin chip which that rides over the edge of a waterfall. She is perfectly beautiful and perfectly ignorant (ignorant in the sense of being uninformed) of her beauty and grace. Only the speaker is aware of the her perfection and watches, absorbed.

- The repetition emphasizes both her perfection and her insensibility. She is perfectly beautiful, but she is also perfectly ignorant of it. The repetition emphasizes her oneness with the scene and the author's fascination with her movements.

Tone~9

○ Consider:

Proper Presents for the Wedding Party

Dear Miss Manners:

What are the proper presents to give bridesmaids and my fiancé's usher? Is something so untraditional as a good book—different books for each, of course, according to their tastes—all right instead of things like bracelets and cuff links they may never use?

Gentle Reader:

Are trying to give these people something they might enjoy, or are you trying to do the proper thing by them? Books, at best, are only read, but useless, monogrammed silver objects that cannot be returned serve to remind one of the occasion of their presentation every time one sees them tarnishing away, unused. Cuff links and bracelets are all right, since everyone has too many of them, but silver golf tees or toothpaste squeezers are ideal.

—Judith Martin, *Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior*

○ Analysis:

- What is Miss Manners' attitude toward gifts for bridesmaids and ushers? What is her attitude toward gifts in general?
- What is the tone of the passage? Note that the attitude toward gifts does not determine the tone of the passage. What attitude does determine the tone? Write down the details, images, and diction that reveal the tone.

○ Apply:

- Write an answer to the following request for advice. Your tone should be critical and condescending. Express your attitude through details, diction, and images. Do not be openly critical.
- Dear Advice Person:
 - I like to go to school, but I hate homework. My parents and teachers say I have to do my homework. But it takes way too much of my time. I would rather watch T.V. Most of my friends hate homework too. What should I do?

Tone~9

○ Analysis:

Miss Manners' attitude toward gifts for bridesmaids and ushers is that they are usually useless, unused, and cannot be returned. Miss Manners' attitude toward gifts in general is that they should be selected to please the recipient and given with the goal of the recipients pleasure.

- Although Miss Manners has a positive attitude toward gift-givers that try to please, the tone of the passage is not positive. In fact, the tone here is imperious, even withering. That is because the tone reflects her attitude toward the gentle reader not the ideal gift-giver. The gentle reader is inclined to do the proper thing, not give these people something they might enjoy (or why would she have taken the time to write Miss Manners?) Since either giver fails to focus on the recipient's pleasure, Miss Manners haughtily (and ironically) suggests that books are at best only to be read. Better to get useless monogrammed silver objects that cannot be returned, the more useless (silver golf tees) the better. Miss Manners never answers the question directly. Instead, she uses sarcasm and scorn to dismiss the question and the gentle reader's concern all together.

Tone~10

○ Consider:

Certainly we must face this fact: if the American press, as a mass medium, has formed the minds of America, the mass has also formed the medium. There is action, reaction, and interaction going on ceaselessly between the newspaper-buying public and the editors. What is wrong with the American press is what is in part wrong with American society.

Is this, then, to exonerate the American press for its failures to give the American people more tasteful and more illuminating reading matter? Can the American press seek to be excused from responsibility for public lack of information as TV and radio often do, on the grounds that, after all, “we have to give the people what they want or we will go out business”?

○ Analysis:

- What is Luce’s attitude toward the American press?
- How does the use of rhetorical questions help express this attitude? In other words, how do the rhetorical questions help set the tone?

○ Apply:

- Write an answer to the rhetorical questions in the passage. Adopt a tone of sneering derision as you express the attitude that the American press can indeed be excused from responsibility in order to make more money.

Tone~10

○ Analysis:

- Luce's attitude toward the American press is reproachful. She states that the American press has been irresponsible. The American press has shaped the minds of America, but American taste has also shaped the press, exerting market pressures. She does not exonerate the American press, however, but holds them responsible for more tasteful and illuminating reading matter despite business pressures.
- The rhetorical questions in the second paragraph emphasize the American press's responsibility to provide tasteful and illuminating reading matter and information, despite the taste of the American public. The questions assume and answer: no. The questions also holdup TV and radio as examples of mass media which have succumbed to American taste. The questions raise the expectation that the American press should rise above TV and radio.

Tone - 11

Situation: You have just gone to your junior prom and had the best time ever! Write a short letter about your prom experience to (a) your date, (b) your best friend from out of town, and (c) your grandmother.

Take about 10 minutes to think about and write each of your letters. After completion, notice how your tone (your VOICE) changed with each letter. How did you find your language different when writing to a friend or a date rather than to your grandmother?

Tone ~12

Consider:

I can't forget
How she stood at the top of that marble stair
Amazed, and then with a sleepy pirouette
When dancing slowly down to the fountain-quieted square;

Nothing upon her face
But some impersonal loneliness, --not then a girl
But as it were a reverie of the place,
A called-for glide and whirl;

And when a leaf, petal, or thin chip
Is drawn to the falls of a pool and, circling a moment above it,
Rides on over the lip~~
Perfectly beautiful, perfectly ignorant of it.

~~ Richard Wilbur, "Piazza Di Spagna, Early Morning"

Discuss:

1. What is the speaker's attitude toward the woman he describes? List the images, diction, and details that support your position.
2. Consider the last line of the poem. How does the repetition of the syntactical structure (adverb adjective, adverb adjective) support the tone of the poem?

Apply:

Using Wilbur's poetry as a model, write a sentence which expresses stunned admiration for a stranger. Use repetition of syntactical structure to create your tone. Share your sentence with the class.

Tone~13

Consider:

It was very late and everyone had left the cafe except an old man who sat in the shadow the leaves of the tree made against the electric light. In the day time the street was dusty, but at night the dew settled the dust and the old man liked to sit late because he was deaf and now at night it was quiet and he felt the difference. The two waiters inside the cafe knew that the old man was a little drunk, and while he was a good client they knew that if he became too drunk he would leave without paying, so they kept watch on him.

"Last week he tried to commit suicide," one waiter said.

"Why?"

"He was in despair."

"What about?"

"Nothing."

"How do you know it was nothing?"

"He has plenty of money."

--Ernest Hemingway, "A Clean, Well Lighted Place"

Discuss:

What do you notice about the dialogue between the two waiters? What is their attitude toward the old man? How do you know?

What are some words in the first paragraph that show *tone*? What sort of tone do these words indicate?

Apply:

Using Hemingway as a model, write a dialogue between two employees (your choice of work places) in which they discuss a recent tragedy involving their boss. Make the dialogue matter-of-fact and not showing much emotion. The exchange should be 10 lines—5 for each speaker.

Tone ~ 13

Analysis: "A Clean, Well Lighted Place"

Although tone is an extremely complicated issue to analyze, it is one of the most elementary literary elements. Like a tone of voice, the tone of a story may communicate joy, anger, love, sorrow, and contempt. It shows the feelings of the author, so greatly that we can sense them. The tone adds to the overall feeling, and effectiveness portrayed in any literary work. Those feelings may be similar to the feelings expressed by the narrator of the story, but sometimes they may be dissimilar, even sharply opposed. The characters in a story may be regarded even as sad, but we sense that the author regards it as funny, as in Ernest Hemingway's "A Clean, Well Lighted Place", where Hemingway purposely "sets up the aura" of an apathetic tone; using diction, imagery, and a third person point of view, by not directly confronting any emotions. We don't see the café, nor do we know where it is or anything else about it – however, Hemingway manages to sketch out just enough of the scene for us to create a feeling of the setting for us. We have little else to focus on but the character's words and thoughts, and Hemingway doesn't attempt to interfere with our interpretation of these things. He very rarely places any judgment on his characters.

Tone ~14

Consider:

Everybody was willing. So Tom got out a piece of paper that he had wrote the oath on, and read it. It swore every boy to stick to the band, and never tell any of the secrets; and if anybody done anything to any boy in the band, whichever boy was ordered to kill that person and his family must do it, and he mustn't eat and he mustn't sleep till he had killed them and hacked a cross in their breasts, which was the sign of the band. And nobody that didn't belong to the band could use that mark, and if he did he must be sued; and if he done it again he must be killed. And if anybody that belonged to the band told the secrets, he must have his throat cut, and then have his carcass burnt up and the ashes scattered all around, and his name blotted off of the list with blood and never mentioned again by the gang, but have a curse put on it and be forgot forever.

Mark Twain – *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Discuss:

1. What words or phrases show this passage is told with a sense of childish wonder and adventure?
2. Is this passage serious or humorous? Is it informal or formal? How do you know?

Apply:

Drawing on the tone that an excited, idealistic 5th or 6th grader might use, write a vivid description of a pact that you may have made.



Tone~15

Tone~16

Tone~17

Tone~18
