



Teaching Tone

Using 'Voice Lessons'

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TONE: Some words to describe the tone of a work or passage

accusing	derisive	gloomy	mock-serious	scornful
admonitory	derogatory	grave	moralistic	selfish
affectionate	desolate	greedy	mournful	sentimental
allusive	despairing	grim	mysterious	serene
ambivalent	desperate	gushy	nervous	serious
amused	detached	happy	nostalgic	shocked
angry	diabolic	haughty	objective	silly
annoyed	didactic	hilarious	ominous	simpering
anxious	diffident	holier-than-thou	optimistic	sinister
apprehensive	disappointed	hopeful	outraged	skeptical
audacious	disbelieving	hopeless	outspoken	sober
authoritative	disdainful	horrific	paranoid	solemn
baffled	disgusted	humorous	passionate	somber
bantering	disinterested	impartial	pathetic	staid
benevolent	dispassionate	impatient	patronizing	stirring
bewildered	distressed	incisive	pedantic	stoic
bitter	disturbed	incredulous	pensive	straightforward
blunt	doubtful	indignant	persuasive	strident
bossy	dramatic	inflammatory	pessimistic	suspenseful
brusque	ebullient	informative	petty	suspicious
burlesque	effusive	insipid	pithy	sympathetic
candid	elated	insolent	playful	taunting
casual	elegiac	instructive	pompous	tender
ceremonial	empathetic	intimate	pretentious	tense
cheerful	encouraging	introspective	proud	terse
cheery	enraged	ironic	provocative	thoughtful
choleric	enthusiastic	irreverent	psychotic	threatening
clinical	euphoric	irritated	questioning	timorous
cold	excited	jocund	reflective	turgid
colloquial	expectant	joyful	regretful	uncaring
compassionate	exuberant	laidback	relaxed	unconcerned
complimentary	facetious	learned	reminiscent	uneasy
conceited	factual	lethargic	remorseful	unhappy
concerned	fanciful	lighthearted	resigned	unsympathetic
conciliatory	fatalistic	loving	restrained	urgent
condemnatory	fearful	lugubrious	reticent	vibrant
condescending	fervent	matter-of-fact	reverent	vitriolic
confident	flippant	measured	romantic	whimsical
confused	foreboding	meditative	rousing	wistful
contemptuous	formal	melancholic	sad	worried
contentious	frantic	melancholy	sanguine	wrathful
critical	frightened	mirthful	sarcastic	wry
cynical	frustrated	miserable	sardonic	zealous
delightful	furious	mock-heroic	satiric	
depressed	gleeful	mocking	scared	

More Help Describing Tone

Another set of words to describe tone:

upset/concerned

Provocative = Stimulating, exciting
Audacious = Daring, bold, insolent
Persuasive = Written to convince or win over
Condescending = patronizing, arrogant
Disdainful = Arrogant, lordly, superior, unsympathetic
Sarcastic = Snide, mocking, sharp taunting that wounds
Sardonic = Derisively mocking, scornful and cynical
Satiric = Ridiculing, ironic, mocking, farcical, exposing folly
Mock-heroic = Ridiculing a “hero”
Apprehensive = anxious, uneasy, worried
Ominous = Fateful, ill-boding, foreboding, dire
Urgent = imperative, critical, intensely necessary
Threatening = Menacing, intimidating
Horrific = Appalling, shocking, gruesome
Disappointed = Deceived, crestfallen, let down
Regretful = Contrite, apologetic, sorry (spans mere disappointment to a painful sense of dissatisfaction or self-reproach)
Remorseful = Moral anguish, penitent, contrite, rueful over past misdeeds
Somber = Bleak, depressing, dismal
Elegiac = Lamenting, poignant, funereal

upbeat/neutral

Amused = Entertaining in a light and playful manner (directing attention away from serious matters in an agreeable & pleasing manner)
Bantering = Teasing, joking, playful
Simpering = Smiley in a silly, self-conscious, often coy way
Whimsical = Capricious, unpredictable
Reverent = Venerating, worshipping
Reflective = Contemplative, meditative, introspective
Intimate = Personal, informal, private
Sympathetic = Compassionate, sensitive, sharing or understanding feelings
Factual = Certain, absolute, irrefutable, unbiased
Detached = Aloof, impartial, disconnected emotionally
Pedantic = Scholarly, making a show of knowledge
Provocative = Stimulating, exciting

Adapted from materials from Ron Smith, Roby [Texas] HS and Susan VanDruten

Using a dictionary of synonyms

proud, arrogant, haughty, lordly, insolent, overbearing, supercilious, disdainful mean showing superiority toward others or scorn for inferiors

Proud may suggest a feeling or attitude of pleased satisfaction in oneself or one’s accomplishments that may or may not be justified and may or may not be demonstrated offensively <a *proud* man, unwilling to admit failure>. **ant** humble, ashamed

Arrogant implies a claiming for oneself of more consideration or importance than is warranted and often suggests an aggressive, domineering manner an *arrogant* business executive used to being kowtowed to>. **ant** meek, unassuming

Haughty suggests a blatantly displayed consciousness of superior birth or position <a *haughty* manner that barely concealed his scorn>. **ant** lowly

Lordly implies pomposity or an arrogant display of power <a *lordly* indifference to the consequences of their carelessness>..

Insolent implies insultingly contemptuous haughtiness <suffered the stares of *insolent* waiters>. **ant** deferential

Overbearing suggests a tyrannical manner or an intolerable insolence <wearied by demands from her *overbearing* in-laws>. **ant** subservient

Supercilious implies a cool, patronizing haughtiness <*supercilious* parvenus with their disdainful sneers>.

Disdainful suggests a more active and openly scornful superciliousness <*disdainful* of their pathetic attempts>. **ant** admiring, respectful

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary of Synonyms and Antonyms. Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 1992, Print. [p. 310]

VOICE LESSONS : SAMPLES 1

DICTION

Her face was white and sharp and slightly gleaming in the candlelight, like **bone**. No hint of pink. And the hair. So fine, so pale, so much, crimped by its plaiting into springy zigzag tresses, **clouding** neck and shoulders, shining metallic in the candlelight, catching a hint, there it was, of green again, from the reflection of a large glazed cache-pot containing a vigorous sword-leafed fern.

— A. S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance*

DISCUSS:

1. When Byatt describes a face “like *bone*,” what feelings does she suggest?
2. How can hair be “*clouding* neck and shoulders”? What picture does this word create for the reader?

APPLY:

Substitute another noun for bone in sentence one. Your substitution should change the meaning and feeling of the sentence. Show your sentence to your team and explain how your noun changes the sentence’s connotation and impact.

DETAIL

How fine it is to enter some old town, walled and turreted, just at approach of nightfall, or to come to some straggling village, with the lights streaming through the surrounding gloom; and then, after inquiring for the best entertainment that the place affords, to “take one’s ease at one’s inn”!

— William Hazlitt, “On Going a Journey”

DISCUSS:

1. What details support the generalization, how fine it is ?
2. What feelings are evoked by the details of the town (old, walled, turreted)? How does this selection of detail communicate Hazlitt’s attitude toward the town?

APPLY:

Imagine going to a motel after a long day on the road. The motel is the only place to sleep in town, and the next town is 200 miles away. The motel is old and dirty; your room is shabby and dark. Plan a brief monologue which expresses your attitude toward this room. Include specific references to the details that both produce and reveal your attitude. Perform your monologue for your team.

Nancy Dean. *Voice Lessons: Classroom Activities to Teach Diction, Detail, Imagery, Syntax, and Tone*. Gainesville: Maupin House, 2000, Print.

VOICE LESSONS: SAMPLES 2

IMAGERY

She looked into the distance, and the old terror flamed up for an instant, then sank again. Edna heard her father's voice and her sister Margaret's. She heard the barking of an old dog that was chained to the sycamore tree. The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air.

— Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*

DISCUSS:

3. Although the narrator "looks into the distance," the images are primarily auditory. What are the auditory images in the passage? What mood do these images create?
4. The last sentence of this passage contains an olfactory image (the musky odor pinks fill the air). What effect does the use of an olfactory image, after a series of auditory images, have on the reader?

APPLY:

Write a paragraph in which you create a scene through auditory imagery. The purpose of your paragraph is to create a calm, peaceful mood. Use one olfactory image to enhance the mood created by auditory imagery.

SYNTAX

She is a woman who misses moisture, who has always loved low green hedges and ferns.

— Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*

DISCUSS:

1. Both of the subordinate clauses in this sentence modify *woman*. What effect does this parallel structure have on the sentence?
2. How would it change the feeling evoked by the sentence if it read:
She misses moisture and has always loved low green hedges and ferns.

APPLY:

Write a paragraph in which you create a scene through auditory imagery. The purpose of your paragraph is to create a calm, peaceful mood. Use one olfactory image to enhance the mood created by auditory imagery.

TONE

JACK (*slowly and hesitantly*): Gwendolen—Cecily—it is very painful for me to be forced to speak the truth. It is the first time in my life that I have even been reduced to such a painful position, and I am really quite inexperienced in doing anything of the kind. However I will tell you quite frankly that I have no brother Ernest. I have no brother at all. I never had a brother in my life, and I certainly have not the smallest intention of ever having one in the future.

— Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Ernest*

DISCUSS:

1. What is Wilde's attitude toward Jack? What specific diction and detail reveal this attitude?
2. What is Wilde's attitude toward the audience or the reader? How do you know?

APPLY:

Rewrite Jack's lines to reflect the attitude that lying is terribly wrong. Adopt a disdainful attitude toward your audience and a scornful attitude toward Jack. Have your teammates read your lines.

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V O I C E L E S S O N S

‘ P l a n B ’

	<i>Type</i>	<i>#</i>	<i>Pg.</i>	<i>Writer</i>
1	Diction	15	17	Byatt
2	Diction	1	3	Kingsolver
3	Diction	2	4	White
4	Detail	1	25	Macaulay
5	Detail	2	26	Rios
6	Detail	3	27	Miller
7	Syntax	1	69	Woolf
8	Syntax	2	70	Chief Red Jacket
9	Syntax	3	71	Poe
10	Imagery	1	47	Coleridge
11	Imagery	2	48	Hijuelos
12	Imagery	3	49	Chopin
13	Tone	1	91	Bombeck
14	Tone	2	92	Twain
15	Tone	3	93	Mukherjee

One order of activities with the lessons:

1. The teacher models one or two lessons.
2. Students work through the lessons listed above as an opening activity.
3. Students are given transparencies or presentation files of one lesson and work in pairs to prepare an analysis (250-500 words) of the lesson's content, including an extended logical definition of the author, and then present the lesson to the class. They are limited to 20 minutes and must have questions or activities prepared to "engage" the class in the lesson.
4. Students in pairs are given passages and assigned one of the five elements. They construct an exercise modeled on those done in class, including two 'discuss' questions, one 'apply' activity, and 'discussion suggestions.' The teacher chooses most passages from the work the class is currently studying or has already completed.
5. Students work in small groups to select one of the five elements and locate an appropriate passage to illustrate it. (Or they may choose to 'work backwards,' starting with a favorite text and then selecting an appropriate element.) They construct an exercise modeled on those done in class, including two 'discuss' questions, one 'apply' activity, and 'discussion suggestions.' They might be encouraged to use the work the class is studying or one it has completed.

VOICE LESSONS: SAMPLES 3

USING VOICE LESSONS FOR POETRY ANALYSIS

TONE

Piazza di Spagna, Early Morning

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-quiet square.
5 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
10 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

DISCUSS:

3. What is the speaker's attitude toward the woman he describes? List the images, diction, and details that support your position.
4. 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 poem as a model, write a sentence which expresses stunned admiration for a stranger. Use repetition of a syntactical structure to create your tone.

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