

# Tone

## 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*

## Discuss:

1. What is the attitude of the writer toward the subject matter?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. 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. Begin a class chart of tone descriptors, listing the tone vocabulary you and your fellow students have collected. Add to the chart as you discover new tone words throughout these exercises.

# Tone

## 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 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 a 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 at all.

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

## Discuss:

1. What is 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?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. 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. Share your paragraph with the class.

# Tone

## 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"

## Discuss:

1. What is the narrator's attitude toward Brent (Dad)? Cite your evidence.
2. 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. Read your rewritten sentences to a partner and discuss how the longer sentences affect the tone of the passage.

# Tone

## Consider:

Microphone feedback kept blaring out 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"

## Discuss:

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

## Apply:

Substitute a new sentence for *I laughed out loud*. Your new sentence should express support for the political speaker. Read the passage – with your new sentence – to a partner and explain how your sentence changes the tone of the passage.

# Tone

## Consider:

What a thrill –  
My thumb instead of an onion.  
The top quite gone  
Except for a sort of a hinge

Of skin,  
A flap like a hat,  
dead white.  
Then a red plush.

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

## Discuss:

1. What is the poet’s attitude toward the cut? What words, images and details create the tone?
2. 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 to the accident. Read your description to a partner and discuss the details, images, and diction that create your tone.

# Tone

## 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*

## Discuss:

1. What is the author’s attitude toward *the collective white man*?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What is the tone of the passage? Circle and discuss the words that reveal the tone of this passage.

## Apply:

Rewrite the first sentence of the Malcolm X 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 noncritical. Share your sentence with a partner and discuss the power words have to reveal and shape attitudes.

# Tone

## 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*

## Discuss:

1. What is Carson's attitude toward the tide?
2. Carson uses negative constructions several times in this paragraph ("There is **no** . . . , **not** even in the . . . , that does **not** know. . . . **No** other force..."). Yet her tone is uniformly positive and reverential. How does the use of negatives create such 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? Share your sentence with a partner and discuss the effect.

# Tone

## 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”

## 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 Wilber'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

## Consider:

### Proper Presents for the Wedding Party

DEAR MISS MANNERS:

What are the proper presents to give bridesmaids and my fiancé's ushers? 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 you 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 tube squeezers are ideal.

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

## Discuss:

1. What is Miss Manners' attitude toward gifts for bridesmaids and ushers? What is her attitude toward gifts in general?
2. What is the tone of the passage? Note that the attitude toward gifts does not determine the tone of this passage. What attitude does determine the tone? Circle and discuss the details, images, and diction that reveal the tone.

## Apply:

Write an answer to the following request for advice. The tone of your reply should be critical and condescending. Express your attitude through details, images, and diction; do not be openly critical. Share your reply with the class.

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

## 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 of business”?

— Clare Boothe Luce, “What’s Wrong with the American Press?”

## Discuss:

1. What is Luce’s attitude toward the American press?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. 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. Use at least one rhetorical question in your reply. Share your answer with the class.

# Tone

## Consider:

The best part of human language, properly so called, is derived from reflection on the acts of the mind itself. It is formed by a voluntary appropriation of fixed symbols to internal acts, to processes and results of imagination, the greater part of which have no place in the consciousness of uneducated man; though in civilized society, by imitation and passive remembrance of what they hear from their religious instructors and other superiors, the most uneducated share in the harvest which they neither sowed nor reaped.

— Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*

## Discuss:

1. What is Coleridge's attitude toward the uneducated man?
2. How does Coleridge's choice of details, diction, and syntax reveal his attitude toward the uneducated man?

## Apply:

Rewrite the first sentence of this passage. Keep the same basic ideas that Coleridge expresses, but change the tone. Your tone should express contempt for academic elitism. Choose details, diction, and syntax that support your tone. Share your sentence with the class.

# Tone

## Consider:

The dry brown coughing beneath their feet,  
(Only a while, for the handyman is on his way)  
These people walk their golden gardens.  
We say ourselves fortunate to be driving by today.

That we may look at them, in their gardens where  
The summer ripeness rots. But not raggedly.  
Even the leaves fall down in lovelier patterns here.  
And the refuse, the refuse is a neat brilliancy.

— Gwendolyn Brooks, “Beverly Hills, Chicago”

## Discuss:

1. Who is the *we* (line 4) of the poem? Who are *these people* (line 3)? What is the poem’s attitude toward *these people*?
2. Examine lines 6-8. Even *rot* and *refuse* is *neat* and *brilliant*, and *leaves fall down in lovelier patterns here*. What image does the diction create? How does that image contribute to the tone?

## Apply:

Write two or three sentences which reveal a tone of disdain in describing a clique at school. Use imagery or concrete detail to create the tone. Do not directly state your disdain; the images and detail should carry the tone. Work with a partner. Share your sentences with the class.

# Tone

## Consider:

Everybody latched on to you during these trips, congressmen, businessmen and directors and presidents of this and that. Every hotshot in town wanted to be next to *the astronaut*. For the first ten or fifteen minutes it was enough for them to breathe the same air you breathed and occupy the same space as your famous body. But then they began looking at you . . . and waiting . . . Waiting for what? Well, dummy! – waiting for you to say a few words! They wanted something hot! If you were one of the seven greatest pilots and seven bravest men in America, then obviously you must be fascinating to listen to.

— Tom Wolfe, *The Right Stuff*

## Discuss:

1. What is Wolfe's attitude toward the astronaut? How do you know?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What is Wolfe's attitude toward the people who come to see the astronaut? What diction and syntax reveal this attitude?

## Apply:

Think about your favorite musician or movie star. Using Wolfe's paragraph as a model, write a paragraph, addressed directly to the star, about his/her relationship with the fans. Your tone should be conversational and enthusiastic. Share your paragraph with a partner.

# Tone

## Consider:

And I started to play. It was so beautiful. I was so caught up in how lovely I looked that at first I didn't worry how I would sound. So it was a surprise to me when I hit the first wrong note and I realized something didn't sound quite right. And then I hit another and another followed that. A chill started at the top of my head and began to trickle down. Yet I couldn't stop playing, as though my hands were bewitched. I kept thinking my fingers would adjust themselves back, like a train switching to the right track. I played this strange jumble through two repeats, the sour notes staying with me all the way to the end.

— Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*

## Discuss:

1. How does the narrator's attitude toward her performance change in the passage?
2. How does the author's use of detail, diction, and imagery reveal the narrator's changing attitude?

## Apply:

Write a paragraph about an outing that turned out badly. In your paragraph, express a change in tone. Begin with a positive tone and end with a tone of disappointment. Use detail, diction, and imagery to create the changing tone. Share your paragraph with a partner.

# Tone

## Consider:

DiMaggio burst upon the nation just nine years after Charles Lindbergh almost inadvertently invented celebrity of a degree – of a kind, really – never before experienced. DiMaggio played a team game but somehow knew, in the intuitive way an artist has of knowing things, that our rough-and-tumble democracy, leveling though it is, responds to an individual with an aura of remoteness.

— George F. Will, “The First Michael Jordan”

## Discuss:

1. What is Will’s attitude toward DiMaggio?
2. Fill out the following chart with specific diction, detail, imagery, and syntax that create the tone.

Diction	Detail	Imagery	Syntax

## Apply:

Write a paragraph about a personal hero. In your paragraph create a tone of admiration and respect. With Will’s paragraph as a model, try to utilize all of the elements – detail, diction, imagery, and syntax – to create the tone. Share your paragraph with the class.

# Tone

## Consider:

In Pride, in reasoning Pride, our error lies;  
All quit their sphere, and rush into the skies.  
Pride still is aiming at the best abodes,  
Men would be Angels, Angels would be Gods.  
Aspiring to be Gods, if Angels fell,  
Aspiring to be Angels, Men rebel:  
And who but wishes to invert the laws  
Of Order, sins against th' Eternal Cause.

— Alexander Pope, “An Essay on Man”

## Discuss:

1. What is Pope’s attitude toward pride, the subject matter? Cite your evidence.
2. What is the tone of this passage? What attitude underlies the tone?

## Apply:

Write a short paragraph of advice about drinking and driving. Show through your diction and choice of detail that you believe yourself superior in every way to your reader. Never directly state your superiority. Instead, let the tone of your paragraph carry your haughty attitude.



# Tone

## Consider:

Indeed, it strikes me that to lay this obscenity off to some mitigating factor, no matter how worthy, is to make the crime smaller than it is and offer rationalizations that insult the sufferers.

Meaning that I don't care what video games these wretches played. Don't give a damn if they were picked on by other kids.

It makes no difference.

This was a special category of evil.

— Leonard Pitts, Jr., “Why? Maybe It’s a Blessing Not to Know Why Those Two Boys Did It”

## Discuss:

1. What is Pitts’ attitude toward the perpetrators of the crimes in Littleton, Colorado? What words reveal his attitude?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. In the second paragraph of this passage, Pitts uses two incomplete sentences. How does his syntax contribute to the tone?

## Apply:

Think of an issue for which you have a decided opinion. Write a paragraph defending this opinion. Create a tone of righteous indignation. Use at least one incomplete sentence to help create your tone. Use Pitts’ passage as a model. Share your paragraph with the class.



# Tone

## Consider:

. . . The gracious Duncan  
Was pitied of Macbeth. Marry, he was dead.  
And the right valiant Banquo walked too late;  
Whom, you may say (if't please you) Fleance killed,  
For Fleance fled. Men must not walk too late. (5) \*can avoid thinking  
Who cannot want the thought\* how monstrous  
It was for Malcolm and for Donalbain  
To kill their gracious father? Damned fact\*, \*deed  
How it did grieve Macbeth! Did he not straight,  
In pious rage, the two delinquents tear (10) \*slaves  
That were the slaves of drink and thralls\* of sleep?  
Was not that nobly done? Ay, and wisely too,  
For 'twould have angered any heart alive  
To hear the men deny't. So that I say  
He has borne\* all things well; and I do think (15) \*carried off  
That, had he Duncan's sons under his key  
(As, an't\* please heaven, he shall not), they should find \*if it  
What "twere to kill a father. So should Fleance.

— William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

## Discuss:

1. The speaker in this passage is a lord in Macbeth's court. His attitude is critical of Macbeth, but his tone is not critical, angry, or vengeful. How would you characterize the tone of this passage? Defend your views.
2. Shakespeare uses the simple image of a man walking in lines 3 and 5. How does this image contribute to the tone of the passage?

## Apply:

Write a paragraph which, in a direct and angry manner, states that Macbeth is a tyrant who killed Duncan and Banquo to gain power. Read your paragraph to the class and discuss the effect this change in tone has on a reader.

# Tone

## Consider:

Shug come over and she and Sofia hug.

Shug say, Girl, you look like a good time, you do.

That when I notice that Shug talk and act sometimes like a man. Men say stuff like that to women, Girl, you look like a good time. Women always talk bout hair and health. How many babies living or dead, or got teef. Not bout how some woman they hugging on look like a good time.

— Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*

## Discuss:

1. What is the tone of this passage: what attitude toward Shug, toward men, and toward women underlies the passage?
2. Walker repeats the phrase, *look like a good time*, three times in the passage. How does this use of repetition help create the tone of the passage?

## Apply:

Write a short paragraph about someone you know which, through the use of repetition, expresses a tone of admiration. Share your paragraph with a partner.