**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.

*Lesson 1: Tone* / 91

**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 pres- ently 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.

92 / *Lesson 2: Tone*

**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.

*Lesson 3: Tone* / 93

**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.

94 / *Lesson 4: Tone*

**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.

*Lesson 5: Tone* / 95

**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.

96 / *Lesson 6: Tone*

**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.

*Lesson 7: Tone* / 97

**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.

98 / *Lesson 8: Tone*