

Personal Style and Tone

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn more about style in writing by exploring its connection to tone, as well as the unique choices that writers can make to develop their personal style. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Tone and Style
2. Personal Style
3. Personal Style and Tone in Context

1. Tone and Style

Recall that **tone** is the writer's attitude toward the subject, as conveyed through a piece of writing. Most of the time, when tone is referenced, it means the tone of a piece of writing, since one writer can make use of many different tones to suit different purposes. Just like word choice, tone impacts style because it affects how writers communicate their ideas to their readers.



THINK ABOUT IT

Consider how one reader might find a text's tone to be overly hostile, while another, due to differing perspectives, might not. This is why it's so important to remember your audience when determining your tone.

Consider this paragraph taken from a movie review. Judging from this short excerpt, what would you say the tone of this piece is? As you read the paragraph, keep an eye out for any hints about the writer's mood or attitude.

I don't know why we keep paying money to see sequels, but we do. Case in point: Last weekend I paid \$14 to see 300: Rise of an Empire. I had no excuse. I didn't really like the first film much, I've hated every 3D movie I've ever seen, and I am generally skeptical about moviemakers' motives when it comes to sequels. But since I was with friends I don't get to see often, I kind of just went with it.

So, what did you think? It's rather personal, and even a little abrupt. While not exactly hostile, it does provide the sense that it might become that way momentarily, doesn't it? It's certainly not trying to maintain an objective stance.

Next, look at the following paragraph. The tone should stand out as different from that of the last paragraph:

Because of technological and social growth, the relationship between the public and its information is changing. The way people receive their news has never before undergone such a drastic shift as we have been seeing over the past 10 years or so, and the only thing experts seem to agree on is that the change isn't stopping. The future will be different, and mainstream journalism as a whole cannot, as it has traditionally trained itself to do, continue to sit idly by observing and discussing the trend as if it itself were not a central part of the change.

As you can see, this came from a more academic text, and like most academic writing, it's using a much more serious, formal tone. It's also more objective and thoughtful. You wouldn't imagine the writer of this text ending the paragraph with “I kind of just went with it,” like the writer of the last excerpt.



One common sign of a formal, academic tone is that there are no personal references, such as “I” or “you.” These are just two examples of different tones that writers can take. They are by no means the limit to the range you'll likely see when reading or even writing.



Tone

A writer's attitude toward a subject, as conveyed through a piece of writing.

2. Personal Style

Even though there's a huge range of tones that writers can adopt during a particular writing project, in general, most experienced writers will stick to one or two stances. This, combined with other habitual techniques and preferences, contributes to what is called the writer's **personal style**, or voice. This is the unique style for a particular writer; it's that combination of traits that makes you recognize your favorite writer's work, even if all you see is a little passage.

Some writers are capable of varying their personal styles, particularly writers that work with different genres, such as fiction and essays. Even so, once writers develop—over years of practice—a style that they like, they tend to stick with it, though of course their style will continue to change and mature as they themselves do.

As an example of personal style, read this paragraph taken from an essay called “The Crack-Up” by F. Scott Fitzgerald:

...Life, 10 years ago, was largely a personal matter. I must hold in balance the sense of the futility of effort and the sense of the necessity to struggle; the conviction of the inevitability of failure and still the determination to “succeed”—and, more than these, the contradiction between the dead hand of the past and the high intentions of the future. If I could do this through the common ills—domestic, professional and personal—then the ego would continue as an arrow shot from nothingness to nothingness with such force that only gravity would bring it to earth at last.

Fitzgerald is demonstrating his own personal writing style, or voice, in a variety of ways here. The first of which is his usage of dashes as punctuation. Notice that he has several dashes in his sentences. He's doing that on purpose to communicate a specific idea or tone in his personal style.

We also see some very lengthy sentences. That's also part of his personal style. He uses elaborate, complex, sentences because his ideas in general are also complex. When reading his work, we get some sense of how his thoughts were being processed in his own head.

At the end of the passage, he refers to “an arrow shot from nothingness to nothingness with such force that only gravity would bring it to earth at last.” That's a rather poetic statement. When we combine the poetic nature, punctuation, lengthy sentences, and complexity of the ideas he's expressing, we start to get a better idea of Fitzgerald's personal style.

As a contrast, consider this excerpt from a short story called “Spunk” by Zora Neale Hurston:

...They had arrived at the house. Lena's lamentations were deep and loud. She had filled the room with magnolia blossoms that gave off a heavy sweet odor. The keepers of the wake tipped about whispering in frightened tones. Everyone in the village was there, even old Jeff Kanty, Joe's father, who a few hours before would have been afraid to come within ten feet of him, stood leering triumphantly down upon the fallen giant as if his fingers had been the teeth of steel that laid him low.

We can see that Hurston is explaining her ideas in a very straightforward way, rather than making them more complex like Fitzgerald did. Still, she's using word choice to communicate her personal style. She describes magnolia blossoms with a “heavy sweet odor,” she uses action words such as “whispering,” and she describes someone who “stood leering triumphantly.” This vivid imagery is part of her voice.



TERM TO KNOW

Personal Style

The unique style of a particular writer.

3. Personal Style and Tone in Context

A main takeaway from this lesson is that all forms of writing, no matter how specific and regulated the genre might seem, have room for writers to express their personal style. Writers have the freedom to make their writing their own, but it's still important to be mindful of the genre, audience, and purpose for which one writes.

Let's look at three short passages written in the same genre and for the same purpose. All three attempt to make the same claim but with a different style. Here's the first paragraph:

Society, as a whole, may suffer the consequences of a decrease in manners. Americans perceive that manners have gotten worse in recent years. A survey conducted by Good Housekeeping magazine demonstrates that 79% of people are ruder to each other now than they were just 10 years ago. An additional 42% of respondents agree that they encounter rude behavior on a daily basis (Good Housekeeping, 2002). This study is more than 12 years old, which means that the problem has likely worsened since the time these results were collected. With at least 42% of Americans experiencing rudeness on a daily basis, the consequences of this behavior are plaguing society.

The personal style in this first example is rather formal. The writer is using a variety of sentence structures and has avoided using informal terms or words. Instead, she uses more formal phrases, such as “suffer the consequences,” “respondents agree,” and “plaguing society.” This is all part of the personal style of this writer.

Next, consider this paragraph, which makes the same argument. Look for stylistic and tonal differences:

Collectively, we are all experiencing the effects of a lack of manners. Americans think that rudeness is a bigger problem now than it has been in the past. Most people (79%) think that Americans have gotten ruder. Even worse yet, 42% of people say that they see rude behavior everyday (Good Housekeeping, 2002). If that many people are being affected by rudeness, lack of manners is clearly a big problem. Society needs to place more emphasis on improving manners.

This example is a little less formal than the first example we just looked at. The author is using the word “we” to communicate to the audience, and the sentences are a little less complex and have more casual phrasing, such as “most people think that” and “people say.” You may recall that in our first example, the author wrote, “respondents agree.” If we compare the phrase “respondents agree” to the phrase “people say,” we can see that they are stylistically different even though they're communicating almost the same idea.

Finally, consider this version of the argument:

People are so rude lately! It's not just my opinion; it's a fact. A magazine did a survey and found out that most people (79%) think that people have gotten ruder lately. The survey also found out that 42% of people see rude behavior every single day (Good Housekeeping, 2002). It's really unfair for us to have to live in a society where almost half of us are dealing with rude people every day. That adds unneeded stress to our lives, and our society should focus on improving manners so that we live in a happier place.

This example is written in a very informal personal style. It almost sounds as though someone is just having a conversation with us about this topic. The author uses a lot of commentary to express her ideas by stating, “people are so rude,” “it’s not just my opinion,” “it’s really unfair,” and “so that we live in a happier place.” Even though this example is on the same topic as the other paragraphs, the personal style is impacting the way that this writing sounds, and that’s partially based on the tone the author has chosen for the writing.

As you can see from our three examples, different tones can produce vastly different texts, not just within the same genre, but within the same topic and purpose.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the connection between **tone and style**. Tone is a writer’s attitude toward a subject, so it can tell us a lot about a writer’s thoughts and feelings toward what is being written about. Tone can also be part of a writer’s **personal style**, which is a writing style unique to a specific writer. You looked at several examples of **personal style and tone in context** to see how tone and style can vary drastically across different texts that share a subject matter and purpose.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: THIS TUTORIAL WAS AUTHORED BY SOPHIA LEARNING. PLEASE SEE OUR [TERMS OF USE](#).



TERMS TO KNOW

Personal Style

The unique style of a particular writer.

Tone

A writer’s attitude toward a subject, as conveyed through a piece of writing.