

Tone and Personal Style

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of tone and personal style, as well as how they're impacted by context.

Our discussion breaks down as follows:

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

1. Tone and Style

Many writers and compositionists frequently use the word tone, though in fact, it's a hard term to define. For the purposes of this lesson, think of **tone** as the writer's attitude toward the subject as it's 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.



TERM TO KNOW

Tone

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

Some of the most common tones a text can take are earnest, hostile, pensive, detached, and more. Essentially, these are just descriptors. Just as readers vary, so, too, will the perceived tones of a text.



EXAMPLE For example, one reader might consider a text tone to be overly hostile, while another, due to different perspectives, will not.

Consider this paragraph taken from a movie review. What would you say was the tone of this piece judging from this single paragraph? As you read the paragraph, keep an eye out for any signals of 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 am generally skeptical about movie-makers' motives when it comes to sequels. But since I was with friends I don't get to see often and a little drunk, 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 -- and woe be the reader who enjoyed the movie!

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

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 sedate, formal tone. It's also more objective, and more pensive and thoughtful. You wouldn't imagine the writer of this text ending the paragraph with, "I kind of just went with it," like the last excerpt.



One common signal for this kind of tone is that there are no personal references such as "I" or "you."

Lastly, consider this paragraph taken from another less academic text:

Medical insurance is a crock. So are the credit card laws. That's why I try to avoid both. No matter what, they are a business and they need to make money -- if they didn't, they wouldn't exist. Credit cards are a captive market. You need credit cards to rent a car, hotel room, buy a house, get a loan, rent movies, etc. But we don't do anything about it. This is why capitalism works -- as long as there's someone else to spit on, we don't mind the rain. Sometimes it's easier to sink than to make waves.

It shouldn't be a stretch to say that this text has a much more pessimist tone than either of the previous ones. Even though it shares a similar level of formality with the first, the tone here is different -- darker, angrier, and quicker to jump to conclusions and make judgments. It's a tone that might be somewhat off-putting to some readers.



Keep in mind that these are just three 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.

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 the other habitual techniques and preferences, contributes to what is called the writer's **personal style**. 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.



TERM TO KNOW

Personal Style

The unique style for a particular writer.

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 do.

As an example of personal style, read this paragraph taken from an essay by Mark Twain:

"I do not claim that I can tell a story as it ought to be told. I only claim to know how a story ought to be told, for I have been almost daily in the company of the most expert storytellers for many years. There are several kinds of stories, but only one difficult kind -- the humorous. I will talk mainly about that one ... The humorous story depends for its effects upon the manner of the telling; the comic story and the witty story upon the matter. The humorous story may be spun out to great length, and may wander around as much as it pleases, and arrive nowhere in particular; but the comic and witty stories must be brief and end with a point. The humorous story bubbles gently along, the others burst."

It's fair to say that this passage is pretty indicative of Mark Twain's style. He's known for his wit and for making the kind of self-deprecating gestures he starts this paragraph with. He's also famous for using metaphors, like the humorous story bubbling gently along. There's a kind of intellectualism that he uses here, cut by the conversational, "everyday guy" tone that many associate with Twain's writing, nonfiction and fiction alike.

As a contrast, consider this excerpt from Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*:

"A prince ought to have no other aim or thought, nor select anything else for his study, than war and its rules and discipline; for this is the sole art that belongs to him who rules, and it is of such force that it not only upholds those who are born princes, but it often enables men to rise from a private station to that rank ... Because there is nothing proportionate between the armed and the unarmed; and it is not reasonable that he who is armed should yield obedience willingly to him who is unarmed, or that the unarmed man should be secure among armed servants. Because, there being in the one disdain and in the other suspicion, it is not possible for them to work well together."

Here, you can see a very different style. Machiavelli is famous for making the kind of broad, sweeping, authoritative statements he's making here. The part about how a prince ought to have no thought but for fighting and war definitely dates this text, in terms of content, but it also expresses his drier, more purely informative and authoritative style. No metaphors here!

3. Personal Style 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, and indeed, they should do that, as nothing is more boring to read than text written by a writer trying to hide, stifle, or smother his or her style. Still, it's important to be mindful of the genre, audience, and purpose for or to which one writes, in order to do so as effectively as possible.

Now, 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 each with a different style. Here's the first paragraph:

I am personally opposed to the death penalty because I don't see what's fair about a government telling people not to kill people, then doing it itself. I guess that could be why I'm against war, too, but still, to focus on the death penalty, it doesn't make much sense, since no murders are being prevented by it. All that's being done is a lot of money is spent on inmates who, in addition to being imprisoned for a while, get murdered, too.

In this version, the tone is fairly familiar but leans toward an academic style, though the diction and syntax are a bit informal. It's something you could expect to see in an introductory composition class.

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

The death penalty is an archaic notion, a relic of a bygone era in which fear of the hangman's noose was used to keep troublemakers in line. Thankfully, our society has progressed sufficiently enough that we no longer require the threat of death to prevent crime. What we need is to promote trust in the government, and the best way to go about that is removing the last ties to a time when the people feared their government because of its ability to kill. The death penalty will be a good start.

This one was a bit different, don't you think? However, besides the words used and the vastly different attitude that this version presents, what's changed? Not much. The argument is the same, and it even uses much the same line of reasoning -- that a government shouldn't ask citizens not to kill and then kill.

Here is the last version of the argument to review:

Why would you possibly support a government that blatantly violates its own laws? The hypocrites in charge aren't even satisfied with stealing while telling us not to steal (but we all knew they do that). They also tell us not to kill, but what do they do? They kill, and not just those women and children that they call "enemy combatants," either. No, an angry or desperate or sick or even handicapped guy who kills someone, may find himself -- it's usually a he, after all -- the victim of murder. Murder by the government that forbids it, that is.

This time, the total difference should have been obvious, as this hypothetical writer's attitude is much more aggressive than either of the previous two. The tone, the voice, the style of writing, all point toward a much

more emotionally-engaged writer. As you can likely tell, though, there's a reason that those in composition generally advise against writing that comes from the gut like this. After all, what are the chances that this kind of argument would ever convince anyone who is not *already* on the writer's side?



BIG IDEA

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



SUMMARY

Today we learned about tone and style, and how a writer's personal style impacts the text he or she creates. We also learned how different tones can change even the same argumentative stance, for better or worse.

Source: Adapted from Sophia Instructor Gavin McCall



TERMS TO KNOW

Personal Style

The unique style for a particular writer.

Tone

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