Voice: Diction, Syntax, Structure, Style, Tone, & Mood

Note: Some of the materials used are from Nancy Dean's *Voice Lessons*, Gary Provost's *100 Ways to Improve Your Writing*, and exercises found on the Montrose High School website (mhs.mcsd.org) and the Wheaton College Writing Center website (wheaton.edu).

Directions: As you read this document and consider (and answer) the questions in it, think about how writers create meaning and how you, as a writer, try to communicate and create meaning effectively. There is no simple (or complex, for that matter) formula for effective writing, but understanding what voice is, how it works, and how to use the elements of voice (diction, syntax, structure, style, tone, and mood) can help you become better at communicating and creating meaning effectively. As you begin to understand the different elements of voice, use the "How To" and "Tips" suggestions to improve your writing. The best way to improve your writing it to try different ways of writing. See for yourself.

Terms & Definitions

DICTION: The term "diction" refers to *the choice of words* a writer uses.

SYNTAX: The term "syntax" refers to *the arrangement of words and punctuation* in a piece or unit (usually a sentence) of writing.

STRUCTURE: The term "structure" refers to *the arrangement of groups of sentences, paragraphs, and ideas* in a piece of writing.

TONE: The term "tone" refers to *the attitude a writer has toward the subject of their (his/her) writing and/or their audience*.

MOOD: The term "mood" refers to *how the reader is made to feel (about a subject) by the writer.*

STYLE: The term "style" refers to *the choices of syntax and structure* to create a specific *form* of writing that creates, develops, or sustains the tone (attitude) and/or mood (feeling) of a piece of writing.

VOICE: Voice is choice. The term "voice" refers *to the choices of diction, syntax, structure, and style* that create the distinct *tone* and/or mood of a piece of writing and the unique voice a reader "hears" when reading that piece. When discussing *style*, in most cases you are discussing the choices of *diction*, *syntax*, and *structure*. These things make up the "style" of a writer. When discussing *tone* and *mood*, most often you are discussing how stylistic choices (choices about *diction*, *syntax*, and *structure*) create a particular "tone" (attitude) and "mood" (feeling) of a piece of writing. *Voice* is the combination of all of the elements of *style* and *tone* to create the "voice" (the personality) of a writer. Voice is choice: the choices a writer makes that create the voice readers hears when they read.

DICTION

DICTION: The term "diction" refers to *the choice of words* a writer uses.

Words reflect and determine the level of formality of a written work, and they inform and influence a reader's understandings, perceptions, and feelings about the topic(s)/subject(s) explored in a written work.

Effective writing is created by thoughtful word choice: choosing words for specificity, precision, and effect.
Effective writers use words that invoke specific ideas and evoke feelings.
> A coat isn't *torn*; it is *tattered*.
> The vigilante does not *want* revenge; she is *thirsty* for revenge.
> A door does not *shut*; it *slams*.
> The fan wasn't *enthusiastic*; he was *maniacal*.

Diction depends on topic, purpose, and occasion. The subject often determines the sophistication of diction. As with clothes, level of formality influences appropriate choices.
The writer's purpose (to convince, entertain, amuse, inform, plead, etc.) determines their (his, her, their) diction. Words should be chosen to impart a particular effect on a reader and to reflect and sustain a writer's purpose.
> *Formal academic language* is largely reserved for scholarly writing.
> *Formal language* is used in most other works of prose (essays, articles, etc.).
> *Informal language*, *colloquial diction*, and *slang* are typically used to create a mood or capture a particular historic or regional dialect.

Writers must understand both connotation (a meaning suggested by a word) and denotation (a word's literal meaning).
When a writer describes a person or character as *slender*, the word evokes a feeling different from describing a person or character *gaunt*. A word's power to produce a strong reaction in the reader lies mainly in its connotative meaning.

Diction can impart freshness and originality to writing.
Using words in surprising or unusual ways make readers rethink assumptions and pre existing understandings and beliefs so that they reexamine meanings. Diction, the foundation of voice, shapes a reader's thinking while guiding reader insight into a writer's idiosyncratic expression of thought: the writer's voice.

Exercise: Consider the differences in connotation among the members of each of the following groups of words. Place a positive ("+") sign or a negative ("-") sign above or next to each word signifying that the word has either positive or negative connotations.

House, abode, dwelling, domicile, mansion, residence, habitat, home

Bizarre, weird, singular, outlandish, off the wall, curious, odd, unusual, extraordinary, remarkable, strange, eerie, unique

Laugh, giggle, chuckle, guffaw, roar, snicker, cackle

Honest, straight, on the level, guileless, unaffected, artless, genuine, candid, truthful, sincere

Stubborn, pig-headed, obdurate, adamant, stiff-necked, rigid, obstinate, dogged, steadfast

Sullen, taciturn, glum, withdrawn, down, silent, reticent, wordless, quiet

Concise, pointed, laconic, terse, bare bones, economical, pithy, compressed, brief, boiled down

Looking at the list above with your positive and negative signs, find two words that you marked either as positive or negative and consider how they may change from a positive to a negative or a negative to a positive depending on the context in which they are used and the personality and values of a reader.

Often two words roughly "mean" the same thing, except that one has an unfavorable, the other a favorable, connotation.
You may like to think of yourself as an *idealist*, people who do not sympathize with your attitudes might call you a *naive*.

For the following pairs of terms, consider explanations of why you might like to be described by one term but not by another:

slender/skinny	hypocritical/diplomatic
high-strung/stressed	hard worker/workaholic
trusting/gullible	assertive/pushy
firm/stubborn	hysterical/passionate
reckless/adventurous	unique/weird
flexible/wishy-washy	plodding/methodical
relaxed/flakey	scholar/bookworm

Exercise: Select at least two of the pairs of terms above and use them to describe a person, place, or thing. Use diction that fits the connotation of each term.

Examples:

The model looked *slender* in his black leather pants; the prisoner of war was *skinny* after being held captive for years.

Jenny was *assertive* in advocating to her boss that she deserved a raise; Bob was *pushy* and alienated himself by bullying the few friends he had.

Passage:

"Most men wear their belts low down here, there being so many outstanding bellies, some big enough to have names of their own be formally introduced. Those men don't suck them in or hide them in loose shirts; they let them hang free, they pat them, they stroke them as they stand around and talk."

Garrison Keillor, "Home"

Consider:

1) What is the usual meaning of "outstanding"? What is its meaning here? What does this pun reveal about the attitude of the author toward his subject?

2) Read the second sentence again. How would the level of formality change if we changed "suck" to "pull" and "let them hang free" to "accept them"?

HOW TO: IMPROVING YOUR DICTION

Perhaps the quickest and easiest way to improve your diction (and your writing in general) is to find "to be" verbs (am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been) and see if you can replace them with more descriptive verbs. Another way is to find any filler words and cliches (words that don't add anything to your writing, such as "very," "really," "great," "good," "bad," "in the end," etc.) and replace them with more expressive and detailed words.

TIPS:

Be careful: If you don't know what a word means, don't use it. This doesn't mean you should search for new words and use tools such as a thesaurus--you should. But once you've found a word that you think "works" or "sounds right" (sometimes we choose one word over another because of how it sounds, and that's ok), get to know that word. Look at all of its definitions and meanings; search the word as you might use it (with another word or two) and see how other writers use it and see if it still "sounds right."

SYNTAX

SYNTAX: The term "syntax" refers to *the arrangement of words and punctuation* in a piece or unit (usually a sentence) of writing. Consider the different meanings and feelings communicated in these two sentences:

"I am sorry."

"Am I sorry?"

Or these sentences:

"You'll fail this class if you don't bring your iPad to every class."

"If you do not bring your iPad to every class, you will fail this class."

Passage:

"The impact of poetry is so hard and direct that for the moment there is no other sensation except that of the poem itself. What profound depths we visit then—how sudden and complete is our immersion! There is nothing here to catch hold of; nothing to stay us in our flight…The poet is always our contemporary. Our being for the moment is centered and constricted, as in any violent shock of personal emotion."

Virginia Woolf, "How Should One Read a Book?"

Consider:

1) Woolf uses a variety of punctuation and sentence types in this selection. Identify one of them and explain its effect.

2) How is the meaning of the passage reinforced and clarified by punctuation and sentence length?

HOW TO: PLAYING WITH SYNTAX

Try things: after writing something, try changing some punctuation marks and/or the placement of words. See if these different versions of your sentences communicate meaning in a more accurate or engaging way.

TIPS:

Be careful. Especially when writing for academic purposes, don't overuse punctuation marks that are less frequently used, such as semicolons, dashes, exclamation points, and question marks. This is a good rule in general. You don't want your punctuation and/or your syntax to distract or annoy your readers.

STRUCTURE

STRUCTURE: The term "structure" refers to *the arrangement of groups of sentences, paragraphs, and ideas* in a piece of writing.

Passage:

"This sentence has five words. Here are five more words. Five word sentences are fine. But several together become monotonous. Listen to what is happening. The writing is getting boring. The sound of it drones. It's like a stuck record. The ear demands some variety. Now listen. I vary the sentence length, and I create music. Music. The writing sings. It has a pleasant rhythm, a lilt, a harmony. I use short sentences. And I use sentences of medium length. And sometimes, when I am certain the reader is rested, I will engage him with a sentence of considerable length, a sentence that burns with energy and builds with all the impetus of a crescendo, the roll of the drums, the crash of the cymbals–sounds that say listen to this, it is important."

Gary Provost, *100 Ways to Improve Your Writing*

Exercise:

1) In one sentence, write the main idea of the paragraph.

2) How does the arrangement (or organization) of ideas work in this passage?

3) Try to communicate the main idea of the quotation above in a different way. (Not necessarily in words.)

HOW TO: STRATEGIC STRUCTURE

You should have a strategy for your structure. What ideas and information do you need to present at the beginning, middle, and end? What effect will it have on your reader if you withhold ideas or information? Where might you place a counter argument? One means of keeping your reader's attention is by making your writing structure engaging. Your structure can keep your reader engaged and it can also emphasize one sentence more than others. What might the effect of a short sentence follow several long sentences? As with any writing choice you make, you should know why you are making that choice and how it might affect your reader.

TIPS:

Similar to working with syntax, try different structures to see what works best. Make sure you vary sentence structure and lengths, but don't alternate long and short sentences. Instead, think of ways the structure of a sentence or a paragraph might *move* of affect readers.

TONE

TONE: The term "tone" refers to *the attitude a writer has toward the subject of their (his/her) writing and/or their audience*. If voice is a writer's "personality," tone is that writer's attitude.

Passage:

"Now, practically even better news than that of short assignments is the idea of shitty first drafts. All good writers write them. This is how they end up with good second drafts and terrific third drafts. People tend to look at successful writers who are getting their books published and maybe even doing well financially, and think that they sit down at their desks every morning feeling like a million dollars, feeling great about who they are and how much talent they have and what a great story they have to tell; that they take in a few deep breaths, push back their sleeves, roll their necks a few times to get all the cricks out, and dive in, typing fully formed passages as fast as a court reporter. But this is just the fantasy of the uninitiated."

Anne Lamott, "Shitty First Drafts"

Consider:

1) How would you describe the tone of this piece?

2) How does Lamott create and develop this tone? What specific things in the piece create the tone? (How do the different elements of voice, such as diction and structure, create and develop this tone?)

HOW TO: REVEALING TONE

Similar to style (and voice), tone should simply be there: an effective creation and development of tone may be deliberate, but it should feel natural. Diction is the basic element of all writing, and it is basis of tone. When choosing the words, you should consider two things: subject and audience. How you feel about the subject you are writing about will consciously (and subconsciously) determine much of the language you will use, but it is also important to consider who your audience is: Will they respond to the language you use or will it offend them? Will you use formal language, or would informal language be more engaging and still be able to

address your topic appropriately? Finally, consider purpose: Is your aim to calm your audience or provoke them? Do you want to persuade or antagonize? (Of course there are many more purposes than the binary examples I offer here.)

TIPS:
Think about what Lamott does here: she uses an extremely informal tone to explore a subject, writing, that is most often discussed using formal language. One reason she is able to pull this off is because she is a respected author. This doesn't mean that a less venerated writer or student couldn't use the same language to achieve this effect, but if you choose to use informal language be sure that "works" and that it isn't done for shock value and that it would not offend a reasonable audience.

MOOD

MOOD: The term "mood" refers to *how the reader is made to feel (about a subject) by the writer.* Mood and tone are closely related. The mood (a reader's experience) is often a response to a writer's tone.

Passage:

> "The former tenant of our house, a priest, had died in the back drawing-room. Air, musty from having been long enclosed, hung in all the rooms, and the waste room behind the kitchen was littered with old useless papers. Among these I found a few paper-covered books, the pages of which were curled and damp: *The Abbot*, by Walter Scott, *The Devout Communicant*, and *The Memoirs of Vidocq*. I liked the last best because its leaves were yellow. The wild garden behind the house contained a central apple-tree and a few straggling bushes, under one of which I found the late tenant's rusty bicycle-pump. He had been a very charitable priest; in his will he had left all his money to institutions and the furniture of his house to his sister."
>
> James Joyce, "Araby"

Consider:

1) What words would you use to describe the mood of this piece?

2) How does Joyce create and develop this mood? What specific things in the piece create the mood? How do the different elements of voice, such as diction and structure, create and develop this mood?

HOW TO: SETTING THE MOOD

As is the case with tone, mood is, in large part, created by a combination of diction and style. Whereas tone may depend more on the use of punctuation and syntax, mood relies heavily on diction. But don't forget how elements such as structure can affect a reader's experience. A series of long sentences can create a feeling of exhaustion. Short sentences can create pace. Deliberate uses of long and short sentences can emphasize or deemphasize words and phrases.

TIPS:

Pay attention to both the denotative (dictionary) meaning of words AND their connotative (what ideas/emotions we associate with words) when you write. Beyond that, consider the audience for whom you are writing: are there cultural norms and/or shared historical experiences that may create connotative meanings?

STYLE

STYLE: The term "style" refers to *the choices of diction, syntax, and structure* to create a specific *form* of writing that creates, develops, or sustains the tone (attitude) and/or mood (feeling) of a piece of writing.

Passage:

"They carried USO stationary and pencils and pens. They carried Sterno, safety pins, trip flares, signal flares, spools of wire, razor blades, chewing tobacco, liberated joss sticks and statuettes of the smiling Buddha, candles, grease pencils, The Stars and Stripes, fingernail clippers, Psy Ops leaflets, bush hats, bolos, and much more. Twice a week, when the resupply choppers came in, they carried hot chow in green marmite cans and large canvas bags filled with iced beer and soda pop. They carried plastic water containers, each with a 2-gallon capacity. Mitchell Sanders carried a set of starched tiger fatigues for special occasions. Henry Dobbins carried Black Flag insecticide. Dave Jensen carried empty sandbags that could be filled at night for added protection. Lee Strunk carried tanning lotion. Some things they carried in common. Taking turns, they carried the big PRC-77 scrambler radio, which weighed 30 pounds with its battery. They shared the weight of memory. They took up what others could no longer bear. Often, they carried each other, the wounded or weak. They carried infections. They carried chess sets, basketballs, Vietnamese-English dictionaries, insignia of rank, Bronze Stars and Purple Hearts, plastic cards imprinted with the Code of Conduct. They carried diseases, among them malaria and dysentery. They carried lice and ringworm and leeches and paddy algae and various rots and molds. They carried the land itself—Vietnam, the place, the soil—a powdery orange-red dust that covered their boots and fatigues and faces. They carried the sky. The whole atmosphere, they carried it, the humidity, the monsoons, the stink of fungus and decay, all of it, they carried gravity. They moved like mules. By daylight they took sniper fire, at night they were mortared, but it was not battle, it was just the endless march, village to village, without purpose, nothing won or lost. They marched for the sake of the march. They plodded along slowly, dumbly, leaning forward against the heat, unthinking, all blood and bone, simple grunts, soldiering with their legs, toiling up the hills and down into the paddies and across the rivers and up again and down, just humping, one step and then the next and then another, but no volition, no will, because it was automatic, it was anatomy, and the war was entirely a matter of posture and carriage, the hump was everything, a kind of inertia, a kind of emptiness, a dullness of desire and intellect and conscience and hope and human sensibility. Their principles were in their feet. Their calculations were biological. They had no sense of strategy or mission. They searched the villages without knowing what to look for, not caring, kicking over jars of rice, frisking children and old men, blowing tunnels, sometimes setting fires and sometimes not, then forming up and moving on to the next village, then other villages, where it would always be the same. They carried their own lives."

Tim O'Brien, "The Things They Carried"

Consider:

1) Look at O'Brien's diction. Identify three words that create specific meaning in the passage.

2) Identify two places where O'Brien' syntax (the arrangement of words and punctuation) is important. What are the punctuation marks doing?

3) How do O'Brien's syntax and structure create a style that captures, expresses, and communicates the emotions, ideas, and meanings he wants his reader to understand?

HOW TO: SUBLIMINAL STYLE

Style, like tone and voice, has a subliminal aspect to it. The style of your writing will be understood (and, sometimes, felt) by your readers often without their knowing it. You want the style of your writing to move your reader towards a better understanding of what you are trying to communicate. At times, this may mean using elevated diction (sophisticated word choice) and long paragraphs, and at other times you may find using short sentences and short paragraphs communicates more effectively. The important thing is to consider, and try, different styles of writing.

TIPS:

Your style should not appear forced. In the same way that your use of punctuation shouldn't distract a reader, neither should your style. You may choose, for creative writing purposes, to write in a convoluted or deliberately complex style, but when writing more formal pieces (especially for academic purposes) your writing should be clear and direct, first and foremost.

VOICE

VOICE: The term "voice" refers *to the choices of diction, syntax, structure, and style* that create the distinct *tone* and/or mood of a piece of writing and the unique voice a reader "hears" when reading that piece. When discussing *style*, in most cases you are discussing the choices of *diction*, *syntax*, and *structure*. These things make up the "style" of a writer. When discussing *tone* and *mood*, most often you are discussing how stylistic choices (choices about *diction*, *syntax*, and *structure*) create a particular "tone" (attitude) and "mood" (feeling) of a piece of writing. *Voice* is the combination of all of the elements of *style* and *tone* to create the "voice" (or personality) of a writer. Voice is choice: the choices a writer makes that create the voice readers hears when they read.

Try this:
The following paragraph has several inconsistencies in its voice. Rewrite the paragraph, correcting the inconsistencies so that it has a unified, distinct voice.

> "When writing a term paper, the one thing you've got to remember is to use authoritative sources. These are vital if the paper is to persuade the intended audience. Reliable sources can be found everywhere from the library down the street to the internet. Internet sources must be used cautiously, since some sites are just run by wackos; nonetheless, some sites do provide quality information. Once the writer has found her sources, she must remember to cite them properly in order to avoid plagiarism. Plagiarism is bad. Citation styles vary across the disciplines, but they can usually be figured out with a proper style manual."