

The Elements of Voice

There are five elements of voice: diction, detail, imagery, syntax, tone.

DICTION

Diction is an author's choice of words; it is the foundation of voice and contributes to all of its elements.

When reading serious literature – NEVER skip words you don't know!

Effective voice = words that are clear, concrete, exact. Consider the connotation for the following pairs:

A *torn* coat vs. A *tattered* coat
To *want* revenge vs. To *thirst* for revenge

Diction depends on topic, purpose and occasion:

- *Topic* = specificity and sophistication
Example – writing about technology includes specialized language (e-mail, server, interface, wiki)
- *Purpose* = words are chosen to impart a particular effect
Example – Purpose to inform = straightforward diction
Purpose to entertain = ironic, playful, unexpected
- *Occasion* = level of formality
Formal – scholarly writing, serious prose, poetry
Informal – expository essays, newspaper articles, fiction
Colloquial – “slang” – to create a mood or capture a historic or regional dialect.
- *Connotation* – meaning suggested by associations of the word
- *Denotation* – literal meaning of a word

Art is the **antidote** that can call us back from the edge of numbness, restoring the ability to feel for another.

— Barbara Kingsolver, *High Tide in Tucson*

1. By using the word *antidote*, what does the author imply about the inability to feel for another?
2. If we changed the word *antidote* to *gift*, what effect would it have on the meaning of the sentence?

DETAIL

Detail includes facts, observations, reasons, examples and incidents used to develop a subject and impart voice

- Detail refers to fewer things than general descriptions, creating a precise mental picture.
- Detail brings life and color to description.
- Detail focuses the reader's attention.
- Detail brings the reader into the scene.

Because use of detail encourages readers to participate in the text, use of detail influences reader's views of the topic, the settings, the narrator, and the author.

Detail shapes reader attitude by focusing attention

- The writer can't describe everything, so what the writer chooses to describe shows its importance
- The more specific the detail, the greater the focus on the object described.

Detail turns abstraction into concrete, particular, and unmistakable

Details connect abstractions to the reader's lives, to specifics they can imagine, have participated in, and understand vicariously.

When the reader is can empathize or understand through similar experiences, your writing becomes more effective.

Detail can also state by understatement.

- The absence of specific details that are expected leads the reader to wonder why?
- Again, focusing attention on the subject.
- The absence of specific details, for example, may be in sharp contrast to the intensity of a character's pain. In this case, elaborate, descriptive detail could turn the pain into sentimentality.

I rounded the hut and saw a man's dead body sprawling in the mud. He was an Indian, a black Dravidian coolie almost naked, and he could not have been dead many minutes. The people said that the elephant had come suddenly upon him round the corner of the hut, caught him with its trunk, put its foot on his back and ground him into the earth. This was the rainy season and the ground was soft, and his face had scored a trench a foot deep and a couple of yards long. He was lying on his belly with arms crucified and head sharply twisted to one side. His face was coated with mud, the eyes wide open, the teeth bared and grinning with an expression of unendurable agony.

— George Orwell, "Shooting an Elephant"

1. What is the author's attitude toward the coolie's death? What details in the passage reveal this attitude?
2. Examine the last sentence of this paragraph. How would it have affected the overall impact had Orwell written, *his eyes wide open, his teeth bared and grinning*. . . ?

IMAGERY

Imagery is verbal representation of sensory experience.

Visual Imagery – Words that appeal to the sense of sight.

Auditory Imagery – Words that appeal to the sense of hearing.

Tactile Imagery – Words that appeal to the sense of touch.

Gustatory Imagery – Words that appeal to the sense of taste.

Olfactory Imagery – Words that appeal to the sense of smell.

Imagery depends on specificity of author's *diction* and choice of *details*.

Imagery contributes to voice, evoking a vivid experience, conveying specific emotions, suggesting a particular idea.

Imagery is not in itself figurative, but it can be.

Examples – “parched earth” can stand for a character’s despair
“bird in flight” metaphor for hope
“winding river” – long journey

A woman drew her long black hair out tight
And fiddled whisper music on those strings
And bats with baby faces in the violet light
Whistled, and beat their wings
And crawled head downward down a blackened wall
And upside down in air were towers
Tolling reminiscent bells, that kept the hours
And voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells.

— T. S. Eliot, “The Waste Land”

1. Paraphrase the image of the first two lines. What mood does the image create?
2. List the auditory images in these lines. How do these images help create the mood of the passage?

SYNTAX

Syntax is the relationship between and among words in a sentence, the way words are arranged within sentences.

Although every sentence must have a subject and a verb; word order can vary. How writers control and manipulate the sentence is a strong determiner of voice and imparts personality to the writing.

Syntax encompasses

- word order
- sentence length
- sentence focus
- punctuation

WORD ORDER:

Most English sentences follow a subject-verb-object/complement pattern. Deviating from the expected word order can serve to startle the reader and draw attention to the sentence. This, in turn, emphasizes the unusual sentence's message.

There are several ways to change normal word order:

Inverting subject and verb (Am I ever sorry!)

Placing a complement at the beginning of the sentence (Hungry, without a doubt, he is.)

Placing an object in front of a verb (Sarah I like – not Susan.).

Good writers shift between conformity and nonconformity, preventing reader complacency without using unusual sentence structure to the point of distraction.

SENTENCE LENGTH:

Writers vary sentence length to forestall boredom and control emphasis.

A short sentence following a much longer sentence shifts the reader's attention, which emphasizes the meaning and importance of the short sentence.

Many modern writers put key ideas in short sentences. However, this has not always been so. Sentence length contributes to variation and emphasis among sentences.

SENTENCE FOCUS:

Sentence focus deals with variation and emphasis within a sentence.

In the English sentence, main ideas are usually expressed in main-clause positions. However, main-clause placement often varies, and this placement determines the writer's focal point.

Sentence focus is generally achieved by syntactic tension and repetition.

Syntactic tension is the withholding of syntactic closure (completion of grammatical structure) until the end of the sentence.

Sentences that delay closure are called periodic sentences.

Periodic sentences carry high tension and interest: the reader must wait until the end of the sentence to understand the meaning.

For example, note that the main idea of the following sentence is completed at the end of the sentence: *As long as we ignore our children, refuse to dedicate the necessary time and money to their care, we will fail to solve the problem of school violence.*

In contrast, sentences that reach syntactical closure early (loose sentences) relieve tension and allow the reader to explore the rest of the sentence without urgency. Note the difference in tension when we change the sentence to a loose sentence: *We will fail to solve the problem of school violence as long as we ignore our children and refuse to dedicate the necessary time and money to their care.*

Repetition is another way writers achieve sentence focus.

Purposeful repetition of a word, phrase, or clause emphasizes the repeated structure and focuses the reader's attention on its meaning. Writers can also repeat parallel grammatical forms such as infinitives, gerunds, and prepositional phrases. This kind of repetition balances parallel ideas and gives them equal weight.

PUNCTUATION:

Punctuation is used to reinforce meaning, construct effect, and express the writer's voice.

Of particular interest in shaping voice are the semicolon, colon, and dash:

The *semicolon* gives equal weight to two or more independent clauses in a sentence, resulting in syntactical balance that reinforces parallel ideas and imparts equal importance to both (or all) of the clauses.

The *colon* directs reader attention to the words that follow.

It is also used between independent clauses if the second summarizes or explains the first.

A colon sets the expectation that important, closely related information will follow, and words after the colon are emphasized.

Three ways to signal a syntactic interruption:

The Comma: , _____, **Least intrusive.** May interrupt with relative clauses (who, whom, which, that) and Restrictive and Non-Restrictive Appositive Phrases.

Eg: The course, which can be deadly, is required of all graduate students.

Eg: *Middle Passage*, which won the American Book Award, was written by Charles Johnson.

Eg: *Middle Passage*, winner of the American Book Award, sold out at the store.

Look at the difference between these two sentences:

My brother Joseph went on his mission six months ago.

(Restrictive Appositive) One of multiple brothers. Joseph restricts "brothers."

My brother, Joseph, went on his mission six months ago.

(Non-Restrictive Appositive) Only one brother. The name is additional, non-essential information.

The Parentheses: (_____) **Moderately intrusive.** The information in parentheses is somewhat removed from the semantic load (meaning) of the sentence. It can provide additional information that is peripheral, contextual and somewhat removed from what is being discussed. It is also used when internal punctuation already exists.

Eg: *Glory* (a movie about the Civil War) provides material for serious discussion of both society and psychology.

Eg: Toni Morrison's eight novels (*The Bluest Eye, Sula, Tar Baby, Beloved, Jazz, Paradise, Love, A Mercy, and God Help the Child*) should be read in sequence.

The Dash: —this is an interruption with a dash— **Most intrusive.** Indicates that the material is far removed from the subject and meaning of the sentence. It can also indicate an abrupt and jarring interruption. Use sparingly and only with the correct intent.

Eg: The problem with the dash—as you may have noticed!—is that it discourages truly efficient writing. It also—and this might be its worst sin—disrupts the flow of a sentence. Don't you find it annoying—and you can tell me if you do, I won't be hurt—when a writer inserts a thought into the midst of another one that's not yet complete?"

Eg: Even the simplest tasks—washing, dressing, and going to work—were nearly impossible after I broke my leg.

Eg: Math, science, English, even P.E.—he hated all of them.

SENTENCE STRUCTURE:

Describe the sentence structure by considering the following:

1. Examine the sentence length. Are the sentences *telegraphic* (shorter than 5 words in length), *short* (approximately 5 words in length), *medium* (approximately 18 words in length), or *long and involved* (30 or more words in length)? Does the sentence length fit the subject matter? What variety of lengths is present? Why is the sentence length effective?
2. Examine sentence beginnings. Is there a good variety or does a patterning emerge?
3. Examine the arrangement of ideas in a sentence. Are they set out in a special way for a purpose?
4. Examine the arrangement of ideas in a paragraph. Is there evidence of any pattern or structure?
5. Examine the sentence patterns. Some elements to consider are listed below:
 - a. A *declarative (assertive) sentence* makes a statement: e.g., The king is sick.
 - b. An *imperative sentence* gives a command: e.g., Stand up.
 - c. An *interrogative sentence* asks a question: e.g., Is the king sick?
 - d. An *exclamatory sentence* makes an exclamation: e.g., The king is dead!
 - e. A *simple sentence* contains one subject and one verb: e.g., The singer bowed to her adoring audience.
 - f. A *compound sentence* contains two independent clauses joined by a coordinate conjunction (and, but, or) or by a semicolon: e.g., The singer bowed to the audience, but she sang no encores.
 - g. A *complex sentence* contains an independent clause and one or more subordinate clauses: e.g., You said that you would tell the truth.
 - h. A *compound-complex sentence* contains two or more principal clauses and one or more subordinate clauses: e.g., The singer bowed while the audience applauded, but she sang no encores.

- i. A *loose sentence* makes complete sense if brought to a close before the actual ending: e.g., We reached Edmonton/that morning/after a turbulent flight/and some exciting experiences.
- j. A *periodic sentence* makes sense only when the end of the sentence is reached: e.g., That morning, after a turbulent flight and some exciting experiences, we reached Edmonton.
- k. In a *balanced sentence*, the phrases or clauses balance each other by virtue of their likeness of structure, meaning, or length: e.g., He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters.
- l. *Natural order of a sentence* involves constructing a sentence so the subject comes before the predicate: e.g., Oranges grow in California.
- m. *Inverted order of a sentence (sentence inversion)* involves constructing a sentence so that the predicate comes before the subject: e.g., In California grow oranges. This is a device in which normal sentence patterns are reverse to create an emphatic or rhythmic effect.
- n. *Split order of a sentence* divides the predicate into two parts with the subject coming in the middle: e.g., In California oranges grow.
- o. *Juxtaposition* is a poetic and rhetorical device in which normally unassociated ideas, words, or phrases are placed next to one another creating an effect of surprise and wit: e.g., “The apparition of these faces in the crowd:/ Petals on a wet, black bough” (“In a Station of the Metro” by Ezra Pound)
- p. *Parallel structure (parallelism)* refers to a grammatical or structural similarity between sentences or parts of a sentence. It involves an arrangement of words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs so that elements of equal importance are equally developed and similarly phrased: e.g., He was walking, running, and jumping for joy.
- q. *Repetition* is a device in which words, sounds, and ideas are used more than once to enhance rhythm and create emphasis: e.g., “...government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth” (“Address at Gettysburg” by Abraham Lincoln)
- r. A *rhetorical question* is a question that expects no answer. It is used to draw attention to a point that is generally stronger than a direct statement: e.g., If Mr. Ferchoff is always fair, as you have said, why did he refuse to listen to Mrs. Baldwin’s arguments?

He slowly ventured into the pond. The bottom was deep, soft clay, he sank in, and the water clasped dead cold round his legs.

— D. H. Lawrence, “The Horse-Dealer’s Daughter”

1. What effect does sentence length have on this passage?
2. Examine the second sentence. How does the structure of the sentence reinforce the meaning?

But George sat stiffly on the bank and looked at his right hand that had thrown the gun away.

— John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*

1. The subordinate clause, *that had thrown the gun away*, is used as an adjective to modify the word *hand*. What effect does this have on the meaning of the sentence?
2. Compare Steinbeck’s sentence with the following:

George, who had thrown the gun away, sat stiffly on the bank and looked at his right hand.

TONE

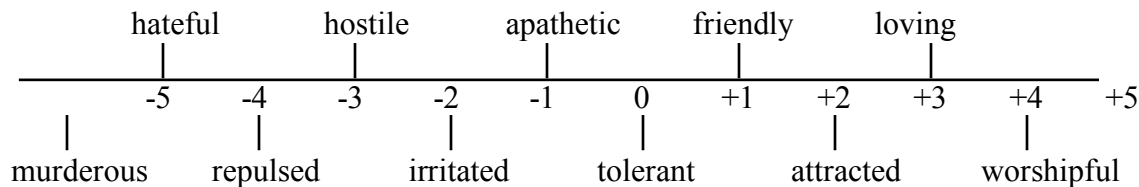
Tone “may be defined as the writer’s or speaker’s attitude toward the subject, the reader, or herself or himself” (Perrine 804). Anyone can sense a speaker’s attitude in tone of voice; however, understanding the tone in written poetry is an entirely different matter. The reader does not have voice inflection to carry meaning. Thus, your understanding of diction, images, details, language, and syntax all contribute to the understanding of tone.

Shifts in Tone

As you grow more aware of tone, you will discover that good writers rarely stick with one tone. Shifts in tone are often cued by:

- ✓ key words (but, yet, nevertheless, however, although)
- ✓ punctuation (dashes, periods, colons)
- ✓ stanza and paragraph divisions
- ✓ changes in line and stanza or in sentence length
- ✓ sharp contrasts in diction

Intensity of Tone Words



Tone Vocabulary

A basic tone vocabulary is essential in describing attitudes discovered in text:

COLUMN A	COLUMN B	COLUMN C	COLUMN D	COLUMN E
bitter	angry	apathetic	complimentary	condescending
contemptuous	apologetic	childish	disappointed	horrific
friendly	arrogant	concerned	enthusiastic	humorous
nostalgic	candid	didactic	ironic	optimistic
reverent	detached	dramatic	mocking	peaceful
sentimental	giddy	fanciful	sarcastic	skeptical
somber	hostile	pejorative	serious	sympathetic
zealous	ominous	resigned	urgent	vibrant