

UNIT TEN

PURPOSE AND TONE

An important part of reading critically is realizing that behind everything you read is an author. This author is a person who has a reason for writing a given piece and who works from a personal point of view. To fully understand and evaluate what you must recognize purpose -- the reason why the author writes. You must also be aware of tone-- the expression of the author's attitude and feeling. Both purpose and tone are discussed in this chapter.

PURPOSE

Authors write with a reason in mind, and you can better evaluate what is being said by determining what reason is. The author's reason for writing is also called the purpose of a selection. Three common purposes are:

- **To inform** -- to give information about a subject. Authors with this purpose wish to give their readers facts.
- **To persuade** -- to convince the reader to agree with the author's point of view on a subject. Authors with this purpose may give facts, but their main goal is to promote an opinion.
- **To entertain** -- to amuse and delight; to appeal to the reader's senses and imagination. Authors with this purpose entertain in various ways, through fiction and nonfiction.

Read each of the three paragraphs below and decide whether the author's purpose is to inform, to persuade, or to entertain. Write in your answers, and then read the explanations that follow.

1. Using the present measurement system is as inefficient and old-fashioned as using Roman numerals. If more Americans realized how easy it is to convert milliliters to liters as opposed to converting to quarts, the metric system would be adopted immediately.
Purpose: _____
2. About 113 billion people have lived and died in the history of our planet, according to scientific estimates. Of all these people, the names of about seven billion, or approximately 6 percent, are recorded in some way---o

monuments or in books, manuscripts, and public records. The other 106 billion people are gone without a trace.

Purpose: _____

3. Because of the contrast between his medium-size wardrobe and his extra large-size body, my brother has made a commitment to only three meals a day. His definition of a meal, however, is as broad as his belly. If we spot a pretzel salesman or a hot-dog stand on our way to an Italian restaurant, for example, he is not beyond suggesting that we stop. "It'll make a good appetizer," he says.

Purpose: _____

In the first paragraph, the writer's purpose is to persuade the audience that Americans should change over to the metric system. That is clear because the author claims that our present system is "inefficient and old-fashioned," that conversions in the metric system are "easy," and that people would prefer the metric system. These are statements that are used to convince us rather than to inform us. The purpose of the second paragraph is to inform. The author is simply providing readers with information about the people who have lived and died on Earth. In paragraph three, the playful and exaggerated details tell us the author's main goal is to entertain with humor.

At times, writing may seem to blend two purposes. An informative article on losing weight, for example, may include comic touches, or a persuasive letter to the editor contain factual information. Remember in such cases to focus on the author's primary purpose. Ask yourself, "What is the author's main idea?" That will help you determine his or her principal intention.

Practice 1

Label each item according to its main purpose: to inform (I), to persuade (P), or to entertain (E).

1. In the 1886 baseball World Series, sixty-three errors were committed.
2. Nurses assigned to intensive care units should be given shorter shifts and higher pay because the work is unusually demanding and stressful.
3. It's easy to quit smoking; I've done it hundreds of times.
4. Shoparama has low, low prices, an outstanding selection of health and beauty products, and a convenient location near you.
5. The career of a professional athlete is usually quite short.
6. An artificial odor is added to natural gas so that people can tell whether or not gas is leaking.
7. Fred believes in a seafood diet: when he sees food, he eats it.

- 8. More women should get involved in local politics and support the growing number of female candidates for public office.
- 9. The best approach to take when you feel the urge to exercise is to lie down quickly in a darkened room until the feeling goes away.
- 10. In ancient Egypt, priests plucked all the hair from their bodies, including their eyebrows and eyelashes.

Practice 2

Following are three passages: from a textbook, a humor book, and a collection of essays. Label each item according to its main purpose: to inform (I), to persuade (P), or to entertain (E).

- 1. We have all heard the story of how the young, impoverished Abraham Lincoln trekked miles to borrow books from a neighbor and then read them by firelight. We know that nineteenth-century readers would rush to the wharf to greet the ship carrying the latest chapters of a Dickens novel. Today, reading seems less urgent and less exciting to many of us. Worse, few people impart a passion for books to their children. Instead, they leave the children in front of the television and hope, weakly, that too much watching won't be bad for them. But we cannot afford to stop reading. Books shed a light that illuminates our problems and crises. They are also mirrors that reflect the truest image of ourselves.
- 2. Most of what I know about carpentry, which is almost nothing, I learned in Shop. You should know that I took Shop during the Eisenhower administration, when boys took Shop and girls took Home Economics -- a code name for "cooking." Schools are not allowed to separate boys and girls like that anymore. They're also not allowed to put students' heads in vises and tighten them, which is what our Shop teacher, Mr. Schmidt, did to Ronnie Miller in the fifth grade when Ronnie used a chisel when he should have used a screwdriver. (Mr. Schmidt had strong feelings about how to use tools properly.) I guess he shouldn't have put Ronnie's head in the vise, but it (Ronnie's head) was no great prize to begin with, and you can bet Ronnie never confused chisels and screwdrivers in later life -- assuming he made it to later life.
- 3. Studies of job satisfaction indicate that the vast majority of workers are at least somewhat satisfied with their jobs and would continue to work even if they didn't have to. The meaning of work varies from person to person. To some, it is a course of self-respect and life purpose. For others, work is a means of passing time. To still others, it is primarily a

source of financial independence. Among women, available work is often less satisfying than home management. Yet, most women report increases in self-esteem when employed, especially if they experience support from their families.

TONE

A writer's tone reveals the attitude he or she has toward a subject. Tone is expressed through the words and details the writer selects. Just as a speaker's voice can project a range of feelings, a writer's voice can project one or more tones, or feelings: anger, sympathy, hopefulness, sadness, respect, dislike, and so on. Understanding tone is, then, an important part of understanding what an author has written.

To appreciate the differences in tone that writers can employ, read the following versions of a murder confession:

"I just shot my husband five times in the chest with this .357 Magnum." (Tone: matter-of-fact, objective.)

"How could I ever have killed him? I just can't believe I did that!" (Tone: shocked, disbelieving.)

"Oh, my God. I've murdered my husband. How can I ever be forgiven for this dreadful deed?" (Tone: remorseful, regretful)

"That dirty rat. He's had it coming for years. I'm glad I finally had the nerve to do it." (Tone: revengeful, triumphant)

Below is a list of words commonly used to describe tone. Note that two different words may refer to the same tone or similar tones-- for example, matter-of-fact and objective, or comic and humorous. Brief meanings are given in parentheses for some of the words.

A List of Words That Describe Tone

straightforward	cheerful
matter-or-fact	joyous
objective	light-hearted
serious	amused
formal	humorous
informal	comic
solemn	playful
bitter	outspoken (spoken boldly and freely)
sorrowful	impassioned (filled with passion and strong feeling)
depressed	tolerant (respecting of other views and behavior)
distressed	<u>remorseful</u> (filled with guilt over a wrong one has done)
angry	<u>outraged</u> (very angered)
critical	sarcastic (making sharp or wounding remarks; ironic)
cruel	mocking (ridiculing; sneering; holding up for scorn)
hesitant	scornful (looking down on someone or something)
fearful	ironic (meaning the opposite of what is expressed)
anxious	arrogant (conceited)
alarmed	irreverent (lacking respect)
tragic	cynical (believing the worst of others)
self-pitying	indignant (angry about something unfair or mean)
disbelieving	revengeful (wanting to hurt someone in return for an
injury)	
surprised	<u>vindictive</u> (very revengeful)
regretful	malicious (spiteful; intentionally harmful)
sympathetic	contemptuous (expressing great scorn and disgust)
compassionate	<u>ambivalent</u> (uncertain about a choice)
loving	optimistic (looking on the bright side of things)
sentimental	pessimistic (looking on the gloomy side of things)
forgiving	desperate (having a great desire or need for something)
excited	grim (harsh; dealing with unpleasant subjects)

Below are five statements expressing different attitudes about a shabby apartment. Five different tones are used:

optimistic

tolerant humorous

bitter

sentimental

Label each statement according to which of these five tones you think is present. Then read the explanation that follows.

- ___1. This place may be shabby, but since both of my children were born while we lived here, it has a special place in my heart.
- ___2. This isn't the greatest apartment in the world, but it's not really that bad.
- ___3. If only there were some decent jobs out there, I wouldn't be reduced to living in this miserable dump.
- ___4. This place need some repairs, but I expect the landlord to get around to them any day now.
- ___5. When we move away, we're planning to release three hundred cockroaches and two mice so we can leave the place exactly as we found it.

The tone 1 is sentimental. "It has a special place in my heart" expresses tender emotions. In item 2, the words "not really that bad" show that the writer is tolerant, accepting the situation while recognizing that it could be better. We could describe the tone of item 3 as bitter. The writer resents a situation that he blames for forcing him to live in a "miserable dump." Item 4 is optimistic since the writer is expecting the apartment to be improved soon. Finally, the tone of item 5 is humorous. Its writer claims to be planning a comic revenge on the landlord by returning the apartment to the intolerable condition it was in when the tenants moved in.

A Note on Irony

One commonly used tone is that of irony. When writing has an ironic tone, it says one thing but means the opposite. Irony is found in everyday conversation as well as in writing. Following are a few examples; notice that the quotation in each says the opposite of what is meant.

If at the beginning of a semester you discover that one of your teachers is particularly demanding, you might comment, "This class is sure going to be a barrel of laughs!"

After seeing a terrible performance in a movie, someone might say about the actor involved, "Now there's a person with a great chance for an Oscar." If a person is a Klutz, someone might remark, "There goes an Olympic champion."

Irony also refers to situations in which what happens is the opposite of what we might expect. We could call it ironic, for example, if a man bites a dog. So another way for a writer to be ironic is to describe such situations. Here are a few more examples of this type of irony:

Helen won a lifetime supply of Marlboros a week after she quit smoking.

To get some quick extra cash, Elliot sold his stereo. For his birthday the next day, his girlfriend bought him the new Whitney Houston album.

Lenny, who adores basketball, is five inches tall. His brother Frank, who plans on being a cartoonist and has no interest at all in sports, is six feet three.

Practice 3

- A. Below are five statements expressing different attitudes about a boss. Five different tones are used:

Admiring	sympathetic	objective
Ironic	critical	

For each statement, write the tone that you think is present.

1. Tony is an excellent manager -- the best one I've ever had.
2. I know Tony's boy has been sick. Naturally it's hard for him to concentrate on work right now.
3. Tony's too ambitious for his own good. That ambition may yet destroy him and the company.
4. Under Tony Robertson's leadership, sales in appliance division have increased 30 per cent in the last six months.
5. Tony's wonderful, all right. He's gotten as far as he has without the slightest idea of how to manage a division.

- B. The following conversation between mother and son involves five of the tones shown in the box below. For each statement, write the tone that you think is present.

threatening	joyful	solemn	straightforward
sympathetic	pessimistic	self-pitying	ironic
nostalgic	disbelieving		

- ___ 6. "Please take the garbage out on your way to school this morning."
___ 7. "Sure, Morn. I've been looking forward to that chore all" morning."
___ 8. "Listen, young man, if you don't start fulfilling your responsibilities around this house, your father and I will start asking you for rent or to find your own place."
___ 9. "Okay, I'll take the garbage out. But you know it's not easy going to school full-time, working twenty hours a week, and just getting over a bad case of the flu."
___ 10. "I know, honey, this semester has been an especially difficult one for you."

Practice 4

Each passage illustrates one of the tones in the box below. In each space, put the letter of the tone that best applies. Don't use any letter more than once.

Remember that the tone of a selection reflects the author's attitude. To find the tone of a paragraph, ask yourself what attitude is revealed by its words and phrases

a. arrogant	b. forgiving	c. worried	d. sorrowful
e. revengeful	f. affectionate	g. hypocritical	h. scornful

- ___ 1. Spam- that slimy canned pork product- is surprisingly still around after more than fifty years. Despite its high fat content (more than three and a half teaspoons per two-ounce serving) and high calories count (171 calories per serving), more than four billion cans have been sold since 1937. Spam's greasy, rubbery consistency and salty flavor have made it the butt of many jokes-such as David Letterman's suggestion of Spam-on-a-rope for people who want to eat and shower at the same time.

Shareholders in George Hormel and thousands of years, at least, all the way to the bank. More than three cans of ketchup are consumed every second, despite its high cost—pound it costs about the same as strip steak.

2. My grandfather lived with my family as I grew up, and some of my warmest early memories revolve around him. He was a sweet man with simple tastes. He liked Western movies, and when I was a preschooler, he often took me along to see them. After the movies, we would go to a nearby Bridgeman's ice-cream shop. He would order a hot chocolate. It always came with a couple of sugar cookies, which he would give to me to eat with my scoop of ice cream. Once I began school, he would go the Westerns alone. But it wasn't unusual for me to come home from school and find those same sugar cookies waiting for me in a Bridgeman's napkin.
3. By the year 2000 there will be nearly ten million Americans over the age of eighty. Can we expect these people to be cared for by their relatives, who are themselves in their sixties? If the caregivers are retired, they may have more time to take care of older family members, but the costs of such care (especially in terms of retirement income) are high. As the retirees grow older, the task of caring for older people becomes harder. This is made more difficult by the fact that old age can be distressing because it is a time of continual loss. Too often adults take in ailing, elderly relatives without being aware that they are taking on an immense full-time job. Such caregivers should have somewhere to turn for help.
4. Are you on my list? If you know me, you may well be. See, I keep a record of everyone who's ever crossed me. Whether it's for making fun of my new dress, of stealing my boyfriend, I believe in getting mad and getting even. It may take a while, but I settle the score with everyone on my list—the girl who made fun of my dress, for example. It took me a whole year to get back at her. Finally, one night a date took me to a party she gave. I took advantage of the opportunity and spilled red nail polish on the white rug in her powder room. That night, I took great satisfaction in crossing her name off my list.
5. My mother died a week after I had given birth to my first child. Mother and I had both wanted desperately for her to see little Emily. And Mom had managed to hang on for months, despite the cancer that was ravaging her body. I had just spoken to her the night before, and my plans were to bring Emily the fifty miles to see Mom that weekend. "I'm going to do it," Mom said. "I'm going to hold my granddaughter before I die." But it was not to be.

1. Americans love parks and wildlife refuges, but the crowding they find there is a national disgrace. Parking lots are packed, and roadways through parks and refuges are often so jammed that they might as well be the parking lots. Playing fields and barbecue grills are claimed early in the day, and even on remote trails voices can be heard from every direction. Americans badly need more land devoted to open space where nature walks, picnics, and camping can take place in uncrowded tranquility. Communities across the nation should establish parks and trails that provide free access to open space for everyone.
2. Sediment will sometimes accumulate in shower heads, causing the water to flow unevenly or completely clogging the shower head. Sometimes briskly opening and closing the adjustment mechanism a few times is enough to solve the problem. If this does not work, remove the shower head from the wall, holding onto the pipe while you unscrew the shower head so that you do not loosen the pipe inside the wall. Once you have removed the shower head, try cleaning it with a toothpick or wire. If necessary, take the shower head apart and soak it in water overnight to soften the mineral deposits.
3. One afternoon a man entered a bar with his dog and ordered two martini. He drank one martini, and his dog drank the other. The same thing happened for the next three days. On the fifth afternoon, the dog came in alone, and the bartender served him a drink without even asking. The next day the man came in carrying a box. "You were so nice to my dog yesterday that I brought you a present," he said. "It's a king crab." "Oh, thanks," said the bartender. "I'll take him home for dinner." "Oh no," said the man. "He's already had dinner. Why not take him out to a movie instead?"
4. During the fifties and sixties, researchers discovered that monosodium glutamate (MSG), commonly used to flavor foods, caused brain damage in baby rats, mice, and monkeys. In 1970, a National Academy of Sciences committee concluded that MSG in food is unlikely to harm human infants, but the committee nevertheless recommended that MSG not be used in baby food. By then, however, the baby-food industry had already stopped using MSG because of public pressure.