The power of word choice

Life

Words are powerful. Therefore, skilled authors do not choose their words randomly. They select and control the language of each text to affect their readers in a particular way. As you read the following selections, keep in mind that the author's choice of language and the tone it creates are crucial aspects of the text, shaping what the author has to say and how he or she feels about the subject matter.

Whether you realize it or not, you manipulate language every single day in both your speech and writing. Think about a phrase as simple as " I'm sorry." There is a distinct difference between saying, " I'm really, really sorry" and " Yeah, right, sorry." As you will see, the content of an informational text is just one layer of meaning. How the author conveys the ideas and details within the text is another equally important layer, and one that can be much more subtle.

Tone in Informational Text

Essentially, tone is the author's attitude toward the subject—how he or she chooses to write about the topic at hand. In school, you may write a report on the same topic as the student who sits behind you, but it is likely that you will each convey your thoughts differently—so differently that you will produce two distinct reports even if your writing shares a lot of the same details. Authors are much the same way. Just like you and your classmate, authors have their own thoughts on the subjects they write about, and these likes, dislikes, and other opinions enter into their works through the language they choose. As a result, you can look to the language of a particular text for clues about how the author feels, as well as how he or she expects the reader to feel about the topic.

Meaning, Tone and Word Choice

Remember figurative language and connotative language from Lesson 21? Well, authors use these types of language to help influence the meaning and tone of a text. However, if you read informational texts carefully, you will notice that authors make many different and distinct word choices to bring specific meaning to their content.

Unlike literary texts, which have an endless variety of tones, informational texts are typically written in a more neutral tone. This is because they are meant to inform. However, do not be surprised if you find exceptions to this rule. Authors do modify tone when they feel it is necessary.

For example, a court document will present the facts of a case as neutrally as possible. But let's say a journalist writes a newspaper article on the same subject, using the facts from this case. That journalist may choose more specific language to sway a reader to think about the subject in a specific way, more than likely the way the journalist feels about the topic. Now let's say a reader of that newspaper writes an opinion piece or letter to the editor on the same subject. This person's tone may be different, too, as he or she tries to convey yet another opinion or additional thoughts and feelings on the subject.

Here is an example of how just one word can change the entire meaning of a simple sentence: The skateboarder was thin. The skateboarder was skinny. The skateboarder was gaunt.

Thin, skinny, and gaunt are related words, yet their connotations are worlds apart. Thin is neutral or even positive. It implies that the skateboarder is

trim, perhaps even healthy. Skinny, on the other hand, implies that the skateboarder weighs less than he or she ought to. Gaunt has a third connotation, which is negative without a doubt. This word implies that the skateboarder is scrawny and possibly unhealthy. Sometimes words that similar in meaning, such as thin and skinny, are not necessarily as alike as you might think.

Here is a list that illustrates how similar words—even words you might think of as synonyms—can actually have positive, neutral, and negative connotations. These are just a few words that an author might use to illustrate their opinion or try to sway the reader to his or her side. There are many others to keep a lookout for.

Now that you know a little more about connotation and tone, read this passage from " Excerpt from the ' Special Message to the Congress on Urgent National Needs'":

This decision demands a major national commitment of scientific and technical manpower, materiel and facilities, and the possibility of their diversion from other important activities where they are already thinly spread. It means a degree of dedication, organization and discipline which have not always characterized our research and development efforts. It means we cannot afford undue work stoppages, inflated costs of material or talent, wasteful interagency rivalries, or a high turnover of key personnel.

New objectives and new money cannot solve these problems. They could, in fact, aggravate them further—unless every scientist, every engineer, every serviceman, every technician, contractor, and civil servant gives his personal

pledge that this nation will move forward, with the full speed of freedom, in the exciting adventure of space.

Question: Which words and phrases affect the meaning and tone of the text? Look for connotative and figurative language.

Feedback: In the first paragraph, President Kennedy uses words with negative connotations like inflated, wasteful, and rivalries to illustrate what he believes should not be done. He implies that this is the way the system is currently working and must stop. In the second paragraph, the president uses parallel construction (repetition of the word " every") to drive home the point that everyone involved must be equally dedicated. In addition, the figurative phrase " with the full speed of freedom" has a positive connotation due to the word " freedom," implying how quickly this can be accomplished. When President Kennedy then goes on to use the phrase " exciting adventure" (again, a positive connotation) he tries to sell the idea of space travel as something wonderful and worth the colossal expense.

So how can you identify and analyze the use of tone in an informational text? Here are a few tips to help you out:

1. Consider the shades of meaning and connotations the author uses. Look for words that are positive or negative. This will give you a clue that the author is trying to sway your opinion about something or someone within the text.
2. Identify the general style the author uses. Some informational texts, such as newspaper articles, tend to be on the formal side. However, informational texts can also be informal, serious, funny, sarcastic, etc.

It depends on the author's intention and who he or she thinks the audience will be.

3. Examine words that represent people, places, and ideas. These are excellent opportunities for the author to describe things using connotative words, such as describing a person as " clever" (positive connotation) instead of " crafty" (negative connotation).

4. Reflect on your own emotions as you read the author's work. As with a persuasive text, it is important to know what is influencing your feelings—the content or the way the author is presenting it.

Examples of Tone in Informational Text

Read this passage from " Rivers and Stories: An Introduction, Part 2": There was also something unsettling about the scene, and it was not until later in the day, as I was wandering around the city, that it dawned on me what I had seen. Or not seen: I turned abruptly around and traced my way back to the river, leaned against the embankment, and stared a long time. There were no birds. Not a single gull, no ducks, no herons or egrets. Not a cormorant or a grebe. There were not even sparrows or songbirds in the spindly trees in the riverside park. And there was not a fisherman in sight. The river, for all its human vitality, was dead.

When Robert Hass says, " it dawned on me," he is giving the reader a clue that something is about to change. In previous paragraphs, he establishes that the river is " teeming with traffic"—barges, tankers, sailboats.... Now, however, he repeats the words " no" and " not" (negative words) to establish the absence of life. With each example, you realize Hass' implication: commerce and traffic have replaced wildlife as well as people who interact

with and live off the river. In the last sentence, he concludes with personification by calling the river " dead," as though he is referring to a person. The tone of the passage transforms from lively to depressing. The author's use of language and tone tells the reader that this change to the river is upsetting and not acceptable to him. Even though Hass does not use those exact words, the meaning is there.

Here is another passage from " Rivers and Stories: An Introduction, Part 2": Most of our rivers are still alive, and they are immensely resilient. It now seems possible that human civilization can begin to undo the damage it has done in this last century. Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt, symbolically perhaps, has begun to decommission some American dams. The technology and the understanding of flood dynamics and of the need for water conservation have begun to make the twenty-first-century work of river restoration seem a possibility. A starting place for this work would be to recover an elder imagination of the earth. That is one of the reasons why we need stories about rivers, and why The Gift of Rivers has such intense resonance.

Notice how Hass uses positive words in this passage, such as " alive," " resilient" and " restoration." These words have a healthy feel to them, quite the opposite of " dead" from the previous passage. He offsets these words with the phrase " undo the damage it has done in this last century." This shows the author's opinion about how rivers are sometimes treated poorly, though the passage itself is mostly positive because Hass clearly believes the situation can improve. Also, consider the figurative phrase " to recover an elder imagination of the earth." This unique turn of phrase has a dreamy

sense to it, something from a long time ago. It connects with the author's idea of restoration. Compared to the previous passage, Hass uses a much livelier, hopeful tone. His combination of language and tone again help to convey his meaning about the poor state of some rivers, but they also convey his optimism about improvement.

Remember that even though a text is informational, the author's emotions and opinions can still be present. An author's feelings (for example, sadness about a situation, passion about a cause, or opposition to a particular thing or idea) can persuade you, so be on the lookout for connotative and figurative language.

Although connotative and figurative language are extremely common and helpful aspects of informational text, technical language is another option authors have to influence the meaning and tone of their writing. Technical language can be present in many types of writing, such as magazine articles and textbooks—any type of writing focused on a particular field of study. Technical language lends a formal tone to writing and suggests expertise.

Take a look at this passage from " NASA Twins Study Confirms Preliminary Findings": By measuring large numbers of metabolites, cytokines, and proteins, researchers learned that spaceflight is associated with oxygen deprivation stress, increased inflammation, and dramatic nutrient shifts that affect gene expression.

Question: What is an example of the use of technical language in the passage? How does the technical language influence the passage's meaning and tone?

Feedback: One example of technical language is the phrase " gene expression." It contributes to the passage's knowledgeable, serious tone, which would be both expected and appropriate in a scientific piece of writing. It presents the author of the passage as experienced and educated. In addition, it shows that the content is cutting edge.

How an author says something is just as important as what is said. Even in an informational text, an author's opinions and emotions can reveal themselves through words and tone. As you read, consider whether words are being use connotatively or denotatively, and not how the author's word choice affects the tome of the text.