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Determining the Tone in a Poem

Erin Micklo

Performing Poetry: Managing Tone, Pitch, Volume and Rate

Abstract: This lesson teaches students the importance of varying the tone, pitch, rate and volume of their voices when performing a poem. Emphasizing different words and varying the delivery will alter the meaning of the poem that the students are reading. This is in preparation for the Poet Laureate presentations, when they will read aloud their poet's poem, reflecting their group's interpretation of the poem.

Common Core Standards:

RL.9-10.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

RL.11-12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

RL.11-12.6 Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

RL.11-12.7 Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist.)

Procedure:

PREMISE: Variety is achieved through combining pitch, tone, volume and rate.

1. Instruct students on interpreting **TONE** in a poem:

A. **Tone** refers to the emotional content carried by our voices. It is not the words themselves, but 'how' we say them. To speak expressively, is to fill or energize our words appropriately.

1. For example: a person who puts very little energy into their speech, no matter what they are saying, is often described as being 'flat'. By contrast

someone who fills their speech to overflowing with energy is described as being 'exuberant' or 'enthusiastic'.

2. Activity: “Come here” Exercise

Repeat the words “Come here” in as many varying ways as you can. For example say it angrily, happily, sadly, lovingly, despairingly, laughingly, importantly, slyly, snidely, shyly... This is a fantastic exercise to share with a partner. Take turn about giving each other the way to say the phrase. Repeat until you run out of variations. Listen for emotional truth or believability!

2. Instruct students on using **VOLUME** in a poem:

A. How loudly or quietly you speak is called **volume**. When examining a poem, what volume would be appropriate in the reading of the poem? Will the volume vary during different parts of the poem? Where would it vary? **WHY** would it vary?

B. How would the volume (or variance of volume) impact the following two statements:

i. Her Grandmother died yesterday.

ii. I want a new car.

3. Instruct students on varying **RATE** within a poem:

A. The term **RATE** refers to speaking pace. How fast or slow do you speak? Can you vary the rate? Do you know the effect of slowing deliberately? Speaking rate matters because how fast or how slow you speak alters the listener's perception of your topic.

4. Instruct students on varying **PITCH** within a poem:

A. Pitch: To understand pitch, think of music. It has high and low notes as do people's voices. Everyone's voice has a natural pitch. Women's tend to be higher than men's and everybody has a pitch range: the number of notes we habitually use. When that range is very small, the effect is monotonous.

B. Students should say the sentences below in their high, middle and low pitch range. Note what happens to the intensity and the way they perceive the emotional content of the sentences. There will be a distinct variation between each.

Her Grandmother died yesterday.

I want a new car.

Source: <http://www.write-out-loud.com/quickeasyeffectivetipsforvocalvariety.html>

5. Individually, read the poem “Warning” by Jenny Joseph. Try to determine the tone of the poem. Is her tone bitter? Joyful? Resigned? Hopeful? Sad? Apathetic? Something else? Ask yourself--Does the tone dictate the reading of the poem? Or does the reading of the poem dictate the tone?
6. In groups, share your responses to the poem, then examine in the poem by notating it in the following way:
 - a. Circle the words or passages that indicate/support the tone you anticipate
 - b. At what RATE will the poem be read? Put slashes where you anticipate pauses in the poem.
 - c. Note an arrow UP when you anticipate the volume rising, and an arrow DOWN when you anticipate the volume lowering
 - d. What is the pitch of the poem?
5. Groups should each select one person to read the poem according to the tone, rate, volume and pitch your group has selected. Run through the poem a few times. Group members should coach the reader.
6. I will select a few groups to perform for the class.
7. Afterward, we will watch a few performances of that poem on youtube. One is read by a child (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fr1RU4SM2L8>) and the other is by a woman (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8syyMmYrMZc&feature=related>) and discuss how these two interpretations leave us with different impressions.
8. Last, each group will turn to their Poet Laureate nominee’s poems and analyze them in the same way--first on paper, considering pitch, rate, tone, and volume--and then by practicing them. Your performance of the poem will impact the way your audience views and interprets the poem.
9. Practice performing your poem to another group if time allows.

Materials:

Jenny Joseph poem, "Warning" (given to students as a handout)

Warning By Jenny Joseph

When I am an old woman I shall wear purple
With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me.
And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves
And satin sandals, and say we've no money for butter.
I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired
And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells
And run my stick along the public railings
And make up for the sobriety of my youth.
I shall go out in my slippers in the rain
And pick flowers in other people's gardens
And learn to spit.

You can wear terrible shirts and grow more fat
And eat three pounds of sausages at a go
Or only bread and pickle for a week
And hoard pens and pencils and beer mats and things in boxes.

But now we must have clothes that keep us dry
And pay our rent and not swear in the street
And set a good example for the children.
We must have friends to dinner and read the papers.

But maybe I ought to practice a little now?
So people who know me are not too shocked and surprised

When suddenly I am old, and start to wear purple.

Jenny Joseph was born in 1932 and is one of the UK's foremost living poets. She was born in Birmingham, and studied English literature at St Hilda's College, Oxford, before becoming a journalist. She has worked for the Bedfordshire Times, the Oxford Mail and Drum Publications (Johannesburg, South Africa).

Her first collection of poetry was published in 1960. The poem, entitled Warning, a witty poem about growing old, is her most popular work, and the inspiration for the Red Hat Society. A BBC poll found it to be the most popular 20th Century poem.