



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative  
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## Change Moans and Groans to a Love of Tone: Teaching Students to Listen to Text

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### Introduction

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Is it any coincidence that *tone* rhymes so perfectly with the words *moan* and *groan*? Not based on my recent experiences as the mere mention of the former induces a classroom full of the latter. I'm not even sure how this tone concept became the one most riddled with failure in my classroom—that wasn't always the case. For years, my students seemed fairly adept at identifying the tone of a passage as they are required to do on the AP English Language and Composition Exam; at the very least the success they experienced was in proportion to their analytical abilities across the board. No more—now the mere mention of the word elicits the aforementioned moans and groans. Their spirits deflate. Every brilliant idea or innovative strategy falls flat. I don't know what happened, but I do know that I am not alone. As I searched for new ideas, I found innumerable complaints from other teachers about this problem in their classrooms. Headings on the AP English electronic discussion group include, "NEED TONE HELP," and "If I hear that the tone was serious ONE MORE TIME ...!" " 1 Obviously, the struggles with teaching the concept of tone in the classroom are not unique to me. What is the problem? Why are students having so much difficulty?

A recent classroom experience gave credence to my theory that students are not struggling with tone per se—they are struggling with the identification of tone in a written context. Students can use the recognition of sound to improve their analytical skills. Students were presenting movie projects that required them to create their own visual texts and synthesize their knowledge of analysis. They essentially created a visual file that served as that analytical text, using the film program to juxtapose the speech audio file with image files and effects. The movie had to reflect the strategies and tone of the speech itself. While they were presenting, students heard a recording of Martin Luther King, Jr. juxtaposed with a speech by Malcolm X. The students identified the tone of each text and how it contributed to the speaker's purpose with greater ease than they had exhibited with the written text. I was somewhat amazed—this just seemed too easy after all our struggles. Clearly, the students can hear the tone of the spoken word—the question is: how do we help them make the transition to hearing the sound of the written text and identifying that tone? It seems clear that the emphasis on sound is what must be incorporated into our studies.es.

This unit will promote the idea that the study of poetry, with a particular emphasis on sound, can actually serve as the impetus for improving student facility in discussing the tone of any *prose* text, fiction or

nonfiction. The unit will begin with a more substantive discussion of the definition of tone, accompanied by activities that build student confidence in the ability to recognize audible tones in their day-to-day lives. When we actually hear what someone is saying, we can easily recognize how it is being said—we hear the tone. Firmly rooted in an historically oral tradition, poetry serves as a natural bridge from the study of spoken words to written texts. As students shift to the study of poetry, they will begin with "dialogue poems" that specifically emphasize the connection between the audible sound they recognize and the written context they must learn to identify. The final transition in the unit will involve students taking the same approaches they have learned in the study of the sound of poetry and applying them to their study of prose. These techniques should be used in conjunction with other analytical techniques as an organic discussion of the meaning of the text—not isolated as arbitrary exercises. The ultimate goal is to improve, not replace, an already substantive analysis of text.t.

## Background

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Teaching Advanced Placement Language and Composition in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system is challenging. The course itself is one of the more difficult sponsored by The College Board. Only twenty-five percent of students who took the test in 2008 scored a four or a five (compared to forty-five percent of the also popular and accessible AP Psychology course), and fewer than fifty-seven percent received a passing score.<sup>2</sup> The primary goal of the AP Language course is to create strong analysts with the skills to write effectively. Students must identify rhetorical choices, connect them to stylistic devices, and explain how the precise language of the text works to achieve the purpose of the author. The focus of The College Board examination is nonfiction; however, in Charlotte the task is complicated by the fact that the course also serves as a student's primary English credit for eleventh grade. In other words, we must teach these skills of nonfiction analysis while also incorporating texts from the traditional American literary canon—along with whatever other local requirements might come along in the ever-evolving implementation of the Graduation Project standards—and suddenly we find ourselves with far less time to focus on the new and challenging curriculum, essentially teaching three classes in one.e.

Further complicating the issue is the fact that students are coming increasingly unprepared for the course. I have taught the course for six years—with a two year break in between segments. When I began eight years ago, the jump in curriculum was so enormous that I was struggling to keep up. I could essentially throw any idea at my students—and because of their ability level they could turn almost anything into a fantastic learning opportunity. I learned right along with them. One would assume that at this point I could be on some sort of "cruise control," but every year the course becomes more difficult. While my mastery of the material and instructional techniques has increased, their agility in working with the language has decreased significantly. The possible explanations for this trend are myriad. Because of the open-enrollment policy, students are entering the course with a variety of skill sets, many with verbal PSAT scores well below the College Board recommendation. No Child Left Behind requirements focus classroom instruction on standardized test improvement—and most of those tests focus on reading comprehension or other skills for which there is one clear, correct answer—not analysis, writing, or independent thinking. Further, increased access to technology means that students are constantly accessing Sparksnotes.com or other such sources for that "right response," and because of this they have spent years practicing reading and absorbing what someone else has told them to think—more reading comprehension -instead of exercising their own powers of

analysis and independent thought.

This lack of student preparation would seem to necessitate more individualized instruction; however, demographic shifts in our population and economy have compounded the difficulties in facilitating student success in the classroom. I teach at Providence Senior High School in Charlotte, North Carolina. The combination of an explosive growth rate and a dwindling economy has impacted our ability to serve the individualized needs of our students. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system has grown at a rate of three percent per year; in other words, approximately four thousand students enter the CMS system each year, and a large percentage of them come from our attendance zone. It is anticipated that this growth will continue for ten years.<sup>3</sup> Yet with recent setbacks in our national, state and local economies, the system has cut approximately twenty percent of the qualified teachers from our school. This reduction in force has led to the elimination of many Advanced Placement courses, and increased class sizes in those that remain. Students who come to the course with limited skills need individual attention, and with class sizes anticipated to be above thirty-five across the board, that individualized instruction will become more and more difficult. Our job as teachers will be to find strategies that will work effectively with larger groups of students.

The course requirements themselves are daunting for even the most skilled students because they are so advanced and outside the realm of preparation and prior expectations. I find that the mere mention of the word *rhetoric* can induce utter panic—to say nothing of the introduction to *metonymy* or *epanalepsis*. Students need assistance in learning how to break down a text into manageable pieces so they can see how the language creates meaning. They need guidance as they move from the familiar land of reading comprehension to the undefined wilderness of analysis. But even within all this uncharted territory, the concept that seems to be increasingly difficult for students, at least within my own personal experience, is the identification and application of *tone*.

Students struggle with the identification of tone and how it contributes to the establishment of purpose. They confuse tone with the mood, with the attitude of a character within the text, or even with the author's viewpoint on a particular topic. When originally considering the seminar description for "The Sound of Words: An Introduction to Poetry," I had an "ah-ha" moment—what if the sound is what is actually missing in our discussion? If the tone is the *verbal stance* an author holds toward characters, events or situations as reflected in his *voice*, then perhaps it is the concept of the sound of the language that has been missing from my presentations. Students spend so much time mechanically dissecting the diction, syntax and selection of detail that they don't stop to listen to the author. In essence, they are unable to hear what they are reading.

## Objectives

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My goal for this unit is for students to identify successfully the tone of a passage and explain how it relates to the author's purpose. By focusing students on the sound of the text, along with the more traditional analytical devices normally emphasized in the course, I hope to enhance the recognition of how the relationship between the content and the sound work together to establish tone and meaning. The fundamental question is how to get the students to move from their appreciation of tone in their everyday spoken interactions to a reading experience. The incorporation of poetry into the curriculum will allow students to establish these skills and bring the same techniques of analysis to the study of prose, primarily nonfiction. Students will focus on the sound of poetry as they complete text-based analysis without the introduction of outside context such as

biographical information. As an originally oral form, poetry foregrounds the "how" of verbal communication and will serve as an effective bridge between the verbal and written formats. Eventually, the improvement in skill will facilitate the establishment of their own voices in their writing.

## Rationale

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### Text-based Instruction

Students are unable to hear the voice of the author because they are waiting for the biographical information that they believe will unlock the meaning of the poem; they lack the confidence needed to interact independently with the text. When discussing poetry instruction with colleagues, I find that the biographical information of an author is of consistent interest. Beyond a normal curiosity, these inquiries seemed to establish the underlying assumption that this information is necessary to get at the truth of a poem. Teachers even discuss what is apparently a familiar strategy: let students read a poem on their own and share what they think—then tell them about the author so that they will know what it "really" means. No wonder students are reticent to interact with a text—they've been conditioned to believe that they cannot read it on their own. Why bother with one's own interpretation if it will be replaced by a corrected biographical reading? Imagine how massive a book of poetry must look to a student who can only imagine the tomes of information that would be needed to wade through to its true understanding—one binding visible and an entire concealed library ready to correct his initial response. And if they aren't engaged in "conversation" with the text, they will certainly not hear the voice of the speaker.

Now, I'm certainly not arguing that information about the author is irrelevant to the reading of the text. Obviously the background information to a poem such as Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" is essential to a full and complete reading. Can one fully appreciate the brilliance of the poem without knowing that the poem was written on October 27, 1962, or that the picture Plath references in the poem is an actual photograph of her father in front of a German language lesson on his blackboard, holding a book over his heart?<sup>4</sup> Probably not. Yet it is dangerous to assume that biography is the key to an accurate, or final, reading of the text. If this were the standard, we could only read a poem after reading a poet's biography. This outside context may be an important part of the discourse—but it should not be considered the definitive discourse—especially if we expect students to interact willingly with a text on their own.

Any text offers multiple layers of meaning; one can apply different strategies of interpretation to search for universal connections and understandings even when all pertinent information is not readily available. Take, for example, May Swenson's "Come In Go Out." Will the average student realize that it loosely follows the traditional Anglo-Saxon model with an accented meter of four beats per line, neatly divided into halves, with alliteration highlighting the emphasis? Likely not. Does that mean that the student cannot consider the implications of different ways to read the poem (based on the columnar design), or notice the significance of the rhyme, diction, and alliteration? If students recognize that the pattern emulates the ebb and flow of the water—and cannot make the historical connection—they can still discuss the significance as related to universals of humanity. Is it necessary to believe that their observations and understandings are insignificant because they are not scholarly enough? I would argue that this is the message that they have received, and that they are "listening" for that background information instead of listening to the voice of the author (or the speaker of the poem) with whom they don't believe they have the credentials to interact.

Peter Elbow says that it is important to look through the "lens of text" that eliminates the history, the biography, "the actual person trying to do something to someone else." This type of close reading helps us better see the "bare meanings and relationships." Focusing on the background information can "muddy the water" and leave us "confused or mistaken in our reading or analysis." <sup>5</sup> For practical purposes, this strategy is essential as that is what they will be expected to do on their AP Language and Composition exam. More importantly for this curriculum unit, this approach serves as a template for how the poetry will be presented as I endeavor to establish and build on that interaction with the text, encouraging students to further enter into a discourse with the text that will allow them to listen to that text.

### **Focus on Sound**

The exercises in this unit will focus on sound. Although all aspects of a text work together to create meaning, and it is artificial to assume that one can completely isolate one element to the exclusion of the others, I am establishing this focus because in my own experience it is the element most often left out of the conversation. Students can mechanically discuss diction, syntax and other elements of language analysis, but they don't have the appropriate tools to discuss the sound of the text. Arguably, this is the element that could bring it all together.

The discussion of tone has even fallen out of favor with literary critics. Once a common term in literary criticism, and a critical element of New Criticism, the term is "now disused."<sup>6</sup> But according to Frost, the "living sounds of speech" are the actions of the voice, the "stuff of life" that are the "basis of all effective expression."<sup>7</sup> Sound is just too important of a sense to be eliminated from the discussion of a text. Poetry, in particular, originated as an oral form that was sung or chanted. "Poetic form as we know it is an abstraction from, or residue of, musical form," and that "ghost of oral poetry," as John Hollander terms it, never completely disappears.<sup>8</sup>

In the Introduction to *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing*, Peter Elbow cites Mikhail Bakhtin as a critic who emphasizes the importance of the sound in a text. Bakhtin argues that "intonation is the point where language intersects with life" and often unlocks the most important meaning in a text—meaning that is not "carried by the lexical, semantic meaning."<sup>9</sup> Too much focus has been placed on the visual sense to the exclusion of the "global fullness of experience" and the "richness of listening."<sup>10</sup> According to Walter Ong, sound is "a special sensory key to interiority" that conveys meaning much more powerfully than the visual. Sound has a significant connection to what one would consider a sense of presence, and since the spoken word "moves from interior to interior," this exploration of sound facilitates our full discourse with the text.<sup>11</sup>

### **Clearly Defining Tone**

Another problem facing an instructor may be the lack of a clear definition of tone; this should be established if students are to work with the concept effectively. The typical definition students find in the classroom is "the attitude of the author," and clearly that definition isn't doing much good. The word *attitude* isn't specific enough to give students an understanding of what they are looking for. Even New Criticism divided the concept of attitude into two categories: feeling referred to the author's attitude toward his subject, and tone referred to how he felt about his reader—how he felt about saying what he had to say to that particular audience.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, an understanding of tone is going to come from a discussion that presents the information more organically and less mechanically. It's a complicated subject, not a simple one sentence definition that students can easily mark off on a quiz—not if we want students to have the appropriate understanding of the term..

Langdon Hammer says that discussing tone is like discussing a person's mood. Tone is the key to interpreting the author's intentions—the way a word or phrase was intended to be said—and therefore the "manner of relationship the writer constructs with his reader."<sup>13</sup> Frost famously refers to tone as the "sound of sense," the sound that emanates from the voices we hear behind a door even if we don't understand the words.<sup>14</sup> It is the "vital element," the "animating spirit of the living voice."<sup>15</sup> Robert Pinsky describes the sound that emanates from the text as the "energies that course through the lines and make them feel alive."<sup>16</sup>

Frost says there are hundreds of tones.<sup>17</sup> While there may be a unique quality of a person's voice, people "display enormous variation" in how they speak depending on the occasion. They use different tones of voice at different times depending on whether they are "excited, scared, angry, sad."<sup>18</sup> These tones "come through the door." We understand them because we recognize them based on our own experiences. We hear the tones that we have used; we register tones we've heard before. They are "common property." This ability to discern the tone is what Frost calls "the imagining ear."<sup>19</sup> Because this sound comes from an "interior space from which we are barred," we use this sense to "construe the interiority of other speakers," thus enhancing our understanding of the author's purpose.<sup>20</sup> Bakhtin says that intonation "lies on the border between life and the verbal aspect of utterance," injecting life-energy into the text, providing greater insight into the extraverbal context—the authorial intention..<sup>21</sup>

Frost argues that it is a "fundamental fact" that certain forms of writing depend on sound, which he emphasizes as the "basis of all effective expression—not merely words or phrases, but sentences,—living things flying round,—the vital parts of speech."h."<sup>22</sup> He says that the success of a poem depends more upon the "meaning it conveys by tone of voice" than that which it conveys through the meaning of the words.<sup>23</sup> Failing to focus on such an important part of the text limits a student's ability to interact with the text. Discussing the complexities of the concept will enhance their reading experiences.

### **What Creates Sound?**

Ultimately, we must guide students in the sophisticated task of recognizing sound on the page when their prior instruction has probably been limited to a discussion of sing-song rhyme and the "buzz buzz" of onomatopoeia. So how does one go about this? What creates the sound on the page?

Obviously, a written text does not have the advantage of posture, facial expression and changes in audible voice in conveying its tone. <sup>24</sup> Tone is derived through context—the relationship of words with each other as they are constructed within the sentence..<sup>25</sup> The sentence construction is a notation for suggesting tones of voice in the same way that a musical notation suggests the development of the sound.<sup>26</sup> This context includes the dramatic situation, but, more importantly, the "syntactic context of the sentence, which conveys, independently of any semantic information, a distinctive "posture."<sup>27</sup> Elbow says we must pay more attention to "how things are said" and the relationship "between their words and their meanings and their referents."<sup>28</sup>

When referencing the tone of a written text, we cannot literally hear the tone the way we can the spoken word—the sentence provides an intangible construction of the sound we can hear through our "imagining ear." A number of acoustical variables work together to create an "intonational contour" that gives the reader direction on how to read a sentence, "which words will be emphasized, and to what effect." These variables can include pitch (high and low), stress (volume and emphasis), <sup>29</sup> duration (quantity), degree,<sup>30</sup> speed (fast or

slow), intensity (relaxed or tense), rhythm, timbres (breathy, shrill, nasal), glides and jumps, varied lengths of pauses, syntax, diction, structure, strategies and stance,<sup>31</sup> line breaks and punctuation.<sup>32</sup>

Frost refers to metrical beat as something for the "rhythm of the vocal tones to play across, to make a figure in, to make a posture in."<sup>33</sup> Pinsky divides his discussion of stress into both accent and duration. Accent is, of course, whether the sound is stressed or unstressed. "A stressed syllable is determined only in relation to the other syllables within the foot."<sup>34</sup> Further, he argues that accents fluctuate by degree. In other words, in a line with four stressed syllables, each of those stressed syllables does not have the exact same stress. The stressed element of one foot might actually be closer to the unstressed element of another foot. This variation means that the "actual rhythm of the words is not singsong or repetitious."<sup>35</sup> A change of pitch (usually higher) can also indicate an accent. The duration of a syllable can alter word sounds or accent pattern and comes in a matter of degrees.<sup>36</sup> The variation in meter and the tension between the "concrete utterance and metrical grid" create the tone.<sup>37</sup>

Robert Hass goes into much greater detail about the "rhythms and rhythm play that make texture in our lives,"<sup>38</sup> focusing on how rhythm works with the imagination we exercise as we listen to the text. He reminds us that rhythm is power—power that makes us move and has access to our subconscious. Rhythm engages us in multiple phases. The first phase is one of alertness where we become aware first of sounds, then of patterns, then of repetition. When that pattern changes, it signals to us—"as it would to a hunting or a grazing animal—that something in the environment is changed."<sup>39</sup> In the second phase, we move from a required attention to more of a "field of play." The effects are difficult to describe except metaphorically (as dance, weaving, dialogue, interplay, enchantment, magic) and therefore at this level of awareness the rhythm is an "idiom of the unconscious" that seems to "an echo of many other human activities."<sup>40</sup> The third and final phase involves the resolution of rhythmic play. Rhythms are seen in myriad elements of nature, but "only human beings complete them."<sup>41</sup> There are numerous possibilities for the endings of the rhythmic play, and the "articulation of what the ending feels like is active making."<sup>42</sup> This ending naturally suggests the insight the reader looks for when the "endings are true enough." Change is required for a thing to be complete,<sup>43</sup> again emphasizing the variation and tension that contribute to the tone.

The information presented here is not a succinct blueprint for a student to follow, but rather an indicator of the complexity of sound issues that can be discussed as part of what contributes to tone. The key is to move beyond the mechanical dissection and the reliance on the visual. "The imagination of the ear," Frost writes, "is more peculiarly poetical than the imaginative eye, since it deals with sound which is what poetry is before it is sight."<sup>44</sup> Focus on the "concrete images of sound—concrete tone images" will enhance a student's ability to analyze the text by adding depth and specificity to the question of the author's attitude..

## Strategies

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### Audible Recognition

The overall construction of the unit is one that will allow students to develop confidence in their ability to recognize and discuss tone. They do recognize tone in their everyday lives—they know when their parents are angry, when their teacher is frustrated to a breaking point, when a friend is distraught. Beginning with a

concentration on those skills of aural recognition will focus students on what they already know. The importance of sound—often left out of the discussion of the meaning of a text—will also be emphasized. As our seminar description indicates, "even apparent nonsense can communicate essential feeling and expression." In other words, there are certainly times when the sound is so important that the meaning it generates supersedes the meaning of the words, or conveys meaning without the benefit of any semantic reference. Take something as simple as the lullaby "Rock-a-bye Baby." I was singing that to my niece a few weeks ago in a restaurant as we neared a total collapse of rational behavior, and she was practically asleep in my arms, completely comforted. But consider the words of the song: It's a song about a baby crashing "cradle and all" out of a tree. Frankly, how didd

the baby and cradle get in the tree in the first place? The "rocking" rhythm of the poem and the lulling sounds of the words completely overshadow the near nonsense of the text.

Students will initially practice the identification of audible tone unrelated to text entirely. This idea was generated as I stood in a waiting area the other day. A woman was on the phone—and she was furious. I did not recognize anything she said as she was speaking entirely—and rapidly—in Spanish. But I knew she was angry based on my recognition of an audible tone. Students can practice the identification of the tones that come from "behind the door," as Frost would say. Sample audio recordings could be generated with the foreign language teachers in the school or compiled from other available recordings.gs.

Students will then make a transition to the study of the same audible tone with recognizable words—but focusing on the fact that a particular word does not have an inherent tone; that tone would change based on the context of the words around it. At this stage they would still be focusing on their understanding of vocalized tone—looking at different ways they could say the same word or phrase, using intonation, posture, stress, etc. to convey different tones. Frost illustrates this concept in his essay on "Vocal Imagination" when he argues that the inherent sound in poetry is most certainly not "a matter of vowel and consonant sounds." He supports his contention with a detailed discussion of the word "no" which will always be spelled with the same vowel and consonant combination, but can distinctively convey different meaning based on the tone.e.<sup>45</sup> Frost further emphasizes his point in a letter to John Bartlett when he says that the "high possibility of emotional expression all lets in this mingling of sense-sound and word-accent."<sup>46</sup> He says that "abstract vitality of our speech" is purely sound. The reader must be prepared to give the appropriate "posture" to the sentence based on the context.<sup>47</sup> This same activity Frost initiates with "no" can be played out with any number of simple words that can be said in a variety of ways. "Yes" and "oh" are two that stand out as obvious choices for play. Peter Elbow suggests the intonation of the word "hello" as people answer the telephone—immediately we get a sense of speaker's mood and the relationship established. Elbow also suggests taking this same sort of activity to another level with simple phrases that can be manipulated in a similar way; his particular example is the sentence, "Listen to me."<sup>48</sup> The ultimate goal is to focus students on the idea that tone is sound, and that it conveys meaning outside the meaning suggested by the definitions of words.

### **Transition to Poetry**

Students will then move to the study of poetry and how the sound works organically with other stylistic elements to create the tone. To ease the transition between the vocalized sound and the written context, they will begin with poems that actually have a clear speaker or speakers who literally "talk" in the poem. Again, Frost illustrates such an example in his essay "The Imagining Ear" when he discusses the tones indicated by the farmers in "The Mending Wall." As they work on their spring repairs, the farmers, as described by Frost,



speak with clear, definitive tones that emanate from particular elements of dialogue. For example, Frost describes the tone in "We have to use a spell to make them balance:/Stay where you are until our backs are turned!" as challenging and threatening.<sup>49</sup> Students could discuss how sound and other techniques work together to create varied tones. Any of Frost's dialogue poetry would be appropriate for this sort of discussion. "Home Burial," in particular, is a poem that would offer extensive opportunities for the dissection of tones. The poem works because, as Pinsky says, the dialogue is credible as speech, enabled by "the artist's arrangements of vocal noises at the threshold of consciousness."<sup>50</sup> The poem presents multiple opportunities for presentation in the classroom; one would be that students could read the two parts as sort of "creative dramatists." They might discuss the differences in how they chose to read the "parts." At this point, they should defend their discussion of the tone with references to the text. How did they decide on that particular tone? What about the context made them read the lines that way? How does the tone contribute to the meaning of the text?

Depending on the level and adaptability of one's students, teachers can present any number of strategies to assist students in the assessment of how a close reading of the written context creates this tone. The chapter on "Sound and Meaning" in *Perrine's Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense* has a breakdown that instructors might find particularly helpful. The chapter reinforces Frost's ideas that the sound reinforces and enhances the meaning of the poem. While the strategies an author might implement are endless, the text identifies the four most common under headings with numerous examples. A poem follows each detailed explanation, and exercises direct students to specific sound issues that they can then connect to meaning.

The first category highlighted is one characterized by "words whose sound to some degree suggests their meaning."<sup>51</sup> The most obvious example is onomatopoeia which, strictly defined, refers to words that, in theory, "sound like what they mean."<sup>52</sup> The uses are limited in isolation as the sounds are typically described as "imitative." However, the chapter also points to another group of words called "phonetic intensives" whose sounds somehow, indirectly, connect with their meanings. The text provides a number of fascinating examples, such as, "An initial *st* often suggests strength, as in *staunch, stalwart, stout, sturdy, stable*" and a short *l* "often goes with the idea of smallness, as in *inch, imp, thin, slim, little, bit*."<sup>53</sup> The second category also refers to sound groupings, specifically those that the poet can use to create an effect that is "smooth and pleasant sounding (*euphonious*) or rough and harsh sounding (*cacophonous*). Vowels are often considered more pleasing and musical than consonants."<sup>54</sup>

The final two groupings refer to the way the poet controls the pace and movement in the lines. A poet can use sound to enhance meaning by "controlling the speed and movement of the lines by the choice and use of meter, by the choice and arrangement of vowel and consonant sounds, and by the disposition of pauses."<sup>55</sup> The text provides an example of how Tennyson slows down a traditional meter of iambic pentameter by his manipulation of accented syllables, both in terms of placement and the long vowel sounds that "the voice hangs onto."<sup>56</sup> The final strategy identified is a poet's ability to "control both sound and meter in such a way as to emphasize words that are important in meaning."<sup>57</sup> The use of this "metrical deviation to give emphasis to important words"<sup>58</sup> might be particularly helpful in the prose transition.

At this point the lessons can move to a study of poetry without dialogue. Because the eventual goal is to transition to a study of prose, particularly nonfiction, the poetry will remain focused on modern/contemporary free verse poetry with a clear speaker. Again, the goal will be for students to incorporate the study of the sound of the poem with their other analytical techniques as they discuss the meaning of the text. Varied exercises can be incorporated here to encourage students to think about sound and how the context of the

words alters the tone and, therefore, the meaning. Robert Hass illustrates one such exercise in his essay, "Listening and Making." To demonstrate the impact of options available in a free-verse poem, he presents multiple options for finding the "forms of closure" that might be right for the poem depending on the desired tone and emphasis. The main idea is that "for a thing to be complete, it has to change. And the kind of change indicates how you feel about that fact." He plays with a short poem by Whitman, "Farm Picture." By eliminating text and experimenting with ways to end the poem, he establishes a number of possible closures—one that emphasizes a sense of longing, one that incorporates an ironic balance, one that stresses loss, etc..<sup>59</sup> Incorporating these sorts of activities into this section will help students gain a fuller understanding of the varied sound elements and how they work together to create tone and meaning.

## Transition to Prose

At this point in the unit, students will transition from the study of poetry to the study of prose. Looking at poetry will have made them more sensitive to language usage, especially the sound of words. In an interview published in *WritersAsk*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni talks about the relevance of the study and writing of poetry as it relates to prose. She says that she is "very aware of the rhythm of prose—which is very different from the rhythm of poetry, but it's certainly there." She talks about how she is "conscious of the sounds of" her sentences and spends significant time reading them out loud to herself. If something sounds awkward, she continues working..<sup>60</sup> Jayne Anne Phillips speaks to the same issue when she describes herself as a "language-oriented writer" who began as a poet and transitioned to narrative. She says because of her beginnings, she has always "written line by line and with a real sense of the sound of a sentence and the rhythm of words against one another."<sup>61</sup> The fact that so many authors speak of the relevance of the connections between the study of writing and the study of prose indicates the essential correlation between the genres.

The ultimate goal of the unit is for students to apply these same strategies for identifying sound and its connection to meaning as they analyze longer excerpts of nonfiction presented on the AP exam. The selected pieces could be from any genre of nonfiction, but for this particular transition the logical focus would be a speech—written with the intention of a verbal presentation to a selected audience—or a narrative piece of prose. One activity that could help students see the connection between the prose and the poetry would be one that we did in seminar: student could take a short piece of prose and, without changing any words, put the prose into the form of a poem. Discussion could focus on the reasons for their organizational choices—what they heard in the text that made them end a line in a particular place, establish a balance or a variation, etc. Eventually, students will fully dissect a piece of nonfiction, incorporating their recognition of sound quality as it relates to the tone and meaning of the text. t.

## Activities

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### Activity One: What's Behind the Door?

Students will begin the unit by practicing their recognition of audible tones that come from "behind the door" as Frost would say. This activity can be completed in one or two class periods (on a ninety minute block).

As preparation for the first activity, students should read two of Frost's essays, "The Imagining Ear," and, "The Last Refinement of Subject Matter: Vocal Imagination." Students will come to class with copies they have

annotated while practicing close-reading techniques. Before discussing the articles, the instructor will play audio recordings of people speaking with tones that are recognizable—but words that are not. These recordings can be generated with the foreign languages teachers in one's school or compiled from other available resources. Students will recognize the tone that exists outside the denotation of the words.

Students will then go to their groups and discuss the Frost essays. They can practice the examples that Frost uses (like the changes in saying the word "no") to emphasize the fact that a particular word does not have an inherent tone; that tone is determined by context. They can also brainstorm and practice this same activity with words they come up with themselves. Other ideas include "hello," "yes," and "oh." Groups will share their ideas with the class.

An enrichment component would require students to "eavesdrop" for homework and come in with five sentences, phrases or words that they heard people say with a distinctive tone. They would present words without any identification of the tone, and classmates would try to verbalize the phrases with the appropriate tone. A comparison of classroom performance with the initially observed scenario would allow for the beginnings of connection with the written context—why the classmate spoke the sentence with a different tone, where applicable..

### **Activity Two: Are You Listening?**

The unit will continue with a transition to poetry. They will begin with "dialogue poems" to facilitate the transition between the vocalized sound and the intonation within a written context. This activity can be completed in one or two class periods.

As preparation for the second activity, students will practice close reading strategies and annotate Frost's poem "Home Burial." Students will work with partners to practice until they have a reading that they feel is most appropriate to the text. I would have my students work on this at the same time to avoid initial "stage fright" and nervousness interfering with the goals—yes, this will be a loud and chaotic day, and another instructor might want to change to better suit your class and school personality. When they have established their readings, I will ask them to identify the tones they used in the readings. They will then talk about what made them read those parts with that tone. The key here will be to force students into a text-based discussion—they can't just say, "Well, a woman who just lost a baby would be upset." No outside context allowed. .

At this point students may present their interpretations to the class, and the ways that the context contributes to the tone can be discussed and debated with the entire class, especially if there were differences in how the groups chose to read the parts. The final element of the discussion should focus on how the tone enhances the meaning of the text.

### **Activity Three: Sounds of Greatness**

Having become more sensitive to language usage through their study of poetry, students will move on to the study of how the relevance of sound can also play a role in prose analysis. In keeping with my overall strategy, this activity is based on one that I have used before in the classroom. I am shifting the focus from a simple analysis of diction to a more encompassing look at how the sound of the passage, generated with some of the same techniques used in poetry, significantly impacts the tone and, by extension, the meaning of the text. While the activity itself can be completed in two to three class periods, the preparatory work will take significant time.

For one, students should have completed *The Great Gatsby* prior to the activity. In keeping with the focus on a close, text-based reading without outside interference, students will complete the reading independently. Although probably considered heresy to most high school English teachers, the novel will be presented to students without historical or biographical context. We will not discuss Fitzgerald or the Roaring 20s; we won't do any posters about fashion of the period; we won't listen to any music. Students will analyze the prose the same way we have been practicing the poetry.

Further, this activity would benefit from the prior completion of exercises from the "Sound and Meaning" chapter in *Perrine*, presented in detail in the strategies section. Most of the categories explained in that chapter are also found in *Gatsby*. Students will be more familiar with those strategies if they have completed the readings and exercises in the *Perrine* text.

The activity itself is modeled after the requirements of the AP English Language and Composition exam and certainly could be modified to particular needs of different classes. On the day of the activity, students will be directed to focus on one short passage from the first chapter of *Gatsby*. The passage begins, "We walked through a high hallway into a bright rosy-colored space," and ends, "and the two young women ballooned slowly to the floor."<sup>62</sup> Students will analyze the passage in as much detail as possible, focusing on the identification of how the author uses poetic techniques to help establish a tone. They will, in turn, discuss how this tone contributes to the meaning of the text. At this point I am usually continuing to expand on what it means to discuss the meaning of the text, or the author's purpose. Students tend to focus on didactic or moralistic readings from their youth; they need continued practice in recognizing that a "theme" can be simply observational, emblematic of something that happens. Any technique they identify must be connected to the effect it creates in the passage, and how the establishment of that tone contributes to the author's purpose.

To begin, students will take the prose selection and write it in the fashion of a poem. They cannot eliminate or change any words. This manipulation of the text will encourage them to focus on a close reading of fiction that is comparable to the reading they have done previously with poetry. Using think-pair-share or another discussion group strategy, students can discuss the differences in how they chose to reposition the text. This should immediately focus them on some of the techniques identified in the *Perrine* text, particularly the way that the author emphasizes the words that are most important to the meaning. Why did they end a line where they did? Why break into a stanza? Any number of questions can guide them to thinking about what they saw—or heard—when they were looking at the text. The passage is also rich in other examples of the language generating sound. Students will identify examples of onomatopoeia in the "whip and snap of the curtains," along with other phonetic intensives, like the dresses that "were rippling and fluttering."<sup>63</sup> They may also consider the juxtaposition of the euphonious words, like "buoyed,"<sup>64</sup> with those that are more cacophonous. Students may also notice how the author manipulates the speed of the text. When Tom Buchanan enters the room and shuts the windows, the sentence reads much faster as he kills the wind that was creating the movement and the "ballooned"<sup>65</sup> effect.

These elements should be discussed in conjunction with other stylistic techniques, not arbitrarily isolated as a singular facet of language. Students will recognize diction, imagery, and even metonymy. For example, they will notice the sea imagery and the "frosted wedding cake."<sup>66</sup> They also tend to focus on the use of color in the passage—the "rosy-colored space," the "wine-colored rug," and the "gleaming white against the fresh grass outside."<sup>67</sup> Students will be asked to identify the tone of the passage, defending their choice with text. In keeping with the AP course requirements, I will then have them write a thesis that identifies how the author

uses these elements to achieve his purpose. They may choose to focus on issues of expectations, class, the American Dream, or the passage of time. Any number of ideas would be acceptable as long as they can be defended with text.

An enrichment component can require students to recreate the activity independently, without so much guidance. Divide students into their discussion groups. Divide the novel into the required number of segments and assign one to each group. Each group can select one short passage and start from the beginning, analyzing the text and constructing a thesis that explains how the author uses the language to create the tone and the meaning of the text. They can outline how they would write a paper and present their findings to the class.

## Annotated Bibliography

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"Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools Demographic Overview." *Charlotte Mecklenburg School System*. <http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/cmsdepartments/StudentPlacement/Pages/Charlotte-MecklenburgSchoolsDemographicOverview.aspx> (accessed July 10, 2009).

This website offers information on the specifics of the CMS school system.

Elbow, Peter, ed. *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing*. Mahwah, NM: Hermagoras Press, 1994.

An important resource that provides significant insight into the scholarly discussions of voice, tone, and the teaching of writing. Any English instructor would benefit from almost every essay in this collection.

Electronic Discussion Group-AP English Language. "Messages." *The College Board*, [http://lyris.collegeboard.com/read/my\\_forums/?forum=ap-english](http://lyris.collegeboard.com/read/my_forums/?forum=ap-english) (accessed July 10, 2009).

This discussion group offers outstanding suggestions for activities on a variety of topics. You can search for ideas or pose a question to the group. Although specifically tailored to AP English teachers, anyone can join and modify the suggestions.

Frost, Robert. *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, edited by Lawrance Thompson. New York: Holt, 1964.

Letters offer particular insight into Frost's views on sound, sentence function, tone.

Hammer, Langdon. "Frank Bidart and the Tone of Contemporary Poetry." In *On Frank*

Bidart: *Fastening the Voice to the Page (Under Discussion)*, edited by Liam Rector

and Tree Swenson, 7-21. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007.

This essay offers invaluable insight into the issue of tone—it was among my most helpful resources. Prior knowledge of the poet is not necessary..

—. "The Sound of Words." Presentation, Yale National Initiative Intensive Session,

New Haven, CT, July 6-18 2009.

The particular lecture referenced in the text focused on Sylvia Plath's "Daddy."

Hass, Robert. *Twentieth Century Pleasures: Prose on Poetry*. NY: Ecco Press, 1984.

The chapter "Listening and Making" provides detailed analysis on how rhythmic patterns of recurrence and variation contribute to the meaning of a poem.

Hollander, John. *Rhyme's Reason: A Guide to English Verse*. New Haven: Yale

University Press, 2001.

The section cited here references formal rhyme schemes and the significance of the fact that all poetry was originally oral.

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. "State Standards: AP English." *NCDPI*.

[www.dpi.state.nc.us/curriculum/languagearts/scos/2004/31apenglish](http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/curriculum/languagearts/scos/2004/31apenglish) (accessed July 30, 2009).

Quick links to academic standards in North Carolina.

Pinsky, Robert. *Democracy, Culture and the Voice of Poetry (The University Center for*

Human Values Series). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

While not directly focused on the study of sound, an informative text on the place of poetry in our culture. Does include a discussion of "Home Burial."

—. *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999.

The chapter on "Accent and Duration" will add to one's understanding of how sounds function as the energy and movement in a poem.

"Student Grade Distributions." *The College Board*. [http://professionals.collegeboard.](http://professionals.collegeboard.com/profdownload/STUDENT_GRADE_DISTRIBUTIONS_11-3.pdf)

[com/profdownload/STUDENT\\_GRADE\\_DISTRIBUTIONS\\_11-3.pdf](http://professionals.collegeboard.com/profdownload/STUDENT_GRADE_DISTRIBUTIONS_11-3.pdf) (accessed July

10, 2009). Provides information regarding student performance on AP exams.

## Student Resources

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Arp, Thomas R., and Greg Johnson. *Perrine's Literature - Structure, Sound, and Sense*.

Belmont: Thomson & Wadsworth, 2006.

Any edition of the Perrine *Sound and Sense* publications offers both students and teachers a variety of poetry, exercises, and detailed discussions of the sound and structure of poetry. This is my number one recommendation for instructors who want to focus on the sound of a text; the chapter on "Sound and Meaning" offers invaluable insight in how to present this information to students. The lessons in this chapter are referenced in the third activity.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2003.

A classic of American literature that offers tremendous opportunity for the study of the sound techniques emphasized in poetry.

Frost, Robert. *Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays Complete Poems 1949 in*

*The Clearing Uncollected Poems Plays Lectures, Essays, Stories, and Letters*. Library

of America Series. New York: Library of America, 1995.

Students can access the important essay, "The Imagining Ear," along with poems used in activities.

—. *The Collected Prose of Robert Frost*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2008.

This is a resource for students and teachers. Students can access the essay and "The Last Refinement of Subject Matter: Vocal Imagination," and teachers can read other prose pieces to better understand Frost's assessment of tone and language.

Johnson, Sarah Anne. "Structure and Rhythm." *Writers Ask* 26 (2005): 5.

One of myriad samples students could explore in this genre of journals, providing them with insight into how much a writer actually thinks about the specifics of language use. Also, for the purposes of this lesson, emphasizes the connection between poetry and prose.

—. "Use of Language." *Writers Ask* 32 (2006): 4.

Again, one of myriad samples students could explore in this genre of journals, providing them with insight into how much a writer actually thinks about the specifics of language use. Also, for the purposes of this lesson, emphasizes the connection between poetry and prose.

*Poets.org*. The Academy of American Poets. <http://poets.org>.

One of the better websites offering students and teachers access to poetry, information on authors, audio recordings, etc. Students can use this site to look for poems individually.

## Appendix 1: State Standards

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The unit meets the requirements for AP English Language and Composition as specified by the state of North Carolina. The specific goals addressed are as follows:

### Competency Goal 1

The learner will react to a variety of texts and media by drawing upon personal experiences, readings, and observations.

1.02 Respond to a variety of texts and media by defending, qualifying, or refuting the author's position to create a variety of formal and informal responses (e.g. journals, in-class writings, letters, memoirs, parodies), and projecting his/her voice in reflective writing.

### Competency Goal 2

The learner will use inquiry and research to inform an audience about complex subjects.

2.02 Respond to informational texts or media by: assessing the language, culture, structure, and historical perspective of the text to explain insights into language, and explaining significant connections among the speaker's/author's purpose, tone, biases, and the message for the intended audience.

### Competency Goal 1

The learner will analyze prose written in a variety of periods, disciplines, and rhetorical contexts.

4.01 Determine the author's intent/argument by identifying an author's use of rhetorical strategies and devices and the extent to which they impact the development of the theme (e.g., selection of detail, tone, mood, style, attitude, point-of-view, syntax, organization, diction, voice), and explaining the effectiveness of the author's use of language for the intended audience.

4.02 Analyze the effectiveness of the author's intent/argument by: evaluating the author's rhetorical purpose, synthesizing connections between text and historical and cultural context, and critiquing the use of literary devices (e.g., figurative language, irony, imagery).

### Competency Goal 5

The learner will develop a deeper understanding of representative literature with a specific emphasis on non-fiction.

5.02 Analyze the author's rhetorical strategies and linguistic choices by: understanding the author's intent, recognizing the author's rhetorical style, identifying the author's audience, and evaluating the effectiveness of such choices.



## Notes

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1. Electronic Discussion Group-AP English Language, "Messages," *The College Board*, [http://lyris.collegeboard.com/read/my\\_forums/?forum=ap-english](http://lyris.collegeboard.com/read/my_forums/?forum=ap-english) (accessed July 10, 2009).
2. "Student Grade Distributions," *The College Board*, [http://professionals.collegeboard.com/profdownload/STUDENT\\_GRADE\\_DISTRIBUTIONS\\_11-3.pdf](http://professionals.collegeboard.com/profdownload/STUDENT_GRADE_DISTRIBUTIONS_11-3.pdf) (accessed July 10, 2009).
3. "Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools Demographic Overview," *Charlotte Mecklenburg School System*, <http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/cmsdepartments/StudentPlacement/Pages/Charlotte-MecklenburgSchoolsDemographicOverview.aspx> (accessed July 10, 2009).
4. Langdon Hammer, "The Sound of Words" (presentation, Yale National Initiative Intensive Session, New Haven, CT, July 6-18 2009).
5. Peter Elbow, ed., *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing* (Mahwah, NJ: Hermagoras Press, 1952), xiii.
6. Langdon Hammer, "Frank Bidart and the Tone of Contemporary Poetry," in *On Frank Bidart: Fastening the Voice to the Page (Under Discussion)*, edited by Liam Rector and Tree Swenson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 7.
7. Robert Frost, *Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays Complete Poems 1949 in The Clearing Uncollected Poems Plays Lectures, Essays, Stories, and Letters*. Library of America Series (New York: Library of America, 1995), 688.
8. John Hollander, *Rhyme's Reason: A Guide to English Verse* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 4.
9. Elbow, *Landmark Essays*, xxvi.
10. *Ibid.*, 170
11. *Ibid.*, 23.
12. Hammer, "Frank Bidart," 8.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, 12.
15. Frost, *Collected Poems*, 687.
16. Robert Pinsky, *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 19.
17. Frost, *Collected Poems*, 687.
18. Elbow, *Landmark Essays*, xxi.
19. Hammer, "Frank Bidart," 12.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Elbow, *Landmark Essays*, 7.

22. Frost, *Collected Poems*, 688.
23. Robert Frost, *The Collected Prose of Robert Frost* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2008), 31.
24. Hammer, "Frank Bidart," 12.
25. Frost, *Collected Poems*, 687.
26. Frost, *Collected Prose*, 31.
27. Hammer, "Frank Bidart," 12.
28. Elbow, *Landmark Essays*, xl.
29. Hammer, "Frank Bidart," 8.
30. Pinsky, *Sounds*, 12.
31. Elbow, *Landmark Essays*, xxxix
32. Hammer, "Frank Bidart," 17.
33. Frost, *Collected Prose*, 32.
34. Pinsky, *Sounds*, 12.
35. *Ibid.*, 13.
36. *Ibid.*, 15.
37. Hammer, "Frank Bidart," 13.
38. Robert Hass, *Twentieth Century Pleasures: Prose on Poetry*. (NY: Ecco Press, 1984), 107 .
39. *Ibid.*, 112.
40. *Ibid.*, 113.
41. *Ibid.*, 118.
42. *Ibid.*, 119.
43. *Ibid.*, 120.
44. Frost, *Collected Prose*, 32.
45. *Ibid.*, 30.
46. Robert Frost, *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, edited by Lawrance Thompson (New
47. York: Holt, 1964), 81.

48. Ibid., 80.
49. Elbow, *Landmark Essays*, xxiii.
50. Frost, *Collected Poems*, 689.
51. Robert Pinsky, *Democracy, Culture and the Voice of Poetry (The University Center for*
52. Human Values Series) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 28.
53. Thomas R. Arp, and Greg Johnson, *Perrine's Literature - Structure, Sound, and Sense* (Belmont: Thomson & Wadsworth, 2006), 864.
54. Ibid., 865.
55. Ibid.
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57. Ibid.,868.
58. Ibid.,869.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid.,870.
61. Hass, *Twentieth Century*, 124.
62. Sarah Anne Johnson, "Structure and Rhythm," *Writers Ask* 26 (2005): 5.
63. Sarah Anne Johnson, "Use of Language," *Writers Ask* 32 (2006): 4.
64. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 12.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid.
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68. Ibid.
69. Ibid.

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