



Podium Points: Refining Tone, Emphasis, and Pace

By Victoria Reinsel, Jennie Eng, Rachel Hynes, Ashley Moss-Pham, and Krista McKim

Ford's Theatre Society and Montgomery County (MD) Public Schools
Secondary/ Three Periods

Introduction:

Students, learn how tone is essential to communicating the intended message of a speech (e.g. the author's or speaker's intended message). Students explore how to use tone to achieve their desired outcome (convince the audience of something, inspire the audience, etc.) Students also explore how and when to alter their pace, and discover how emphasizing different words can change the meaning of a text.

Learning Objectives:

- explain how emphasizing different words changes the intention of a phrase.
- understand and recognize the importance of pace in oratory.
- explain how and when to alter their own pace in oratory.
- explain how tone changes the meaning of a piece of text.

Guiding Questions:

- How do you use tone, pace and emphasis effectively?
- How does the speaker's purpose and intended message influence their choices for tone, pace and emphasis?

Common Core Standards:

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4](#) Present information, findings and supporting evidence clearly, concisely and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance and style are appropriate to purpose, audience and task.

Materials:

- A copy of *The Gettysburg Address* for each student.
- A copy of this section of Ronald Reagan's "Mr. Gorbachev, Tear Down This Wall!" speech:
 - o "General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization: Come here to this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"
- Tone and Objectives Worksheet
- Open Scene Worksheet

- Guide to Marking a Speech

Procedures:

- **Lesson Activity One: Operative Words**
 - Students will understand how emphasis changes the intention of a phrase.
- **Lesson Activity Two: Reading the Speech for Emphasis**
 - Students will find the operative words and thereby place emphasis on them in a speech.
- **Lesson Activity Three: Testing Different Paces**
 - Students will understand how pace informs the emotion of a phrase.
- **Lesson Activity Four: A Variety of Pace**
 - Working in pairs and as a whole group, students try out different paces and analyze the effect.
- **Lesson Activity Five: Pace's Influence on Volume and Diction**
 - Students experiment with changing their pace and notice its effect on volume and diction.
- **Lesson Activity Six: Tone to Communicate Meaning**
 - While practicing open scenes, students explore how tone affects meaning.

Lesson Activity One: Operative Words

Start by defining the term "Operative word":

- **Operative Word:** The most important word in a phrase, which explains the essence of a situation. Operative words are usually active verbs, nouns or meaningful adjectives, or contain imagery that connotes emotion. Avoid making prepositions, conjunctions, articles, etc. operative. Also, modern speakers have a tendency to over utilize pronouns as operatives—always see if there are other, more important words to use instead. Example: She was looking forward to a *relaxing* vacation. (Operative word: relaxing.)

Next, write on the board "**Go to the store and buy some milk and eggs.**" Tell students you will say this sentence in three different ways and ask them to listen for and be ready to tell you what purpose the differences served. (Alternately, you can select a student or students to read the sentence with the selected emphasis. Be sure to choose students who understand how to emphasize or this will fall flat.)

Read the sentence aloud in three different versions.

- Version 1: Emphasize the word "store."
- Version 2: Emphasize the word "buy."
- Version 3: Emphasize "milk" and "eggs."

Ask students what you did in Version 1 (i.e. you emphasized "store" or you made "store" your operative word). Then ask students why you did that. If they struggle

with this, prompt them to describe other locations you didn't want the listener to go to for the milk and eggs (e.g. a farm or a dumpster).

Repeat the process for versions 2 and 3. Point out that any of those three versions was valid—it depended on who the listener was (i.e. it would be different if the speaker was talking to a thief versus a person with a sweet tooth who would buy candy instead). Reinforce that you didn't make operative the small words with less significance (e.g. "to" and "and").

Lesson Activity Two: Reading the Speech for Emphasis

Put the students in pairs. Have one student in each pair read through *The Gettysburg Address*. Tell those students to emphasize every other word. It will go something like this:

- **Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent...**

Once they are finished, discuss as a group how it felt to the speakers to emphasize so many words. What was the effect of that delivery on the listeners? Did the listeners understand the message of the speech? Why or why not?

Back in pairs, have the listening student now be the speaker. Have the speakers read *The Gettysburg Address* emphasizing only the words "of", "to" and "the." Discuss as a class what emphasizing insignificant or common words does to a speech. Where did our focus go as listeners? Ask if they understood the meaning of the speech.

Back in pairs, have the students go through *The Gettysburg Address* on their own, and have them underline words that they think convey the key message of the speech aka the operative words. If there are words they do not understand in the speech, have them look those words up and write out the definitions.

Next, tell the paired students to read ONLY their underlined words, as though those words are the speech. It may be only verbs, or only adjectives, and that's okay. Now ask, "Did you understand the message? How is it different without the other words?"

As a whole class, ask for volunteer pairs to read the whole speech aloud, emphasizing the operative words they underlined. The pairs can alternate sentences or paragraphs.

Discuss as a class why certain words were emphasized. Were the operative words selected? Reflect as a group, asking, "Why is it important to know the operative words of your speech?"

If working on original speeches, ask the students:

- How will today's lesson help them identify operative words in their own speeches?

- If they cannot identify the operative words in their original speeches what does that signify?

Lesson Activity Three: Testing Different Paces

Write on the board the John F. Kennedy, Jr., quote: **“Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.”** Have three students come in front of the class.

- **The first student** should read the quote very fast. Ask the students, “What did you hear? What did you feel?”
- **The second student** should read the quote very slowly. Ask the students, “What did you hear? What did you feel?”
- **The third student** should read the quote at a moderate pace. Ask the class, “Which pace was easiest to understand? Which pace made the words seem important? Which pace did you prefer?”

Lesson Activity Four: A Variety of Pace

With the entire class, discuss how using a variety of paces might be effective:

- What happens if you have the same pace throughout your entire speech? Is that exciting or boring to an audience?
- What engages the audience more? The same pace or a variety? Why?
- When might it be valuable to speed up or slow down? If you wanted to get your audience pumped up, you might speak a bit faster. If you wanted to draw attention to your message, you might slow down or pause.

Give each student a copy of the Ronald Reagan speech quote. Explain that this speech was controversial because these words had the possibility of offending the U.S.S.R., but President Reagan was determined to speak them.

Discuss the punctuation in the speech, and look for clues that might tell the speaker when to speed up and when to slow down. Does an exclamation point signify a phrase should be said more passionately and maybe a bit faster? Do the commas serve to slow you down? Why does Reagan express his main point, “tear down this wall,” in monosyllables? (Hint: ask a student to read that phrase giving equal emphasis to each of the four words.)

Have the students take turns speaking the quote at different speeds. Ask them each time, “What effect did pace have here? Do we feel excited? Do we feel reassured? Has the pace brought us in or turned us off?”

Lesson Activity Five: Pace’s Influence on Volume and Diction

When pace is off, volume and diction are affected too. Using the two quotes you’ve used already (JFK Jr., and President Reagan), have your students choose one to practice pace on.

In pairs, have them speed up and slow down throughout the quote. Ask their partner to pay attention to how volume and diction are affected. Switch partners.

Come back to the group. Reflect as a group, asking, “What effects did your pace have on volume and diction?” The students can share their discoveries.

Lesson Activity Six: Tone to Communicate Meaning

Ask the students to define tone and give some examples of it. Either come up with a class definition or give the following definition: verbal/vocal dimension of oratory; the musicality of the line; the primary vehicle for our expression of our feelings and intentions. Explain to students that we communicate meaning and intention through tone. We use tone to inspire action, thoughts and feelings in others. Great Orators understand that tone is our ally and our tool to get the audience to think or feel or DO something. If the students are familiar with rhetorical appeals, it would be worth mentioning the relationship between each appeal and tone.

Using the simple phrases, “Come on” have five students use different tones to communicate five tones to the audience:

1. Expressing mild impatience
2. Inviting
3. Coaxing/pleading
4. Encouraging
5. Expressing anger

Repeat the same process with the phrases: “No thanks;” “Yeah, right;” “No kidding;” “I’ll try;” “It’s possible;” and “Why not?”

Break up the class into pairs. Each pair should devise different scenarios for their chosen open scene, by filling out the front of the handout. They should practice their scene and then perform it in front of the class. After each performance have the class guess the context of the scenario. The audience should explain their reasoning for their guess. Lead a discussion on how tone helped students infer the scenario. Also ask how tone might change over the course of a scene or speech.

Assessment:

Using the guide to remind them of what they have learned, have students mark their speech for tone, emphasis and pace.