**Purpose and Tone of a text**

Once you understand the requirements of a written text, you're ready to begin thinking about the essay. What is its purpose? For what audience will it be written? What tone and point of view will you use? Later on, you may modify your decisions about these issues. That's fine. But you need to understand the way these considerations influence your work in the early phases of the writing process.

**Purpose**

Start by clarifying to yourself the essay's broad purpose. What do you want the essay to accomplish? The papers you write in college are usually meant to inform or explain, to convince or persuade, and sometimes to entertain. In practice, writing often combines purposes. You might, for example, write an essay trying to convince people to support a new trash recycling program in your community. But before you win readers over, you most likely would have to explain something about current waste-disposal technology. When purposes combine in this way, the predominant one influences the essay's content, organization, pattern of development, emphasis, and language. Assume you're writing about a political campaign. If your primary goal is to entertain, to take a gentle poke at two candidates, you might use the comparison-contrast pattern to organize your essay. You might, for example, start with several accounts of one candidate's "foot-in-mouth disease" and then describe the attempts of the other candidate, a multimillionaire, to portray himself as an average Joe. Your language, full of exaggeration, would reflect your objective. But if your primary purpose is to persuade readers that the candidates are incompetent and shouldn't be elected, you might adopt a serious, straightforward style. Selecting the argumentation-persuasion pattern to structure the essay, you might use one candidate's gaffes and the other's posturings to build a case that neither is worthy of public office.

**Tone**

Just as your voice may project a range of feelings, your writing can convey one or more tones, or emotional states: enthusiasm, anger, resignation, and so on. Tone isn't a decorative adornment tacked on as an afterthought. Rather, tone is integral to meaning. It permeates writing and reflects your attitude toward yourself, your purpose, your subject, and your readers. In everyday conversation, vocal inflections, facial expressions, and body gestures help convey tone. In writing, how do you project tone without these aids? You pay close attention to sentence structure and word choice. Determining your tone should come early in the writing process because the tone you select influences the sentences and words you use later. Sentence structure refers to the way sentences are shaped. Although the two paragraphs that follow deal with exactly the same subject, note how differences in sentence structure create sharply dissimilar tones:

*During the 1960s, many inner-city minorities considered the police an occupying force and an oppressive agent of control. As a result, violence grew against police in poorer neighborhoods, as did the number of residents killed by police.*

*An occupying force. An agent of control. An oppressor. That's how many inner-city minorities in the '60s viewed the police. Violence against police soared. Police killings of residents mounted.*

Informative in its approach, the first paragraph projects a neutral, almost dispassionate tone. The sentences are fairly long, and clear transitions ("During the 1960s"; "As a result") mark the progression of thought. But the second paragraph, with its dramatic, almost alarmist tone, seems intended to elicit a strong emotional response; its short sentences, fragments, and abrupt transitions reflect the turbulence of earlier times.

**Word** **choice** also plays a role in establishing the tone of an essay. Words have **denotations**, neutral dictionary meanings, as well as **connotations**, emotional associations that go beyond the literal meaning. The word **beach**, for instance, is defined in the dictionary as "a nearly level stretch of pebbles and sand beside a body of water." This definition, however, doesn't capture individual responses to the word. For some, beach suggests warmth and relaxation; for others, it calls up images of hospital waste and sewage washed up on a once-clean stretch of shoreline.

Since tone and meaning are tightly bound, you must be sensitive to the emotional nuances of words. Think about some of the terms denoting adult *human female: woman, chick, broad, member of the fair sex*. While all of these words denote the same thing, their connotations-the pictures they call up-are sharply different. Similarly, in a respectful essay about police officers, you wouldn't refer to *cops, narcs, or flatfoots;* such terms convey a contempt inconsistent with the tone intended. Your words must also convey tone clearly; otherwise, meaning is lost. Suppose you're writing a satirical piece criticizing a local beauty pageant. Dubbing the participants "livestock on view" leaves no question about your tone. But if you simply referred to the participants as "attractive young women," readers might be unsure of your attitude. Remember, readers can't read your mind, only your paper.