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A Cold Manipulation of Language

English language fascinates and inspires some of us. Through close examination we learn about the subtle changes and nuances of language—those alterations that authors make to elicit a compelling response from a reader throughout a lengthy text, say, a book or novel. Sophisticated readers recognize the tone shifts, the waves of emotions, the power of the language. Some students, however, see a monotone, flat line similar to an EKG of a corpse.

Textbooks and grammar worksheets do not adequately convey to students how readers or listeners are shaped by the language of the writer. The best way to help students understand the emphasis of a dash or another device is to see one used during a suspenseful moment in a dramatic selection. It is up to the teacher to select dramatic works that generate internal conflicts for students, because those literary selections will make them sit up and pay attention to the language that is in front of them. Once they are aware of their physical responses, most readers will note the language and yearn to figure out the ultimate question: “How did the author do that?”

A useful text to illustrate that authors control language for an audience is In Cold Blood by Truman Capote, so I always start my AP English Language and Composition course with that text. Activities that teach tone, diction, and syntax are used throughout my Capote unit to help the students understand and master concepts that might be poorly understood. I introduce the Aristotelian model of rhetoric (audience—subject—speaker) with this book, as Capote carries the students through his real (or invented) personal saga with Perry Smith and Dick Hickock. Students appreciate the complications that In Cold Blood presents, and they enjoy examining the language that Capote uses to change readers’ perceptions of the events as he takes them through an account of the true story. One thing is always guaranteed during this unit: no one falls asleep!

Teaching Nonfiction and In Cold Blood

With nonfiction, especially imaginative nonfiction, such as Capote’s In Cold Blood, the question of “What is the author’s purpose?” can be challenging. Maybe there is a global or local message to convey as in Fast Food Nation. Perhaps the author wants to prompt an action or generate a movement such as Booker T. Washington’s Up from Slavery. Or, as in Capote’s case, perhaps the writer has so many agendas that the discussion of intentions is endless. Truman Capote wanted to break away from fiction to awaken the world to a new genre by melding imaginative writing with journalistic reporting, so he wrote a nonfiction book—with a little flair. With his friend Harper Lee, he investigated the true account of the murder of Herbert Clutter’s family in Holcomb, Kansas, in 1959. Capote befriended the family, friends, and killers of the Clutter family to tell this horrific story. He presents the events chronologically with his “unnamed narrator” revealing everything from a “detached” viewpoint; however, it becomes apparent in Part II that the killers, or “Persons Unknown,” are shown some sympathy by the author. Frequently he presents one murderer, Perry Smith, as a victim instead of a...
The murder is quickly detailed in Part I and forgotten as the killers are described and followed on their trek across the country in a failed attempt to escape capture. The author gradually shows Smith’s handicaps and then begins detailing his past; before readers realize what is happening, they find themselves feeling some sympathy for this cold killer. Capote’s manipulation is gradual, but every reader recognizes it by the time he reaches Part II.

I do not warn students that this shift in perspective is coming. In fact, I enjoy watching them discover it on their own, because it is the best example I know of an author’s deliberate manipulation of an audience. When students realize that Capote is showing kindness toward Smith, they are surprised, just as everyone else was when the book was released after Smith’s and Hickock’s executions. Without any encouragement from me, students ask, “Why did Capote do this? He just showed us the details of the murders in Part I.”

That curiosity is a springboard for a discussion into HOW? How did Capote manipulate the reader to feel kindness toward Smith? This natural progression of curiosity—thanks to Capote—provides me an opportunity to show students how language can be controlled for a specific purpose.

Lessons to Get There

Through questioning and Socratic seminars, students arrive at the conclusion that Capote feels sorry for Smith because he connects to him on some level. In Chapter 1, Capote’s presentation is a good example of an author who starts by carrying readers down one path (presenting the Clutters as an ordinary country family before and during a horrible death) only to reroute the reader to a different path (presenting one killer as a benign, abused boy-like man with mental and physical handicaps). Capote leaves Dick Hickock, a cruel brute, out there to take the fall for the murders, only to shock the reader later (spoiler alert) with the revelation that it was Perry, the child-man for whom we felt some sympathy and understanding, who murdered the Clutters “in cold blood.” When students are put in a circle and asked to discuss the events of the story in a Socratic style, they arrive at some of these conclusions without my aid, and those conclusions are more powerful than a worksheet or lecture.

Capote’s ultimate purposes for writing In Cold Blood can be discussed for days. What was Capote’s true purpose in presenting Smith as a damaged child? Did he connect to Smith and feel sympathy for him? Did Capote want to toy with an audience, or was he presenting his real conflicted feelings? Did Capote want to create a new genre?

Students often argue that Capote wants readers to understand Smith. Some will research and support the notion that he felt romantically attached to Perry Smith. Claims such as these must be proven through evidence in the text, and that takes a lot of work on the student’s part. The ending of the book suggests another purpose as the narrator attends the execution and blatantly opposes the action to make a clear political statement against the death penalty. By the time my students reach the end of the book, everyone agrees that Capote had an agenda far beyond detailing the events of a murder in Holcomb, Kansas. Of that, we can be certain.

While reading the book, I incorporate lessons to highlight tone, diction, syntax, attitude, and style to explain rhetoric since these are the tools that create the manipulation of language (see examples in the next section). My primary objective is to teach my audience how these fundamental devices can enable them, as writers, to have a desired effect on their own audiences. Students need to understand audience and what their readers demand, but they also need to understand how diction and syntax can alter the tone of a paragraph; I also want them to recognize that the tone can shift and change throughout a selection—just as it does in In Cold Blood.

Since In Cold Blood walks the line between fiction and nonfiction, it makes an excellent study for a class that wants to discuss “purpose” and “audience,” as the author deliberately takes readers where Capote wants them to go—into the mind of Perry Smith, a man that he possibly cared for more than we want to know about. He confuses readers as he relates affection for Smith, aversion to Hickock, and indifference for the family. This makes the
students ask, without prompting, “What is this author doing?” They read along with the text and recognize the nuances of the language while examining the passages. Capote said in an interview in the New York Times, “in the nonfiction novel [one] can also manipulate; if I put something in which I don’t agree about I can always set it in a context of qualification without having to step into the story myself to set the reader straight” (qtd. in Plimpton). My class can follow the chronology of the events and the way the tone shifts to trace how the “narrator” changes his opinions about the people involved in the case as he continues his investigation. This shift is obvious in the tone and style of Capote’s writing. The study of this book enables a class to examine an author’s use of language—not only so the students can understand his methods, but so they can understand the power of these tools for their own writing. Students practice writing passages in which they alter the tone for a specific audience and shift that tone within a single work. Finally, they start to recognize the depth of language a little bit more.

Highlighting Authorial Choices

First published in 1956, one of Capote’s short stories, “A Christmas Memory,” serves as a nice comparison/contrast piece for In Cold Blood when analyzing tone as a rhetorical device (see fig. 1). At least part of Capote’s intent with his descriptions is to create verisimilitude that encourages readers to visualize the characters. In his fiction and in In Cold Blood, he details the people he wanted the readers to see. However, the paragraph about the eccentric old aunt in “A Christmas Memory” is different from the description of Herbert Clutter in the more journalistic account (however blighted) of In Cold Blood. Both are vivid portrayals, but the description of Buddy’s aunt includes more adjectives and different syntax. Inserted commas for the aunt allow the author to add more color; the dashes in the second selection from In Cold Blood allow him to add more details. “Decisions about formal and informal language, the use of narrative or quotations, the tone of familiarity or objectivity” are important aspects of rhetoric that go beyond lessons on grammar (Roskelly 9). The students get to observe how a writer uses punctuation correctly as a tool to change the tone. After looking at the punctuation, the class can examine the diction, syntax, and tone, all leading to the author’s purpose for each piece of literature.

Comparing and contrasting samples of In Cold Blood to other works by Capote helps students see how his intentions vary as he switches from fiction to nonfiction. The style of both varies just enough to generate a good discussion about tone and attitude because the short story is more saccharine than anything in In Cold Blood, except, perhaps, the description of Nancy Clutter. The voice is far more detached in the second selection, and the diction is less expressive. The syntax, too, is less complex. The clauses differ enough to generate discussion. Students are able to deduce the reasons behind the differences for these authorial strategies.

Since Truman Capote wrote Breakfast at Tiffany’s and In Cold Blood, it is also a useful selection for showing students how one author can narrate in a different voice. Students can compare selections of
the novella to *In Cold Blood* to examine the differences in the author's writing style. A teacher could also show sections of the Audrey Hepburn movie, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, to compare the tone of the romantic movie to Capote's story, which is far darker than the film. However, that takes up more class time than the lesson involving “A Christmas Memory.” Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's* has a completely different quality and nature, however, and provides good discussion regarding purpose, audience, and intent.

**Examining Pathos**

Once students start to see a definite preference in Capote for Smith, a good activity to discuss *pathos*, or appeals to emotion, is a comparison of Smith and Hickock, the two murderers. I typically discuss the details that are included about Smith—his sister's letter, his father's interview, etc.—and how that information is used to convey that Smith was an abused, ignored child with little hope or intelligence. Readers quickly infer that Smith suffers from some form of mental illness as the narrator includes dreams about a bird that visits Smith. Information about Hickock is scarce in comparison. These included details illustrate a lot because “[w]hen writers draw on the emotions and interests of readers, and highlight them, they use *pathos*, the most powerful appeal” (Roskelly 10; italics in original). The lack of details regarding Hickock speaks just as loudly, if students are encouraged to notice it. I ask students to keep a chart of information for both killers in the middle of Part II (see fig. 2). It does not take long for them to see Capote's inequitable treatment of them, and then the students can discuss what that means. Once Capote's favoritism of Perry is noted, students can pull paragraphs to analyze tone, syntax, and diction to find more examples of partiality.

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**FIGURE 2. In Cold Blood**  
Name _____________________

**PART II: PERSONS UNKNOWN**

Directions: Use this chart to record the stylistic differences in Capote’s writing as he describes Dick Hickock and Perry Smith in Part II. In each column, provide textual evidence of these distinctions, note the stylistic device used, and write any thoughts you have about these notes. At the bottom, please summarize your annotations and draw a conclusion about Capote’s purpose in his presentation of these men. Stylistic devices to look for include details, tone, figurative language, diction, and syntax. I have provided two examples. Please write down the page number next to the quote.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STYLISTIC DEVICE</th>
<th>DICK HICKOCK</th>
<th>STYLISTIC DEVICE</th>
<th>PERRY SMITH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Detail</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syntax—use of dashes and italicized word</td>
<td>Perry says, “Dick, if he knew Dick, and he did—now he did—would spend it right away on vodka and women” (119).&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;This detail presents Dick as a womanizer and a drunk. The syntax (dashes/italics) shows Perry as being wise and superior. He’s more likable than Dick.</td>
<td>Detail</td>
<td>Otto’s drawings of Perry: “Perry’s expression, his look of flawless fulfillment, of beatitude, as though at last, and as in one of his dreams, a tall yellow bird had hauled him to heaven” (120).&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;In this entire chapter, Otto draws portraits of Perry. Does that mean that he’s worthy of being drawn? Is he overtly attractive, or somehow precious?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figurative Language</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Strong adjectives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syntax—dramatic pause with “as though at last,” almost wistful</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary of observations: (What did you notice?)

Conclusion of observations: (What do you think accounts for the differences?)
The Value

Through these lessons students recognize how to engage with a text and question an author by recognizing that writers have agendas other than making money or getting published. The primary objective for me is to teach my readers and writers the command of voice. I want students to understand how it can empower their writing; likewise, students must understand how uncontrolled voice can hinder what writers are trying to communicate. Capote was castigated for his attempts at making a martyr out of Smith when he was obviously a brutal killer of an innocent family that lived on the plains of Kansas. This result is a reminder of the power of rhetoric. Students must learn to question writers.

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The final job is for students to learn how to manipulate their rhetorical devices for their own purposes. But that, I dare say, is another lesson.

Works Cited


READWRITE THINK CONNECTION Lisa Storm Fink, RWT
See the lesson plan “What’s the Purpose?: Examining a Cold Manipulation of Language,” which is based on the above article and written by the same author. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/what-purpose-examining-cold-30653.html

Dog Moon Turkey

The thick gristle of the wing bone of the wild turkey lifting its gaggle off the ground, the dog in a hopeful ecstasy of chase.

That’s what I’d arrange to be tomorrow if tomorrow were to choose me as target.

A spill of bluets on the grass now, dropped last night by a moon carrying more milk than its bucket holds.

The turkey thinks it’s beautiful. The moon plays Jackson Pollock on the grass.
The dog chases what it knows it can’t catch.

—Roger Mitchell
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