Using Voice Modulation and Tone Effectively

Learning the Skill

When you are giving a speech, how you use your voice is as important as the words you say. Developing good speaking skills involves becoming aware of your voice. This lesson will help you modulate, or vary, your voice tone, pitch, and volume.

Follow these guidelines to use voice modulation effectively:

• Whether you have a naturally high or low speaking voice, varying your pitch frequently throughout a presentation will keep your audience engaged. Nothing lulls an audience to sleep faster than listening to someone speak in a monotone.

• Speak loudly enough for everyone in the room to hear you. A good rule to remember is to project your voice as though you are speaking to the person in the back row. You will lose your audience if you speak too loudly for long periods of time, though. Raise and lower your voice to stress key points in your speech.

• Vary the speed of your presentation. Speaking too slowly will bore your audience, but do not speak so rapidly that they cannot understand you. Pausing before or after certain words will alert your audience to key points in your speech.

• Your voice tone should reflect the meaning and importance of your words. Use a serious tone of voice when speaking about a serious subject, and use a more lighthearted tone if your presentation is entertaining. For example, if you say “she won first prize,” say it with enthusiasm. If you use the word heartbroken, your voice tone should indicate sorrow or sadness.

• Practice modulating your pitch, volume, and speed, and using different voice tones in front of your family. Ask for feedback. If possible, record your speech and assess your performance.

Practicing the Skill

Directions: Read the speech below about griots in West Africa. Then answer the questions that follow.

Who holds the memory in your family? Do you have a grandparent or great aunt who seems to have a gift for remembering everything that ever happened in the history of your family? In West Africa, that person is called a griot. Griots keep the family history of everyone in a village, often going back several centuries. They pass this information along from one generation to the next.

Griots can be either male or female. They began to appear in African kingdoms that arose during the A.D. 900s to the 1100s, such as Mali, Senegal, and Gambia. Griots kept their
memories in both word and musical form. As they recounted and often sang the important stories in their villages, they were much more than historians. They were entertainers, musicians, advisers to royalty, messengers, and "praise singers."

Much of what is known about West African history came from oral traditions. Griots kept the history of West African societies alive in their own languages. Over time, these oral histories became epics—long stories of great importance.

In 1976 African American author Alex Haley published *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, a book describing his family's history. In researching his book, Haley traveled to Juffure, a village in Gambia where his ancestor Kunta Kinte was kidnapped and sold into slavery some 200 years earlier. There, Haley met with a griot in the village. He described how the griot recited the history of the Kinte clan.

"[S]pilling from the griot's head came an incredibly complex Kinte clan lineage that reached back across many generations. . . . The old griot had talked for nearly two hours. . . . I sat as if I were carved of stone. My blood seemed to have [thickened]. This man whose lifetime had been in this back-country African village had no way in the world to know that he had just echoed what I had heard all through my boyhood years on my grandma's front porch in Henning, Tennessee. . . ."

Griots' roles have changed over time. Today they may perform on TV and radio, record CDs, or play in concerts. Some reinterpret traditional songs or write new songs about village life. In West Africa, griots still perform at important ceremonies, but they also play their music worldwide.

Some things, however, do not change. Although griots play an important role in West African culture, they rank low on the social scale. In Mali, griots form a special caste called *jélé*. Salif Keita, a singer who achieved worldwide fame during the 1990s, is a descendant of thirteenth-century Malian ruler Sundiata Keita. Yet Keita has been scorned by his Malinke clan because he is a griot.

1. **Expressing** Read this sentence from the speech: *In researching his book, Haley traveled to Juffure, a village in Gambia where his ancestor Kunta Kinte was kidnapped and sold into slavery some 200 years earlier.*

Which of the following would be the BEST voice tone to use for the word **kidnapped**?

A. disbelief  
B. horror  
C. eager  
D. impressed

2. **Specifying** Read this sentence from the speech: *Yet Keita has been scorned by his Malinke clan because he is a griot.* Where would you place a pause in this sentence? Explain your answer.
3. Applying Read the following sentence: *I sat as if I were carved of stone.*

Try using different tones of voice as you recite the sentence. How does it add to or change the meaning of the words?

Applying the Skill

Directions: With a partner, you are going to take turns reading the speech about *griots.* Pay particular attention to modulating your voice and tone to increase audience interest.

1. Before delivering the speech, take turns reciting the following sentence from the speech, varying voice tone, volume, pitch, and speed: *Some things, however, do not change.*

Take turns telling your partner how you as a listener are affected by his or her various interpretations.

2. After your partner has delivered his or her speech, offer two suggestions for ways he or she can make the speech more effective by using voice modulation.

Assessment Checklist

Assess your speech using the checklist below:

- [ ] Varied pitch, speed, and volume frequently
- [ ] Spoke loudly enough for everyone to hear
- [ ] Used pauses to stress certain points
- [ ] Spoke slowly enough for everyone to follow; varied the pace
- [ ] Used a tone of voice appropriate for the meaning of the words