

# SHORE SCRIPTS

## HOW TO CONVEY TONE IN YOUR SCREENPLAY

### INTRODUCTION

#### What is tone?

In its simplest form, tone is the feeling that a piece of writing evokes in the reader. It's the mood, atmosphere, and emotion being experienced by the audience in reaction to the story you're telling. Much in the same way that you can indicate tone in your voice, you can use selective word choice and sentence structure to evoke tone in your writing. Often, it's not what you say, it's the way that you say it.

Tone also underscores the genre of your story too. You can't exactly have a tense thriller which is comedic in tone as the two different attitudes conflict with one another, but you can have a tense thriller that's gripping, suspenseful, shocking, or provocative, which are all similar attitudes, just all slightly different. Similarly, a light-hearted family comedy probably isn't going to be very successful if it makes the audience feel embittered, horrified, depressed, or empty. Think of tone as a way to enhance the genre, not work against it.

#### Why is it important?

Filmmaking is all about creating an emotional response in the audience. You're trying to make the viewers feel, react, and connect in a certain way throughout your story. If you don't, you're going to have a flat and forgettable film that ultimately feels unrewarding, and who wants that, right?

Not only is it necessary to connect with the audience, you need to connect with the reader too. They're the first point of engagement during the filmmaking process, and if you can't connect with whoever's reading your story, there's every chance you're not going to connect with the people making, financing, distributing, or watching it either.

Tone is a stylistic choice too, so it's also going to be a reflection of your unique writing voice, meaning it's what's going to help your script stand out amongst thousands of others. Experimenting with tone will help strengthen your storytelling abilities, find creative ways to

engage, excite, and surprise the audience, and it'll also help you develop your writing voice. We're going to look at several means of creating tone in your screenplay, so let's get started!

## GENRE

Let's look at the most obvious way that you'll use tone in your script – to enhance the genre. You probably won't need to think about this too hard at first, as it's fairly straight forward, but it's also worth using this section to double check that you're not missing simple ways to reflect the tone of the genre here. A reader needs to be able to tell both from the first couple of pages of your script. If they can't, you may have problems.

It's probably a lot easier to figure out which types of tones won't work with your chosen genre. As mentioned in the intro, clashing tones won't do your script any favours; a comical look at rape or a feel good movie about genocide (extreme examples, but you get the point), are going to be so tonally off that they're going to be very hard to market, which in turn, means the scripts are unlikely to sell either.

Instead, think about all the emotions that genre fans will expect to experience while watching your movie. (If you know what they want first, then you can later decide if you want to play around with those expectations or not, so it isn't always a case of delivering exactly what you think is desired) Understandably, you may be writing a mixed-genre piece or a sub-genre that's very niche, and also consider that some genres will take the viewers on a bigger rollercoaster of emotions more than others, so yes, the tone may very well shift throughout your story, but that's fine.

To get you started, here's a list of common tones to use (and not to use) when writing each genre. Of course, there's lots of room to further develop these suggestions, to bend the genre, and to add something new. This is just a simple guide to help you visualise the basics.

GENRE	TONES THAT WORK	TONES THAT DON'T WORK
Action	Persistent, confident, exciting	Leisurely, passive, solemn
Adventure	Inoffensive, hopeful, playful, inspiring	Skeptical, spiritless, intimate
Comedy	Humorous, optimistic, light	Horrific, depressing, aggressive, heavy
Drama	Gripping, compelling, melancholy, dark	Dull, ordinary, indifferent
Horror	Frightening, gruesome, shocking	Peaceful, pleasant, uplifting
Romance	Emotional, heart-warming, touching	Bleak, joyless, rushed, scary

Thriller

Serious, matter-of-factly, tense,  
urgent, mysterious

Comedic, subdued, laborious

Why are we listing obvious tones and their corresponding genres? We're doing this to get you into the right mindset. You won't know how best to elicit an emotion in your writing if you don't first know exactly which emotion you're attempting to spark in the audience/reader.

## EXERCISES

Work your way through these exercises. If you come across any that aren't relevant, it's okay to skip ahead, as some will focus on **before** the writing process begins, and some only apply during the **rewriting** process.

1: What **emotions** do you want the audience to feel when watching your movie? You can be as general or specific as you want. Ideally, you should have a good idea of how you want the viewers to be feeling during *each and every scene*, but if you're not at that stage just yet, this could be a good way to start plotting the rollercoaster of emotions you want to take them on.

2. Does that list of emotions fit the **genre** you're writing in? This is an easy yes or no question that should indicate that either your story better suits another genre or that you need to alter the tone to be more in-keeping with genre expectations. Looking at your list, are there any emotions that you could play with, twist, or reverse in order to create an unexpected emotion, but that is still in harmony with the tone of the movie?

3. If you're already aware of your own **writing style**, now might be a good time to ask whether that too is a good fit for the genre you've decided to write in. You may have a dry, fact-like style of prose that likes to take time to savour the details, in which case, you may not be the best person to write that fast-paced, punchy, comedy idea that you have. Similarly, do you like to inject your sense of humour into your writing and engage with the reader on that level? In which case, perhaps you need to be aware that you might not be able to resist the urge to do this while writing a hard-boiled crime movie. Be aware of your strengths and weaknesses. Do you need to adapt your writing style or will the genre emphasize your style?

## WORD CHOICE

Tone needs to be clear from page one, two at the very latest. Yes, again, the tone can change throughout your story. I mean, not every horror starts off with a gruesome murder or a jump scare on the very first page, but you do need to be able to give the reader some idea of what they're getting into and as soon as possible. Using scene description is a great way to do this.

While it's not difficult to understand; a horror needs to be scary, a comedy needs to make you laugh, a drama takes you on an emotional rollercoaster etc., tone can be, and is, difficult to implement in your writing. It's often said that screenwriters will spend countless hours going over their work looking for just the right words to use, and establishing the tone is the reason why.

Be aware of the language you use. The way you word a sentence can create very different reactions. Word choice, punctuation, sentence length, rhythm, and description all come into play here.

Every **word** conveys a slightly different feeling.

'Scathing' is more cutting than 'Bitter', 'Hostile' is more aggressive than 'Unfriendly', and 'Exuberant' is more intense than 'Merry' etc.

Pay attention to **rhythm**.

"She makes her way over towards a table with picked-over food and scans the room for anyone she knows" feels more deliberate and focused than "Awkwardly nibbling the buffet. She glances around."

**Sentence length** can also alter the tone.

Rather than "She wore a yellow dress", adding in some context and emotions drastically changes the tone, "Her mother hated yellow, so on the morning of her funeral, she put on her sunniest yellow dress."

## EXERCISE

Practice writing in different tones. Here are 5 neutral sentences:

- She has green eyes.
- George looks at Graham.
- They walk around the estate.
- Vincent throws the ball to Ken.
- They laugh at the clown.

And here are 5 different tones:

- Hostile
- Sarcastic
- Romantic
- Magical
- Sinister

Rewrite each of the neutral sentences in each of the different tones. Get creative, expressive, and precise, but the rewritten sentence must still convey the same idea. If something comes across as being vague or could easily be interpreted in more than one manner, you're not working hard enough.

## DIALOGUE

Dialogue can heavily influence the tone of a scene, not only by the words that your characters say, but in the way in which it's delivered. This isn't a prompt to start heavily dictating how your characters talk to the actors by overusing parentheticals in your script or by directing every single moment that a character makes, but it is a prompt to think about shaping tone by again paying attention to speech patterns, syntax, grammar, as well as the language that you use too.

Take these iconic lines. Could they be anything other than from a horror?

"What do you want?"

"Your blood all over me." – *When a Stranger Calls*

"I get this ache... and I thought it was for sex, but it's to tear everything to fucking pieces." – *Ginger Snaps*

"I have centuries to discover the things that make you whimper." – *Hellraiser 3*

"I see dead people." – *The Sixth Sense*

"Why are you doing this?"

"Because you were home." – *The Strangers*

Similarly, with these crime movie lines. Note the threatening undertones that help create the tone.

"As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a gangster." – *Goodfellas*

"You don't make up for your sins in church. You do it on the streets. You do it at home. The rest is bullshit and you know it." – *Mean Streets*

"Now if I ever, I mean ever, see you here again you die, just like that." – *Carlito's Way*

"Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer" – *The Godfather: Part II*

"You can get much further with a kind word and a gun than you can with just a kind word." – *The Untouchables*

## PARENTHETICALS

There will be times when the meaning of a line of dialogue isn't completely clear. Ideally, the tone and context of the scene should be enough, but this is when you need to use a parenthetical.

Take the examples below (all taken from *Lady Bird*) as examples of lines of dialogue that could easily convey many different tones, but the parenthetical used helps to tell us which.

JULIE  
(annoyed)  
Okay, bye then.

LADY BIRD  
(tightly)  
Congratulations.

SHELLY  
(small voice)  
Eggs aren't good for the  
environment, anyway.

Try to keep parentheticals to a minimum in your script. Often, the meaning of a line is perfectly clear without one, meaning that a you're just wasting a line on the page for no reason as in the examples below.

LADY BIRD  
(curious)  
Why does that cigarette look so  
weird? Like not like cigarette?

MIGUEL  
(almost yelling)  
PUT THE MAGAZINE BACK.SHIT.

LADY BIRD (CONT'D)  
(very obnoxious)  
MOM! The eggs are NOT DONE!

## EXERCISE

Practice changing the tone of your character voice. Here are 5 different scenarios:

- A TEACHER (65, frail) stands at the head of the class trying to establish order.
- LOUISE joins a flock of people in the parking lot hurrying to their vehicles.
- JOHN and SANDRA sit opposite one another in the restaurant.
- SHEILA opens the note that's just been slipped under her door out loud.
- NICK corners DAVE after exiting the meeting.

Here are 5 different tones:

- Regretful
- Nostalgic
- Assertive
- Malicious
- inspirational

Now write the first line (or two) of dialogue spoken in each scenario five separate times, each trying to convey those 5 different tones using speech alone.



## SOUND

While you won't have any control over the music used in your produced screenplay (please never list music tracks in your spec script unless the song is completely pivotal to the plot), the tone that you've established in your writing should heavily influence the composer, music supervisor, and director's decisions when choosing music that fits. What you can use instead are sound effects.

Another howl, this one long and loud. It is a very inhuman noise, terrifying, and closer this time.

*-An American Werewolf in London*

### INT. GAMES ROOM - DAY

We hear nothing except a HEART BEAT.

Chris' head hangs, asleep. His lips are dry. Chris wakes up.

The Television turns on. On the screen, a woman's hand holds a tea cup. With a spoon, she clinks it. We don't hear it though. We still hear nothing but the HEART BEAT.

CHRIS

No, No--

*-Get Out*

### INT. MR. GUMB'S CELLAR - DAY - GREEN LIGHT

Slowly, savoring the moment, Mr. Gumb aims the big Colt, which is already cocked, using both hands... He is just about to squeeze the trigger, when we hear his DOOR BUZZER, surprisingly loud and close by. He turns, startled, and sees

A DUSTY BLACK METAL BOX

the extension buzzer, mounted high on the wall, which is making the hideous, grating JANGLE. It finally stops, but not before waking Precious, who starts frantically BARKING, off screen., as -

*-The Silence of the Lambs*

You can even use a lack of sound to evoke the mood too.

INT. THE SLAUGHTERED LAMB - NIGHT

It is quiet.

WOMAN

You can't let them go.

This is even more essential when writing fiction podcasts, where the soundscape is absolutely instrumental in shaping the tone for the listeners.

Evan passive aggressively slams papers down on the copier and it loudly begins the copying process.

*-The Truth Fiction Podcast*

EXT. CAMP SITE - DAY

Footsteps CRACKLE against the leaves, as four teenagers SET UP a camp site.

Music PLAYS from a battery-powered portable stereo. Hunter OPENS a beer can and hands it to Lincoln.

*-Blackout (fiction podcast)*

SFX: Joan walking up to the door and scanning her keycard before punching in the code.

SFX: The door slides open.

SFX: Joan and Jackson step through the doorway.

SFX: The door slides shut behind them.

ATMOSPHERE: TIER 5

It is eerily quiet just inside the door. There's a faint buzzing, but no other sounds.

DR. BRIGHT

Oh my god-

*-The AM Archives (Fiction Podcast)*

## EXERCISE

Practice using sound to alter the tone of a scene. Here are 5 different scene openers:

- Annie and Lillian are walking in downtown Milwaukee.
- Brian checks his watch as he waits by the bus stop.
- Neil squeezes Helen's arm as they're about to walk down the aisle together.
- The door locks, leaving James alone in the police cell.
- A full moon shines down on the graveyard where Tommy and Cassie lock eyes with one another.

Here's 5 different tones:

- Humorous
- Dry
- Pessimistic
- Uneasy
- Solemn

Expand on each scene opener by using sound to evoke each of the tones listed, this could be anything from the weather, ambient sound, or suggestive sound effects.

## VISUALS

Much in the same way that you can use sound to evoke the tone in your writing, you can also use visuals, which is going to be even stronger than relying on audio. Film is literally visual storytelling, so it's only natural that this element can heavily affect the tone of your script.

Think **location** – The way a stifling desert may help encapsulate feelings of desolation, barrenness, or urgency. A calm pristine beach could set a relaxing mood, create a serene tone of peacefulness. And consider how a bustling city is going to have a different energy to a sleepy little town, both of which can set differing tones to your story, just as the environment will too. Compare a grimy polluted industrial habitat to that of a clean, idyllic countryside to get the picture.

Think **lighting** – What time of day it is can drastically alter the tone. Darkness is indicative of the unknown, fear, and danger, while light is useful for creating the opposite effects, such as cheer, inspiration, or safety. You'll know yourself how different it can feel walking about alone at night as opposed to in broad daylight, so being aware of time of day as well as the way an internal scene is lightened can make all the difference.

Think **weather** – This can be a little cliché, but weather has been used for a long time to help establish the atmosphere and tone. Storms are typically associated with danger, disaster and fear. Dull and dreary drizzle with melancholy and sadness. Wind often foreshadows a change of some sort. Consider how different environments can alter the tone of your story and scenes.

Think **color** - Artists have used color for centuries to evoke tone in the images they produce and audiences will be more familiar with this than you realise too. Pink traditionally conveys innocence, femininity, sweetness etc. Red evokes passion, danger, violence, and power. Blue is usually associated with sadness, isolation, or calm. Although this is more a job for the cinematographer than the screenwriter, you can still use color symbolically when needed.

## EXERCISE

Take this generic scene opener:

EXT. WOOD CABIN

HOLLY (23), athletic and confident, jangles keys as she approaches the front door.

HOLLY  
Finally here.

No response.

She turns to see GEOFF struggling to lift their bags out of the car at the bottom of the drive.

There's no clear or definitive tone here, so you're going to rewrite it 4 different ways. Add or change each of these elements to discover if you can create a stronger sense of tone:

- Location
- Lighting
- Weather
- Color

A picture paints a thousand words, as they say, so use selective visuals to enhance this scene as much as you can.

## CHARACTER

Tone isn't just reflected in the things that your characters say or the way that they say them, it's also reflected in the things that they do. Consider whether your characters are embodying, complimenting, or juxtaposing against the tone you're trying to convey?

Read these two examples and examine how the action that the character's take helps to add to the tone.

01:00:02

### **CAPTION OVER: VIENNA**

01:00:07

#### INT. AUSTRIA. VIENNA. ICE-CREAM PARLOUR - EVENING

Sitting alone and upright at a small table is VILLANELLE.

She neatly eats her ice cream.

Sat at a table opposite are a MOTHER and YOUNG DAUGHTER.

The YOUNG DAUGHTER sits eating ice cream while staring over at VILLANELLE, meanwhile her MOTHER sits quietly reading a magazine.

VILLANELLE and the GIRL stare at each other for a moment. Both eating their ice creams.

Eventually VILLANELLE smiles awkwardly at the YOUNG DAUGHTER.

The YOUNG DAUGHTER does not smile back, but continues to stare suspiciously, shovelling ice-cream into her mouth.

VILLANELLE stares back, put out by this reaction and her smile fades.

She sees the YOUNG DAUGHTER move her gaze to the left and a huge chocolaty grin peels across the YOUNG DAUGHTER's face.

Without turning her head, VILLANELLE's gaze follows that of the YOUNG DAUGHTER and she sees a YOUNG MAN stood behind the counter grinning back at the YOUNG DAUGHTER.

VILLANELLE observes the easy exchange: the dipping of the YOUNG MAN's head, the crinkle of his eye, the kind, wide smile.

She turns back to the YOUNG DAUGHTER and smiles at her again, but this time identically mimicking the dipping of the YOUNG MAN's head, the crinkle of his eye, the kind, wide smile.

The YOUNG DAUGHTER now smiles back at her.

Satisfied, VILLANELLE looks at her watch, there is a dot of blood on it. She wipes it off with her thumb, then stands, picks up her bag and light ticket lying on the table and drops some change into the tip jar as she passes, heading to the exit.

As she passes the grinning YOUNG DAUGHTER, VILLANELLE deliberately knocks the ice-cream into her lap.

VILLANELLE exits with a small smile.

*-Killing Eve*

There's a great reversal here and the tone of the piece is encapsulated when Villanelle deliberately and maliciously knocks the ice-cream into the young girls lap. With that simple

action, we learn that we cannot trust the MC. There's some dark humour and we're going to be kept on our toes here.

FADE IN:

INT. APARTMENT BUILDING (NEW YORK), HALLWAY - NIGHT 1

ANGLE ON apartment doorway. As it opens and an enormously SWEET-FACED, ELDER WOMAN steps out, bungled up against the cold -- turning back to call inside to the unseen love of her long life.

SWEET-FACED WOMAN  
I'm just going to get some flowers,  
dear. I'll be back in twenty  
minutes. It's tulip season today.  
I'm so happy.

And now she turns and faces the hallway... her sweetness dissolves in a flash... replaced by repulsion and that quickly she has reversed herself and re-entered her apartment... closing the door as we consider her vacated.

POV - MELVIN UDALL

in the hallway... Well past 50... unliked, unloved, unsettling. A huge pain in the ass to everyone he's ever met. Right now all his considerable talent and strength is totally focused on seducing a tiny dog into the elevator door he holds open.

MELVIN  
Come here, sweetheart... come on.

ON DOG  
Sniffing at a particular spot on the hall carpeting. Melvin lets the elevator door close and advances on the mutt who has ignores him.

MELVIN  
Wanna go for a ride? Okay, sweetie?

The dog lifts his leg at the precise moment Melvin lunges and picks him up with a decisive heft -- so that dog urine squirts the hall wall for a second or two. The DOG sensing a kindred spirit starts to GROWL and BARK.

MELVIN  
(a malevolent tone)  
You've pissed your last floor, you  
dog-eared monkey.

The dog takes a snap at Melvin, but the man is much meaner and quicker than the dog -- he holds his snout shut with his hand and reaches for the door of the garbage chute.

-As Good As It Gets

Here, the MC, Melvin, takes a couple of dubious actions that we wouldn't normally expect the hero to take – he's mean to an animal! Hardly the 'save the cat' moment many of us are used to, but it's one that makes us wonder what's going to happen next and where his is going. What tone is this establishing? Again, dark humour, there's vindictiveness, and the MC is probably making us as uncomfortable as he does to the characters in the movie. We're about to have our assumptions challenged.

## **EXERCISES**

Pick 5-10 different movies in the same genre as you're writing in and see if you can find and download them online.

You're going to examine the first 10-pages of each movie and take notes on how each main character is introduced i.e. the words that are used to describe them, the action they're taking when we first meet them, and the first lines of dialogue we hear them speak.

Now answer these questions:

- What tone is the writing giving off?
- Look at the word choice that the writer's used. List the prominent words that evoked that tone.
- How does the sentence length, pace, and structure add to the tone?
- How has the setting, time of day, and weather added to the tone (if any)?

Pick one script out of those 5-10 and rewrite the opening sequence in a completely different tone.



## THE TONAL REWRITE

For those of you who are at the rewriting stage or have an already completed screenplay that's possibly hasn't been getting sufficient positive feedback due to confusing, inconsistent, or a weak tone, it's time to do a dedicated pass, solely looking at tone, encompassing everything you've already learned.

Make this more digestible by cutting the process up into smaller chunks, such as tackling each act, each sequence, or each scene.

- The first thing you need to be aware of is what tone you're trying to evoke. Jot that down before examining each scene.
- Then check whether the scene description doing enough to evoke that tone. Tweak the working if you have to.
- Check whether changing some elements, such as location, evocative imagery, sound, or lightening etc could enhance a scene or sequence that has a weak sense of tone.
- Have you used foreshadowing if there's a slow change of tone throughout the story?
- Is the tone reflected in the MC's character arc?

Some tips:

Don't go overboard. Screenwriting isn't the same as novel writing. You have a limited number of pages in which to tell your story, so you can't spend more time than necessary creating the tone.

Look for fresh ways to evoke tone. Avoid cliches if possible.

Try to keep the audience in mind at all times. How exactly do you want them to feel at all times, and is your writing doing enough to ensure that they'll feel that way when watching as well as the reader when reading?

## CONCLUSION

On the surface of it, tone sounds easy. It's something that should come naturally in our writing, but this really isn't the case. You really need to be aware of the tone you're trying to convey first before it starts to become that easy.

As you can see, there's numerous ways in which to convey tone, but don't feel that you need to apply each and every one to your script. A little goes a long way when it comes to tone, and as with everything else screenwriting, less is more.

It's certainly something worth exploring and practicing, especially as it's also a great way to develop new ways to add originality to your story and it'll get you brainstorming creative and innovative ideas too.

The key takeaway from this is that you need to acknowledge that your screenplay has to emotionally engage with the reader on some level. Establishing tone is just one way out of many to help you do this.

Keep practicing, keep writing, and get the thesaurus out!