

Tone It Up!

How to use
your voice for
powerful effect.

By Jillian Mitchell

If you cringe at your outgoing voicemail, this one's for you. The good news? With minimal effort, you can befriend the sounds you make, and this essential step just may be the trump card that turns a good speech into a great one.

Tone is quickly becoming one of the vocal industry's hottest topics. As a 20-year vocalist and a vocal coach, I want to pull back the curtain on this industry buzzword by answering the top tone-centric questions I get asked and offering accessible tips on how you can best harness this quality in your own voice. (Hint: You'll want to. And don't worry—it's not a ton of work and most likely, your voice is better than you think.)

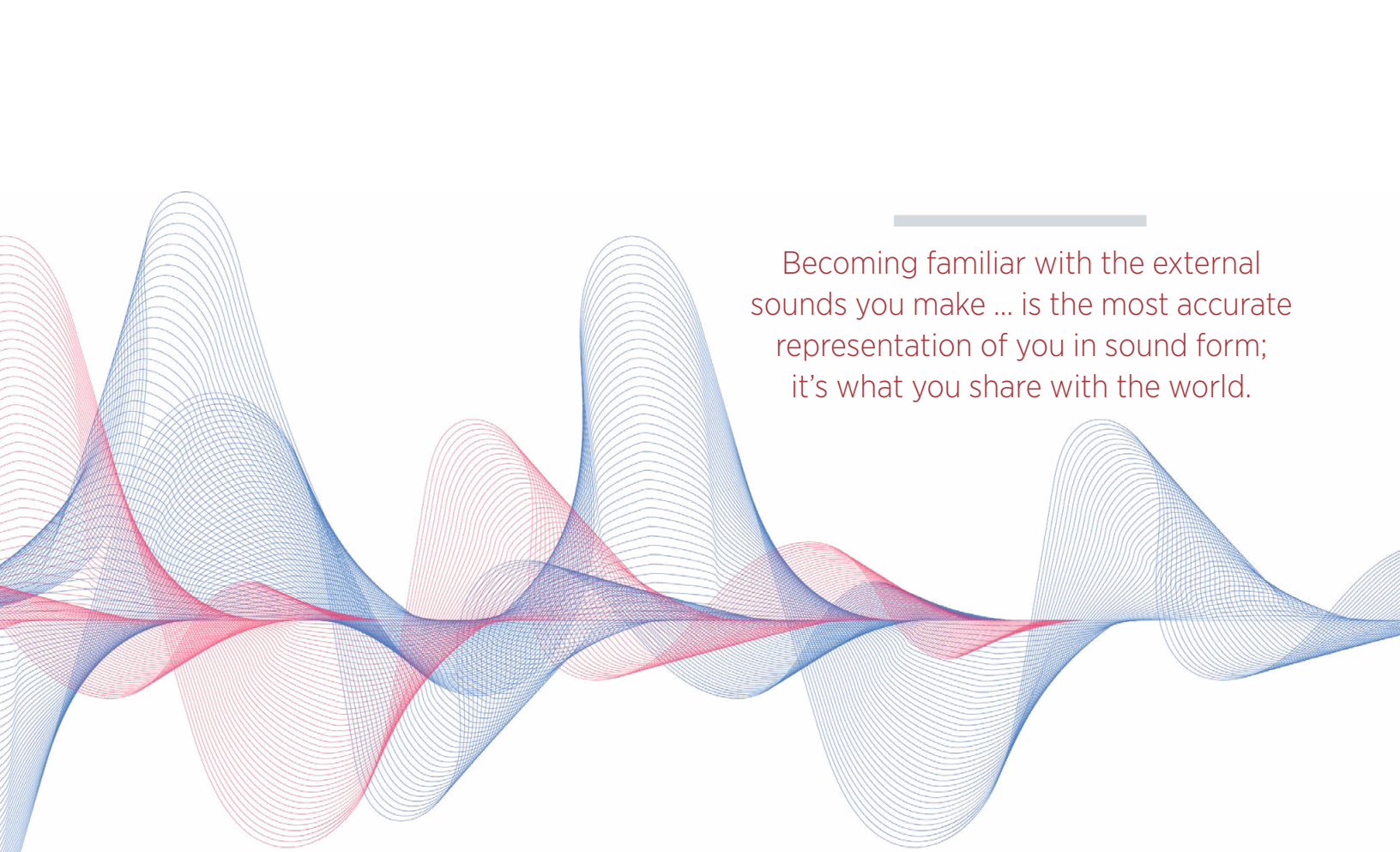
What is Tone?

Many Toastmasters will recognize tone—along with pitch, volume, and pace—as characteristics of vocal variety, which is considered essential to expressive public speaking. In Pathways projects, tone is understood as the *emotions behind what we say* that telegraph joy, anger, sadness and more to listeners.

In this article, tone refers to the *quality of sounds* you make, the color or timbre of your voice, as opposed to the emotional intent behind the sounds.

Tone is one of the most distinguishable vocal qualities we have—it's why we can recognize one voice from another. Words like *warm*, *bright*, *rich*, *raspy*, *barky*, and *nasal* are just some of the descriptors that help us understand the quality of vocal tone.





Becoming familiar with the external sounds you make ... is the most accurate representation of you in sound form; it's what you share with the world.

On a biological level, tone is the product of air from the lungs moving through the voice box and resonating in the body's acoustic chambers (head, throat, chest). And since our body is one-of-a-kind, so is our tone.

Why does tone matter?

Ever wonder why you choose to listen to certain podcasts and not others (despite both having equally appealing content)? Or find yourself drawn to a presentation on a topic you thought you weren't interested in—or conversely, find yourself nodding off during a lecture you were excited for? This is largely tone in action.

The fact is, our brains are wired to favor certain sounds (free, clear sounds) and it shows in our preferences and reactions. And research is starting to reveal the “why” behind our sound preferences.

Numerous studies have shown that people are able to detect an unexpected range of characteristics from a voice, including dominance, cooperativeness, emotional state, and even the body size of the speaker. Individuals who spoke with good tone were viewed as more successful, while those with rough, weak, strained, or breathy voices were viewed as negative, weak, passive, or tense. Add to that, new research concurs that the sound of a person's voice significantly affects how they are perceived—and may matter twice as much as content. Other top factors include the speakers' passion, knowledge, and presence, all characteristics Toastmasters strive to bring to their speeches.

What makes for good tone?

Though the term *good* is relative, let's go with this: Good tone is the result of the respiratory, phonatory, and resonatory systems working together in perfect harmony.

There is no one ideal voice or octave of speech that makes for good tone. Much like fingerprints, no two voices are alike and it's in this uniqueness that we can maximize our appeal.

Every voice can maximize tone while maintaining individuality. For example, these famous voices demonstrate good tone, with diverse and distinguishable qualities: Morgan Freeman, Sir Patrick Stewart, Meryl Streep, Dame Judi Dench, Oprah Winfrey, and the late Sir Sean Connery.

What are the benefits of achieving good tone?

According to celebrity vocal coach Roger Love, tone is a key component that takes speakers from unnoticed to in demand. In his book *Set Your Voice Free*, he offers three characteristics of a tonally balanced voice: a voice people want to listen to, a voice that inspires trust, and a voice that can motivate people to action.

Isn't the voice I have the voice I'm stuck with?

The short answer is no. Because the voice you have today may not accurately reflect the voice you were born with.

From a DNA perspective, our voices haven't changed since birth (other than the obvious growth and development from childhood to adulthood, the sound quality remains). But here's where the environmental factors enter the conversation: The sounds we make as adults are heavily influenced by our childhood influencers, namely our parent figures, family, friends, and schoolteachers. From these influencers, we learned how to use our instrument (both good and bad habits), and we learned which sounds were acceptable and which were not. From there, our childhood selves began emphasizing certain qualities and deemphasizing others—again, some good habits, some not. And for many of us, this is the tone we have today.

Of course, there are always exceptions to the rule: Select comedians and voice actors have made successful careers from exaggerated, blocked tones. To that I say, bravo! I encourage folks to play with the instrument they've been given, and part of that play is finding your most free voice for your day-to-day interactions.

Exercises: Getting to Know Your Voice

What do you sound like? Use this chart to explore your tone. Check Column 1 against Column 2. See if you have any characteristics of a blocked tone you might want to work on.

Tone: A Free vs. a Blocked Voice

Free	Blocked
Warm	Nasal
Bright	Brassy
Supported	Breathy
Velvety	Husky/Raspy
Balanced	Barky
Resonant	Dopey
Rich	Quiet
Powerful	Loud (one volume)
Melodic	Weak
Strong	Dull/Flat

Ready? Record.

Record yourself reading the following voicemail script and listen back (objectively) for tonal qualities. Use the chart for reference.

"Hi, you've reached [name]. I'm either away from my desk or on the other line.

Please leave a message after the tone and I will be sure to return your call. Cheers!"

5 Exercises to Explore Vocal Tone

Visit the [author's website](#) to try these exercises.

- ♦ **Exercise 1:** Inhale and Exhale
- ♦ **Exercise 2:** Breath and Speech
- ♦ **Exercise 3:** Vocal Chords
- ♦ **Exercise 4:** Breath to Face
- ♦ **Exercise 5:** Putting It All Together

Now, record the greeting for a second time. Take note of any changes. Repeat as desired.

However, if you've learned from tonally sound influencers, chances are your tone is more open than someone who did not. The good news: Habits can be changed.

Why does my voice sound different on recordings?

Because it is! When you speak, what others hear differs from what you hear due to the vibration of bones, muscles, and tissues during phonation. Your voicemail greeting is an example of your external voice. Becoming familiar with the external sounds you make is integral to tonal work because it's the most accurate representation of you in sound form; it's what you share with the world. If it still makes you uncomfortable to hear your voice in this way, I've got you covered with the exercises on the left of this page.

I'm worried that changing my tone will make me sound fake or phony.

This is a natural response. Knowing more about your voice is a gift of awareness and this kind of change can be off-putting even if it's well-meaning. Remember though, your voice today is likely a reflection of your past experiences and may not accurately represent you as you are now (or the sounds you were born to make). The goal of this work, then, becomes unblocking your natural voice and becoming more authentically you.

How can I achieve good tone?

Though the best way to maximize tone is by working with a vocal coach, there are things you can do now on your own to start the process. The vocal exercises below are a good place to start.

A few tips before you start.

- Record and listen to yourself regularly to get familiar with your external voice. You'll be able to see progress as you practice.
- Stay objective when you practice. It makes for a more enjoyable experience and expedites results.
- As with any new practice, consistency is key. Spending a few minutes each day on tone will foster the muscle memory required for a balanced voice.

Once you can maintain this balanced sound consistently, simply defer to your regular [vocal warm-up](#), with the addition of a few tonal exercises for good measure. If you don't have one, I highly recommend it. The voice is a muscle just like any other, and just as runners must stretch before they run, speakers must warm up before they can speak most effectively and influentially.

Knowing more about your voice is a gift of awareness. Happy exploring!

Jillian Mitchell is a vocal coach, recording artist, vodcast host, writer, and all-around voice advocate. She is the founder of [Voxsana](#), an online platform dedicated to voice empowerment. Jillian lives in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, with her husband and two children.