

## ***In Cold Blood* and "A Christmas Memory"**

When an author uses specific details and diction, he can create a different image of a character or setting. He can also do that through syntax. By changing up the organization of a sentence, the emotional response of the reader may change. This is particularly notable when an anecdote is taking place and suddenly the author hits the reader with a short, pithy sentence. It shocks the reader. (See?) Long, wieldy sentences with multisyllabic words tend to sooth the reader. Short, curt sentences seem to sound, well, sharp. Authors use syntax, diction, and tone to create characterization in their texts. Imagine mixing together short sentences with Southern colloquialisms, and the voice of the character is suddenly from Alabama. Let's practice!

### **This passage is taken from "A Christmas Memory":**

"Other people inhabit the house, relatives; and though they have power over us, and frequently make us cry, we are not, on the whole, too much aware of them. We are each other's best friend. She calls me Buddy, in memory of a boy who was formerly her best friend. The other Buddy died in the 1880's, when she was still a child. She is still a child."

1. Look at the complicated sentence structure in the first sentence. Describe the effect of this construction on the reader. Describe the way the speaker may feel and the way the reader might feel when he or she reads it. How does the author create that feeling with the syntax?
2. The last sentence of this passage is a short declarative sentence. What impact does that have on the passage?
3. Describe the voice of this narrator. How is that voice achieved?

### **Here is another passage to analyze. This is from *In Cold Blood*:**

"This is authentic. I've got a map. I've got the whole history. It was buried there back in 1821 – Peruvian bullion, jewelry. Sixty million dollars – that's what they say it's worth. Even if we didn't find all of it, even if we found only some of it – Are you with me, Dick?"

1. Describe Perry Smith after reading this excerpt. How does the syntax of the sentence impact your characterization?

**Another passage:**

"Dick ordered another hamburger. During the past few days he'd known a hunger that nothing – three successive steaks, a dozen Hershey bars, a pound of gumdrops – seemed to interrupt. Perry, on the other hand, was without appetite; he subsisted on root beer, aspirin, and cigarettes. 'No wonder you got leaps,' Dick told him. 'Aw, come on, baby. Get the bubbles out of your blood. We scored. It was perfect.'"

1. How does this presentation of Dick differ from the presentation of Perry? How did the author achieve this feat? In addition to the syntax, look at the details and diction.
  
2. What was the author's purpose in this presentation of Dick at this moment? When does this occur in the story? Feel free to look in your book.

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Capote said in an interview, "I make my own comment by what I choose to tell and how I choose to tell it. It is true that an author is more in control of fictional characters because he can do anything he wants with them as long as they stay credible. But in the nonfiction novel once 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" (Plimpton).

Question: How is this reflected in his writing of "A Christmas Memory" and *In Cold Blood*?

**Works Cited**

Capote, Truman. "A Christmas Memory." Short Story Classics. Multimania.com. 8 February 2004. Web. 12 July 2010.

Capote, Truman. *In Cold Blood*. New York: Random House, 1965. Print.

Plimpton, George. "The Story Behind a Nonfiction Novel." Truman Capote: His Life & His Works. *The New York Times*. 6 January 1966. Web. 12 January 2010.