

Tone

Tone and Mood

People produce an amazing range of emotions when they speak. A harsh **tone** signals fear or anger. A gentle tone may inspire confidence or affection. A stirring oration can provoke listeners in a way the speaker desires, such as to urge people to take action, influence their feelings toward an issue, or even incite hatred.

Other things besides the human voice register tone. Places create tone, too. Think of the tone of a football field as opposed to the tone of your home or of a funeral hall. A clown or mime can project tone through soundless actions. People communicate certain tones: one person is severe while another is flighty; the mere presence of one person makes you feel good about yourself while another makes you feel fearful or insecure.



Tone carries with it a **mood**. Mood describes the feeling or emotion that the tone of a voice, a place, or a person generates. In the classroom your mood may be solemn or reflective. But just downstairs in the cafeteria everyone is at ease, gossiping, laughing, and eating. The mood may be sober and tense while a principal drones on about figures and achievements. But the mood may become suddenly hilarious if a stray cat wanders in and jumps on the lectern.

Tone and mood are interactive because both involve feelings. They are so similar, in fact, that many people see no difference between them. But tone is the manner, atmosphere, or attitude that carries or conveys a feeling. Mood is the feeling itself.

Tone and mood work together in literature. An author feels a certain way about an idea, a character, or some action and expresses this mood, or feeling, through a tone. You sense the tone as you read and recognize the mood that it creates. If the author has done a good job creating tone, it conveys just the mood intended. It is not unusual, however, for people to respond in different ways to the tone of a piece. The best way to learn about tone and mood is to read and see what kinds of feelings you can sense in the passage.

Far from the main street, in one of the Negro sections of the town, Doctor Benedict Mary Copeland sat in his dark kitchen alone. It was past nine o'clock and the Sunday bells were silent now. Although the night was very hot, there was a small fire in the round-bellied wood stove. Doctor Copeland sat close to it, leaning forward in a straight-backed kitchen chair with his head cupped in his long, slender hands. The red glow from the chinks of the stove shone on his face—in this light his heavy lips looked almost purple against his black skin, and his gray hair, tight against his skull like a cap of lamb's wool, took on a bluish color also. He sat motionless in this position for a long time. Even his eyes, which stared from behind the silver rims of his spectacles, did not change their fixed, somber gaze.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, Carson McCullers

The tone of the passage is somber. Some might even find the passage eerie because the doctor sits in the dark with the fire casting an unnatural appearance to his features. The doctor's somber mood seems to match the somber tone of the room, but you sense another feeling as well. Doctor Copeland's attitude suggests unhappiness and probably despair. You can pick out the words and phrases that create these impressions: "his dark kitchen"; "the Sunday bells were silent"; "leaning forward in a straight-backed kitchen chair with his head cupped in his long, slender hands"; "his heavy lips looked almost purple"; "even his eyes ... did not change their fixed, somber gaze."

The author has imparted a tone to the passage. The feeling that you derive from her writing is the mood of that scene. The author is communicating her feelings to you through the vehicles of tone.

Changing Tones and Moods

As you know from personal experience, moods can change rather quickly. It is entirely possible to be happy one minute and sad the next, depending on changing circumstances. Moods also change as the atmosphere or tone of your surroundings change. For example, think about the way a sudden thunderstorm can change the mood of a beach party.



In literature the changes are carefully planned by the author to produce specific effects. In the following three paragraphs, the mood changes three times.

"A person can't pick up their children and just squeeze them to which-a-way they wants them to be. Whether it hurt them or not. Whether it right or wrong. You done tried that hard as any man could try. And now I the only one of us that would come in this here house and sit with you like this."

The light was very bright in Doctor Copeland's eyes and her voice was loud and hard. He coughed and his whole face trembled. He tried to pick up the cup of cold coffee, but his hand would not hold it steadily. The tears came up to his eyes and he reached for his glasses to try to hide them.

Portia saw and went up to him quickly. She put her arms around his head and pressed her cheek to his forehead. I done hurt my Father's feelings," she said softly.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, Carson McCullers

In the first paragraph Portia is lecturing her father. The tone is angry, and in the next paragraph you read that "her voice was loud and hard." She has been attacking her father for his stubborn refusal to allow his children to be anything except what he wants them to be. Doctor Copeland lost his children because of his attitude toward them, but the loss has still hurt him. The doctor was visibly shaken by Portia's words, and his sorrow affects the mood of the second paragraph. When Portia sees her father crying her mood changes instantly. She is sorry for her harshness, and she becomes loving and sympathetic.

Setting, Character, Tone, and Mood

Places convey tones that inspire particular moods; for example, a church conveys a different tone than a ballpark does. People also project tones that affect the moods of those with them: contrast a conversation with a principal to a chat with an old friend.

Authors are aware of the tones inherent in settings and characters that produce certain moods. You have already experienced the feelings produced by Doctor Copeland's bare, dark kitchen. Now look at the tone his presence creates for his son and son-in-law and notice the mood that develops among them.

Doctor Copeland shook hands with both of them. Willie hung back shyly against the wall, but Highboy stepped forward and bowed formally. "I has always heard so much about you," he said. "I be very pleased to make your acquaintance."

Portia and Doctor Copeland brought in chairs from the hall and the four of them sat around the stove. They were silent and uneasy. Willie gazed nervously around the room-at the books on the kitchen table, the sink, the cot against the wall, and at his father. Highboy grinned and picked at his tie. Doctor Copeland seemed about to speak, and then he wet his lips and was still silent.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, Carson McCullers

Doctor Copeland is intimidating to his children, because they remember his severe ways. The author reminds you once again of the severity of the setting as Willie looks around. The books, the bare furnishings, and the cot, make the room appear like a monk's cell. How would you feel in such a place facing a person like Doctor Copeland? You would probably feel nervous. The tension in the room is heavy. The problem of the estrangement between Doctor Copeland and his children intensifies the mood. You know there will be some unpleasantness, and it surfaces when Doctor Copeland launches into an uncontrolled tirade against Willie.



Authors do not rely just on descriptions, however, to establish tones and to express moods. Writers frequently set the tone and mood of a situation through dialogue - the conversations between the characters. That is a technique you should all be familiar with because you use it in your everyday encounters with people. Tone, you will recall, is sometimes described as an attitude, and an author's attitude toward a particular character can be expressed in the tone of the passages where that person appears and speaks. In *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* you only need to listen to Portia to understand what the author feels about her.

Portia saw and went up to him quickly. She put her arms around his head and pressed her cheek to his forehead. "I done hurt my Father's feelings," she said softly.

His voice was hard. "No. It is foolish and primitive to keep repeating this about hurt feelings."

The tears went slowly down his cheek and the fire made them take on the colors of blue and green and red. "I be really and truly sorry, said Portia.

Doctor Copeland wiped his face with his cotton handkerchief. "It is all right."

"Less us not ever quarrel no more. I can't stand this here fighting between us. It seem to me that something real bad come up in us ever time we be together. Less us never quarrel like this no more."

"No," said Doctor Copeland. "Let us not quarrel."

Portia sniffed and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. For a few minutes she stood with her arms around her father's head. Then after a while she wiped her face for a final time and went over to the pot of greens on the stove.

The author describes Portia as a very sympathetic character. She is loving, understanding, and capable of great feelings. She shows a strong feeling for her father even though he is a very difficult man to get along with. It is evident that the author is also sympathetic toward the doctor, but she depicts him as a very precise man who is racked with inner sorrows and turmoil. The mood that Carson McCullers establishes between the two people depicts the ambivalent feelings many people have in their family relationships.

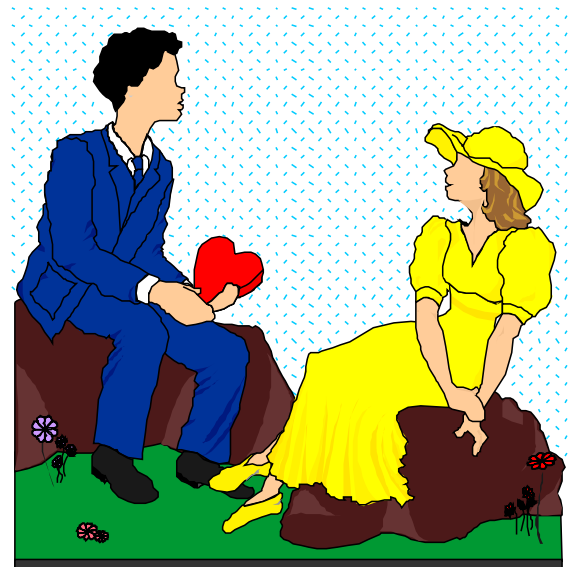
Definition of tone

Tone, in literature, may be defined as the writer's or speaker's attitude toward his subject, his audience, or himself. It is the emotional coloring, or the emotional meaning, of the work, and is an extremely important part of the full meaning.

A writer may have a number of different attitudes toward different subjects. In an article about student bullying, a writer may take a bitter or angry tone. A writer expressing his love for his wife may take a mellow and romantic tone. A writer expressing his disapproval of overpaid hockey players in Vancouver might take a sarcastic tone, referring to the 'poor' and underpaid player who makes a \$100,000 a game.

Tone is revealed by the writer's style, or manner of expression, and by the words used. **Style** and **Tone** are so closely linked and so often even elements of each other that it is best to consider them together.

But there is a difference. Think of two young students, each with his girlfriend on separate moonlit dates, whispering in nearly identical tender and loving tones of voice. One young man says, "Your eyes, dearest, reflect a thousand sparkling candles of heaven," and the other says, "Them eyes of yours in this light-they sure do turn me on." Their *tones* were the same; their *styles* considerably different. The same distinction exists in writing.



The tone is determined by the *attitude* of writers toward their subject and toward their audience. Writers, too, may be tender and loving, but they may be indignant, solemn, playful, enthusiastic, belligerent, contemptuous-the list could be as long as a list of the many “tones of voice.”

Style, on the other hand, expresses the author’s individuality through choices of words (*Diction*), sentence patterns (*Syntax*), and selection and arrangement of details and basic materials.

The tone of piece of fiction may be humours, sarcastic, satirical, critical, sentimental, romantic, frivolous, bitter, angry, solemn, and so on.

A writer who creates humour may do so not only through the events in the story but also by his style (the way the story is told). Two common styles that create humour are comic description and comic exaggeration.



Comic Description

She was not only an ill-natured cat, she was also badly dressed. She was a calico, and the distribution of her colours was a mess; she looked as if she had been left out in the rain and her paint had run. She had a Roman nose as the result of some early injury, her tail was skinny, she had a perfectly venomous look in her eye. My family said -my family discriminated me -that I was much closer kin to Muff than I was to any of them.

(Jean Stafford, “Bad Characters”)

Comic Exaggeration

To tease me into a tantrum, my brother Jack and my sister Stella often called me Kitty instead of Emily. Little Tess did not dare, because she knew I’d chloroform her if she did.

(Jean Stafford, “Bad Characters”)

In complex passages, the author will have a distinct tone for his subject and another tone for his audience.

When you talk, the tone of your voice conveys as much as your words--possibly more. You can say, “I’m sorry” in a tone that says you aren’t sorry at all and are only saying so because you think you must; you can say, “I’d love to” in a tone that shows genuine pleasure or in one that shows complete lack of enthusiasm. If your words and tone say different things, which one is believed? If you have ever said something like, “It wasn’t what he said that made me mad, it was the way he said it!” you know that a listener often responds to the tone or style instead of the statement..



Written words also convey a tone, although not quite in the same way as spoken words. A speaker can depend on voice tones, gestures, and facial expressions to express meanings that the writer must express in words alone. It is certainly easier to recognize attitudes in the voice tones of a speaker but you can learn to notice tone in writing if you are alert to the clues the writer gives. Not catching the tone can mislead the reader more than not knowing the meaning of some of the words. If a writer is joking, for example, and you take him seriously, you may miss his point altogether.

To investigate tone, the acronym D I D L S is sometimes helpful.

DICTION:	The important and individual words the author uses
IMAGES:	The word pictures created by groups of words
DETAILS:	Often confused with images, these are more precisely FACTS, and are notable not only for what is included but what is purposefully omitted
LANGUAGE:	This term describes the characteristics of the body of words used: terms like slang, scholarly, and jargon denote language
SENTENCE STRUCTURE	Expressed in its most elemental form, this notes that short sentences are often emotional or assertive and that longer sentences move toward more reasonable or even scholarly intent



Words That Describe Tone

afraid	disgusted	jealous	sharp
aggravated	disheartened	joyful	shocked
aggressive	disturbed	laconic	shrewd
agitated	dominating	lethargic	snooty
agreeable	domineering	lighthearted	solemn
alarmed	dreamy	lonely	somber
amiable	ecstatic	loud	soothing
angry	elated	loving	stern
apathetic	embarrassed	majestic	strong
apologetic	encouraging	malicious	sultry
appreciative	enthusiastic	manipulative	superficial
arrogant	envious	meek	superior
artificial	euphoric	melancholic	surprised
audacious	evil	miserable	sweet
baffled	excited	mystical	sympathetic
banal	explosive	nervous	threatening
benevolent	exuberant	numb	timid
bewildered	facetious	obnoxious	tired
bitter	fearful	obsessive	uninterested
bleak	frenetic	outraged	upset
boring	friendly	overwhelmed	vexed
calm	frightened	paranoid	vibrant
caustic	frivolous	passionate	vicious
cautious	furious	passive	weary
chaotic	gentle	patronizing	wrathful
chauvinistic	giddy	peaceful	zealous
cheerful	happy	persuasive	
childish	harsh	perturbed	
coarse	hating	petulant	
complacent	haughty	pitiful	
concerned	hollow	pleading	
confident	humble	pleasant	
confused	humorous	presumptuous	
consoling	hurt	proud	
content	hypnotic	questioning	
convincing	hypocritical	remote	
critical	impatient	revengeful	
curious	impious	romantic	
cynical	impotent	rude	
dejected	informative	sad	
depressed	innocent	sarcastic	
desperate	instructive	sardonic	
determined	inventive	satiric	
disappointed	ironic	seductive	
disbelief	irrational	sentimental	
discouraged	irritated	serious	