

Tone in Composition

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn how a text's purpose and audience influence its tone, as well as how to assess tone in writing. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Establishing Tone

1a. Word Choice

1b. Level of Formality

1c. Sentence Structure

2. Identifying Tone in a Piece of Writing

1. Establishing Tone

As you learned previously, your purpose and audience influence everything about your text, particularly:

- Word choice
- Level of formality
- Sentence structure

It's these factors that in turn determine what your **tone**, or attitude toward your subject, is. Tone helps create the feel of the text—everything working together to speak in the author's voice.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** Maybe the author's voice is negative, positive, or neutral. It could be sarcastic or angry, melancholy or exuberant, nostalgic or hopeful. Just as the inflection in the tone of a person's voice can move from naive to jaded to sad, so, too, can the tone of a piece of writing.

You can even describe the tone of writing in the same way that you describe the tone of voice. In this way, you can even try to hear writing as if it were being read aloud, if you want to assess its tone.

Thus, listening to the author's voice is one great way to assess and identify the tone of a piece. You might read a text aloud to really hear how it sounds and what those sounds make you feel.



TERM TO KNOW

Tone

A writer's attitude toward a subject, as conveyed through a piece of writing.

1a. Word Choice

First, tone is determined by the words the author chooses. Does the author use formal or informal language? What level is the vocabulary—highly technical and precise or more general and casual?

Think also about the connotations and denotations of these words. Has this author chosen words with heightened emotional connotations? Or has the author tried to maintain a drier tone and use words strictly in their denotative sense?

1b. Level of Formality

Tone is also determined by the level of formality the author uses. Does the text affect a formal tone or a casual one?

If a piece of writing relies on the personal, uses slang, and takes a relaxed approach to grammar, then that piece is casual. Conversely, if a text remains neutral in tone, uses more complex vocabulary, and eschews the personal entirely, then it's formal.

1c. Sentence Structure

Finally, tone is determined by the complexity of the sentence structure in a text. Are the sentences short and choppy, long and complex, or a mixture? All of these factors work together to create an overall tone.

Writing dominated by short sentences and highly emotional words is more casual. Formal writing, on the other hand, tends to feature longer and more complex sentences, as well as vocabulary that includes technical words.

2. Identifying Tone in a Piece of Writing

How do you figure out what tone a piece is affecting? You might start by reading it aloud to yourself, then determining if what you hear is positive, negative, or neutral.

Once you've established the text's emotional category, you can start narrowing the tone down to what kind of positive, negative, or neutral emotion it has created.

Read the following text aloud to yourself and see if you can identify its tone.

The utter lack of accountability amongst politicians has reached a distressing high, or, we might say, plummeted to its utter nadir. Previously, term limits ensured that the whims of one politician could only be granted time for so long, but now that the same monied powers purchase time with each elected official in turn, the same interests again and again parade through the halls of government. And do we see the

voters rising up? No, because they have been bought and paid for themselves, in the grease of their favorite foods and the glittering spectacle of their video games.

The author sounds angry and disgusted. How do you know where the tone comes from in the language? Look at the first sentence: *The utter lack of accountability amongst politicians has reached a distressing high, or, we might say, plummeted to its utter nadir.*

The phrase “utter lack of accountability” is saying that politicians are not being held responsible for their behavior. That’s a pretty divisive argument, but the tone of the phrase itself indicates the author’s feelings. This author could have said something more neutral, and the meaning would’ve been the same. But with intense words, you can tell that this is angrier. All of that language and tone is meant to drive readers to action by making them want to change the situation.

The following piece of writing has a very different tone:

Teaching popular texts in college courses can help students be more interested in the lesson. Students come to college already knowing what they are interested in, so if colleges teach popular texts about what those students enjoy, they will be more likely to enjoy the lesson. For example, if students practice writing and reading with a text on a subject they find interesting, such as a sports article, instead of more traditional texts, such as books about economics or philosophy, they will already be drawn to the material and likelier to pay attention to the lesson. Giving students reading about topics of their own interest will help them become more interested in the course, which is the ultimate goal.

This is a pretty academic piece. You see an argument about teaching popular texts in college courses, so you know that this is meant to convince the reader of something. But how does it differ from the first example, which was also trying to persuade the reader of something?

Unlike the first example, this piece isn’t appealing to your emotions by using inflammatory words and intensely evocative description. Instead, this uses a more neutral tone and walks through the implications of its claims with a gentler, unemotional affect:

Students come to college already knowing what they are interested in, so if colleges teach popular texts about what those students enjoy, they will be more likely to enjoy the lesson.

Think about how different this would be if the text instead made the same point this way:

College students are fully capable of understanding what is and is not a priority or interest to them; denying them the ability to focus on the subject matter about which they are most passionate and connected will only drive them further away from the very purpose of these classes.

That latter sentence is intense and emotional again. That kind of argumentation would work well on a debate stage or maybe on a talk radio show. But the original tone would work better in an academic setting where you know that the tone is usually meant to eschew bias and be more neutral.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that once you determine the purpose and audience of your text, you can start to think about **establishing tone**. Tone is the writer's attitude toward a particular subject, and there are three main factors that should be considered when establishing tone: **word choice**, **level of formality**, and **sentence structure**. Considering all three of these will help you choose the most effective tone for your particular purpose and audience.

Additionally, you practiced **identifying tone in a piece of writing**. When trying to determine the tone, it's often helpful to read the piece aloud and look for tonal clues, such as whether the author uses emotional or unemotional language, and how the argument or main point is framed.

Best of luck in your learning!

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TERMS TO KNOW

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