Tone

by Sophia

1. Purpose and Audience

It's important to start by thinking about the purpose and audience of a text, which are two factors that have huge effects on the way you write.

The purpose of a text is what it's meant to do, such as convince your readers to take your side in a debate or inform them about something interesting. And of course, those readers are your audience.

Together, the 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 is.

2. Establishing Tone

Tone is a writer's attitude toward the subject, as conveyed through a piece of writing. In other words, the tone of a text is how authors express their opinion toward and attitude about the topic. Tone helps create the feel of the text—everything working together to speak in the author's voice.

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.

But what is doing the work to make you feel? There are a few ways in which **tone** can be established:

- Word choice
- Level of formality
- Sentence structure

These three factors work in concert with one another, like an orchestra turning out a complex melody.

📄 TERM TO KNOW

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

2a. 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?

2b. Level of Formality

Look also to 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.

2c. 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.

3. 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, but then you can also ask if what you hear is positive, negative, or neutral.

Once you've established the text's emotional category, you can start narrowing down to what kind of positive, negative, or neutral emotional tone 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. </div 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 phase "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. Here are some other words and phrases that seem charged with intensity, anger, or even disgust:

- distressing
- plummeted
- utter nadir
- whims
- monied powers purchase time
- again and again through the halls of government

- bought and paid for
- grease
- glittering spectacle

In this context, it's hard to say any of these words in a happy tone. Thus, the author's reason for using this tone is to make the readers get angry and be spurred to action. 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:

> You'll never guess the hilarious thing that happened on Halloween! I was out with my husband and dog on Halloween, taking a walk. As we rounded a bend, we saw before us another couple and their dog, dressed in costumes already. Though they were far off, we could make out the details: one was dressed as Winnie the Pooh, one as Piglet, and the dog was Eeyore. But as we got closer... we realized that Eeyore was no dog—he was a pig! A pot-bellied pig, tall as our hound dog and at least twice as wide! We stopped and stared before engaging the trio in conversation; I even got to pet the porker, who was friendly and sweet. We walked away in a daze; who would've thought we'd befriend a pig on Halloween?

This is lighthearted and even funny in places. It's also written in an entirely narrative manner. Given the style, the author's purpose is to tell an entertaining story. Do you see the ways that the tone reflects this? Look at how the story is framed:

You'll never guess the hilarious thing that happened on Halloween!

That first sentence tells you that the purpose is hilarity. You can also notice spots like these that indicate a more casual, lighthearted tone:

- Eeyore was no dog—he was a pig!
- at least twice as wide!

See the exclamation point and the dash that indicates a kind of interruption or realization? All of that makes this sound more conversational.

Finally, this text has another tone entirely:

> 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 subject about which they are already interested, such as a sports article, instead of more traditional texts, such as economics or philosophy, they will already be interested in 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 the 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 tutorial, 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.

Finally, 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.

Good luck!

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Martina Shabram.

📄 TERMS TO KNOW

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