

Tone

Definition of Tone

Tone, in written composition, is an [attitude](#) of a writer toward a subject or an [audience](#). Tone is generally conveyed through the choice of words, or the viewpoint of a writer on a particular subject.

Every written piece comprises a central [theme](#) or subject matter. The manner in which a writer approaches this theme and subject is the tone. The tone can be formal, informal, serious, comic, sarcastic, sad, or cheerful, or it may be any other existing attitude. Consider the following examples of tone:

“I want to [ask](#) the authorities what is the big deal? Why do they not control the epidemic? It is eating up lives like a monster.”

“I want to draw the attention of the appropriate authorities toward damage caused by the epidemic. If steps are not taken to curb it, it will further injure our [community](#).”

The theme of both tone examples is the same. The only way we can differentiate between them is their separate tone. The tone in the first example is casual or informal while, it is more formal in the second.

Tone Examples in Common Speech

We adopt a variety of tones in our day-to-day speech. This intonation of our speech determines what message we desire to convey. Read a few examples below:

Example #1

Father: “We are going on a vacation.”

Son: “That’s great!!!”

– *The tone of son’s response is very cheerful.*

Example #2

Father: "We can't go on vacation this summer."

Son: "Yeah, great! That's what I expected."

– *The son's tone is sarcastic.*

Example #3

"Yeah, your grades on this exam will be as good as the previous exams."

– *The tone is pessimistic in this example.*

Example #4

"Can someone tell me what the hell is going on here?"

– *This has an aggressive tone.*

Short Examples of Tone

Though the starry sky was beautiful, his mood was so melancholic that he took no interest in it.

The old man took the handful of dust from his farm and sniffed it with great pleasure.

The sweet smell of spring roses made overjoyed him.

The old man's face looked so peaceful after death that he seemed in deep sleep.

The spectacle of sunset was so astounding that people stood watching breathlessly.

The scorching heat of the desert sun burned his skin black, and he could see death hovering over his head.

The singing of birds was deemed a messenger for approaching spring. His stinking breath kept listeners at a considerable distance from him.

The muffled church bell sounded as though it came from an unfathomably deep well.

The kind touch of her mother's hand comforted her in her pain.

He was on his way to home when he saw a boy of ten, who moved his heart as he stood weeping.

The negotiations between the two states came to a halt after terms of reference could not be agreed upon.

The harsh gusts of cruel cold wind battered her body.

He went into the restaurant and ordered a hot coffee, the cozy [atmosphere](#) inside reminded him of the past.

Examples of Tone in Literature

Tone has a significant place in literature as it manifests writers' attitudes toward different subjects.

Example #1: *Catcher in the Rye* (By J. D. Salinger)

Holden Caulfield, in J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, unfolds his personality through the tone he adopts throughout the novel. Let us have a look at some of his remarks:

"All morons hate it when you call them a moron."

"If a girl looks swell when she meets you, who gives a damn if she's late? Nobody."

"Goddamn money. It always ends up making you blue as hell."

"Catholics are always trying to find out if you're Catholic."

Holden's tone is bitterly sarcastic as he criticizes the nature of things in real life. His [character](#) may reveal the attitude of the writer towards life, as it is common for writers to use their characters as their mouthpieces.

Example #2: *The School* (By Donald Barthelme)

Observe the tone of a short story, *The School*, by Donald Barthelme:

"And the trees all died. They were orange trees. I don't know why they died, they just died. Something wrong with the soil possibly or maybe the stuff we got from the nursery wasn't the best. We

his or her own little tree to plant and we've got these thirty dead trees. All these kids looking at these little brown sticks, it was depressing."

The use of the adjectives "dead" and "depressing" sets a gloomy tone in the passage. As trees signify life here, their unexpected "death" from an unknown cause gives the above passage an unhappy and pessimistic tone.

Example #3: *The Road Not Taken* (By Robert Frost)

Robert Frost, in the last [stanza](#) of his poem *The Road Not Taken*, gives us an insight into the effect of tone:

"I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference."

Frost tells us about his past with a "sigh," this gives the above lines an unhappy tone. This tone leads us into thinking that the [speaker](#) in the poem had to make a difficult choice.

Example #4: *A River Runs Through It* (By Norman Maclean)

"This was the last fish we were ever to see Paul catch. My father and I talked about this moment several times later, and whatever our other feelings, we always felt it fitting that, when we saw him catch his last fish, we never saw the fish but only the artistry of the fisherman."

The extract contains tones of loss and [nostalgia](#); however, the characters look quite satisfied with the way things are moving forward.

Example #5: *The Tell-Tale Heart* (By Edgar Allen Poe)

“It was A LOW, DULL, QUICK SOUND – MUCH SUCH A SOUND AS A WATCH MAKES WHEN ENVELOPED IN COTTON. I gasped for breath, and yet the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly, more vehemently but the noise steadily increased. I arose and argued about trifles, in a high key and with violent gesticulations; but the noise steadily increased. Why WOULD they not be gone? I paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides, as if excited to fury by the observations of the men, but the noise steadily increased. O God! What COULD I do?”

This short story by Poe contains the tones of insanity, nervousness, and guilt. The character suffers from all these feelings, which the writer has translated into a story.

Example #6: *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* (By Ernest Hemingway)

“It was very late and everyone had left the cafe except an old man who sat in the shadow the leaves of the tree made against the electric light. In the day time the street was dusty, but at night the dew settled the dust and the old man liked to sit late because he was deaf and now at night it was quiet and he felt the difference.”

In this short excerpt, the culminating tone of the writer is that of peace and serenity, though he talks of the day time in a bit different tone.

Function of Tone

Tone, in a piece of literature, decides how the readers read a literary piece, and how they should feel while they are reading it. It stimulates the readers to read a piece of literature as a serious, comical, spectacular, or distressing manner. In addition, tone lends shape and life to a piece of literature because it creates a mood. Moreover, tone bestows [voice](#) to characters, and throws light on the personalities and dispositions of characters that readers understand better.

[A Pound of Flesh](#)

[Curiosity Killed the Cat](#)

[Hamlet Act-I, Scene-I Study Guide](#)

[To Sleep, Perchance to Dream](#)

[Once More unto the Breach](#)

[My Kingdom for a Horse](#)

[Neither a Borrower Nor a Lender Be](#)

[All the World's a Stage](#)

[Miles to Go Before I Sleep](#)

[Alas, Poor Yorick!](#)

[Raining Cats and Dogs](#)