**Tone**

(adapted from information provided by Ann Rudkin, College Board)

Tone is a musical metaphor for writers' relationships with readers that result from writers making two decisions:

1. How they will express *their feelings* about the subject;

2. How they will place themselves socially, intellectually, or morally with regard to their implied readers – as their *superiors*, looking down; as their i*nferiors*, looking up; or as their *equals*, addressing them eye-to-eye.

Tone as the *expression* *of feeling* should not be confused with the *description* of feeling. Tone expresses or implies the writer's emotional state, the feeling about the subject that the writer desires to share; it will often differ markedly from the feelings expressed by characters who appear in the writing. A writer, for example, can describe the cheerfulness of the airline flight attendants in a sarcastic tone, the self-dramatizing gloom of a spoiled child in a scoffing tone, or the pompous pontifications of a political candidate in a tone of good-natured joshing.

Clearly, writers need not say what they are feeling; tone emerges as a quality of the whole utterance, whether spoken or written. An indignant speaker might say with deep sarcasm, "I'm delighted that you show such contempt for my efforts. Nothing pleases me more than to find honesty where I might least expect it." The speaker does not need to say, "I'm indignant." When Wordsworth says, "But yet I know, where'er I go,/ That there hath passed away a glory from the earth," his sense of loss can be heard without his having to say, "I'm sad." It is reported that Mark Twain would never smile as he delivered popular speeches that kept his audiences in stitches.

Tone, then, is the quality of voice that conveys *feelings*, whether they are stated directly or indirectly. With variations of tone, we can express love or hate, happiness or grief, comradeship or contempt, compassion or loathing, humor or seriousness, anger, indignation, outrage, or forgiveness. And these tones are only a beginning. Writers usually present not only a tone, but a complexity of tones: anger and pity, sorrow and hope, and so on.

An analysis of tone will depend on a precise and accurate understanding of the author's attitude toward: the subject, the audience, and himself.

**Tone Words**

One way to help us recall words that characterize tone is to group them into categories. We might say that tone can be positive, negative, or neutral, but three simple categories only provide a starting point for analyzing tone, since writers often use a combination of attitudes (complexity). We really need a more comprehensive list of categories to adequately describe an author's attitude. The following are some of the words that we can use to characterize tone. Can you think of others?

**Attitudes of persuasion:** explanatory, didactic, admonishing, condemning, indignant, puzzled, curious, guileless, thoughtless, innocent, frank, sincere, questioning, uncertain, doubting, incredulous, critical, cynical, insinuating, persuading, coaxing, pleading, persuasive, argumentative, oracular, impartial, skeptical, straightforward

**Attitudes of pleasure:** peaceful, satisfied, contented, happy, cheerful, pleasant, bright, joyful, playful, jubilant, elated, enraptured, complimentary, effusive, confident, contented, dreamy

**Attitudes of pain:** worried, uneasy, troubled, disappointed, regretful, vexed, annoyed, bored, disgusted, miserable, cheerless, mournful, sorrowful, sad, dismal, melancholy, plaintive, fretful, querulous, irritable, sore, sour, sulky, dismal, sullen, bitter, crushed, pathetic, tragic

**Attitudes of passion:** nervous, hysterical, impulsive, impetuous, reckless, desperate, frantic, wild, fierce, serious, savage, enraged, angry, hungry, greedy, jealous, insane, wistful, seductive

**Attitudes of friendliness:** cordial, sociable, gracious, kindly, sympathetic, compassionate, forgiving, pitying, indulgent, tolerant, comforting, soothing, tender, loving, caressing, solicitous, accommodating, approving, helpful, obliging, courteous, polite, confiding, trusting

**Attitudes of comedy:** facetious, comic, ironic, satiric, amused, mocking, playful, humorous, uproarious, whimsical, joking, silly, flippant

**Attitudes of animation:** lively, eager, excited, earnest, energetic, vigorous, hearty, ardent, passionate, rapturous, ecstatic, feverish, exalted, breathless, hasty, brisk, crisp, hopeful, exhilarated, giddy

**Attitudes of apathy:** inert, sluggish, languid, dispassionate, dull, colorless, indifferent, stoical, resigned, defeated, helpless, hopeless, dry, monotonous, vacant, feeble, dreaming, bored, blasé, sophisticated

**Attitudes of self-importance:** impressive, profound, proud, dignified, lofty, imperious, confident, egotistical, peremptory, bombastic, sententious, arrogant, pompous, stiff, boastful, exultant, insolent, domineering, flippant, saucy, positive, resolute, haughty, condescending, challenging, bold, defiant, contemptuous, audacious, demanding

**Attitudes of submission and timidity:** meek, shy, humble, docile, ashamed, modest, timid, unpretentious, respectful, apologetic, devout, reverent, servile, obsequious, groveling, contrite, obedient, willing, sycophantic, fawning, ingratiating, deprecatory, alarmed, fearful, terrified, trembling, wondering, awed, astounded, shocked, uncomprehending

**How to Describe Tone**

(From Ann Rudkin, College Board, adapted from materials shared by Kathryn Hauser of The Career Center, Winston Salem, NC)

Describing tone as merely “positive” and “negative” shows a lack of sophistication and imagination, and (unfortunately) suggests that the writer has a poor vocabulary. Successful analysis depends on a clear, specific description of tone, both for your understanding and for your reader’s. Some excellent tone words include:

1. Accusatory: charging with wrongdoing
2. Apathetic: indifferent due to lack of energy or concern
3. Awed: in solemn wonder
4. Bitter: exhibiting strong animosity as a result of pain or grief
5. Cynical: questioning the basic sincerity and goodness of humanity
6. Condescending: feeling superior
7. Callous: unfeeling, insensitive to feelings of others
8. Contemplative: thoughtful, reflective
9. Critical: finding fault
10. Choleric: hot tempered, easily angered
11. Contemptuous: showing or feeling that something is worthless or does not deserve respect
12. Caustic: intensely sarcastic; stinging, biting
13. Conventional: lacking spontaneity, originality, and individuality
14. Disdainful: scornful
15. Didactic: educating or instructing the reader
16. Derisive: ridiculing, mocking
17. Earnest: intensely sincere
18. Erudite: learned, polished, scholarly
19. Fanciful: imaginative
20. Forthright: directly frank without hesitation
21. Gloomy: dark, sad, dejected
22. Haughty: proud, vain to the point of arrogance
23. Indignant: angry, especially if aroused by injustice
24. Intimate: very familiar
25. Judgmental: authoritative and often having critical opinions
26. Jovial: happy
27. Lyrical: expressing feelings in a beautiful or poetic way; emotional
28. Matter-of-fact: accepting of conditions; not fanciful or emotional
29. Mocking: treating with contempt or ridicule
30. Morose: gloomy, sullen, surly, despondent
31. Malicious: purposely hurtful
32. Objective: unbiased; able to leave personal judgments aside
33. Optimistic: expecting or seeing the best, hopeful, cheerful
34. Obsequious: polite and obedient in order to gain something
35. Patronizing: condescending
36. Pedantic: overly or inappropriately scholarly
37. Pessimistic: expecting or seeing the worst; hopeless
38. Quizzical: odd, eccentric, amusing
39. Ribald: offensive in speech or gesture
40. Reverent: treating a subject with honor and respect
41. Ridiculing: slightly contemptuous; making fun of
42. Reflective: illustrating innermost thoughts and emotions
43. Sarcastic: sneering, caustic
44. Sardonic: scornfully and bitterly sarcastic
45. Satiric: ridiculing to show weakness in order to teach or reform
46. Sincere: without deceit or pretense; genuine
47. Solemn: deeply earnest, tending toward serious reflection
48. Sanguine: optimistic, cheerful
49. Whimsical: odd, strange, fantastic; fun