

# RECOGNIZING THE AUTHOR'S TONE

## WHAT IS TONE?

*Tone* is the attitude writers take toward their subjects. Authors may write about something they respect or something they hate, but all writers have some perspective or attitude. The attitude or emotion an author conveys in writing is suggestive of the tone of a speaker's voice. Tone is often expressed through word choice—especially the *descriptive words* (adjectives, adverbs, figures of speech) used in a passage. Sentence length and rhythmic flow may also suggest tone.

## QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN DETERMINING TONE

1. How do you think the author's voice would sound?
2. How do you feel when you read the text?
3. What impressions would you form about the author's or speaker's attitude?
4. What type of words does the author use? Does the author present facts without opinion? Does the language used include figures of speech which create associations that are imaginative rather than literal?
5. Do you feel that the author is trying to persuade you? How?
6. In what order is the information presented?
7. What information has been ignored or omitted? Why?

## SOME WIDELY USED TONE WORDS

**Serious:** The writer means just what is written, presents views without hidden messages or jokes, emphasizes facts and information. Serious writing is *typically found in textbooks and often in newspaper and magazine articles.*

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**Solemn:** The writer uses formal English, and his or her attitude is grave or sad. Humorous or informal expressions are rarely used. Generally, funeral orations or eulogies, and official addresses on highly critical issues are expressed solemnly.

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**Critical:** The writer's purpose is to critique or judge the relative merits of some thing or some aspect of a thing. The writer may directly state pleasure or displeasure. For example, a reviewer might write that a specific novel is "highly overrated, devoid of plot, and not worth a reader's time."

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**Cynical:** The writer is not only critical but also distrustful of the motives or sincerity of others or the essential worth of the subject. Even when humor is used, a cynical tone conveys a negative attitude.

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**Humorous:** A humorous tone is typically used to entertain by focusing on comical or amusing situations. Expressions used may be funny, joking or foolish. Sometimes, humor can point out the foolishness or stupidity of mankind in a gentle way. When humor is used with satire, irony or sarcasm, its intention is usually to ridicule.

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**Satiric:** Satire is criticism or disapproval expressed in hopes of promoting change. It often ridicules some aspect(s) of human behavior. The target may be an individual, a class in society, or people with a specific ideology of which the satirist disapproves. Satire often uses humor or wit that is subtle rather than obvious.

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**Sarcastic:** Sarcasm is criticism which is purposefully harsh and bitter. The word “sarcasm” originates from the Greek verb meaning “to tear flesh.” When using a sarcastic tone, the writer is, figuratively speaking, intent upon “tearing apart” the person or thing under discussion. Even when remarks appear on the surface to be funny, they are designed to mock or deride.

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**Ironic:** Irony is based on contrasts; that is, the writer’s true feelings are neither the obvious or expected ones. While one view is stated, another is meant. For example, “Beethoven’s three most complex and recognized symphonies were written when he was stone deaf. He never heard them played.” The irony here is in the fact that a deaf man could produce great music which is still played and well-loved today. Irony can sometimes blend with and enhance satire, sarcasm, or other emotions.

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#### **MORE TONE WORDS**

Cynical	Serious	Melancholy	Critical	Satiric
Comic	Objective	Formal	Informal	Ironic
Amusing	Farcical	Intense	Humorous	Detached
Tragic	Irreverent	Reverent	Impassioned	Mocking
Compassionate	Sympathetic	Optimistic	Pessimistic	Solemn
Disapproving	Earnest	Nostalgic	Straightforward	Dignified