

Tone and Mood: Kissin' Cousins

Tone: The author's attitude expressed through style and reflected in word choice.

Mood: The overall atmosphere or feeling that a work conveys to the reader.

Though kissin' cousins, tone and mood are two distinct elements of literature. I explain the difference to students by telling them that while the mood of a story or poem shapes a reader's emotional response—you may be scared or want to laugh—tone reflects how an author feels about the subject. Writers approach their work with a purpose. They want to persuade you to their way of thinking or to amuse you or possibly to teach you an important lesson. To achieve this purpose, they cast their story in a tone that matches their attitude and intention. Take a look at the first paragraph of Lois Lowry's *The Giver*. What do you think her attitude is towards her subject?

It was almost December, and Jonas was beginning to be frightened. No. Wrong word, Jonas thought. Frightened meant that deep, sickening feeling of something terrible about to happen. Frightened was the way he had felt a year ago when an unidentified aircraft had overflown the community twice. He had seen it both times. Squinting toward the sky, he had seen the sleek jet, almost a blur at its high speed, go past, and a second later heard the blast of sound that followed. Then one more time, a moment later, from the opposite direction, the same plane (p. 1).

Notice how Lowry employs short, stark sentences. Notice how often the word "frightened" is repeated. Other key words that suggest the tone include "sickening," "wrong," "terrible," and "unidentified." Though a reader might not yet know what this story is going to be about, we have a strong sense from Lowry's tone that this is going to be a serious story about a character in trouble.

The mood of this paragraph is ominous. An astute reader will immediately feel uneasy and concerned for Jonas's welfare. We need to teach and use academic language like "ominous" so students can expand the range of their responses to literature. I find that the range of students' thinking is often determined by the range of their vocabularies. The more words students have to describe what they feel, the more likely they will be to say more than "I liked it" or "I hate it" or the most common response, "It's boring." Those responses, while authentic, are often tossed out before young readers have taken the time to consider how a piece of literature affects them. Students jump to evaluation before they give more than a nanosecond to analysis.

I want my students to have power over their reading, to understand how it is that an author is able to make them feel as they do while they read. This, in turn, will allow them to wield their own pens and keyboards with power. Knowing how careful word choice conveys tone, they begin to choose their own words with greater precision. Describing one day in her life, Claire wrote the

following first paragraph to her story titled “Sunday.”

3:12 am—Weak light peeks in through the window masked by curtains. It’s annoying waking up this early. I switch sides, rolling over to face the wall, and try to go back to sleep. The digital numbers on the clock are brighter than the light outside. How odd. Is that technology versus nature? Too many thoughts. Too early. I close my eyes and bury my head into the pillow until the light from the clock is obscured. This is getting ridiculous. I open my eyes again and stare at the window. I just dreamt about being a vampire. I had yellow eyes, fangs, the works. Creepy. I turn back towards the wall and try to sleep. Again.

We feel and can likely identify with Claire’s annoyance at waking up in the wee hours. How does she make us feel this? The short sentences and sentence fragments signal uneasiness and suggest her tossing and turning. The question about technology versus nature implies the restlessness of her mind, even at an hour when it should be at peace. The reference to vampires and her own repugnance towards this image lets the reader know that she wishes that other images filled her dreams. Claire’s attitude towards her subject, her tone, is inquiring. She wants to know herself why she is so restless. Writing becomes a vehicle for exploring her experience.

Sven Birkerts, author of *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (Ballantine Books, 1995), explains that “the tone of a work of fiction might be defined as *how* the *what* gets told” (p. 37). In this, tone is directly related to point of view. How a story is told is deeply dependent upon who does the telling. Useful questions for getting at the tone of a piece include:

- Do you feel you are being persuaded of something? Manipulated?
- What kinds of sentences does the author use? Long and complex or short, staccato bursts?
- Is there any indication of the author’s relationship to the reader? Does the narrator address the reader directly or tell you anything about him or herself?
- Do you think the author is being ironic, that is, saying the exact opposite of what he or she means?

An activity that I sometimes use to help students understand tone was borrowed from our drama teacher. Put students in pairs and ask them to have a conversation that consists entirely of one person saying “A” while the other says “B.” Most commonly, students turn this A-B-A-B-A-B exchange into an argument. Actors use this exercise to learn to convey meaning through expression. The meaninglessness of “A” and “B” demonstrates that it is *how* the words are spoken as much as which word is spoken that conveys meaning. I use the exercise to instigate a conversation about how writers give us clues within the text for how their words should be read.

Tone and *mood* appear on many state standards as elements of literature that students are expected to know and be able to interpret. California’s English Language Arts Standards for sixth grade demand that students, “Define how tone or meaning is conveyed in poetry through word choice, figurative language, sentence structure, line length, punctuation, rhythm, repetition, and rhyme.” By eighth grade, students are expected to “Analyze the relevance of the setting to the mood, tone, and meaning of the text.”

Unfortunately, in common parlance, the terms *mood* and *tone* are often used interchangeably. I want to make sure students understand the difference—not just so they can do well on state tests, but also so they can wield these elements with power.