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 “Sun-
3:12 am—Weak light peeks in through the window 
ing up this early. 
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 pil-
low 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 an-
noyance 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 tech-
nology versus nature implies the restlessness of 
herself, 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 Ele-
gies: 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 re-
lated to point of view. How a story is told is deeply 
dependent upon who does the telling. Useful ques-
tions 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 narra-
tor 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 stu-
dents 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 ex-
change 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 En-
glish Language Arts Standards for sixth grade de-
mand that students, “Define how tone or mean-
ing 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 differ-
ence—not just so they can do well on state tests, 
but also so they can wield these elements with 
power.