

RECOGNIZING AND WRITING ABOUT TONE

Teacher remarks: The denotative meaning of tone is simple: the author’s attitude toward his or her subject or audience. But tone is a large and complex umbrella concept in style analysis in both poetry and prose, fiction and nonfiction. Just as every human voice has a “tone,” all writing has tone. It is the end result of how the author uses all other literary devices, so the devices like imagery, diction, syntax, figurative language, and selection of detail, for example, are the tools a writer uses to create tone. If a reader does not understand the tone of a piece, then he or she simply does not understand the piece. In AP English we often speak of tone and “undertone,” meaning the surface level tone and what we detect underneath. For example, Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is famous for its light, humorous, folksy surface tone and its sometimes dark, bitter undertone. In addition to tone and undertone, in AP English we see that a piece of writing is likely to have shifts in tone. This complexity of tone characterizes much of the writing a student is likely to see on AP English tests, both Literature and Language. Finally, it is helpful to think of the complete phrase “tone...of voice.” In general, any word you can use to describe a tone of voice can also be used to describe tone in writing.

What follows is a nice long list of some of my favorite tone words. Are there any you don’t know? Ask about them, look them up—make a point of learning all of them!

TONE WORDS BY CATEGORY

Reverence

reverent
awe
veneration
solemn
mystical
majestic
biblical
apocalyptic
religious
pious

Irreverence

irreverent
impious
iconoclastic

Happiness

happy
glad
pleased
merry
glee
light

delight
cheerful
cheery
gay
sanguine
mirth
enjoyment
relish
giddy
agreeable
amiable
warm
playful
friendly
blissful
effusive

Sadness

sad
somber
melancholy
sorrow
lament
despair

despondent
regretful
dismal
funereal
saturnine
dark
gloomy
dejected
grave
grieving
morose
sullen
woeful
bleak
remorse
forlorn
agonized
anguished
depressed
miserable
barren
empty
bereft
pitiful

pathetic
lugubrious
distressed
discouraged
disheartened
hurt
wounded
elegiac

Irony

ironic
biting
smirking
sneering
derisive
icy
playful
witty
humorous
sarcastic
satiric
mocking
sardonic
flippant

cynical
mock-heroic
mock-serious
taunting

Love

loving
affectionate
cherish
fondness
admiration
tenderness
sentimental
romantic
Platonic
adoring
narcissistic
passionate
impassioned
lustful
rapture
infatuated
enamored
compassionate
benevolent
dreamy
sweet
flirtatious
coy
seductive
sexy
inviting
yearning
longing

Anger

angry
vehement
rage
outrage
antipathy
irritated
indignation
vexed
incensed
petulant
irascible
riled
bitter
acrimony

irate
fury
wrath
rancor
consternation
hostility
miffed
choleric
aggravated
futility
umbrage
gall
bristle
exasperated
explosive
spiteful
caustic
revengeful
belligerent
petulant
perturbed
pique
sharp
contentious

Joy

joyful
elated
zeal
fervor
ardor
jubilant
buoyant
euphoric
ecstatic

Calm

calm
serene
tranquil
placid
peaceful
content
complacent
accepting
at ease
satisfied
soothing

Hope

expectant
anticipatory
hopeful
encouraged

Hate

hateful
vengeance
abhorrence
evil
animosity
enmity
malice
rancor
aversion
loathing
despising
scornful
contemptuous
disdainful
jealous
envious
repugnance
repulsion
revulsion
revengeful
resentment
spiteful
disgusted
bitter
vicious
invective
harsh
cold
threatening
savage

Fear

fearful
frightened
afraid
timid
apprehensive
anxious
terror
horror
dismay
agitation
sinister
alarm

startled
uneasy
qualms
angst
trepidation
intimidation
appalled
meek
mild
cautious
overwhelmed
paranoid
nervous
alarmed
disturbed

Confusion

confused
shocked
befuddled
baffled
bewildered
disturbed
addled
upset

Strength

strong
authoritative
confident
superior
dominant
arrogant
proud
audacious

Weakness

weak
impotent
passive
lethargic
ashamed
guilty

Youth

young
innocent
callow
naïve
childish

immature
fresh
Mystery
mysterious
furtive
surreptitious
sneaky
covert
subtle
allusive
whimsical

MISC.
passive
agreeable
patronizing
complimentary
humorous
explosive
jealous
lofty
chauvinistic
bored
sexist
cynical
obnoxious
laconic
concerned
remote
hypocritical
condescending
curious
obsessive
critical
disbelief
obnoxious
laconic
lethargic
presumptuous
patronizing
humorous
funny
witty
remote
hypocritical
gentle
regretful
bittersweet
zealous

determined
preachy
pedantic
didactic
impatient
frivolous
humble
stern
solemn
sultry
convincing
hypnotic
chaotic
rude
vulgar
morbid
sensational
inflammatory
heroic
informal
classical
stuffy
restrained
prudish
hollow
dramatic
poignant
apologetic
horrific
respectful
diffident
petty
insolent

Words That Describe Language
literal
figurative
abstract
concrete
formal
informal
objective
subjective
jargon
vulgar
precise
exact
esoteric

abstruse
learned
scholarly
insipid
connotative
poetic
plain
simple
colloquial
slang
artificial
detached
emotional
pedantic
euphemistic
pretentious
sensuous
symbolic
bombastic
grotesque
moralistic
idiomatic
cultured
picturesque
homespun
folksy
provincial
nostalgic
trite