The Tools of Tone: What Creates a Writer's Tone?

**Definition:** Tone is defined as the writer's attitude toward the reader or the subject matter of a literary work. An author may be serious, humorous, sarcastic, playful, angry and so forth. The tone may remain constant, or it may vary in degree of intensity, or shift entirely at some point in the piece of writing.

**What are the tools that a writer uses to create a particular tone in his/her writing?**

- **Diction** - this refers to a writer's (or speaker's) word choice; besides the dictionary definition of a word (its denotation) a word can have an emotional charge or association that creates a secondary meaning (its connotation)

  Mark Twain once said, "The difference between the right word and almost the right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug." What do you suppose he meant by that?

- **Imagery** - look carefully at the pictures that a writer creates; note his/her descriptive details in the setting such as: colors, objects, weather, seasons, use of light or darkness, look at any symbols and what feelings they may suggest

- **Characterization** - look at the various elements of characterization and assess what messages the writer is sending through his characters' actions, reactions, thoughts, speech, physical description or what other characters say about them

- **Plot** - what feelings are created by the writer structures the series of events that occur? What feelings are created by the conflict and how it is solved or resolved?

- **Theme** - Think about the author's message; what attitude comes through in his/her main point?

After collecting evidence in all of these areas, a reader can look at the overall attitude or feeling that the writer is expressing in all of these subtle ways.

As we examine our own writing, are we using all of the tools we can to create a unified tone or attitude?
The Tools Used to Create Tone

This graphic organizer may be used to analyze the tone of a piece of writing, or it may be used to create examples to be used in an original piece.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The strong diction choices that help to clearly create a tone are:</th>
<th>Examples of imagery that best illustrate or create a strong tone are:</th>
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<th>The elements of characterization that have a strong tone are:</th>
<th>The specific events in the plot that create a specific attitude are:</th>
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List of Words to Describe Tone

accusatory  
acrimonious  
aggravated  
agitated  
ambivalent  
angry  
anneled  
anxious  
apathetic  
apologetic  
appreciative  
arrogant  
artificial  
attacking  
authoritative  
bitter  
bored  
brash  
calm  
catty  
caustic  
cheerful  
circumspect  
coarse  
comforting  
conciliatory  
condescending  
confused  
consoling  
contemptuous  
content  
coy  
curt  
cynical  
defeated  
defensive  
devoted  
demanding  
depressed  
desperate  
despondent  
didactic  
disappointed  
disgusted  
dismissive  
doleful  
doubtful  
dreamy  
dubious  
ecstatic  
elegiac  
encouraging  
euphoric  
exasperated  
exhorted  
facetious  
fearful  
feckless  
flirtatious  
forceful  
forthright  
friendly  
frustrated  
furious  
grieving  
guilty  
harsh  
haughty  
hesitant  
hollow  
hopeful  
humble  
humorous  
hurt  
inconsistent  
inquisitive  
intriguing  
invidious  
ironic  
irritated  
judgmental  
livid  
longing  
loving  
manipulative  
melancholic  
mocking  
morose  
omnipotent  
optimistic  
paranoid  
passive  
pedantic  
persuasive  
pessimistic  
pleading  
pleasant  
proud  
resigned  
reverent  
rhetorical  
sarcastic  
saturnine  
scrupulous  
seedy  
seductive  
sentimental  
sharp  
sinful  
sinister  
sober  
soothing  
stern  
superficial  
surprised  
sweet  
understanding  
titillating  
vibrant  
vitriolic  
wary  
whimsical  
wistful
The Tools of Tone: Suggested Applications

1. Choose a few paragraphs that contain several strong elements of tone and have partners highlight and label them. Then, have the partners rewrite the passage (or a portion of it, depending on skill and grade level) with the intent of totally changing the original tone. (Descriptive pieces are good for beginners; as the students' skills increase, they can move to poems or journalism that is fairly objective and try to create a specific bias through tone.)

2. Have students collect a list of the figurative language throughout a longer piece of literature and at various points in the reading have them build a parallel list of words that describe the "collective tone" that the writer is creating through his/her imagery.

3. Have students choose one of Shakespeare's soliloquies and rewrite it using a dramatic shift in both the diction and the tone. They can simply reverse the original tone or they can write a "contemporary version." ("To slack, or not to slack, that is the question.")

Additional Applications:
Reflection on the Use of Tone

Description of the entry:

Self-Evaluation on the Creation of Tone

Of the five basic ways to create a clear tone in a piece of writing, how did you use two of them effectively to create your desired tone or attitude? (refer to the notes on the tools) Provide specific examples from your piece of writing that support your claims.

Which of the five tools do you have the most difficulty using to create the tone you desire? Attempt to clarify for yourself why this might be the toughest tool to use.

One thing I've learned about these "tone tools" is . . .