



What is Tone? - Definition & Examples

Lesson Transcript

In this lesson, you'll learn what tone is in writing and how it can be used to make your writing more interesting to your audience by taking a look at some examples.

Definition of Tone

We've all heard the saying, 'It's not what you say, but how you say it.' Every word we use, the pitch and volume of our voice, even how fast or slow we speak, affects our tone and how our audience interprets what we have said. We might recall being told when we were very young, 'Don't use that tone of voice with me!' We learned to adjust our tone to accommodate our audience and the situation. What we say and how we say it is different when the audience and the situation are different. And that difference is not just in our words, but in our **tone**, or how we convey words.

Likewise, tone in writing adapts and changes to suit the audience and the situation. The choice of words and the way sentences are put together convey tone. The tone can be formal or informal, logical or emotional, intimate or distant, serious or humorous. Tone can consist mostly of long, complex words or short, simple ones or of both. It can consist mostly of long, complex sentences; of short, simple ones; or of something in between. Tone is not just what we write but how we write it.

Examples of Changes in Tone

One measure of the formality of tone is the use of contractions, words like we've, I'd, they're, and it's. Notice how the use of contractions changes the tone of the following sentence from a formal to an informal tone:

- It is strange that the professor has not assigned any papers for three weeks.
- It's strange that the professor hasn't assigned any papers for three weeks.

Another measure of the formality of tone is the use of casual forms of speech, such as the slang we might use in an email conversation with a close friend:

- The way I'm lookin' at it, someone needs to do something about that brother of yours. What's the big deal? He's so bogus! There's some really awesome sales at the mall Saturday. What're you up to this weekend?

Different Tones for Different Purposes

Let's take a look at some examples of how tone can change for different purposes.

Newspaper - a column for a newspaper will be more formal than an email, but it can still be funny or familiar as seen in this excerpt from a column by *New York Post* writer Lois Weiss:

'Pink Flamingo seen in SoHo' (February 19, 2013)

'It appears that the owners of hip Miami clothing boutique, The Webster, Laure Heriard Dubreuil and Milan Vukmirovic, along with their pink flamingo logo, have just plucked a Big Apple outpost at 29 Greene St.'

In this example, the title of the article suggests that a real pink flamingo has been seen walking down the streets of SoHo, having a little fun with the fact that a company with a pink flamingo logo had just moved to the neighborhood. The column offers a formal explanation of the facts, but still has a little fun.

For another example, let's take a look at a magazine. An article in a magazine, such as *The Atlantic Monthly* will be even more formal. Notice how the language creates the formal tone in this paragraph from an article declaring that the cultural assumptions of the 18th-century Enlightenment are current at the end of the millennium:

Edward O. Wilson, 'Back from Chaos,' March 1998

'Governments everywhere are at a loss regarding the best policy for regulating the dwindling forest reserves of the world. Few ethical guidelines have been established from which agreement might be reached, and those are based on an insufficient knowledge of ecology. Even if adequate scientific knowledge were available, we would have little basis for the long-term valuation of forests. The economics of sustainable yield is still a primitive art, and the psychological benefits of natural ecosystems are almost wholly unexplored.'

Finally, let's take a look at a scholarly journal. An article in a scholarly journal will be entirely formal and leave no room for personal reflection or casual forms of speech, as in this excerpt from *The Journal of Nutrition* (retrieved, February 20, 2013):

'There is increasing scientific and clinical interest in the interactions of nutrition and health as part of the aging process. This interest is due to the important role that nutrition plays throughout the lifespan. This role affects the growth and development of the body during childhood, affects the risk of acute and chronic diseases, the maintenance of physiological processes and the biological process of aging.'

In all of these cases, although there is some freedom of self-expression, the writer is adapting to the audience and the situation and changing the tone of the writing to suit that audience and that situation.

Lesson Summary

Remember, **tone** is how we convey our words. Tone in writing adapts and changes to suit the audience and the situation. The choice of words and the way sentences are put together convey tone. The tone can be formal or informal, logical or emotional, intimate or distant, serious or humorous. Tone can make use of long, complex words; of short, simple words; or of both. It can consist mostly of long, complex sentences; of short, simple sentences; or of something in between. Tone is not just what we write but how we write it.

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