Identifying Tone

“Tone” is short for “tone of voice” and points to a speaker’s attitudes and character. The speaker may be the author herself, a narrator, a character, or even an inanimate object personified. All stylistic elements—the way a speaker speaks—contribute to tone.

To find the tone in the material you are reading, imagine how the speaker would have spoken aloud. Does his voice seem excited, melodramatic, sarcastic, bored or complacent? Looking for tone means deciding how to perform this utterance in its context, and a performance demonstrates how the speaker is thinking, feeling, and acting. Look for the speaker’s attitudes toward the audience, subject or himself. Does the author have faith in the reader’s judgment? Is the speaker for or against the subject? Does the speaker trust himself or the situation? Remember there is not one attitude or tone of voice in a text, but multiple tones and attitudes. Because tone gives us the emotional content of a work, the words we use to describe tone ought to be words that help us identify emotions.

Tone vs. Mood

Tone should not be confused with mood or atmosphere. While tone refers to an author’s feelings toward her subject, audience, and self, mood refers to the world in which the characters move. For example, although the mood of a story may be suspenseful, the author’s tone may express sympathy, sorrow, fear or awe.

Fiction vs. Nonfiction

Remember that in nonfiction the only attitudes present are the author’s. In fiction the author and his characters may have differing attitudes. Because of this, it’s extremely important that we keep our frames separate: first identify the tone of voice for the individual characters, then for the narrator, and last of all for the author herself.

I. Identifying tone

We decide what the tone of voice is based on how the following textual elements work together.

1. Language:

A) Diction includes the choice of words and their associated meanings. When considering diction, ask what types of words the author is employing. Are they formal or informal, ordinary or specialized, abstract or concrete, emotionally strong or emotionally restrained? Note how the author names and identifies people, things, and ideas. Why does the author choose these specific words instead of others?

B) Syntax is word patterns and arrangements. How do word order, rhythm, repetition, parallel structure or hierarchical or coordinate arrangements, and other organizational schemes imply the speaker’s judgments?

2. Details: What details does the speaker include and exclude? Does she include or exclude different details when she’s speaking to different people? Does she exaggerate or understate
certain messages, ideas, and subjects? How do the speaker's details imply what is important and unimportant?

3. Feelings toward characters: Are there any characters whom the author holds up as good examples or heroes? Are there any characters who are made dishonorable or inhuman? Does the speaker treat her characters respectfully or sarcastically? Does she take them seriously or satirically?

4. Feelings toward readers: What audience(s) is the author addressing? How does he address his readers—as equals, inferiors, or superiors? Must he defend himself to a skeptical audience or is he addressing a sympathetic group? Why is he addressing his audience in this way? Based on how he addresses his audience, what does the author believe about his readers' intelligence, friendliness, and values?

5. Main idea: What topics is the author treating? What are his claims and conclusions about those topics? How do all the topics relate to each other? To what central unifying idea do they point?

6. Intentions: What results does the author hope to achieve? Consider, for example, if she is exposing a problem, apologizing, entertaining, persuading or showing off. What are her motivations for doing that?

7. Consistency: How do all the textual elements relate to one another? Is there consistency or inconsistency among them? Is the author purposefully inconsistent, or is he unaware of inconsistencies?

II. Three letter examples

Examining the previous seven textual elements, we can identify the tone(s) in the following three letters. Although each letter addresses the same subject, the letters have very different tones of voice. Read carefully to note how these letters use tonal elements differently; then compare your findings to those in the analysis section.

Letter #1
Dear Bob,

Good news! I'm rich! You guessed it: Barb sent back my ring. I just sold it to the local pawnbroker for only ten dollars less than I paid for it. If my thinker is thinking right, you want to hear the scoop; well, here it is.

Last Wednesday, I got a letter from the Queen, herself, saying she was thinking about showing up here at nine-forty-five next Saturday evening. I thought it was a big joke—what would she fly all the way out here in the middle of winter for? I laughed it off.

Some of the boys and I held a small atomic blast (complete with fallout) at Ken's apartment last Saturday night. I left word with my landlord that I could be reached at Ken's address. At nine-thirty (a close approximation) the boys left to get some more refreshments and pizza. I was elected to stay and entertain the girls. Get this—six girls? You know me; I played the stereo; they sang and danced. At ten the doorbell rang. Emmy, the blonde I told you about from Texas, answered it.
“Yes, he’s here, Honey, but this is a private party, were y’all invited?”

When I went to see who it was, I tripped on the rug and fell flat on my face—right at Barb’s feet. Scrud, was she mad? It reminded me of the time we locked the Chief of Police in the Post Office. I tried to explain; how does a guy explain to his fiancee being alone with six girls in someone else’s apartment? She left on the eleven-ten flight to Ohio. I got the ring in the mail yesterday. It broke me up to look at it. It looked nearly new, like it had hardly been worn.

I’ve got to run. I still have to write her parents and mine.

See you in the Spring,
Bruce

P.S. Now I know how Tom felt when he signed the Declaration of Independence!

Letter #2
Dear Folks,

I’ve been doing a lot of heavy thinking lately; I’ve finally discerned the wisdom in your advice to me about marriage. I realize now that I should take advantage of my youthful freedoms while I’ve still got them. Although it was painful to both of us, I proposed this theory to Barbara. She didn’t think too much of the theory, but she did finally agree that a year or two apart might be better for both of us. One cannot tell, but perhaps in the space of two years, both of us will have changed our minds about getting married.

Barb flew out here to see me late Saturday. It was wonderful (and surprising) to see her again. We didn’t have much time to discuss the matter, but we both agreed on the solution. I received the ring in the mail yesterday.

Everything is going smoothly here. I like my boss; he is so helpful in explaining the things I don’t understand. He’s patient too. I’m looking forward to coming home this spring. I sure miss the mountains and trees of Montana. We have mountains here, but they’re naked—no trees.

Your loving son,
Bruce

Letter #3
Doctor and Mrs. Peterson,

I suppose by now you have been informed of the particulars concerning the recent termination of the plans for marriage between your daughter and myself. Although the impartiality of the particulars you have received remains a matter of speculation, it is not my purpose to add to your information or to defend myself.

The situation has caused a great deal of grief to me, and in order to be truthful and upright, I must accept all responsibility for my hasty actions and those of your daughter.

It is possible that our engagement was not meant to endure any longer than it did; one can only speculate. Nevertheless, I am deeply sorry about the matter in which our agreement was broken. I therefore offer my apologies for any feelings that were perhaps injured in the process. I also wish to express my hopes that if possible, sometime in the future, I may again have the privilege of asking for your daughter’s hand in marriage.

Respectfully yours,
Bruce Bunger

III. Analysis

As Bruce addresses different audiences, he uses different tones of voice. To determine the tones in each letter, we will explore the stylistic elements listed above.
1. Language (Diction)

Letter #1: Because Bruce is writing to a peer, his first letter is full of conversational slang such as “my thinker is thinking,” “hear the scoop,” the “Queen, herself,” and a “small atomic blast (complete with fallout).” Phrases like “Good news, I’m rich!” and “Now I know how Tom felt when he signed the Declaration of Independence” imply a flippant attitude. Bruce is sarcastic about Barb’s appearance at Ken’s house, calling her the “Queen herself,” and about the news of Barb’s visit, which he calls “a big joke.”

Letter #2: This letter contains no slang. Bruce employs words like “discern,” “theory,” and “heavy thinking” to demonstrate his thoughtfulness. His use of the less common, gender neutral pronoun “one” and subdued phrase like “I’m looking forward to” (as opposed to the more colorful and conversational “I can’t wait”) creates a more formal feel than is found in the first letter.

Letter #3: Bruce uses lengthy words in this letter: “particulars,” “speculation,” and “termination.” He also uses many apologetic words: “deeply sorry,” “great deal of grief,” and “injured feelings.” Such word choice in this letter contributes to its being the most formal of the three. However, the language is so formal that it feels artificial and contrived.

Language (Syntax)

Letter #1: Bruce narrates the events in chronological order in order to distance himself from the events he has experienced and be able to laugh at them. He also uses several rhetorical questions that solicit pity from the reader and help him rationalize his actions: “I thought it was a big joke—what would she fly all the way out here in the middle of winter for?” and “I tried to explain; how does a guy explain to his fiancée being alone with six girls in someone’s apartment?” His use of sentence fragments and non-grammatical sentences, such as “Get this—six girls?” and “Scrub, was she mad?,” contributes to the informal, colloquial feel of this letter.

Letter #2: Bruce doesn’t labor over his breakup. He briefly mentions the event in simple, direct, short sentences: “Barb flew out here,” “It was wonderful,” etc. He sounds calm, rational, business-like and resolved.

Letter #3: Bruce writes formal, passive, lengthy phrases. For example, he uses verb phrases where single words would suffice, such as “you have been informed,” “must accept all responsibility,” “offer my apologies,” and “wish to express my hopes.” Using passive voice, as in “our engagement was not meant to endure,” Bruce diverts attention and responsibility from himself and makes it appear that what has happened just happened of its own accord.

2. Details

Letter #1: This is the only letter that includes the account of the party and the selling of the ring. By showing his careless, fun-loving spirit, Bruce entertains and assures his friend he is doing well. This letter is the only letter that contains his actual feelings and reactions to receiving the ring back. Although he says that looking at the ring “broke him up,” his almost irreverent attitude toward the breakup makes it hard to tell how much he was hurt.

Letter #2: This letter focuses on reasoned thinking and speculation about what will happen in the future—both of which contribute to a philosophical tone. Bruce leaves out any details that would make him sound irresponsible or upset—such as details of the party—and instead speaks of things that suggest he is caring and mature, such as work, spring plans, and respect for his parents.
Letter #3: This letter of apology also excludes details about the break-up. It focuses instead on Bruce’s apologies and regrets. This is the only letter in which Bruce voices a positive view of the possibility of his and Barb’s future. Writing to Barb’s parents, Bruce is trying to show he still cares about Barb, even though the speculatory “particulars concerning the recent termination” the Petersons may believe have revealed him as insensitive and irresponsible.

3. Feelings Toward Characters
Letter #1: Bruce has mixed feelings about Barbara. He must have loved her if he was engaged to her, but he seems to consider her a burden because he rejoices so much when the engagement is broken and because he sarcastically labels her “the Queen.” Now that he’s free from her, he considers himself a lucky, happy person. Yet he still feels hurt when she returns his ring.
Letter #2: In this letter, Bruce treats Barbara as an equal with whom he can discuss his theory on marriage, and he describes her visit in positive terms: “wonderful (and surprising).” Bruce also compliments his boss, calling him “helpful” and “patient.” He is much less abrasive and much more humble in this letter.
Letter #3: Bruce says he still loves Barbara and is sorry to have hurt her; however, he never uses Barbara’s name, but refers to her always as “your daughter.” Such references suggest he thinks of Barbara as the Petersons’ daughter more than as his former fiancé.

4. Feelings Toward Readers
Letter #1: Familiar and open with Bob, Bruce regards Bob as a good friend who will be supportive of his decisions. Since Bruce addresses freedom, pleasure, money, women, and incredible stories, Bruce must believe Bob values these things.
Letter #2: Bruce treats his parents respectfully: he considers and accepts their advice, mentions he is looking forward to coming home, and signs “Your loving son.” However, he writes cryptically, leaving out details he shares with his friend in order to create a distance between himself and his parents. He instead discusses things his parents value: work stability and home life.
Letter #3: Bruce treats Doctor and Mrs. Peterson with respect by apologizing to them and by trying to prove he is acting with integrity. He defers to them as more powerful than he in the dynamics of his relationship with Barbara and avoids arguing because he wants to appear mature and regain their favor.

5. Main Idea
Letter #1: Bruce is arguing that it was good to call off the engagement because the breakup led to greater overall wealth, freedom, happiness.
Letter #2: Bruce says that because he is mature, he was able to end the engagement honorably and move on with his normal life.
Letter #3: Bruce suggests that the breakup should not reflect poorly on him; he is willing to apologize for it and desirous to move beyond it.

6. Intentions
Letter #1: Bruce not only wants to inform his friend of the broken engagement, but he also wants to appear indifferent, even relieved by the broken engagement. This is demonstrated by
emphasizing that he is now rich, by noticing “Emmy” the “blonde from Texas,” and by alluding to the Declaration of Independence.

_**Letter #2:**_ Here, Bruce wants to please his parents and impress them with his maturity. He says he has accepted their advice to “take advantage of [his] youthful freedoms” and implies that this advice caused him to break off his engagement. To please them fully, however, he must assure them he is doing well in spite of the broken engagement. Because he wants his parents to think he is mature, he explains the reasons for the breakup, the progress he’s making at work and his desire to be home in the spring.

_**Letter #3:**_ Bruce is trying to apologize to Barbara’s parents, while making his apology seem more a sign of merit than an admission of guilt. He subtly reminds them that Barbara’s account may not be unbiased by saying that the “impartiality of the particulars” is a “matter of speculation.” In addition, he nobly accepts “all responsibility,” not only for himself, but for Barbara’s actions as well.

7. Consistency

_**Letter #1:**_ The majority of this letter leads up to Bruce’s joyous declaration of independence in the postscript. However, Bruce’s admission that seeing the returned ring “broke [him] up” suggests that he has some hurt feelings over the affair and undermines his protestations of joy. He doesn’t seem to be aware of this inconsistency. We get the sense that his pride has been hurt and he’s doing his best to hide that fact.

_**Letter #2:**_ This letter consistently proves Bruce is doing well in spite of his emotional experience. He admits that the breakup with Barbara was “painful”—as any normal person would—but his positive comments about work, future plans, and personal philosophies and feelings show that he is coping and healing rapidly. His ironic statements—he says it was “wonderful” to see Barbara—are difficult to detect by those uninvolved in the situation, so the letter’s tone is consistently upbeat. However, the fact that he leaves out details about his feelings and the actual events shows that he is not completely forthcoming.

_**Letter #3:**_ Bruce unintentionally uses this letter for two different purposes. Although he attempts to focus his letter on apology, he cannot help defending himself—something he says he doesn’t want to do: “It is not my purpose to . . . defend myself.” But if Bruce is still thinking he wants to marry Barbara, as he suggests in the letter, he does need to repair his reputation. He tries to recommend himself to the Petersons as a son-in-law by highlighting his uprightness, honesty, and ability to be responsible. Unfortunately, this letter’s purposes are inconsistent with each other and with what the Petersons have probably heard about Bruce. Consequently, this letter seems insincere.

**Conclusion: Identifying Tone**

_**Letter #1:**_ Bruce takes pains to sound relieved and excited to his friend; however, his disrespect towards Barbara suggests that he’s upset by how she treated him. The overall tone is light-hearted and flippan, with occasional, incongruous flashes of bitterness.

_**Letter #2:**_ Bruce’s tone in this letter is thoughtful, logical and optimistic. He customizes his tone to what his parents expect to hear. However, because of the typically traumatic nature of breakups, his optimism isn’t very believable. If we were his parents, we would probably suspect he was more upset than he wants to let on.
Letter #3: Bruce suggests that although the events of the breakup were painful, he is not to blame for them and is only willing to apologize because he is a good person. The overall tone is very formal and deferential, but Bruce also comes across as defensive.

IV. Individual Practice

On your own, identify the tones in the following three excerpts. Defend your analysis by citing textual evidence.

Example #1: From J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone

Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you’d expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious because they just didn’t hold with such nonsense (1).

Example #2: From Mikhail Gorbachev’s “The Soviet Union Collapses”

We should have been more vigorous in reforming the Communist Party. And also, I think, I shouldn’t have gone on vacation. But I thought we had an agreement that we’d signed, we had an anti-crisis program. I thought that, in this situation, only an adventurer could decide to take such steps. But they were adventurers.

I made a choice in favor of freedom and democracy, which was bound to lead to the abolition of the monopoly [on power] held by the party, to political pluralism. It was bound to lead to political reforms [and] reforms of property. But this is a very complicated process, especially here. And what is happening now is bad . . .

I would say [the cold war actually ended] in ’89—the movement started already then. The atmosphere became different, international relations were no longer ideological . . .

Everybody [in the United States], even my friend George Bush, thinks that it was a happy moment that fell from the sky when the Soviet Union broke up. OK, it happened. But now Russia wants to be free, democratic, market-oriented, open to other nations. That is what the world needs. The people who live here can endure the kind of things the American would not be able to endure. They will endure it, and they will eventually rise. So I would like to take this opportunity to appeal to all the Americans and ask them to understand Russia. It’s not a poor country, but it is in this cycle now, and it needs help to overcome it.

[With the right reforms in 1991,] the union could have been preserved. And it would have been better for Russia, for other nations, for Europe and the world. But, as they say, history doesn’t know the subjunctive mood (70-1).

Example #3: From William Zinsser’s “College Pressures”

What I wish for all students is some release from the clammy grip of the future. I wish them a chance to savor each segment of their education as an experience in itself and not as grim preparation for the next step. I wish them the right to experiment, to trip and fail, to learn that defeat is as instructive as victory and is not the end of the world.

My wish, of course, is naive. One of the few rights that America does not proclaim is the right to fail. Achievement is the national god, venerated in our media—the million-dollar athlete, the wealthy executive—and glorified in our praise of possessions. In the presence of such a potent state religion, the young are growing up old.
I see four kinds of pressure working on college students today: economic pressure, parental pressure, peer pressure, and self-induced pressure. It is easy to look around for villains—to blame the colleges for charging too much money, the professors for assigning too much work, the parents for pushing their children too far, the students for driving themselves too hard. But there are no villains; only victims (197).

Works Cited

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