

TONE

The importance of tone on the AP exam

The Chief Reader at the AP grading session for 2004 said, "*Teachers should teach tone, always asking students to show how it is achieved and how it contributes to a work's overall effect.*"

In his summary comments about the essays written for last year's free-response questions, the Chief Reader also noted, "The most successful students paid careful attention to the prompt and allowed it to lead them into discussions, avoiding rehearsed and mechanical responses. The best writers developed their essays by allowing the content to dictate the organizational pattern and development strategies." (College Board AP Central website)

Since most AP essay questions (prose and poetry) deal with the tone (or attitude) of the speaker, understanding what tone is and how to identify it is critical to your success on the AP exam.

What is Tone?

Tone refers to the means by which a writer conveys attitudes, more specifically what attitude the writer wants to convey to the reader. An understanding of tone depends largely on your ability to make inferences from the work being read.

Tone is one of the first things we as humans recognize in communication. Think "tone of voice." Tone of voice is a reflection of your attitude toward the person or persons whom you are addressing and also toward the subject matter of your discussion. Identifying tone in speech is easy—it's something we have known to do since we were a baby. At that age, we may not have understood the words "Don't touch that vase," but we clearly understood the tone in which it was delivered.

Identifying tone in literature is another beast altogether. As readers, we do not hear the modulations of timbre in a speaker's voice. Tone, in a skilled writer's hands, is delivered solely through the words on the page. Look at this attempt at tone: 1. "I love shopping with my wife." Really? It's hard to tell. Maybe the writer does, but maybe he is being sarcastic; it's hard to tell from this sentence. Try this sentence: 2. "I love shopping with my wife, slightly more than I love having my pinkie toes gnawed on by anemic alligators." Okay, this sentence is clearly sarcastic unless the writer has a sick, masochistic bent.

What tone is being used?

On the AP exam, you will be asked to identify the tone or attitude of the speaker and analyze the means by which they are expressed. First, let's deal with what tone is being utilized (realize that a writer does not always use one tone, sometimes the tone can be complex). Here are some basic examples of different tones:

burlesque- comic; mocking through caricature or comic exaggeration
colloquial- using a conversational style; informal conversation
condescending- an air of superiority
contemptuous- expressing contempt, a lack of respect, or hate
cynical- an attitude of distrust of people and human nature
despondent- showing extreme discouragement or depression
didactic- in a tone intended to preach a sermon or teach a lesson about life
disdainful- expressing contempt, dislike, or hate
euphoric- feeling of elation or great joy
facetious- playfully humorous
flippant- lacking proper respect
frivolous- lacking in seriousness
hostile- extremely angry
impartial-attitude of being unbiased
incisive- impressively direct and decisive
indignant-attitude of being angry because of an injustice or unworthiness
irreverent- lacking proper respect or seriousness
laudatory- pertaining to or expressing praise
moralistic- characterized by a narrow and conventional moral attitude
nostalgic- a sentimental yearning for a return to some past period of time
patronizing- an air of treating someone well because of a feeling of superiority
pedantic- unimaginative
pretentious- attitude of extreme show to the point of being fake
poignant- affecting the emotions strongly
sarcastic- a tone used to ridicule, amuse, or taunt by sometimes saying the opposite of what the speaker means
somber- conveying a gloomy, dismal, or depressing character or mood
sympathetic- a sensitivity to others' emotions
suspenseful- pleasant excitement as to the uncertainty of events
tranquil- free from disturbance or turmoil
whimsical-erratic or unpredictable

Note: tone can be any human emotional state; this is just a small sampling.

How is the tone created?

Now, how is tone achieved in writing? Almost every single literary device at a writer's disposal can be used to convey tone. Here are a few:

Diction refers to the writer's choice of words. Remember, skilled writers carefully choose their words for the best effect. When you read a passage, ask questions such as:

- Why does the writer use these words to describe a situation or character?
- What adjectives, adverbs, phrases are used for description?
- What is the denotation/connotation of the words used?

Irony is a term used to describe ambiguity or indirection. The use of irony indicates that the writer assumes skill and intelligence on the reader's part to see through the surface statement into the seriousness or levity beneath. The major types of irony are verbal, situational, and dramatic.

- Verbal irony is when the speaker says something opposite of what is meant. Verbal irony may be described as understatement or overstatement (hyperbole). (exp. I love getting up at 3:30 in the morning on Saturdays.)
- Irony of situation is the difference in what we expect and what actually happens. (exp. A dentist with bad teeth)
- Dramatic irony applies when a character in a drama or fictional work perceives a situation in a limited way while the audience sees it in greater perspective. The audience sees double meaning whereas the character sees only one. (Exp. The end of Romeo and Juliet. The audience knows Juliet is not dead, Romeo does not.)

Figurative Language refers to a way of saying something other than the literal meaning of the words. For example, "All the world's a stage" or "The sun is like an angry eye in the sky." The two most important figures are metaphor and simile.

- **Metaphor** A figure of speech in which a **comparison** is made between two things essentially unlike.
- **Simile** A figure of speech in which a comparison is expressed by the specific use of a word or phrase such as: *like, as, than, seems*

Other devices used (especially in poetry) are *anaphora, apostrophe, personification, and paradox*.

Point of View refers to the perspective from which the events are related.

- **First Person** Uses *I, me, my*. This is usually used by writers when they want you to identify or sympathize with a certain character.
- **Second person** Uses *you*. This is rarely used as a POV in good literature.
- **Third person** This is the detached observer. This POV can either be **limited** (i.e. only follow one character, fly on the wall type perspective) or **omniscient** (all knowing—god-like in knowledge). Third person is the most common POV used in literature.

Questions to ask when confronted with writing about tone

Poetry (from your AP book)

- What is the speaker like? Is he or she intelligent, observant, friendly, idealistic, realistic, trustworthy? How do you think you should respond to the speaker's characteristics?
- Do all the speeches seem right for the speaker and situation? Are all descriptions appropriate, all actions believable?
- If the work is comic, at what is the comedy directed? At situations? At characters? At the speaker himself or herself? What is the poet's apparent attitude toward the comic objects?
- Does the writer ask you to 1) sympathize with those in misfortune, 2) rejoice with those who have found happiness, 3) lament the human condition 4) become angry against the unfairness and inequality, 5) admire examples of noble human behavior, 6) have another appropriate emotional response?
- Do any words seem unusual or especially noteworthy, such as dialect, polysyllabic words, foreign words or phrases that the author assumes you know, or especially connotative words? What is the effect of such words on the poem's tone?

Prose (from your AP book)

- How strongly do you respond to the story? What attitudes can you identify and characterize? What elements in the story elicit your concern, indignation, fearfulness, anguish, amusement, or sense of affirmation?
- What causes you to sympathize or not to sympathize with the characters, situations, or ideas? What makes the circumstances in the work admirable or understandable (or deplorable)?
- What does the dialogue suggest about the author's attitudes toward the characters? How does it influence your attitudes? What qualities of diction permit and encourage your response?
- To what degree, if any, does the story affect any previous ideas you might have had about the same or similar subject matter? What do you think made changes in your attitude?
- What role does the narrator-speaker play in your attitudes toward the story material? Does the speaker seem intelligent or stupid, friendly or unfriendly, sane or insane, or idealistic or pragmatic?
- In an amusing or comic story, what elements of plot, character, and diction are particularly comic? How strongly do you respond to humor-producing situations? Why?
- What ironies do you find in the story (verbal, situational, cosmic)? How is the irony connected to philosophies of marriage, family, society, politics, religion, or morality?
- To what extent are the characters controlled by fate, social or racial discrimination, limitations of intelligence, economic and political inequality, and limited opportunity?
- Do any words seem unusual or noteworthy, such as words in dialect, polysyllabic words, or foreign words or phrases that the author assumes you know? Are there any especially connotative or emotive words? What do these words suggest about the author's apparent assumptions about the readers?