



Tone in Creative Writing

What exactly do we mean by tone? That's a good question, as there are many terms—mood, style, voice, cadence, inflection—used to mean much the same thing. For now let's agree that tone is the author's attitude toward his subject: grave, amused, scientific, intimate, aggrieved, authoritative, whatever.

If you were a photographer, tone would be the way you light your subject. For dramatic shadows, lit from the side. For a scary effect, from above. For romance, lit with candles. In a movie, tone is often conveyed with music—think of the ominous score accompanying the girl swimming in shark-infested waters in *Jaws*.

A writer doesn't have a soundtrack or CGI to build the effects they want. Instead they have conflict, surprise, imagery, details, the words they choose and the way they are arranged in sentences.

Like the tone you use when you talk to somebody, tone in writing determines how a reader responds. If the piece sounds angry, they get nervous. If it's wry and knowing, they will settle in for an enjoyable read. If it's dull, they leave it on the train, half read.

You can detect tone problems in your work simply by noting where your attention wanders as you reread it. Or, better still, by reading it aloud. When you're ready to revise a piece, try reading it to someone else, or asking someone to read it to you. You won't have to search for awkward or boring parts—you'll hear them.

Some problems with tone are small and can be easily fixed during revision. Others might require a new approach to the piece as a whole. Here are six of the easiest and most effective ways to improve the tone of your writing.

1. AVOID A PREDICTABLE TREATMENT OF YOUR SUBJECT

In the first draft you write what people expect you to write—what you expect yourself to write. “I wanted a car.” The tone becomes predictable. Now, during your revision, go deeper. Seek out the harder truths. “I wanted a car so I could drive out of my marriage.” Surprise yourself, and you will surprise your reader.

2. KEEP TONE CONSISTENT FROM START TO FINISH

Make sure your very first sentence establishes the tone you want. Look at the opening line of “The Lesson” by Toni Cade Bambara:

Back in the days when everyone was old and stupid or young and foolish and me and Sugar were the only ones just right, this lady moved on our block with nappy hair and proper speech and no makeup.

In one sentence, you know who everybody is. Not only do you want to read on, but you want to know what else she’s written so you can get that, too.

You will choose different tones for different subjects, of course, but stay away from changing tones within a piece. Read your work looking for places where the tone fades or shifts. Focus your revision there.

3. CUT RUTHLESSLY

If you reread a piece and decide that nothing works until the second page, why not simply start it there?

The delete key is your friend. Read your work looking for places where your engagement wanes. Boring is bad. Careful is right next to it. When it comes to tone, don’t try to fix the boring parts – delete them. You can’t fix boring.

4. LET TENSION SUSTAIN TONE

Your piece, whatever it is, should be rife with conflict. It’s not enough to write a piece about how much you like to spend the day in bed. If nothing is stopping you from lazing around under the sheets, then you have no problem, and thus the piece has no tension—an essential element in sustaining any tone for the long haul. If you find you’ve committed this mistake, whether in a fictional story or a true one, bring in someone with the opposite point of view (mothers are always good for this!). That’s why columnists so often reference their mates (guilty as charged)—to be the foil, the reasonable one, so the author isn’t ranting in a vacuum.

5. USE YOUR VOICE

However much you grapple with storyline or setting, it will be your voice, not the content that draws the reader in. So you must sound like somebody. This is true with other forms of personal writing, as well. Resist the urge to come off as uncomplicated, reasonable or polite. If you're expressing opinions, express them.

6. CONVEY TONE THROUGH DETAILS AND DESCRIPTIONS

Consider the difference between “in October” and “under an October sky.” A description of scenery, however luscious, can tire the reader if that's all it is. Use the imagery to show us your character's mood: A sad character will notice rotting houses and untended yards; a contented one will see picturesque shacks and gardens in a profuse state of nature.

When adding details to enrich your writing, tone comes from being as specific as possible. Change “My husband committed suicide” to “My husband gassed himself in our Passat in the Austrian Alps.”

