

Tone and Mood

Teacher Resource

Though some literary authorities consider **tone** and **mood** to be synonymous terms, others find it useful to distinguish between the two concepts. College Board publications for Pre-AP* teachers, including *The AP* Vertical Teams Guide for English*, as well as NMSI English resources use this distinction to differentiate the two ideas:

Tone: The writer’s or speaker’s/narrator’s attitude toward the subject, the audience, or a character

Mood: The feeling created in the reader; the atmosphere of a piece

Teachers who are introducing these ideas to students often emphasize

Tone—author

Mood—reader

Both of these concepts have to do with emotion, and the words used to describe each are the same or similar. For example, a story might contain a frightening tone, creating a frightening mood. For this reason, more advanced readers and writers, including those in Advanced Placement classes, often make little distinction between the two ideas and use the terms interchangeably.

On the following page is a list of words commonly used to describe tone. This list can be duplicated as a student handout.

Activities to Help Students Learn Tone (and Mood) Words

- Create banks of words that describe tone for students to use and add to throughout the year, either through individual student notebooks or with a Word Wall for all to see.
- Use visuals and pieces of music, both instrumental and lyrical, to assess tone.
- Give students a list of tone words, and, as a group activity, have them group the words into synonyms. Then instruct them to place the words in order of degree of feeling. (See the NMSI Close Reading Foundation Lesson “Best Word for the Job” as a model.)
- After completing the activity directly above, instruct students to find photographs in magazines to match each of the words in a short “degree” list. For example, from a list of five “happy” words, ranging from “pleased” to “ecstatic,” find a photo of a person feeling each of those emotions.
- When reading a poem or narrative, instruct students to find examples of several tones taken by the narrator at different points in the piece. (Note that this activity can lead to a discussion of a shift in attitude.)
- Instruct students to write a letter. Provide the situation (for example, responding to an invitation to participate in a summer writing camp). Give each student or group a tone to take in the letter. Have students read their letters aloud while others determine the tone.
- Employ picture books in a discussion of tone.

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A SAMPLING OF TONE WORDS

Positive	Neutral	Negative
admiring	authoritative	angry
amazed	clinical	argumentative
amused	confident	arrogant
awed	detached	biased
benevolent	dramatic	biting
benign	factual	blasphemous
candid	formal	childish
cheerful	impartial	condescending
comforting	ironic	confused
compassionate	matter-of-fact	disdainful
complimentary	neutral	disrespectful
concerned	nostalgic	fearful
delighted	objective	frivolous
ecstatic	outspoken	grim
excited	restrained	indignant
forgiving	sentimental	irreverent
giddy	solemn	melancholy
happy	straightforward	moralistic
humorous	surprised	mournful
impressed		outraged
lighthearted		patronizing
optimistic		pessimistic
peaceful		sad
playful		sarcastic
respectful		scornful
sincere		self-pitying
sympathetic		somber
sweet		threatening