

Close Reading: Analyzing Tone

Pre-AP and AP English

Tone refers to the attitude an author displays toward her subject or audience. **Mood** refers to the audience’s feeling toward the subject of the writing. Authors work hard to create specific tones and moods in their writing, and the job of a careful reader is to “hear” the tone and mood—not just to read the words on the page.

Tone and mood are often subtle. Since we can’t literally hear the author’s voice, we must **infer** her tone and mood from evidence in her writing. Reading this way requires careful attention to every choice an author makes; hence, it is called **close reading**.

To infer the tone of a piece of literature, we will need to recognize and explain how the author uses each of the following elements: diction, imagery, details, language, and syntax. These elements are known, for short, as **DIDLS**.

Diction refers to the author’s choice of words and phrases.

Imagery is a sensory perception created by the author’s words.

Details are small, specific facts that the author chooses to include or omit.

Language refers to the register and the style of the author’s writing. It also refers to the emotional distance between the author and the subject or the author and the audience.

Syntax is the structure and organization of individual sentences and the piece as a whole.

The next few pages provide a more exhaustive discussion of each of these elements—how authors use them and how you can recognize their intended effect.

Diction

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Professional writers choose words deliberately. No word is accidental. When you analyze a writer's diction, you are explaining why she chose the words that she did, knowing that she had thousands of other words to choose from.

When analyzing the purpose or effect of diction, ask the following questions:

1. Is there any difference between the **denotative** meaning (simple, literal definition) and the **connotative** meaning (contextual, suggestive meaning) of the words? If so, what is the difference?
2. Are the words **concrete** (physical, tangible) or **abstract** (emotional, intangible, philosophical)?
3. What is the level of **formality**? Are the words formal, informal, conversational, colloquial?
4. What do the words reveal about the **age** of the author or the **historical context** of the piece? Are the words old-fashioned? Common? Trendy? (Would the author's original audience agree with your assessment?)
5. Do the words exhibit **local color** (e.g. regional dialect), or are they standard and universal?
6. How do the words **sound**? Are they euphonious (pleasant sounding) or cacophonous (harsh sounding)?
7. Are the words **monosyllabic** (one syllable) or **polysyllabic** (more than one syllable)?

As always, make sure that you explain why your observations are **significant**: what they **reveal** about the author, the audience, the subject, or the purpose of the piece.

Words you can use to describe an author's diction:

denotative	connotative
concrete	abstract
formal	informal/conversational/colloquial
old-fashioned	trendy
local	universal
euphonious	cacophonous
monosyllabic	polysyllabic

Imagery

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The purpose of **imagery** is to engage the reader's senses in creating a mood or tone. An author might do this in one of two ways. First, he might provide **descriptions** of sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and feelings to help the reader to experience these sensations with him. Or, second, he might use **figures of speech** or **sound devices** to create pleasant, harsh, or otherwise suggestive sensations in the reader's mind.

When analyzing the purpose or effect of imagery, ask the following questions.

1. If analyzing a **description**, ask:
 - a. Is the description vivid and clear or vague and ambiguous? What makes it so?
 - b. What implied associations (feelings, experiences) does the description conjure?
 - c. How do the author's choices (**details** and **diction**, for example) contribute to the overall effectiveness of the description?
2. If analyzing **figurative language**, ask:
 - a. What image or association does the author create? Is the comparison clever, innovative, archetypal, or trite?
 - b. What other associations might this comparison conjure in the audience's mind? What feelings might it create, and why?
3. If analyzing **sound devices**, ask:
 - a. What sound is being emphasized? Is it a vowel, a consonant, or a whole syllable?
 - b. What might this sound represent? An object? A process? A feeling?
 - c. Is the sound cacophonous or euphonious? Why would the author want it to be so?

Figures of speech commonly used to create imagery:

simile	direct comparison of unlike things, usually using <i>like</i> or <i>as</i>
metaphor	direct comparison of unlike things that assumes that one <i>is</i> the other
synecdoche	metaphor in which a part of a thing represents the whole—or vice versa
metonymy	metaphor in which a word is exchanged for another word closely related to it
hyperbole	deliberate exaggeration for effect
understatement	deliberate downplaying for effect
personification	attributing human qualities to inhuman objects
pun	play on words; using a word with multiple meanings
symbol	a word or object in a story that represents something else—usually larger or more significant than itself
analogy	comparison of two unlike but parallel things or situations
oxymoron	use of words that seem to contradict each other

Sound devices that create imagery:

alliteration	repetition of consonant sounds at the beginnings of words
consonance	repetition of consonant sounds at the ends of words
assonance	repetition of vowel sounds
onomatopoeia	a word that sounds like what it is

Details

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Authors choose to include or exclude specific **details** for specific reasons. The best writers never include insignificant details.

However, no two writers would agree about what constitutes a significant detail. Some include very few specifics, preferring to be deliberately ambiguous and force the reader to supply his own information. This strategy can be very engaging, but it risks criticism for being unclear or overly simplistic. Furthermore, when authors supply less detail, they relinquish some element of control over how others interpret their work. Some authors relish this opportunity to empower readers to interpret their work in diverse ways; other writers resent readers for presuming to impose their own views or experiences on the work.

Another approach to writing is to include so many specific details that (the author hopes) readers cannot help seeing, feeling, and thinking exactly as the author wants them to. This copious style of writing has lost popularity in the last hundred years or so, but was once assumed to be the hallmark of a writer's skill. The danger, of course, in providing too many details is that readers may lose sight of the larger plot or purpose of the work while concentrating on all the specifics. Modern readers (whose attention spans continue to shorten) are likely to get bored with long descriptions and accuse the writer of wasting their time.

In any case, a good writer will try to predict which details, and how many details, are likely to create the desired tone and mood in his specific audience. Your job as a close reader is to analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the author's choice. When doing so, you may ask yourself the following questions:

1. Which details are the most surprising or memorable? What makes them so?
2. Which details are mundane or insignificant? What makes them so? (Is this feeling of banality intentional?)
3. About which subjects does the author include the most detail, and why?
4. Which subjects does he choose NOT to describe in detail, and why? Are there any details that are conspicuously missing?
5. How do the author's other choices (**diction** and **syntax**, for example) relate to his choice of details? How do they affect his presentation of these simple facts?
6. How does the inclusion or omission of details contribute to the author's **tone** toward specific subjects? How does it contribute to his creation of a **mood** in the audience? How does it contribute to his overall **purpose** in the piece?

Language

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In this context, an author's **language** refers to her overall style of writing: the total effect created by her diction, imagery, details, and syntax in an entire work—or even in a collection of many works. Whereas diction, imagery, details, and syntax require specific and pointed analysis, **language** and **style** require a broad and wide view of many authorial choices.

Analyzing an author's writing style is a bit like analyzing a celebrity's style of dress. While a celebrity (Sarah Jessica Parker or Beyoncé, for instance) may never wear the same designer dress twice, fashion analysts can detect general trends and tendencies in their choices. Each of them must find a memorable style all her own—something that suits her personality, her body type, and the image of herself that she wants the public to see. Thus, while a celebrity's style might differ from day to day, it is consistent over weeks, months, and even years—and it is an important part of her public image.

A good writer is the same. Her style differs from sentence to sentence, from paragraph to paragraph, and from book to book; nevertheless, the sum total of her sentences, paragraphs, and books is a carefully crafted public persona that looks and sounds unique. Thus, in order to accurately describe an author's language, you must be ready to discuss how the specific elements—diction, imagery, detail, and syntax—contribute to the overall flow and feel of an entire work.

When analyzing an author's style of language, ask yourself the following questions:

1. What literary and rhetorical devices are most common, and why?
 2. What assumptions does the author seem to make about her audience—in terms of age, culture, background, level of education, social class, etc.? How do you know?
 3. When describing the author's diction, imagery, choice of details, and syntax, do you notice any dominant patterns?
 4. Do the author's tone and mood stay the same, or do they shift when she moves from topic to topic? What do her tone and mood suggest about her style?
 5. What public personality does the author seem to want to portray to her readers? Does this personality change depending on her subject and audience? How do you know?
 6. What adjectives can you use to describe the author's overall style? How does the style change, and why?
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Language

continued

Words to use to describe an author's style of language:

artificial	false	learned	educated, experienced
bombastic	pompous, ostentatious	literal	word-for-word, simplistic
colloquial	slang/vernacular	moralistic	righteous, puritanical
concrete	specific, particular	obscure	unclear
connotative	suggestive, allusive	obtuse	dull-witted, undiscerning
cultured	cultivated, refined	ordinary	everyday, common
detached	removed, separated	pedantic	didactic, scholastic, bookish
emotional	expressive	plain	clear, obvious
esoteric	understood by a chosen few	poetic	lyric, melodious, romantic
euphemistic	insincere, affected	pretentious	pompous, gaudy, inflated, affected
exact	precise	provincial	rural, rustic, unpolished
figurative	illustrative	scholarly	intellectual, academic
formal	academic, conventional	sensuous	passionate, luscious
grotesque	hideous, deformed	simple	clear, intelligible
homespun	folksy, homey, rustic	symbolic	metaphorical, allegorical
idiomatic	peculiar, vernacular	trite	common, banal, stereotyped
insipid	tame, dull	informal	casual, relaxed
jargon (n)	vocabulary used only for a profession	vulgar	coarse, indecent, tasteless

Common stylistic elements:

rhetorical question	poses a dilemma; creates satire
euphemism	substitutes a milder or less offensive word; avoids offending audience, but often undermines speaker's credibility
aphorism	Universal saying. Also called a <i>maxim</i> or <i>proverb</i> . Appeals to a wide audience, often common or unrefined in outlook.
repetition	Adds poetic or rhetorical rhythm; reinforces a dominant mood or meaning.
irony	When pervasive, can either characterize an author as subtle and deep or as cynical and pessimistic.
allusion	Characterizes an author culturally by identifying him with an audience who would recognize the same allusion.
paradox	Can characterize an author as clever or trite, depending on the perceived originality of the paradox.
first person	creates emotional closeness with the audience, since the speaker is confiding to us his personal thoughts and experiences.
second person	Creates intense emotional connection to the reader; puts the reader literally in the narrator's place. Is risky, however, because it is considered informal and (sometimes) inappropriate.
third person	Creates emotional distance between the narrator and the audience; often creates a feeling of objectivity or detachment from the subject matter.

Syntax

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Syntax, or sentence structure, can be hard to notice. Most of us do not think about our own sentence structure when writing, so we tend not to notice professionally crafted syntax when we read it. Perhaps for this reason, intentional syntax, more than any other feature, serves to distinguish skillful writing from amateur writing. As you become more comfortable with recognizing mature sentence patterns in the work of professional writers, you should also seek to use these patterns more in your own essays. Such application of these mechanical tools will yield untold results throughout the year.

When analyzing an author's syntax, ask yourself the following questions:

1. How and why does the author vary the **lengths** of his sentences?
2. How does the author **begin** and **end** his sentences, and why?
3. Which of the three basic **sentence types** (simple, compound, complex) does the author use most frequently—and why?
4. Which of the three most common **detail arrangements** (periodic, loose, and split) does the author use, and why?
5. What **syntactic patterns** (parallel construction, juxtaposition, repetition, rhetorical question, etc.) does the author use, and to what effect?
6. Which of the four **moods** (declarative, interrogative, imperative, exclamatory) does the author use, and why?
7. How does the author **punctuate** the sentences, and why?
8. How does the author **arrange ideas** in sentences and paragraphs, and why does he use that organizational pattern?
9. Which of these devices is most **common** in the piece—and which tends to **stand out**?
10. How does the use of these devices contribute to the **rhythm, organization, or memorability** of the piece as a whole?
11. How do syntactic **shifts** reflect the author's shifting tone, mood, subject, or audience?

Syntactic Elements (refer to grammar notes for definition and purpose):

Simple, compound, complex, and compound/complex sentences	repetition (anadiplosis, anaphora, epanalepsis, epistrophe)
Periodic, loose, and split sentences	reversal
rhetorical fragment	chiasmus
rhetorical question	inversion
antithesis	asyndeton
juxtaposition	polysyndeton
parallelism	