

Tone

In composition, tone is the expression of a writer's attitude toward subject, audience, and self.

Tone is primarily conveyed in writing through diction, point of view, syntax, and level of formality.

Etymology: From the Latin, "string, a stretching"

"In Writing: A Manual for the Digital Age," David Blakesley and Jeffrey L. Hoogeveen make a simple distinction between style and tone: "Style refers to the overall flavor and texture created by the writer's word choices and sentence structures. Tone is an attitude toward the events of the story—humorous, ironic, cynical, and so on." In practice, there's a close connection between style and tone.

What is tone in writing?

Tone is the attitude your writing employs. Just like tone of voice, tone in writing gives much more context beyond the words used. It can reveal intention or conceal it. As memoirist and writing coach Adair Lara says, "Tone is what the dog hears."

If, for example, your boss sent you a Slack message that said, "Do you have a minute to talk?" you might think, "Oh no, what's wrong?" If she rephrased it as, "Got time to chat real quick?" you might be less alarmed. There isn't a negative force lurking in the background. That contrast is because of tone.

And while the emotional response you take away from a message may not necessarily be the intention of the sender, it still exists, and people will seek it out when reading. "If the reader doesn't respond the way you want them to," says Lara, "you don't have a reader."

What informs tone in writing?

Tone, like language itself, works because people agree on the meaning behind words. Cultural norms often dictate how those are perceived. And it takes knowledge of those norms and expectations, as well as the context of the conversation, to be able to convey the intended emotions.

It is like, when you are doing a sensitivity read, you typically examines every single aspect of the work—the language, the content, the plot, the psychology of the characters, the [political and personal] context.

Even if you aren't writing a book about complex topics like race, gender, and class, tone-based misinterpretation can still happen in everyday exchanges. If you're texting someone you just met and are interested in romantically, the difference between "For sure!" and "Ok" can be painfully apparent. That has to do with the cultural expectations placed on words within the context of texting.

"Perhaps because we have become accustomed to exclamation points and emojis, when they are missing, the text can seem angry or cold," notes Dr. Tchiki Davis, founder of the Berkeley Well Being Institute. In fact, that gap between the desired emotional reaction and perception is very common. And many readers will read text as slightly more negative as the writer intended.

Types of tones in writing

Tone is as diverse as our emotions. It can convey the positive, negative, neutral, and everything in between.

Let's say you were invited to someone's party. Here are a few examples of tones that can be employed in a response:

Appreciative: Thanks for inviting me!

Joyful: Yes! My heart is leaping with joy!

Informal: Yeah, see ya at the party

Formal: This is to inform you that I'm going to join you at the party.

Confused: I have no clue.

Skeptical: Have you really thought this through?

Regretful: It's a pity I can't go.

Neutral: kk

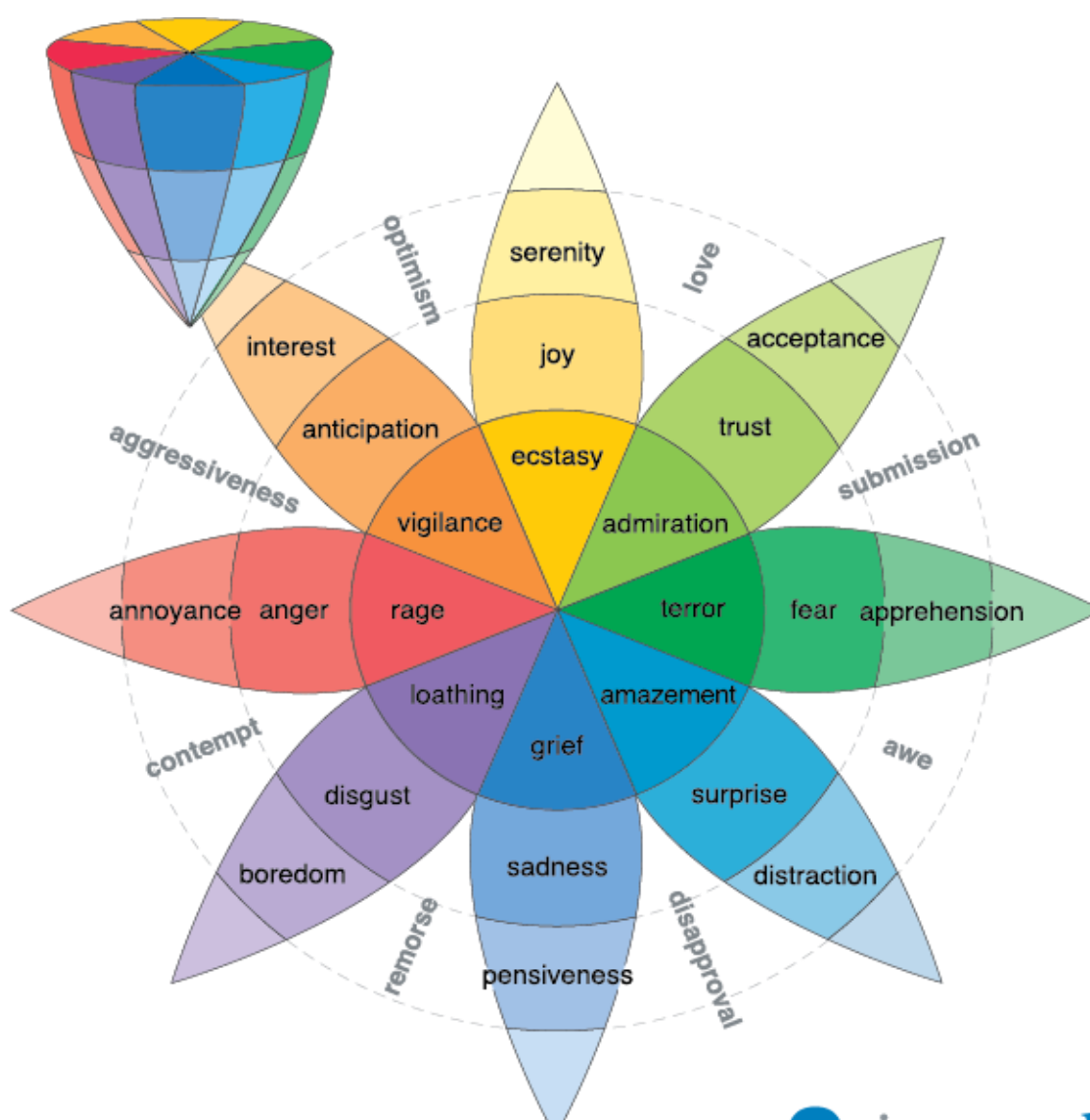
How does tone impact a reader's emotional response?

This complex relationship starts in your amygdala, which is where your brain processes emotions. It's theorized that it interacts with the visual cortex and the orbitofrontal cortex (a.k.a. where your decision-making comes from) to produce the relationship between emotion

and the written word. So you see the words on the page, interpret their meaning, add a layer of emotional context, and that engenders words with emotional meaning.

Except the amygdala isn't always as involved in language comprehension. It varies in strength from person to person. And not every word carries the same emotional weight. So in that way, there is an element of the unknown.

Still, there's room for a scientific approach to mastering tone. According to Plutchik's wheel of emotions, feelings can generally be calculated based on the combination of basic emotions. So to create a feeling of love, there must be both joy and trust. Or to make envy, you'd combine sadness and anger. (Think of it as the alchemist's guide to emotion.) When combined with the NRC Word-Emotion Association Lexicon, which sorts words into corresponding emotional reactions, feelings can be reverse-engineered, word by word.



How to intentionally create tone in your writing

Once you've figured out your desired tone, here are a few things you should keep in mind while writing:

Word (or emoji) choice: In general, it's best to strive for positivity. If a word or emoji feels wrong, consider rephrasing, removing it, or using a thesaurus to find the word that best fits your intention.

Personal pronouns: Pay attention to the main subject in a sentence. For example, "you" puts the onus on the reader, while "I" or a lack of personal pronouns is less likely to make the reader feel called out. It's not a bad thing to use "you," and there are situations where it makes sense. Just make sure it's the right call for the situation. Pronouns are also important when it comes to addressing people. Failing to use the correct pronoun (he/she/they) can create a tone of disrespect.

Punctuation: Lack of punctuation is more casual, which can make it tricky to pull off in professional settings. Punctuation isn't always critical to tone, but keep in mind that it can have an impact.

Consistency: One tone-deaf sentence has the power to destroy all of your hard work. It's especially important to look for consistency when you have strong feelings about the topic.

Honesty: It's important to tell the truth—not just about what you say, but also in how you say it. If you aren't true to yourself, the tone may become contrived or off-message. It's like hearing your sweater vest-wearing aunt Linda use the phrase "it's lit."

Empathy: Once you have your sentence or message written, read it aloud and try to imagine your reader's reaction, or run it by a friend or colleague. External factors, like the recipient's personal or job circumstances, will certainly have an impact—you can't control that. But you can dictate how thoughtful you are about what you write. And that kind of empathy is powerful.

Other Elements

Tone and Persona

In Thomas S. Kane's "The New Oxford Guide to Writing," "If persona is the complex personality implicit in the writing, tone is a web of feelings stretched throughout an essay, feelings from

which our sense of the persona emerges. Tone has three main strands: the writer's attitude toward subject, reader, and self.

"Each of these determinants of tone is important, and each has many variations. Writers may be angry about a subject or amused by it or discuss it dispassionately. They may treat readers as intellectual inferiors to be lectured (usually a poor tactic) or as friends with whom they are talking. Themselves they may regard very seriously or with an ironic or an amused detachment (to suggest only three of numerous possibilities). Given all these variables, the possibilities of tone are almost endless.

"Tone, like persona, is unavoidable. You imply it in the words you select and in how you arrange them."

Tone and Diction

According to W. Ross Winterowd In his book, "The Contemporary Writer," "The main factor in tone is diction, the words that the writer chooses. For one kind of writing, an author may choose one type of vocabulary, perhaps slang, and for another, the same writer may choose an entirely different set of words...

"Even such small matters as contractions make a difference in tone, the contracted verbs being less formal:

- It is strange that the professor had not assigned any papers for three weeks.
- It's strange that the professor hadn't assigned any papers for three weeks."

Tone in Business Writing

Philip C. Kolin reminds us of how important it is to get the tone just right in business correspondence in "Successful Writing at Work." He says, "Tone in writing...can range from formal and impersonal (a scientific report) to informal and personal (an email to a friend or a how-to article for consumers). Your tone can be unprofessionally sarcastic or diplomatically agreeable.

"Tone, like style, is indicated in part by the words you choose...

"The tone of your writing is especially important in occupational writing because it reflects the image you project to your readers and thus determines how they will respond to you, your work, and your company. Depending on your tone, you can appear sincere and intelligent or angry and uninformed... The wrong tone in a letter or a proposal might cost you a customer."