



# What Are Tone Shifts in Literature?

Any piece of literature, whether a poem, short story or novel, has an overall mood. The mood determines if it is a comedy, tragedy, romance or drama. Within a story there are shifts in the mood, or tone, as the story progresses. These tone shifts are what makes the story exciting, taking the reader through a wide range of emotions. Tone is one tool that an author uses to define characters and set the scene. There are too many tones to list them all, but some commonly used in literature are: happy, sad, sarcastic, mad, scary, ominous, love, hate, scary, uneasy, comfortable, serious and humorous. There are many ways an author can use the tools of their trade to create a tone shift.

## Settings

Descriptions of settings will change the tone. A young child plays in a shallow stream as his mother watches from nearby. The tone is nostalgic, comforting and happy. The stream starts to rise quickly, turning into a flash flood. The child clings to a rock in the middle of a raging torrent. The tone has shifted to one of horror.

## Characters

Characters' actions can change the tone of a piece. If a romantically involved couple are having dinner, the tone is romantic. If another man enters the restaurant, the mood can quickly shift from romantic to suspenseful -- especially if readers know the second man is having an affair with the female character.

## Actions

Characters' actions can change the tone of a piece. If the woman suddenly leaves her date and passionately kisses the man while her date looks on, the mood becomes vengeful.

## Dialogue

Dialogue can also change the tone of a work. Perhaps the date calmly states, "I see you've met my brother." The mood has now changed to shock and surprise.

## Attitude

A character's attitude can change how his words and actions affect the tone of the story. What if the date says, "I see you've met my brother," in an irritated manner. Instead of the tone being one of shock and surprise, it would be one of contempt.

## Irony

Irony can affect tone. If a character says, "I love you, too," it would normally set a romantic tone. If those same words were said by a character who has just been betrayed by their romantic partner, the words could be a contradiction to what they really mean. This use of subtext to create irony affects the tone, which in this case would be angry or regretful.

## A Single Word

Any part of speech can be used to change the tone within a piece of literature. When looking for tone shifts, look for key words. Consider how the nouns "man" and "freak" create entirely different feelings in the reader. The verbs "rain" and "downpour" also convey different tones. Does a character go about his work "carefully" or "doggedly?" All it takes is a single word choice to produce a tone shift

## What is Mood?

Mood goes beyond the atmosphere of your novel. Mood is the feeling your novel inspires in the reader.

Whether your reader comes away from the novel with a chuckle, or a heaviness of heart— it's likely to be the mood that's responsible.

You see, mood can influence context, how you experience the story, and what you take from it. For example, in a story where people are stranded on a desolate island: the mood could be Gilligan's Island, or it could be Lost. Similar circumstances, but the two stories produce a profoundly different emotion.

Through the course of your novel, the mood will change. It's likely to shift, as the reader connects with the narrator, develops empathy for the protagonist, and experiences the ups and downs of your exquisite storytelling. Your story's mood can jump from jubilant to sorrowful and then back again.

Remember that mood doesn't have to be constant, but it does need to be ever-present.

## Why is Mood Important?

For your reader's sake, it's key to strike the right mood in your novel. You must create a mood that enhances the story you're telling, whether that story is sad, terrifying, romantic, or joyful.

Conveying mood (or making the reader feel the way you want him to feel) is a huge part of storytelling.

When you tell a story, you want people to feel a certain way when hearing or reading it. For example, if you're relaying a funny story to your best friend— you want your friend to feel happy and even laugh while hearing it.

It's the same way with a novel. If you're telling a sad story, you want the reader to sympathize with the protagonist. You can do that by first striking the right tone, which will then create the right mood. We'll discuss tone more in the next section.

Another reason why mood is important? It enhances the reader's experience.

As a writer, your goal for the reader should always be *emotional reaction*. The reader needs to feel emotionally attached to the story, the characters, the plot, and the possibilities.

And because mood is how the reader *feels* when reading and processing your story, you've got to set the stage for the right mood.

The right mood will help the reader immerse completely into your world of characters. It will give them a personal and visceral connection to the story.

## How is Mood Different from Tone?

Let's talk about tone.

Tone is not the same as mood.

While mood deals with the reader, tone deals with the writer and/or the narrator.

The tone of a story is how the narrator feels about what's happening in the story. Sometimes, it can be connected to the mood, and in other times, it can be in stark contrast to the mood.

For example, let's say you have an unreliable narrator who happens to be a serial killer. He or she may use a matter-of-fact, or even humorous tone when depicting events. As the reader, the tone may make you feel uncomfortable, unsettled, or weirded out— that's the mood!

And that's also an extreme example. Generally, if the narrator can be trusted, the mood and the tone will be similar.

Now is probably a good time to bring up voice. Voice is different from tone. Your writer's voice is your own—it's the unique style in which you tell your stories. You'll carry your voice with you to every book you write. It's tethered to you as an author and doesn't change.

However, tone can change from book to book, character to character, scene to scene.

I like to compare it to that old saying "tone of voice". Your tone can change, but your voice is uniquely and consistently yours, no matter the tone.

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## Start Here



Getting back to mood, let's talk about how to set the right mood for your reader.

Start by answering this question: *What do I want the reader to feel when reading my novel?*

Is the answer: Delighted? Suspenseful? Hopeful? Helpless? Desperate?

Whatever the targeted sentiment, be intentional. Write towards that emotion. And during the self-editing process, check your work against that specific emotion. After a peer critique, inquire about the reader's emotion. Is the same as the emotion you were hoping to create?

If not, edit until you get the right emotion.

Why do you need to have an emotional goal?

Emotions tie the reader to your story. Finding the right emotion(s) will also strengthen your story, and make it more engaging. Without a defined emotional goal, your story will feel loose, unfocused, and unintentional.

## 4 Ways to Establish Mood in Your Novel

Here are four simple ways to establish mood in your novel.

### 1. Explore Theme

What's the theme of your novel?

Not sure what theme means? **The theme of a novel is its big idea.** It's the meaning of your story, and the interpretation you're hoping to communicate.

A few popular themes in literature are:

- The circle of life
- Empowerment
- Fading beauty
- Love and sacrifice
- Self-reliance
- True love conquers all

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Oftentimes, the theme of your novel can set a mood for the reader. For example, when you choose a story that focuses on the theme *true love conquers all*, your reader may feel angry, optimistic, melancholy, nostalgic, and ultimately gratified. By focusing on the theme, you can impact the right mood to your reader.

### 2. Use the Setting

Setting can set the mood.

Let's say your protagonist is lost. As darkness falls around her, she reaches:

1. A dilapidated mansion overtaken with weeds and ivy. It's seemingly abandoned except for the one faint light the emanating from an upstairs window.
2. A well-built log cabin that's nestled deep in the woods. Smoke billows from the chimney, and she can hear a sitcom playing in the background.

In both of the above examples, the protagonist reaches a house, but the mood is different. You can use setting to make the reader feel a sense of foreboding. Or the setting can suggest safety. And depending on the journey you'd like to take the reader on, the mood you create could betray and misdirect the reader.

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### 3. Choose the Right Language



The choice of words you use make a huge impact on how the reader feels about the characters and each scene.

For example, a character laughs. You can choose a term like “cackle” or “giggle” to describe the laugh. One (cackle) suggests a shrill, unpleasant sound. The other (giggle) suggests an innocent, or even nervous, sound.

Your word choice directs the reader on what to feel about the character, the scene, and more.

### 4. Set the Pace

Finally, the pace of your novel can affect mood. Pacing captures the energy of the scene.

When you choose short, terse words and sentences, you’ll cultivate a rushed mood in your narrative. You may choose short words to indicate a range of emotions from excitement to anger.

Alternatively, if you use lyrical, long-winding sentences, you can cultivate a contemplative mood. Wordiness will slow down the narrative and has the subtle power to make the reader feel hopeless, trapped, or completely immersed.

## Examples of Tone in a Story

The tone in a story indicates a particular feeling. It can be joyful, serious, humorous, sad, threatening, formal, informal, pessimistic, and optimistic. Your tone in writing will be reflective of your mood as you are writing.

### What is Tone in Writing?

Tone in writing is not really any different than the tone of your voice. You know that sometimes it is not *what* you say, but *how* you say it.

It is the same with writing. Every adjective and adverb you use, your sentence structure, and the imagery you use will show your tone. The definition of "tone" in literature is the way the author expresses his attitude through his writing.

The tone can change very quickly or may remain the same throughout the story. Tone is expressed by your use of syntax, your point of view, your diction, and the level of formality in your writing.

Examples of tone in a story include just about any adjective you can imagine:

- Scared
- Anxious
- Excited
- Worried
- Foolish
- Smart
- Depressing

## Conveying Tone in a Story

Tone in writing is conveyed by both the choices of words and the narrator of the story.

In *Charlotte's Web* by E. B. White, although the book is sad, the tone is one of peace and acceptance:

But I feel peaceful. Your success in the ring this morning was, to a small degree, my success. Your future is assured. You will live, secure and safe, Wilbur. Nothing can harm you now. These autumn days will shorten and grow cold. The leaves will shake loose from the trees and fall. Christmas will come, and the snows of winter. You will live to enjoy the beauty of the frozen world, for you mean a great deal to Zuckerman and he will not harm you, ever. Winter will pass, the days will lengthen, the ice will melt in the pasture pond. The song sparrow will return and sing, the frogs will awake, the warm wind will blow again. All these sights and sounds and smells will be yours to enjoy, Wilbur-this lovely world, these precious days..."

In Hemingway's *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* the tone is calm and peaceful.

It was very late and everyone had left the cafe except an old man who sat in the shadow the leaves of the tree made against the electric light. In the day time the street was dusty, but at night the dew settled the dust and the old man liked to sit late because he was deaf and now at night it was quiet and he felt the difference.

In *A River Runs Through It* by Norman Maclean loss is also addressed with a kind of acceptance. The tone here is wistful, yet peaceful and moving towards acceptance nonetheless.

This was the last fish we were ever to see Paul catch. My father and I talked about this moment several times later, and whatever our other feelings, we always felt it fitting that, when we saw him catch his last fish, we never saw the fish but only the artistry of the fisherman.

## Choosing Words for Tone

Consider the tone of *The School* by Donald Barthelme. Here, words like "death" and "depressing" set a negative or unhappy tone:

And the trees all died. They were orange trees. I don't know why they died, they just died. Something wrong with the soil possibly or maybe the stuff we got from the nursery wasn't the best. We complained about it. So we've got thirty kids there, each kid had his or her own little tree to plant and we've got these thirty dead trees. All these kids looking at these little brown sticks, it was depressing.

In the following excerpt from Edgar Allen Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," notice the many adjectives and verbs that imply insane, nervous, and guilty tones.

It was A LOW, DULL, QUICK SOUND -- MUCH SUCH A SOUND AS A WATCH MAKES WHEN ENVELOPED IN COTTON. I gasped for breath, and yet the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly, more vehemently but the noise steadily increased. I arose and argued about trifles, in a high key and with violent gesticulations; but the noise steadily increased. Why WOULD they not be gone? I paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides, as if excited to fury by the observations of the men, but the noise steadily increased. O God! What COULD I do? I foamed -- I raved -- I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards, but the noise arose over all and continually increased. It grew louder -- louder -- louder!

In *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens, the tone could be said to be mysterious, secretive, ominous, or evil through the use of words like "clammy," "followed," and "unwholesome."

There was a steaming mist in all the hollows, and it had roamed in its forlornness up the hill, like an evil spirit, seeking rest and finding none. A clammy and intensely cold mist, it made its slow way through the air in ripples that visibly followed and overspread one another, as the waves of an unwholesome sea might do. It was dense enough to shut out everything from the light of the coach-lamps but these its own workings, and a few yards of road; and the reek of the labouring horses steamed into it, as if they had made it all.

## Formal and Casual Tones

An example of a casual tone is:

The way I look at it, someone needs to start doing something about disease. What's the big deal? People are dying. But the average person doesn't think twice about it until it affects them. Or someone they know.

A formal tone is shown in this example:

There was a delay in the start of the project, attributable to circumstances beyond the control of all relevant parties. Progress came to a standstill, and no one was prepared to undertake the assessment of the problem and determination of the solution.

There are as many examples of tone in a story as there are stars in the sky. Any adjective, adverb, or even verb you can think of can help convey the tone in a story.

## Mood Examples

7th grade 8th grade 9th grade Middle School High School College

A mood is a feeling or a person's specific state of mind at any particular time. A mood is also the prevailing emotion found not only in people but also in literature, music, and other expressive arts. Moods set the overall tone for speech or writing and are an important element in literature as well as in everyday life.

## Using Descriptive Writing to Set the Mood

While moods are commonly used to describe how an individual person feels at a given time, they also can be used to describe the atmosphere of groups of people, places, and eras or time periods.

When describing how a group is feeling, a collective mood is often used. For example, if something unfair happens in the workplace and a group of employees lost their jobs, this group's mood can be described as **frustrated** and **enraged**. If a group of students gets to go on a fun field trip for the day instead of sitting in the classroom, the mood can be described as **excited** or **elated**.

Descriptive writing can be used to set the mood of a place. When describing a place, you will want to add plenty of detail and use vivid words. For example, if writing about a beach use words such as salty sea air, gentle breeze, soft sand, lapping waves or warm sun rays. The mood set for this beach is **calm** and **peaceful**.

When referring to a period of time or specific era, moods can be used to set the scene. Use words that describe how people felt during the time and reflect on how they lived their lives. For example, during the Great Depression, the mood in the USA can be thought of as **somber**. People lost their jobs, went hungry and experienced a wide range of emotions. Words such as frightened, panicked and depressed are commonly used to describe people's moods during this time.

## Moods Found in Literature

In literature, mood is the feeling created in the reader. This feeling is the result of both the tone and atmosphere of the story. The author's attitude or approach to a character or situation is the tone of a story and the tone sets the mood of the story. Atmosphere is the feeling created by mood and tone. The atmosphere takes the reader to where the story is happening and lets them experience it much like the characters.

Some common moods found in literature include:

**Cheerful:** This light-hearted, happy mood is shown with descriptions of laughter, upbeat song, delicious smells, and bright colors. A cheerful mood fills you with joy and happiness.

P.L. Travers in *Mary Poppins* creates a cheerful mood throughout the story by using silly words, such as "supercalifragilisticexpialidocious," taking the reader on wild adventures with the children and filling the pages of the book with scenes that make you laugh out loud.

**Humorous:** This mood is silly and sometimes ridiculous. Characters will do and say odd or funny things. This mood can be used to alleviate a somber or dangerous situation or to ridicule or satirize a situation. Jane Austen in *Pride and Prejudice* uses humor and absurd characters to take a comical look at love, reputation, and class.

For example, Elizabeth says the following humorous phrase about Mr. Darcy, "I could easily forgive his pride if he had not mortified me."

**Idyllic:** This is a calm and peaceful feeling, and the mood can sometimes be created by describing a natural setting, like in the countryside, as in this example from Charles Dickens' *Pickwick Papers*:

"The river, reflecting the clear blue of the sky, glistened and sparkled as it flowed noiselessly on."

**Madness:** This is a chaotic mood where random things happen, characters may feel out of control, and there seems to be no reason for what is happening. Madness can be clearly seen in Edgar Allen Poe's "The Black Cat."

The reason the narrator gives for wanting to kill his beloved cat is that, "I fancied that the cat was avoiding my presence... The fury of a demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer." Obviously, he has no justified rationale and made his choices out of madness.

**Melancholy:** This mood is described as pensive and sad. It can be seen in the poem, "The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T.S. Eliot.

"The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes  
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes  
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening



Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,  
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys."

**Mysterious:** In this mood, things are hidden and puzzling. The reader really doesn't know what is going on, at least not for a while. Here's an example from Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven":

"Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,  
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before"

**Romantic:** To create a romantic mood, the setting needs to be beautiful, bright and carefree. This can be a candlelit dinner, a picnic on a beach, or sailing into the sunset. A romantic mood can also be set by emotive words spoken by the characters.

For example, in *A Farewell to Arms* Ernest Hemingway wrote, "Why, darling, I don't live at all when I'm not with you." Instantly, you should feel the amount of love one character is expressing to the other.

## Common Moods

A mood is less specific than an emotion or feeling, less intense and less likely to be triggered by a particular action or event. Moods can be described as being either positive or negative. Here are some common moods that can be used in everyday conversation or in descriptive writing.

### Positive Mood Examples:

- Amused
- Blissful
- Calm
- Cheerful
- Content
- Dreamy
- Ecstatic
- Energetic
- Excited
- Flirty
- Giddy
- Good
- Happy
- Joyful
- Loving
- Mellow
- Optimistic
- Peaceful
- Silly
- Sympathetic

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### Negative Mood Examples:

- Angry
- Annoyed
- Apathetic
- Bad

- Cranky
- Depressed
- Envious
- Frustrated
- Gloomy
- Grumpy
- Guilty
- Indifferent
- Irritated
- Melancholy
- Pessimistic
- Rejected
- Restless
- Sad
- Stressed
- Weird

## Show Your Emotions

There are many mood examples in literature as well as examples of moods that you might experience in everyday life. Moods set the overall emotion of a story and are a way to express how a person is feeling at a specific point in time. Without moods, life would be dull and boring. Moods convey emotion and feelings and add interest to any story or situation.

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