A Tale of Two (Or More) Tones: Strategies for Assessing and Improving Student Knowledge of Tone

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What's Tone Got to Do With It?

Tone, the attitude of a work toward its theme or subject, helps readers discover how and why to read. Students often struggle not only to discern and evaluate tone in their reading, but also to create tone in directed exercises.

How can students best learn to create and evaluate tone?

“At the start of the semester, how would you rate your knowledge of tone?”

Students’ Self Assessment: Beginning Knowledge of Tone

n=29

![Graph showing beginning knowledge of tone]

“How comfortable are you now with tone (its creation and evaluation)?”

Students’ Self Assessment: Ending Knowledge of Tone

n=29

![Graph showing ending knowledge of tone]

Tonal Dissonance

At the start of the semester, I assigned a required diagnostic essay to both classes, which revolved implicitly around tone and its construction.

Although the two classes read different material, they both read Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales, and I highlighted Chaucer and tone in Essay #2. Both classes also completed a peer review worksheet that asked questions of their understanding of tone.

One class, however, did two separate in-class tone worksheets. The other did more informal activities with tone that involved reading aloud and acting out lines and scenes from Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Sonnets, and Twelfth Night.

The first in-class tone worksheet asked students to evaluate tone in Dracula for three of the novel’s main character’s (Jonathan, Lucy, and Mina).

The second exercise prompted students to identify the tone of a passage from The Palace using a word bank of common tones.

Survey of Students’ Response to Exercise #1

Survey of Students’ Response to Exercise #2

The Tone’s the Thing

Tone Does Have Something to Do With It

After various exercises (structured and written for one class, and verbal for the other), both classes demonstrated a working knowledge of tone. The class that received written worksheets, however, made more frequent and specific written mentions to tone, using a greater variety of tone words and evidence from texts. Beyond their helpfulness to written work, the use of written exercises made discussion more lively over time in the class that completed them. Students appeared ready to discuss tone first as they referenced their tone worksheets.

For both classes, the use of a peer review rubric that was both general—it asks students to look for the main characteristics, as I understand them, of an analytical paper—and specific—as it asked them to notice what tone their colleague analyzed and how—was successful for both classes. For the majority of students, in both classes, their comments on the rough drafts and rubrics were similar to ones I would have written.