

Topic: Features of poetry

Understanding tone, voice and mood

Today you will:

- ▶ understand tone, voice and mood in poetry
- ▶ understand how tone, voice, oral and gestural elements can achieve particular purposes, generate mood and affect audience response.

Resources

Find and prepare

Computer software for recording, editing and mixing audio

Key terms

auditory (or oral) features, evaluative language, gestural (or visual) features, mood, poetic voice, position, subject matter, theme, tone

For definitions and explanations of terms, please see the **Glossary**.

Lesson

Understand tone, voice and mood in poetry



In this lesson, we will look at tone, voice and mood in poetry and you will write and present a poem. A poet's work is about creating the perfect mood and tone by using words alone to paint the scene.

tone: the author's attitude towards the subject matter and audience. Tone is reflected in the language choices of the author. Note that there may be shifts and changes in tone across a poem. It is important to understand that tone is distinct from subject matter, although the two are often related. For example:
The poet uses a cynical tone as she describes teenagers' dependence on social media.

Tone

The author's attitude or feelings towards the subject matter and/or audience. Tone is reflected in the language choices of the author. Note that there may be shifts and changes in tone across a poem.

Words to describe tone:

angry, bitter, concerned, cynical, earnest, fearful, formal, happy, hopeful, humorous, gloomy, informal, mournful, playful, polite, intimate, ironic, judgemental, mocking, neutral, pessimistic, reflective, regretful, reverent, sad, sarcastic, sentimental, serious, sincere, solemn, sympathetic, thankful, whimsical

Mood

The emotional atmosphere generated by the tone the poet creates. The 'feelings' or 'emotions' a reader is likely to experience when reading the poem. Like tone, mood may shift and change across a poem.

Words to describe mood:

anger, bitterness, concern, cynicism, earnestness, fear, formality, happiness, hope, humour, gloominess, informality, mournfulness, playfulness, politeness, intimacy, irony, judgment, mockery, neutrality, pessimism, reflection, regret, reverence, sadness, sarcasm, sentimentality, seriousness, sincerity, solemnity, sympathy, thankfulness, whimsy

Voice

A poem may be articulated using the voice of a specific character, a social or cultural group or the poet's own voice. The role of the speaker is made obvious through contextual clues within a poem, or specific language uses.

When considering voice in poetry, note the following points:

- What role does the poet take? How do contextual clues or specific language choices hint at the role? What character or social or cultural groups are represented by this 'voice'? How does this affect the transmission of information?
- What relationships are established with the audience? Are you close to (included/empowered) or distant (excluded/disempowered) from the voice?
- What status does the voice have? Does it have authority? Are we compelled to accept the ideas and attitudes it conveys?

1. Read an Australian poem about a stray dog who became very ungrateful.

A dog's mistake

by AB 'Banjo' Paterson

He had drifted in among us as a straw drifts with the tide,
He was just a wand'ring mongrel from the weary world outside;
He was not aristocratic, being mostly ribs and hair,
With a hint of spaniel parents and a touch of native bear.

He was very poor and humble and content with what he got,
So we fed him bones and biscuits, till he heartened up a lot;
Then he growled and grew aggressive, treating orders with disdain,
Till at last he bit the butcher, which would argue want of brain.

Now the butcher, noble fellow, was a sport beyond belief,
And instead of bringing actions he brought half a shin of beef,
Which he handed on to Fido, who received it as a right
And removed it to the garden, where he buried it at night.

'Twas the means of his undoing, for my wife, who'd stood his friend,
To adopt a slang expression, "went in off the deepest end",
For among the pinks and pansies, the gloxinias and the gorse
He had made an excavation like a graveyard for a horse.

Then we held a consultation which decided on his fate:
'Twas in anger more than sorrow that we led him to the gate,
And we handed him the beef-bone as provision for the day,
Then we opened wide the portal and we told him, "On your way."

Paterson, A.B. 1933, 'A dog's mistake' in *The animals Noah forgot*

2. Consider the tone of 'A dog's mistake'.
 - a. Which word best describes the tone of 'A dog's mistake': regretful, sentimental, humorous or contemplative?
 - b. Justify your choice of tone using evidence from the poem to support your response. Consider how the context of the poem influences the tone. (1–2 sentences)

evaluative language: positive or negative language that judges (or evaluates) the worth of something. Language of Affect, Appreciation and Judgment is used by an author to position a reader to respond to the text in a particular way.

- c. How does the poet use evaluative language to create tone? Use evidence from the text to support your answer. (2–3 sentences)

The poem 'Absence, Pearl Beach' by Geoffrey Dutton, however, has quite a different subject and tone.

3. Read through the poem and think about its tone as you are reading.

Absence. Pearl Beach

by Geoffrey Dutton

The go-away dog
On the squeaky sand
Hunts around for you.

The sea sucks back
Emptiness from the beach.
A wave falls without you.

The lorikeets flash
Through the sombre trees.
Colour gone with you.

Our kookaburra sits
Mute on the clothes hoist.
No laughter without you.

Your small thongs lie
Wanly by the wall.
I walk without you.

Your straw hat sits
On a dome of air.
Hollow without you.

The bed is a lump
Of dead furniture.
I lie without you.

Dutton, Geoffrey 1993 'Absence, Pearl Beach' from *New and selected poems*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney. Used with permission

4. Consider the tone of 'Absence, Pearl Beach'.
 - a. Which word best describes the tone of 'Absence, Pearl Beach': nostalgic, sad, hopeful or contemplative?
 - b. Justify your choice of tone using evidence from the poem to support your response. (1–2 sentences)
 - c. How does the poet use evaluative language to create tone? Use evidence from the text to support your answer. (2–3 sentences)
 - d. Compare the tone of both poems: 'A dog's mistake' and 'Absence, Pearl Beach'. What contributes most to the tone of each poem: subject matter or language choice? (3–4 sentences)

mood: the feelings or emotions evoked by a text, the predominant emotions the reader derives from the text. Like tone, mood may shift and change across a poem

poetic voice: a poem is articulated using the voice of a speaker who is a specific character, a social or cultural group or the poet's own voice. The role of this speaker is made obvious through contextual clues within a poem, or specific language uses

7. Consider the poetic voice in 'Absence, Pearl Beach'.
 - a. Who is the speaker or the *voice* in this poem (the 'I')? What relationship do they have with the second person in the poem (the 'you')? (1–2 sentences)
 - b. What language clues or evidence in the poem confirms the relationship between these two people? (3–4 sentences)
 - c. Is the audience made to feel included, or distanced by the speaker? (2–3 sentences)
 - d. Why would the poet have chosen to establish this type of relationship with the reader? (1–2 sentences)

- e. What status does the poet's voice have? Does it have authority? Are we compelled to accept the ideas and attitudes it conveys? (1–2 sentences)

Apply understandings of tone, voice and mood



You have examined tone, mood and poetic voice in two poems in this lesson. Now you are going to apply your understanding by writing a poem with a clear tone, mood and poetic voice for a specific audience.

8. You used one of the scenarios below in Lesson 1. Select a different scenario and create a poetic text that uses tone and voice appropriately to achieve the suggested purpose and mood. (6–8 lines)





Now if you were to actually perform the poem you have composed, you would also need to consider how you would want it to sound and what gestures you would use. As well as being a famous writer, I was considered quite the actor in my day!

Communication skills such as voice effects, rhythm, facial expressions and gesture can help to emphasise the tone and mood you are trying to express in your poem. Many of these elements can be manipulated by you as a speaker.

Consider these focus questions when presenting a poem to engage an audience:

- volume levels —————> What volume would you use to rouse your team members into action?
- vocal tone —————> What tone would you use to make your audience believe you feel a sense of love and affection?
- rhythm —————> Would you speak quickly or slowly when you are trying to motivate or excite your audience about buying something?
- posture —————> What posture do confident people have when they stand in front of an audience?
- facial expressions —————> What facial expression might someone use if they are truly happy and having fun?
- gestures or movement —————> What gesture might someone use to indicate they are trying to engage their audience to join their team?



9. Record or present an audio performance of your poem, from Question 5, using vocal interactive skills.

Note

If you are recording your presentation, use computer software that is specifically made for recording, editing and mixing audio (if you are able to access it).