

TONE

Style reveals [*tone*](#), the author's implicit attitude toward the people, places, and events in a story. When we speak, tone is conveyed by our voice inflections, our wink of an eye, or some other gesture. A professor who says "You're going to fail the next exam" may be indicating concern, frustration, sympathy, alarm, humor, or indifference, depending on the tone of voice. In a literary work that spoken voice is unavailable; instead we must rely on the context surrounding a statement in order to interpret it correctly.

In Chopin's "[*The Story of an Hour*](#)," for example, we can determine that the author sympathizes with Mrs. Mallard despite the fact that her grief over her husband's assumed death is mixed with joy. Though Mrs. Mallard thinks she's lost her husband, she experiences relief because she feels liberated from an oppressive male-dominated life. That's why she collapses when she sees her husband alive at the end of the story. Chopin makes clear by the tone of the final line ("When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease — of joy that kills") that the men misinterpret both her grief and joy, for in the larger context of Mrs. Mallard's emotions we see, unlike the doctors, that her death may well have been caused not by a shock of joy but by an overwhelming recognition of her lost freedom.

If we are sensitive to tone, we can get behind a character and see him or her from the author's perspective. In John Updike's "[A & P](#)," the narrator clues us into his perspective right away: "In walks these three girls," he begins. This sounds like the beginning of an anecdote someone might tell at a party, maybe even a joke. Sammy, we learn, is a teenaged worker in a grocery store. His casual tone is meant to lull us into the false sense that this story is not monumental, just something that happened at work. Yet the story builds subtly in intensity to the point that Sammy's dramatic, almost impulsive decision to quit takes on the weight of self-definition. A teen quits a dead-end job: no big deal, happens all the time. But the story's final line reveals that this decision has profound consequences in terms of his life's trajectory. He may not realize that, but his author — a Harvard-educated professional writer with a tremendous command of the English language and a boundless vocabulary, as the reader of his other works will quickly see — is well aware of the difference between his character's voice and his own. An insensitivity to tone can lead a reader astray in determining the theme of a work. Regardless of who is speaking in a story, it is wise to listen for the author's voice too.