

Critical Reading III: Being Sensitive to Tone

You may think the word “critical” has only a negative meaning, as in “Professor Smith criticized my paper unfairly.” However, a critical reader is a careful reader. According to Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary, one meaning of the word critical is “exercising or involving careful judgment or judicious evaluation.” In other words, critical reading means being able to comprehend and make educated judgments about what you read.

The skills involved in critical reading are explained in Critical Reading Tip Sheets I-VI.

Why is Tone Important?

In speaking with our friends and family, we can sense their attitudes and feelings by being sensitive to the tone of voice they use. In writing, we can sense the author’s tone by paying careful attention to the words he or she chooses to use to describe something and by the different levels of meaning those words may express.



Readers can occasionally identify an author’s tone by the way the writing makes them feel, but other times it can be more difficult. Almost any adjective could be used to describe tone; below are a few common ones.

abstract	condemning	formal	joyful	reverent
absurd	condescending	frustrated	loving	righteous
amused	cynical	gentle	malicious	sarcastic
angry	depressing	grim	melancholic	satiric
apathetic	detached	hateful	mocking	sensational
arrogant	disapproving	humorous	nostalgic	serious
assertive	distressed	impassioned	objective	solemn
awestruck	docile	incredulous	obsequious	sympathetic
bitter	earnest	indignant	optimistic	tragic
caustic	excited	indirect	outraged	uncomfortable
celebratory	fanciful	informative	pathetic	vindictive
cheerful	farcical	intimate	persuasive	worried
comic	flippant	ironic	pessimistic	
compassionate	forgiving	irreverent	playful	

Make sure to look up any words you’re not sure of, and boost your reading comprehension by sensing the author’s tone.

Adapted from McWhorter, Kathleen T. Reading Across the Disciplines. 2nd Ed. New York: Pearson Longman, 2005.