

SOAPSTone: A Strategy for Reading and Writing 06.14.06

by Ogden Morse - Academic Director, Way Interactive, Inc.

SOAPSTone provides a concrete strategy to help readers identify and use rhetorical devices in their own writing.

SOAPSTone (Speaker, Occasion, Audience, Purpose, Subject, Tone) is an acronym for a series of questions that students must first ask themselves, and then answer, as they begin to plan their readings/compositions.

Who is the Speaker?

The voice that tells the story. Before students begin to write, they must decide whose voice is going to be heard. Whether this voice belongs to a fictional character or to the writers themselves, students should determine how to insert and develop those attributes of the speaker that will influence the perceived meaning of the piece. (Who are you? What details will you reveal? Why is it important that the audience know who you are?)

What is the Occasion?

The time and the place of the piece; the context that prompted the writing. Writing does not occur in a vacuum. All writers are influenced by the larger occasion: an environment of ideas, attitudes, and emotions that swirl around a broad issue. Then there is the immediate occasion: an event or situation that catches the writer's attention and triggers a response. (How does your knowledge of the larger occasion and the immediate occasion affect what you are writing about?)

Who is the Audience?

The group of readers to whom this piece is directed. As they begin to write, students must determine who the audience is that they intend to address. It may be one person or a specific group. This choice of audience will affect how and why students write a particular text. (What are the characteristics of this group? How are they related to you? Why are you addressing them?)

What is the Purpose?

The reason behind the text. Students need to consider the purpose of the text in order to develop the thesis or the argument and its logic. They should ask themselves, "What do I want my audience to think or do as a result of reading my text?" (Explain to yourself what you hope to accomplish by this expression of opinion. How would you like your audience to respond?)

What is the Subject?

Students should be able to state the subject in a few words or phrases. This step helps them to focus on the intended task throughout the writing process. (Just a few words. What are you talking about?)

What is the Tone?

The attitude of the author. The spoken word can convey the speaker's attitude and thus help to impart meaning through tone of voice. With the written word, it is tone that extends meaning beyond the literal, and students must learn to convey this tone in their diction (choice of words), syntax (sentence construction), and imagery (metaphors, similes, and other types of figurative language). The ability to manage tone is one of the best indicators of a sophisticated writer. (What attitude[s] do you want your audience to feel? How will your attitude[s] enhance the effectiveness of your piece? Choose a few words or phrases that will reflect a particular attitude.)

DIDLS – (The Components of Tone)

Diction – the *connotation* of the word choice – Use tone list

Laugh: guffaw, chuckle, titter, giggle, cackle, snicker, roar

Self-confident: proud, conceited, egotistical, stuck-up, haughty, smug, condescending

House: home, hut, shack, mansion, cabin, home, residence

Old: mature, experienced, antique, relic, senior, ancient

Fat: obese, plump, corpulent, portly, porky, burly, husky, full-figured

Images – vivid appeals to understanding through the senses – *concrete language*

The use of vivid descriptions or figures of speech that appeal to sensory experiences helps to create the author's *tone*.

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun. (restrained)

An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying king. (somber, candid)

He clasps the crag with crooked hands. (dramatic)

Love sets you going like a fat gold watch. (fanciful)

Smiling, the boy fell dead. (shocking)

Details – *facts* that are included or those that are omitted

Details are most commonly the *facts* given by the author or speaker as support for the attitude or tone.

The speaker's perspective shapes what details are given.

Language – the *overall* use of language, such as formal, clinical, jargon, politically correct

Like word choice, the language of a passage has control over tone.

Consider language to be the entire body of words used in a text, not simply isolated bits of diction.

For example, an invitation to a wedding might use formal language, while a biology text would use scientific and clinical language.

- When I told Dad that I had goofed the exam, he blew his top. (slang)
- I had him on the ropes in the fourth and if one of my short rights had connected, he'd have gone down for the count. (jargon)
- A close examination and correlation of the most reliable current economic indexes justifies the conclusion that the next year will witness a continuation of the present, upward market trend. (turgid/pompous, pedantic/narrowly academic)

Sentence Structure/Syntax – how structure affects the reader's attitude

How a sentence is constructed affects what the audience understands.

The inverted order of an interrogative sentence cues the reader to a question and creates tension between speaker and listener.

Short sentences are often emphatic, passionate or flippant, whereas longer sentences suggest greater thought.

Sentence structure affects *tone*.

SHIFT IN TONE

Good authors are rarely monotone. A speaker's attitude can shift on a topic, or an author might have one attitude toward the audience and another toward the subject. The following are some clues to watch for shifts in tone:

key words (but, yet, nevertheless, however, although)

paragraph divisions

sharp contrasts in diction

punctuation (dashes, periods, colons)

changes in sentence length