

Mood and Style

Think of a story as a homemade meal. You've learned about the basic ingredients: plot, characters, setting, and theme. What gives a writer's work a unique flavor? What makes you tear hungrily through one story, while another is hard to digest? The answer is the blend of spices, such as mood, imagery, and style.

COMMON CORE

Included in this workshop:
RL 3 Analyze how particular elements of a story interact.
RL 4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings.

Part 1: Mood and Imagery

Mood is a feeling that a writer creates for readers. Imagine this scenario: You and a friend venture into a haunted house advertised as “spine-tinglingly scary.” As you enter the shadowy house, your stomach tightens. You hear eerie howling. Suddenly, a high-pitched howl sends you running for the exit.

The mood of the haunted house was terrifying. As a reader, think of mood as the feeling the writer creates—the overall atmosphere. Often, you can identify the mood by looking at the writer's choice of words, particularly the use of **imagery**—words and phrases that appeal to a reader's senses of sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste.

MOOD

Words to Describe Mood

- cheerful
- wondrous
- peaceful
- romantic
- eerie
- silly
- somber
- terrifying
- thoughtful

Example

The highlighted words and phrases reveal the gloomy setting and create an eerie mood.

A wind had sprung up, driving the dust of the weeks-dry road before it, when they entered the street on which they lived, and the leaves rustled ominously. Lightning flickered.

—from “Rain, Rain, Go Away”
by Isaac Asimov



IMAGERY

Words to Appeal to the Senses

- foggy
- gritty
- hissing
- spaghetti as chewy as string
- a shrill, ear-splitting fire alarm

Example

The highlighted words and details help you almost “see” the author's description.

When he made a fist, his forearm tightened with muscles. His stomach was muscle, his legs muscle. His face was brown, like coffee laced with cream, and his hair black as a chunk of asphalt.

—from *Taking Sides*
by Gary Soto



MODEL 1: MOOD

Here, you see a New England autumn through the eyes of a girl from Barbados. Notice the words and details that are used to describe the setting. What mood do they help to create?

from
The Witch of Blackbird Pond

Novel by Elizabeth George Speare

... The October sun filled the world with mellow warmth. Before Kit's eyes a miracle took place, for which she was totally unprepared. She stood in the doorway of her uncle's house and held her breath with wonder. The maple tree in front of the doorstep burned like a gigantic
5 red torch. The oaks along the roadway glowed yellow and bronze. The fields stretched like a carpet of jewels, emerald and topaz and garnet. Everywhere she walked the color shouted and sang around her. The dried brown leaves crackled beneath her feet and gave off a delicious smoky fragrance. No one had ever told her about autumn in New
10 England. The excitement of it beat in her blood.

Close Read

1. Find two details that the writer uses to describe the setting. Then identify two details that tell you how Kit feels about her surroundings. One of each is boxed.
2. Judging by the details you found, how would you describe the mood?

MODEL 2: IMAGERY

When Roald Dahl was a boy, he spent a lot of time at the local candy shop. In this excerpt from his autobiography, Dahl uses imagery to describe the shop's owner, Mrs. Pratchett.

from
BOY: *Tales of Childhood*

Autobiography by Roald Dahl

But by far the most loathsome thing about Mrs. Pratchett was the filth that clung around her. Her apron was grey and greasy. Her blouse had bits of breakfast all over it, toast crumbs and tea stains and splotches
5 of dried egg yolk. It was her hands, however, that disturbed us most. They were disgusting. They were black with dirt and grime. They looked as though they had been putting lumps of coal on the fire all day long. And do not forget, please, that it was these very hands and fingers that she plunged into the sweet jars. . . .

Close Read

1. This excerpt includes words or phrases the writer chose to create a distinct feeling or impression. One example has been boxed. Find three more words or phrases.
2. Review the words you identified. How would you describe the overall mood that the imagery creates?

Part 2: What Is Style?

Mood and imagery can affect the way you feel about a work of literature. Style, though, is often what helps you recognize the writing of a particular author. In literature, **style** is the way something is written—not what is said, but *how* it’s said. A writer’s style can depend on **tone**, his or her attitude toward a subject. Style is made of such elements as sentence structure, word choice, and tone.

The celebrated author Gary Soto is known for his unique style of writing. Notice how three key elements help to create his one-of-a-kind style.

GARY SOTO’S STYLE



Word Choice

Style begins with **word choice**, a writer’s use of words. With just a few descriptive verbs and adjectives, Soto puts you at the scene of a basketball practice.

Example

Shafts of **afternoon** sunlight **glared** on the **polished** gym floor.

Soto sees himself as “someone who paints a vivid picture.” He says, “Most of my writing is descriptive. You come away with clear pictures of the scene. . . .” Notice how Soto’s style shines through in the examples from his novel *Taking Sides* and in one example from *A Summer Life*, a collection of essays about his childhood.

Sentence Structure

Sentence structure refers to whether sentences are short and simple or long and complex. Notice how these sentences reflect the fast pace of a basketball game.

Example

Lincoln passed to James, who passed to Durkins, who took a shot and missed from the top of the key. But Lincoln pulled the ball down, chambered, and shot—*swish*.

Tone

Tone is how you imagine the writer “sounds.” In one of Gary Soto’s essays, notice his straightforward, good-natured tone.

Example

I began to think that mother was right when she said good manners were important. I began to say “yes,” and not “uh-huh,” and began to walk, not run when someone called. When my aunts kissed me on the cheek, I didn’t turn away and make a sour face.

MODEL 1: STYLE IN SCIENCE FICTION

Many writers, including H. G. Wells, have crafted science fiction stories about time travel. Wells, who wrote *The Time Machine* in 1895, is known for his formal style and use of vivid imagery.

from

The Time Machine

Novel by H. G. Wells

. . . I made good my retreat to the narrow tunnel. But I had scarce entered this when my light was blown out, and in the blackness I could hear the Morlocks rustling like wind among leaves, and pattering like the rain, as they hurried after me.

- 5 In a moment I was clutched by several hands, and there was no mistaking that they were trying to haul me back. I struck another light, and waved it in their dazzled faces. You can scarce imagine how nauseatingly inhuman they looked—those pale, chinless faces and great, lidless, pinkish-grey eyes!—as they stared in their blindness
- 10 and bewilderment.

Close Read

1. Certain words and phrases, such as those in the boxed example, contribute to Wells's formal style. Find two more examples.
2. How would you describe the tone of this passage?

MODEL 2: STYLE IN SCIENCE FICTION

Here is an excerpt from another science fiction story, this one by a contemporary author with a much more informal style.

from

Future Tense

Short story by Robert Lipsyte

A half hour later, Mr. Smith called Gary out of Spanish. There was no expression on his regular features. He said, "I'm going to need some help with you."

- 5 Cold sweat covered Gary's body as Mr. Smith grabbed his arm and led him to the new vice-principal. She read the composition while they waited. Gary got a good look at her for the first time. Ms. Jones was . . . just there. She looked as though she'd been manufactured to fit her name. Average. Standard. Typical. The cold sweat turned into goose pimples.
- How could he have missed the clues? Smith and Jones were aliens!

Close Read

1. Look at the boxed phrases. How does Lipsyte's choice of words compare with Wells's?
2. What is the most striking difference between these two authors' styles? Consider word choice, sentence structure, and tone.

Part 3: Analyze the Text

A man goes out for a walk. What situation could be simpler? Both of the following excerpts begin with this setup. However, you will see how a story's mood, imagery, and style can make even the most similar situations seem very different.

from

One Ordinary Day, with Peanuts

Short story by Shirley Jackson

Mr. John Philip Johnson shut his front door behind him and went down his front steps into the bright morning with a feeling that all was well with the world on this best of all days, and wasn't the sun warm and good, and didn't his shoes feel comfortable after the resoling, and he knew that he had undoubtedly chosen the very precise tie that belonged with the day and the sun and his comfortable feet, and, after all, wasn't the world just a wonderful place? In spite of the fact that he was a small man, and though the tie was perhaps a shade vivid, Mr. Johnson radiated a feeling of well-being as he went down the steps and onto the dirty sidewalk, and he smiled at people who passed him, and some of them even smiled back. He stopped at the newsstand on the corner and bought his paper, saying, "Good morning" with real conviction to the man who sold him the paper and the two or three other people who were lucky enough to be buying papers when Mr. Johnson skipped up. He remembered to fill his pockets with candy and peanuts, and then he set out to get himself uptown. He stopped in a flower shop and bought a carnation for his buttonhole, and stopped almost immediately afterward to give the carnation to a small child in a carriage, who looked at him dumbly, and then smiled, and Mr. Johnson smiled, and the child's mother looked at Mr. Johnson for a minute and then smiled, too.

Close Read

1. What words and details in lines 1–7 help to create a cheerful mood?
2. Read the first sentence aloud. How would you describe its length and rhythm? Notice how the sentence structure reflects Mr. Johnson's carefree attitude.
3. Look at the boxed details. How do these phrases, which are all examples of imagery, contrast with the other details in the description of Mr. John Philip Johnson?

In this excerpt, Rip Van Winkle leaves his nagging wife and goes for a hike with his dog, Wolf. It won't take you long to notice the different "feeling" of this story. Read closely to find out what the author has done to create such a contrasting effect.

from

RIP VAN WINKLE

Short story by **Washington Irving**

... He looked down into a deep mountain glen, wild, lonely, and shagged, the bottom filled with fragments from the impending cliffs, and scarcely lighted by the reflected rays of the setting sun. For some time Rip lay musing¹ on this scene; evening was gradually advancing; 5 the mountains began to throw their long blue shadows over the valleys; he saw that it would be dark long before he could reach the village, and he heaved a heavy sigh when he thought of encountering the terrors of Dame Van Winkle.

As he was about to descend, he heard a voice from a distance, 10 hallooing, "Rip Van Winkle! Rip Van Winkle!" He looked around, but could see nothing but a crow winging its solitary flight across the mountain. He thought his fancy² must have deceived him, and turned again to descend, when he heard the same cry ring through the still evening air; "Rip Van Winkle! Rip Van Winkle!"—at the 15 same time Wolf bristled up his back, and giving a low growl, skulked³ to his master's side, looking fearfully down into the glen. Rip now felt a vague apprehension stealing over him; he looked anxiously in the same direction, and perceived a strange figure slowly toiling up the rocks, and bending under the weight of something he carried on his back.

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1. **musings**: thinking or reflecting.
 2. **fancy**: imagination.
 3. **skulked**: moved fearfully.

Close Read

1. Examine the boxed words and details. What mood do they help to create?
2. Read lines 3–8 aloud and try to hear how the author "sounds" while describing Rip's thoughts. Is the author's tone serious or mocking? Explain.
3. Washington Irving is known for his use of formal words and phrases and long, complex sentences. Find two examples of each in this excerpt.