

What Cone Numbers Mean: Why You Should Care

The pyrometric cones used today by ceramic artists and industrial manufacturers were developed in the late 1800's by Edward Orton Jr. Dr. Orton recognized that ceramists needed a way to determine when their ware was fired correctly to develop the properties they required in their finished products. Thus all ceramic products were assigned a cone number to which they were to be fired to assure maturity of the ware during the firing process such as Cone 06 glazes, Cone 04 bodies, etc. Later, the development of electronic temperature controllers simplified the control of the firing process, but they could not replace the cones as a measure of the accumulative effect of time and temperature on the ceramic ware. An interesting parallel to this principle would be the cooking of a turkey in your electric oven. You can set the oven temperature to 350 degrees Fahrenheit and place the turkey in the oven and estimate how long to cook it to attain an internal temperature of 180 degrees Fahrenheit. However if you want to be assured the turkey reaches the desired internal temperature you can place a meat thermometer into the turkey and it will tell when you have reached the desired internal temperature. Changing the oven temperature will surely effect the time required to reach the desired internal temperature. Cones serve a similar purpose in the firing of ceramics.

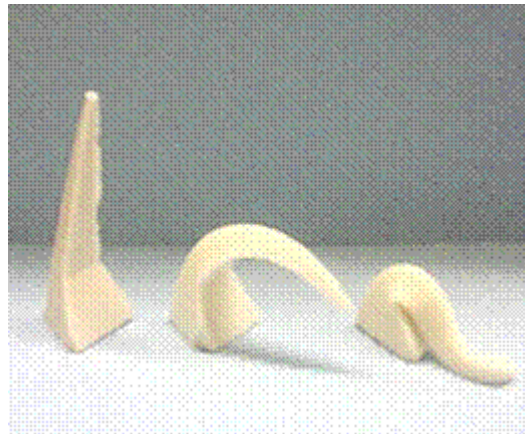
Both the Orton and the Bartlett electronic temperature controllers' cone-fire programs were developed based on the actual firing behavior of Orton cones and would not work without the information on cone behavior provided by the Orton Ceramic Foundation. These controllers automatically adjust the final firing temperature based on the actual heating rate of the kiln so that the kiln delivers the correct amount of heat work specified by the cone number program selected. Therefore the most efficient and reliable way to fire your kiln is to utilize the cone-fire programs built into your controller.

However, the electronic controller is not the ultimate answer for assurance that your ware has been fired correctly. The electronic controller measures the temperature inside the kiln via the thermocouple that is usually mounted in the side wall of the kiln and extending into the kiln 1 to 1½ inches. The thermocouple is great for measurement of temperature at a point in space and a point in time and provides the controller feedback needed to control the firing cycle. But heat work is a function of both temperature and time as measured by the bending of pyrometric cones.

Why is it so important to know if you have attained the correct cone firing? Look at the label on your glaze jar. The odds are that the glaze is specified as a "Cone X" glaze. The unstated instruction for firing such a glaze is to "apply heat work equal to the cone number specified and the glaze will be properly matured". The glaze manufacturer has developed the glaze formula to mature at a certain cone number. The glaze manufacturer has conducted sufficient testing to know the fired characteristics of the mature glaze as related to glaze fit to the body, color development, the chemical resistance of the glaze surface, food-safe, etc. Under-firing or over-firing can prevent the glaze from attaining the appearance and properties you expect.

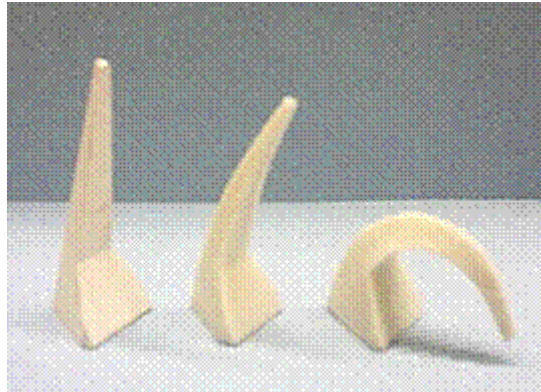
Since the thermocouple and the controller do not measure heat work how do you know if you actually matured the glaze in every firing? The thermocouple measures the temperature near the wall of the kiln where the heating elements are located and unfortunately has no means of measuring the temperature within the setting of the ware in the kiln and therefore cannot confirm if the distribution of heat work was uniform throughout the kiln. Remember the turkey story? One could fire the kiln with such a long firing cycle that all areas within the kiln received the desired

amount of heat work, but this practice could require additional kilns to meet firing needs and the energy consumption would be wasteful. A definite overkill approach without merit. The programmable controller, coupled with the use of pyrometric cones, allows for the development of firing profiles to meet all your firing conditions. Since most shop operators want to have their kiln fully utilized during each firing, we will consider a fully loaded kiln of glazed ware to be fired to cone 06. The load placed in the kiln has a direct bearing on the firing profile required to successfully fire your ware. Select the cone-fire program consistent with the recommendation of the glaze manufacturer, in this case cone 06. Remember that selecting a cone-fire program alone does not insure that you will obtain uniform heat distribution throughout your ware. The controller is designed to compensate if the kiln is heating slower than the expected rate, but only at the tip of the thermocouple, it has no information about what is occurring in the interior of the ware setting. Place a series of three cones, 07, 06, 05 (self-supporting cones are the most convenient to use) one series located on the outside perimeter of the ware setting, and the second series located in the center of the ware setting on each shelf in the kiln (commonly referred to as "witness cones"). Fire the kiln. Once cool, remove the cones marking their location in the kiln. If the cone 06 is bent so that the tip is at the same level as the top of the foot of the cone in all locations, congratulations, you have just achieved a successful firing to cone 06. **See Figure 1.**



Cone 05 Cone 06 Cone 07
Figure 1. Cone 07 is over-fired and cone 06 indicates a successful cone 06 firing.

If some of the locations indicate that you did not reach cone 06, the tip of cone 06 is not bent enough, you will need to modify your firing cycle on your controller. By having cone 07 along side cone 06 you can determine by how much you failed to reach a cone 06 firing. Cone 07 measures a lesser amount of heat work than cone 06, therefore if cone 07 is bent so that the tip is at the same level as the top of the foot of the cone you are only one cone away from the desired heat work. **See Figure 2.** There are two simple ways to correct poor heat distribution within your kiln. First, for your cone-fire program if you selected either *fast*(#1) or *standard*(#2) heating speeds try *slow*(#3), which will allow more time during the firing cycle for the heat to equalize in the ware setting, or you can add additional *hold time* (soak) at the final cone temperature. A combination of both may be necessary depending on how heavily the kiln is loaded. Your kiln manufacturer or your controller manufacturer can be a good resource for suggestions to improve your firing program. The first question you will likely be asked is "what do your witness cones show". Repeat the procedure above once the change(s) to the firing cycle have been made.



Cone 05 Cone 06 Cone 07

Figure 2. Cone 06 has not reached the proper bending angle, indicating an under-fired condition.

Since minor under-firing may not be obvious to the eye, the use of cones in every firing will alert you if there is a potential problem with the correct amount of heat work being delivered uniformly to your ware. And, when the cones confirm a successful firing, you can sleep a little better knowing you have taken a proactive, safe approach to providing your customers a high quality firing process. Retaining the cones constitutes physical proof that the ware was fired according to the glaze manufacturer's specification.

For more information on the use of pyrometric cones and the firing of ceramics please visit the Edward Orton Jr. Ceramic Foundation on the internet at www.Ortonceramic.com.