

# Tone

**Tone** is the author's attitude toward the topic.

The author's attitude is expressed through the words and details he or she selects.

For example, textbooks are usually written with an objective tone which includes facts and reasonable explanations. The objective tone is matter-of-fact and neutral. The details are mostly facts. On the other hand, fiction and personal essays are usually written with a subjective tone. A subjective tone uses words that describe feelings, judgments, or opinions. The details are likely to include experiences, senses, feelings, and thoughts.

- Objective tone is impartial. It does not show any feelings for or against a topic; therefore, it is unbiased or neutral. Often objective tone uses higher level words and avoids pronouns such as *I* and *you*, creating a formal tone.
- Subjective tone is personal, biased, emotional, and often informal.

**NOTE:** Tone is expressed through the words and details the author selects. To determine the author's tone, you must notice how these words and details are used within the writing.

Example: The following statements each express different attitudes about a shabby apartment. Six different tones are used: *optimistic, bitter, tolerant, sentimental, humorous, and objective.*

1. This place may be shabby, but since both of my children were born while we lived here, it has a special place in my heart.  
*The tone is sentimental. "It has a special place in my heart," expresses tender emotions.*
2. This isn't the greatest apartment in the world, but it's not really that bad.  
*The tone is tolerant. The words "not really that bad" show that the writer accepts the situation while recognizing that it could be better.*
3. If only there were some decent jobs out there, I wouldn't be reduced to living in this miserable dump.  
*The tone is bitter. The writer resents a situation that forces him or her to live in a "miserable dump."*
4. This place does need some repairs, but I'm sure the landlord will be making improvements sometime soon.  
*The tone is optimistic. The writer is expecting the apartment to be improved soon.*
5. When we move away, we're planning to release three hundred cockroaches and tow mice, so we can leave the place exactly as we found it.  
*The tone is humorous. The writer claims to be planning a comic revenge on the landlord by returning the apartment to the terrible condition it was in when the tenants moved in.*
6. This is the apartment we live in. It provides shelter.  
*The tone is objective. The writer does not express feelings about the apartment. He simply states facts.*

### Commonly Used Tone Words

absurd	silly, ridiculous
ambivalent	undecided, having mixed emotions, unsure
amused	entertained, finding humor, expressed by a smile or laugh
angry	enraged, very mad, incensed, threatening or menacing
apathetic	lacking concern, showing little or no interest
arrogant	haughty, acting with false superiority
bitter	resentful, having strong animosity or rancor
cheerful	jovial, happy, in good spirits
comic	humorous, funny
compassionate	sympathetic, having feeling for others, showing pity, empathy
complex	complicated, having many varying characteristics
condescending	patronizing, stooping to the level of one's inferiors
critical	disapproving
cruel	causing suffering, causing pain
cynical	scornful of the motives or virtues of others, bitterly mocking
depressed	dejected, sad, unhappy, troubled
detached	uninvolved, having no interest or feelings, objective
distressed	upset
earnest	sincere, showing deep feeling, seriousness
formal	accepting rules, stiff, using textbook style, factual
gentle	considerate, kind, mild, soft
hard	unfeeling, hard-hearted, unyielding
incredulous	doubtful, disbelieving, skeptical
indignant	angry, angered by something unjust, mean, unworthy
intense	deeply felt, concentrated
intimate	personal, close, deeply associated
ironic	wry, an unexpected opposite meaning in words or events
irreverent	lacking respect, lacking reverence
joyous	extremely happy
loving	affectionate, compassionate, showing intense, deep feeling
malicious	spiteful, desiring to harm others or to see others suffer
mocking	ridiculing, imitating
nostalgic	yearning for the past, homesick, wistful
objective	factual, uninfluenced by emotion or personal prejudice
optimistic	positive, believing in positive outcomes
outspoken	frank, candid, spoken without reserve
pathetic	pitiful, useless, wretched
pessimistic	tending to take the worst possible view of a situation
playful	fun-filled, full of good spirits, humorous, jesting
reticent	reserved, restrained
reverent	respectful, showing deep respect and esteem
righteous	morally just, morally right, guiltless
satiric	ridiculing or attacking by means of irony or caustic wit
sentimental	emotional, showing special feelings for (possibly romantic)
serious	earnest, not funny
straightforward	direct, frank, honest
sympathetic	understanding
tragic	disastrous, calamitous
uneasy	lacking security, lacking comfort
vindictive	revengeful, spiteful, bitter, unforgiving

# Purpose

**Purpose** is the reason an author writes about a topic.

An author writes to share a main idea about a topic. An author's main idea is directly related to the author's purpose. One of the three following purposes will drive a main idea: to inform, to entertain, and to persuade.

- **To inform** – to give information about a subject. Authors with this purpose wish to provide facts that will explain or teach something to readers.  
Example: *Pain is a normal part of a physical process that lets us know something is wrong.*
- **To entertain** – to amuse and delight; to appeal to the reader's senses and imagination. Authors with this purpose set out to captivate or interest the audience.  
Example: *"Yes, I have gained weight. I weighed only 8 pounds when I was born."*
- **To persuade** – to convince the reader to agree with the author's point of view on a subject. Authors with this purpose may give facts, but their main goal is to argue or prove a point to readers.  
Example: *The death penalty is deeply flawed and should be abolished.*

**NOTE:** An author may have a more specific purpose in mind other than to inform, entertain, or persuade. The following chart shows examples of specific purposes.

General and Specific Purposes		
To inform	To entertain	To persuade
To analyze	To amuse	To argue against
To clarify	To delight	To argue for
To discuss	To frighten	To convince
To establish		To criticize
To explain		To inspire (motivate a change)

To figure out the author's purpose, the reader must consider the main idea, thought pattern, and tone. For example:

**Topic Sentence:** Spanking must be avoided as a way to discipline due to its long-term negative effects on the child.

*Consider what the author is going to write about spanking.*

- Is the author going to discuss the disadvantages of spanking?
- Is the author going to argue against spanking as a means of discipline?
- Is the author going to make fun of those who use spanking as a means of discipline?

*The tone words 'must' and 'negative' indicate the author's point of view is against spanking. The phrase "long-term effects" indicates that the details will be organized as a list of effects.*

We can conclude that the author is going to argue against spanking as a means of discipline.

# Practice Exercises

Tony's Place is crammed into a tiny building next to the Fine Arts Theater. The owners offer a menu of Italian food. They've got the checkered table clothes, dim lights, and crusty bread. They also know how to make a hearty red sauce. Too bad they use it to drown delicate fish. They also seem to lace everything with truckloads of garlic.

The service needs some work, too. Our waiter didn't know what the specials were. Nor did he think to refill our water glasses before we asked. With a combination of fake-friendly chatter and outright nagging, he made us order, finish up, and clear out. He seemed to see us only as automatic tip machines. The food and low prices bring the customers in the door. The service should not push them out.

1. The tone of the passage is
  - a. sad.
  - b. boastful.
  - c. plain and factual.
  - d. critical, or finds fault.
2. The writer says, "He seemed to see us only as automatic tip machines." The tone of this sentence is
  - a. very serious.
  - b. threatening.
  - c. sympathetic.
  - d. sarcastic.
3. The writer's main purpose is to
  - a. inform the reader.
  - b. caution and entertain the reader.
  - c. flatter the reader.
  - d. sell something to the reader.
4. In which sentence does the author use exaggeration to make a point about the food?
  - a. The owners offer a menu of Italian food.
  - b. They also know how to make a hearty red sauce.
  - c. They also seem to lace everything with truckloads of garlic.
  - d. The food and low prices bring the customers in the door.

Choose the tone word from the box that best describes each item.

a. sympathetic	c. sad	e. irritated
b. straightforward	d. sarcastic	f. threatening

\_\_\_5. "Please note in your checkbook how much money you spent using your ATM card today."

\_\_\_6. "Hey, lay off, you don't have to nag me. I was going to do it anyway!"

\_\_\_7. "When are you going to take the garbage out? Sometime this year, maybe?"

\_\_\_8. "I know it's been hard. And I appreciate all you are going through right now. If you will just put the receipts on the counter, I will take care of the paperwork for you."

Identify the author's purpose for the following items.

I = to inform

P = to persuade

E = to entertain

9. \_\_\_ Cloning human beings should be banned.

10. \_\_\_ The best way to survive babysitting a set of triplets is to come armed with plenty of energy, lots of patience, and a first-aid kit.