In a written composition, tone refers to the attitude of the writer toward a subject or audience.

What is Tone?

Tone refers to the writer's attitude toward her topic/subject. To a great extent, your understanding of tone depends on your ability to make inferences from the work being read.

Tone is one of the first things humans learn to recognize and respond to in communication. Think of tone as "tone of voice." In speech, identifying tone is usually pretty easy; after all, we've been working to fine tune our tone reading skills since we were young. For example, as toddlers, we may not have understood the words "Don't put your finger in that outlet!" but we certainly understood the attitude conveyed.

Identifying tone in literature is more difficult. As readers, we don't have access to the modulations of pitch and intensity that we do when we are listening to someone speak. Rather, tone is conveyed solely through the words on the page. Look at this attempt at tone: "I'm looking forward to writing my college application essays." Really? It's hard to tell. Maybe the writer does, but maybe she is being sarcastic; it's hard to tell from this sentence. Now read this version of the sentence: "I'm looking forward to writing my college application essays only slightly more than I looked forward to having my wisdom teeth pulled." While my example might not be the most creative, the second sentence clearly indicates to the reader that the writer intends her words to be read sarcastically.

Identifying Tone and Tone Words

On the AP English exam, you will be asked to identify the tone/attitude of the speaker and write about how the tone/attitude is conveyed to the reader. Here are some examples of different tones/human attitudes:

- burlesque- mocking through caricature or comic exaggeration
- colloquial- using a conversational style
- condescending- an air of patronizing superiority
- contemptuous- expressing a lack of respect
- cynical- distrust of human sincerity or integrity; assuming people are motivated by self-interest
- despondent- showing extreme discouragement or loss of hope
- didactic- preachy; often intended to teach a lesson about life
- disdainful- expressing contempt, dislike, or hate
- euphoric- feeling of elation or great joy
- facetious- playfully humorous
- flippant- lacking appropriate respect
- frivolous- lacking seriousness
- hostile- very angry
- impartial- unbiased
- incisive- impressively direct and decisive
- indignant-angry at a perceived lack of fair treatment or injustice
- irreverent- lacking appropriate seriousness

- laudatory-expressing praise
- moralistic- characterized by a narrow and conventional moral attitude
- nostalgic-yearning for a return to some past period of time
- patronizing-treat with kindness that betrays a feeling of superiority
- pedantic-narrow, dull, unimaginative
- pretentious- assumption of importance especially when exaggerated
- poignant- strongly affecting emotions
- sarcastic-to ridicule, amuse, or taunt by sometimes saying the opposite of what the speaker means
- somber: gloomy, dismal, or dejected
- sympathetic-showing sensitivity to others' emotions
- suspenseful- pleasant excitement as to the uncertainty of events
- tranquil- free from turmoil

Note: These are only a few human attitudes; there are many more.

How is tone created?

How is tone achieved in writing? Almost every literary device can be used to convey tone. Here are a few:

Diction. Diction refers to the writer's choice of words. Writers carefully choose words to help them persuade their readers. When you read a passage, ask questions such as: How do the writer's words help persuade? (To help answer this, ask yourself how other choices of words would have produced a less persuasive tone.) What kinds of adjectives and phrases are used for description? What is the connotation of the words used and how do those connotative values work to appeal to the emotions, logic, or reason of the reader?

Irony. When writers use/create irony, they assume that the readers have enough intelligence to see through the surface statement into the seriousness or humor beneath. The major types of irony are verbal, situational, and dramatic. Verbal irony is represented when the speaker of a text conveys something that is the opposite of what is meant. Verbal irony may be described as understatement or overstatement (hyperbole). (Example: I love getting up at 4:30 every morning to catch the bus to school.) Irony of situation is the difference between what we expect and what actually happens. (Example: a dentist with cracked teeth.) Dramatic irony occurs when a character in a drama or fictional work sees a situation in a limited way while the audience sees it in a larger way. In other words, the audience sees more than one meaning while the character sees only one. (Example: At the end of *Romeo and Juliet*, the audience knows that Juliet is not dead, but Romeo does not.)

Figurative language. Figurative language refers to a way of saying something using words that are different than the literal meaning of the words. For example, "This room is like a freezer!" and "The sky misses the sun at night" are examples of figurative language.

The two most often used figures/devices/techniques are metaphor and simile.

- A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a comparison is made between two things essentially unlike. (Example: "This classroom is a zoo!")
- A simile is a figure of speech in which a comparison is expressed by the specific use of a word or phrase such as "like" and "as." (Example: "My love is like a red red rose.")

Other types of figurative language often seen on the AP English exam are personification (the attribution of a human characteristic to something nonhuman) and imagery (using sensory details to describe or arouse emotion).

Point of view. Point of view refers to the perspective from which the events/information is represented. First person point of view uses "I," "me," "my." First person point of view is often used by writers when they want you to identify or sympathize with a certain character. Second person point of view uses "you." Second person point of view is rarely represented on the AP English exam or in high school literature. Third person point of view is also known as the detached observer's point of view. Third person point of view is the most common point of view represented on the AP English exam and in high school literature. Third person point of view can take two forms: limited (the voice of the character witnessing the events; also known as the "fly on the wall" perspective) or omniscient (all knowing; in other words, the speaker of the text knows what characters are thinking and feeling; she/he is not just an observer; think god-like knowledge of characters).

How to identify tone in poetry:

If you are having trouble identifying the tone of a poem, ask yourself these questions:

- What is the speaker like? Is he or she stupid, intelligent, idealistic, suspect, trustworthy? How do you think you should respond to the speaker's characteristics?
- Are the descriptions and actions believable?
- Does the poem hope that you will sympathize with someone/something, grieve about some human situation, feel anger at a represented injustice, respect an example of human kindness or nobility? What emotional response do you think the speaker of the poem hopes you will feel?
- Do any words especially strike you? How did the choice of those words help the speaker produce the emotional response?

How to identify tone in prose:

If you are having trouble identifying the tone in a prose work, ask yourself these questions:

- What elements in the story elicit your fear, concern, anger, fearfulness, anxiety, or amusement?
- What causes you to sympathize or not to sympathize with the characters, situations, or ideas?
- What makes the events in the text admirable or appalling?
- Does the dialogue give you a hint about the writer's attitudes toward the characters? How does the dialogue represent the characters and how does it influence your understanding of the writer's attitude toward them?
- Does the story make you think differently than you did before reading the text about the same or similar subject matter?
- Does the writer use any words with striking connotative values or emotions associated with them? What do those words suggest about the writer's attitude toward the subject and the readers?
  Adapted from <https://writingcenterofprinceton.com/ap-english-the-essential-guide-to-tone-and-tone-words/>