

A-Z TONE WORDS FOR LITERARY ANALYSIS

Tone is more than an author's attitude toward his/her audience and characters; it is the stylistic means by which an author conveys his/her attitude(s) in a work of literature.

Tone is an integral part of a work's meaning because it controls the reader's response which is essential to fully experiencing literature. To misinterpret tone is to misinterpret meaning.

In order to recognize tonal shift and to interpret complexities of tone, the reader must be able to make inferences based on an active reading of the work. The author's tone or voice is revealed by organization, choice of detail, and sentence structure, but word choice is probably the strongest indicator of tone.

Familiarize yourself with the denotations and connotations of the following tone words to aid your literary analysis.

abashed ashamed or embarrassed, disconcerted
accusatory/accusing charging of wrong doing
acerbic sharp or sour, strident, harsh
admiring regarding with wonder, pleasure, approval, approving, worshipping
admonishing cautioning, reproving, scolding, censorious, damning, reminding
adoring regarding with utmost esteem, love and respect
affectionate with fondness, tenderly, showing, loving, characterized by affection or love
aggravated aggrieved, wronged, exasperated, agitated
aloof indifferent, disinterested, detached
ambiguous doubtful, uncertain from obscurity, having multiple meanings or interpretations, vague, evasive
ambivalent mixture of opposite feelings, inability to make a choice or by a simultaneous desire to say or do two opposite or conflicting things, uncertain
amiable friendly, agreeable, good-humored, pleasant
amused pleurably entertained, occupied, diverted
angry unhappy and resentful, furious
antagonistic hostile, unfriendly, oppositional, argumentative
anxious full of uneasiness or worry, eager for approval, apprehensive, showing mental distress or uneasiness, greatly worried, solicitous out of worry
apathetic indifferent due to lack of energy or concern, impassive, without emotion
apologetic excusing a fault or injury, containing an apology or excuse, penitent
appreciative feeling or expression of gratitude
apprehensive uneasy about the future, nervous
approving to speak of or judge favorably, admiring
ardent intense with feeling, enthusiasm, devoted, fervent, zealous, vehement, impassioned

arrogant overbearing, insolent, superior, making claims or pretensions to superior importance or rights, assuming, haughty, disdainfully proud, snobbish, scornfully arrogant, supercilious, condescending
artificial phony, feigned, forced, false, insincere
audacious fearless, recklessly daring, unrestrained, extremely bold or daring, recklessly brave, impudent, insolent
austere stern, strict, frugal
authoritarian peremptory, dictatorial, domineering, egotistical, having an air of authority, accustomed to exercising authority
awed solemn wonder
baffled confused, bewildered or perplexed
bantering good-humored, playful in conversation
belligerent aggressively hostile, warlike, threatening
bemused preoccupied, deep in thought, confused
benevolent expressing positive or kind feelings
bewildered perplexed, completely confused
biting nipping, keen, cutting, sarcastic, sharp
bitter exhibiting strong animosity due to pain or grief, characterized by intense antagonism or hostility/hard to admit or accept, grim, cynical
blithe joyous, merry, glad, jocund,
blunt abrupt in address or manner, brusque
bold courageous, daring, not hesitating or fearful in the face of danger or rebuff, courageous and daring, not hesitating to break the rules of propriety, forward, impudent, confident
bombastic pretentious and pompous, lofty, elevated
bored indifferent, uninterested
brash brazen, audacious, forward, insolent, rude, uppity
brisk quick and active, lively, stimulating
brusque blunt, impatient with good manners, rough
callous emotionally hardened, unfeeling
calm measured, tranquil, free from passion, serene, peaceful, unmoved, placid, quiet
candid open and sincere, straightforward, honest, frank, outspoken
capricious flighty, erratic, led by whims
casual without serious intention, offhand, careless
caustic intense use of sarcasm, stinging, biting
ensorious severely critical, faultfinding
ceremonial characterized by formality, ritual, ceremony
cheerful/cheery with good spirits
childish puerile, silly, weak, possibly whiny
choleric easily angered, irascible
classical formal, standard, traditional
clinical dispassionately analytic, unemotional, objective
coarse unrefined, crude, vulgar, unpolished
cogent convincing, reasonable
cold uncaring, indifferent, mildly hostile
colloquial ordinary and informal, conversational
comic humorous, funny
commanding in charge, assumes position of authority
compassionate showing concern, empathetic, understanding
complementary politely flattering

conceited showing excessively favorable opinion of one's self
concerned interested or affected or troubled by
conciliatory agreeable, characterized by appeasement
condemnatory expressing strong disapproval
condescending in a patronizing, degrading manner
confident assured
confused perplexed, bewildered, unclear or indistinct
consoling comforting, soothing, condoling, encouraging
contemplative studying, thinking, reflective
contemptuous scornful, expressing disdain
contented satisfied, pleased
contentious involving or likely to cause contention, quarrelsome, argumentative
contradictory antagonistic, paradoxical, conflicting
conversational casual spoken words, slang, 2nd person, chatty, informal
critical finding fault, judgmental
cultured high degree or taste, sophisticated
curt abrupt, brief, terse, laconic, terse, concise
cynical tendency to see humans as selfish, opportunistic, pessimistic, can be sneering and bitter
decadent marked by a decay in morals and values
demanding requiring more than is generally felt to be due, taxing
depressed dejected, downcast, sad, gloomy
dejected hopeless, doleful, discouraged, downcast
derisive ridiculing, mocking, contemptuous
derogatory disparaging, depreciatory
despairing overcome by sense of futility, without hope
desperate reckless or dangerous because of despair or urgency
detached disinterested, unbiased, aloof, impartial, objective
diabolic devilish, fiendish, outrageously wicked
didactic inclined to teach or moralize (often excessively)
diffident timid, reserved in manner, shy, lacking in confidence
direct straight, undeviating, not oblique
disappointed discouraged by failure of some hope or expectation
disbelieving to have no belief in, refusing belief in
discursive moving pointlessly topic to topic, rambling
disdainful scornful, full of contempt
disingenuous not sincere, selective, evasive
disgusted to feel sickened, to feel nauseated by
disrespectful exhibiting no respect, rude, discourteous
disturbed marked by symptoms of mental illness, agitated, distressed, disrupted
dogmatic opinionated, asserting opinions in arrogant manner
domineering overbearing, tyrannical
doubtful uncertain, questioning
dramatic arresting or forceful, filled with showmanship
dreamy romantic, fanciful, imaginary, idealistic, preoccupied, visionary, insubstantial, speculative
dubious wavering or hesitating in opinion

earnest intense, a sincere state of mind, serious
ebullient overflowing with fervor, enthusiasm, high-spirited
ecstatic rapturous, a state of extreme positive emotion
effusive unrestrained, excessive emotional expression
egotistical vain, boasting, selfish, indifferent to others
elated jubilant, in high spirits
elegiac of, relating to, or involving mourning or sorrow
elevated exalted, lofty, extremely reverent
eloquent marked by fluent, forceful, appropriate words
embarrassed self-conscious, ill at ease, disconcerted
emotionless without emotion, logical, matter-of-fact
empathetic showing emotion, understanding of others
encouraging inspiring, approving, motivating
energetic filled with energy, enthusiasm
enraged extremely angry, infuriated
enthusiastic having or showing great enthusiasm
erudite learned, scholarly
eulogistic formal praise, usually for the dead
euphoric beyond earthly happiness, sometimes manic
evasive tending or intending to evade, deliberately vague
evocative having the ability to call forth memories
excited eager, filled with excitement and anticipation
exhilarated to make cheery or happy, invigorating
exhortatory advising, urging, cautioning urgently
expectant having expectations
exuberant effusively, uninhibitedly enthusiastic
facetious lightly amusing, unserious, frivolous,
factual of or pertaining to facts
familiar informal, easygoing, unceremonious, friendly
fanciful capricious or whimsical
farcical comedic with high exaggeration, ludicrous, absurd, mocking
fatalistic in the belief that everything is predetermined
fearful full of fear, dread, awe or reverence
fervent warmth intensity of spirit, ardent
flippant lacking seriousness, disrespectfully casual, uncaring
forceful powerful, authoritative
foreboding to have inward conviction of coming doom
formal marked by correct language, official, stiff
forthright directly frank without hesitation, outspoken
frantic desperate or wild with passion or fear, frenzied
frightened scared, alarmed
frivolous lacking in seriousness, carefree, self-indulgent
frustrated disappointed, thwarted
furious full of fury or rage, enraged, violently passionate
gentle kind, considerate, mild, soft
ghoulish strangely diabolical, delighting in loathsome
giddy frivolous, lighthearted, impulsive, flighty
gleeful full of joy and delight, merry
gloomy hopeless, despairing, pessimistic
grand full of importance, formal, impressive, majestic
grave something serious or solemn, weighty, serious
grim stern, surly, having a forbidding air
haughty proud and vain to the point of arrogance, snobbish, supercilious

histrionic over the top dramatic
holier-than-thou sanctimonious, self-righteous, obnoxiously pious
hollow insincere or false, empty, not solid
homespun simple and homely
hopeful full of optimism, hope
hopeless despairing, without hope, desperate
horrified showing great horror or shock
hostile antagonistic, not friendly, inhospitable
humble meek, unassuming, deferential, modest, self-effacing
humorous funny, comical hilarious
hurt wounded, crushed, distressed, pained, piqued, miffed
impartial fair, just, not showing favoritism, unbiased
impassioned filled with passion, ardent
impassive without emotion, calm, unmoved, serene
impatient not patient, not accepting of delays/excuses
imperious arrogantly domineering, overbearing
impertinent insolently, rude, uncivil, impudent
incredulous unbelieving, disbelieving, skeptical
incisive cutting, biting, sharp, keen, acute
indifferent without interest or concern, not caring, disinterested
indignant marked by anger, aroused by justice
indirect roundabout, deceitful, devious
inflammatory likely to stir up anger or trouble
informal casual, chatty, unofficial
informative giving information, instructive
inquisitive curious, analytical, investigative, prying
insecure subject to fears, doubts, not confident, defensive
insistent earnest, persistent, pertinacious
insolent rude, not showing proper respect, arrogant
instructive enlightening, conveying instruction, teaching, didactic
introspective self-examining, reflective
intimate very familiar, closely personal, deep, detailed
irascible easily provoked to anger, very irritable
irreverent showing disrespect for things that are normally respected
irritated annoyed, provoked, angered
ironic exemplifying irony, unexpected
jocund cheery, joyful, and happy, jovial, merry, blithe
joking teasing, mocking, jesting, ridiculing
jovial hearty, joyous, in the spirit of good fellowship
joyful full of joy, delighted, joyous, jubilant
laudatory containing and expressing praise
learned scholarly, erudite, deeply knowledgeable
lighthearted carefree, cheerful, gay
lively full of life, active, vigorous, animated, spirited, vivacious, sprightly
loathing abhorring, detest utterly, abominate, viewed with extreme repugnance or aversion
lofty exalted in rank, dignity or character, elevated in style or tone or sentiment
ludicrous absurd, provoking ridicule
lugubrious mournful, dismal, gloomy, especially to a ludicrous degree

lyrical expressing deep emotion, rhapsodic
malicious purposely hurtful, spiteful, ill-willed
matter-of-fact practical, not fanciful or emotional, direct, unemotional, straightforward, down-to-earth, not fanciful or imaginative
meditative deeply thoughtful, reflective
melancholic expressing sadness for the past, mournful, filled with ennui
melodramatic exaggerated sentiment, overdramatic
mirthful gay, jolly, arousing or provoking laughter
mischievous playful, annoying, slyly teasing, injurious
mock-heroic satiric imitation of heroic traits
mocking ridiculing, deriding, mimicking in sport
modest free from vanity egotism boastfulness or great pretensions, simple and honest
moralistic concerned with principles of morality, narrowly and conventionally moral
morose gloomy, sullen, surly, despondent
mysterious puzzling, sly, evasive, ambiguous
nervous highly excitable, uneasy, apprehensive
nonchalant coolly unconcerned, indifferent, unexcited
nostalgic longing for the past, wistful over changed conditions
numb dazed, paralyzed, stupefied, listless, remote
obdurate stubborn, unmoved by persuasion, pity or tender feelings, unyielding
objective uninfluenced by emotions, factual
obsequious polite, obedient in order to gain something
offensive disrespectful, displeasing, insulting
ominous foreboding, threatening, inauspicious, baleful
optimistic hopeful, cheerful, sanguineous
oratorical given to making speeches
outraged angered and resentful, furious, extremely angry
outspoken frank, candid, expressed without reserve
overbearing domineering, dictatorial, rudely arrogant
panicked highly fearful, intensely anxious
paranoid irrationally fearful or distrustful
passionate compelled by intense emotion or feeling, quick-tempered, irascible, ardently sensual
pathetic rousing sympathy, pitiful
patriotic nationalistic, devoted to one's country
patronizing to treat in a condescending manner
peaceful quiet, calm, without worry
pedantic concerned with unimportant details
penitent apologetic, feeling deep regret contrite, wishing for atonement
pensive dreamily thoughtful, introspective
perplexed nonplussed, totally puzzled or confused
pertinent pointed, incisive
pessimistic seeing the worst side of things, no hope
petty caring about silly things
petulant easily irritated or annoyed
pious displaying a reverence for God or the divine
placid pleasantly calm or peaceful, unruffled, tranquil, serene
playful teasing, lighthearted joking, gently jesting
pleading begging, entreating, imploring

poignant keen or strong in feeling, emotionally moving
pompous characterized by ostentatious display of dignity or importance
pretentious exaggerated show of dignity or importance
proud filled with satisfaction, self-esteem, or self-respect
provincial limited in perspective, self-centered
provocative tending to provoke, inciting, vexing
prurient preoccupied with lewd and lustful thoughts
puritanical strict or severe in matters of morality
questioning challenging politely, inquiring, curious
quiet calm, measured
quizzical odd, eccentric, amusing
reassuring calming, soothing
rebellious argumentative, disagreeable, challenging, disobedient, bellicose, defiant, fractious, insurgent, mutinous, pugnacious, quarrelsome, seditious
recalcitrant resisting authority, disobedient, noncompliant, refractory
reflective meditative, deliberating
relaxed casual, leisurely, not tense
reminiscent suggestive, raising memories
resigned defeated, submissive, acquiescing
respectful showing politeness or deference, civil, deferential, well-mannered
restrained held back, deprived, controlled
reticent reserved, restrained, inclined to hold back one's true feelings or thoughts
reverent treating a subject with honor and respect
ridiculing slightly contemptuous banter, making fun of
ridiculous worthy of derision or scorn, absurd, preposterous
righteous guiltless, moved by what is morally right
romantic idealizing, chivalrous, starry-eyed, visionary, dreamy, fanciful, sentimental, idealistic, mysterious, quixotic, tender, enchanting, exotic, impractical
sanguine cheerfully optimistic, hopeful or confident
sarcastic sneering, caustic, ridiculing, bitterly ironic
sardonic scornfully or cynically mocking, sarcastic
satiric characterized by satire, mocking, ridiculing
scholarly academic, intellectual
scornful contemptuous, excessively critical
seductive enticing, luring, beguiling, enchanting, inviting, tempting
self-deprecating belittling of the self, excessively modest
selfish self-absorbed, egotistical, narcissistic, self-serving, parsimonious
sentimental colored by emotion rather than realism
serene calm peaceful, tranquil, unruffled
serious not funny, in earnest
severe harsh, unnecessarily extreme in manner
sharp distinct, keen, fierce, impatient
shocked struck with fear, dread, or amazement, stunned, unsettled, disturbed
shocking disgusting, horrifying, surprising
silly characterized by a lack of seriousness, fanciful
sincere without deceit or pretense, genuine

sinister threatening, ominous, dark
skeptical showing doubt, questioning
sly cunning, wily, stealthy, insidious, secretive
solemn deeply earnest, tending toward sad reflection, grave, mirthless
somber gloomy, depressing, dismal, extremely serious
sophomoric intellectually pretentious, overconfident, conceited, immature
speculative theoretical, considering, investigative, inquiringly reflective
sprightly animated, vivacious, gay, lively
stable firm, steady, unshakable, confident
stark plain, harsh, bleak or grim
stately majestic, elegant
stern firm, strict, uncompromising, hard, harsh, severe
stolid having or revealing little emotion
strident loud, harsh, and unpleasantly noisy
stolid unemotional, impassive, not easily moved
straightforward direct, honest
strident grating, creaking, harsh sounding
stubborn unbending, unyielding, obstinate, mulish, perverse, persistent, tenacious, dogged
subdued quiet, inhibited, repressed, controlled
supercilious haughtily disdainful, contemptuous
superficial fake, insincere, frivolous, perfunctory
suspenseful causing suspense
suspicious distrustful, skeptical, wary, apprehensive
sympathetic compassionate, empathetic
taunting reproaching in a mocking, insulting or contemptuous manner
tense strained, tight, taut, rigid
tentative in an unsure state of mind
terse effectively concise, brief, pithy
thoughtful considerate, contemplative, meditative, reflective
threatening menacing, alarming, ominous, sinister, bullying
timorous timid, fearful
tragic dreadful, calamitous, disastrous, fatal
tranquil free of commotion, peaceful, quiet, calm
turgid pompous, excessively ornate, complex in style
uncertain not confident, unclear, hesitant
understated restrained, low-key
uneasy uncomfortable, restless, disturbed, perturbed
urbane sophisticated
urgent compelling, imperative, pressing
venerative regarding with reverence
vexed annoyed, irritated, distressed
vindictive revengeful, spiteful, bitter, unforgiving
vitriolic scathing or bitter
whimsical playful, humorous or fanciful, unpredictable, capricious
wistful melancholic, yearning, pensive, longing
worshipful adoring, reverent
wrathful incensed, ireful, condemnatory
wry satiric, bitter, disdainfully ironic
zealous highly motivated, fervent