Tone is the attitude a writer takes toward his or her subject or audience.

Like the tone of a speaker’s voice, the tone of a work of literature expresses the writer’s feelings. A work’s tone can usually be described with an adjective or two: bitter, playful, sarcastic, and so on. To decide on the tone of a passage, you should ask yourself the following questions:

1. What is the passage’s subject, and who is its audience?
2. What would you say are the most important words in the passage? What connotations, or associations, do these words have?
3. What general feeling do the passage’s images create?
4. Are there any hints that the narrator or speaker does not really mean everything he or she says?
5. Does the narrator or speaker make any jokes? If so, are these jokes lighthearted, bitter, or something else?
6. If the narrator or speaker were speaking aloud, what tone of voice would he or she be using?

Analyzing Tone
Write one or two words to describe the tone of each of the numbered passages; circle phrases within the poem that create the tone. You may choose words from the list below, or you may use words of your own.

sad joyous bitter ironic playful mocking
impassioned anxious contented affectionate gloomy confused
serious objective angry sympathetic critical unemotional
approving grieving romantic fearful melancholy patriotic
teasing reflective admiring happy disappointed loving
agitated tender aggressive mischievous despairing hopeful

“I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain—upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant eyelike windows—upon a few rank sedges—and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees . . . .” (from “The Fall of the House of Usher” by Edgar Allan Poe)

1. Tone: __________________________________

“The war is actually begun! The next gale that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms! Our brethren are already in the field! Why stand we here idle? What is it that gentlemen wish? What would they have?” (from “Speech to the Virginia Convention” by Patrick Henry)

2. Tone: __________________________________
“I am not well. I do not know our target. They do not tell us for which city the bird is targeted. I do not know. That is planning. That is not my responsibility. My responsibility is to watch the console and when certain events take place upon the console, turn my key in the lock. Shotwell bounces the rubber ball on the floor in a steady, stolid, rhythmical manner. I am aching to get my hands on the ball, on the jacks.” (from “Game” by Donald Barthelme)

3. Tone__________________________________

“NO TRESPASSING. We Like the snappy, rude signs. NO TRASPASSING. You get the idea. NO TRUSTPASSING. Keep out. NO BOATS ALOUD—silent boats OK, but no boats aloud.” (From “Misspelling” by Charles Kuralt)

4. Tone__________________________________

“If only I could nudge you from this sleep/My maimed darling, my skittery pigeon.” (from “Elegy for Jane” by Theodore Roethke)

5. Tone__________________________________

“This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood.” (from The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass by Frederick Douglass)

6. Tone__________________________________

Changing the Tone of a Passage
Choose one of the numbered passages above and rewrite it, changing some words and images to give the passage a different tone. Then identify the passage’s new tone.

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