

Tone Words Defined

The following terms are often used in discussions of tone on the AP Exam.

Acerbic—bitter, sharp
Adversarial—opposing, relating to conflict
Aggressive—tending to attack
Aloof—distant and somewhat superior
Antagonistic—displaying hostile opposition
Apocalyptic—suggesting the end of the world
Assertive—confident and forceful
Bantering—playful, teasing
Candid—clear, honest, open
Caustic—biting, bitterly sarcastic, acidic
Choleric—quick-tempered, irritable
Clever—displaying quick or agile thought (sometimes negative)
Colloquial—conversational, informal
Conciliatory—intending to bring about peace and trust
Contentious—argumentative
Coy—provocatively or teasingly pretending to be shy, modest, or ignorant, “playing dumb”
Cynical—distrusting human nature, mocking, scornful
Detached—impersonal, uninvolved
Didactic—teaching or lecturing, preachy, instructive
Diffident—insecure, shy, reserved
Disdainful—scornful, contemptuous
Dramatic—bold, vivid, striking
Effusive—extravagantly or excessively emotional
Elegiac—sorrowful, lamenting
Emphatic—forceful, definite
Esoteric—understandable by only a select few
Evocative—prompting vivid memories or images
Exotic—strikingly unusual and exciting
Exploitive—unfairly using somebody or something
Exuberant—enthusiastic, lively, energetic
Facetious—humorous, light, silly, tongue-in-cheek
Fanciful—imaginative, dreamy
Fey—intentionally bizarre so as to suggest insanity
Flaccid—limp, slack, lacking firmness
Flippant—irreverent joking; disrespectful levity
Frivolous—trivial, lacking substance
Genteel—refined, upper-class, snobbish
Grotesque—disturbingly strange
Haughty—condescending, superior, arrogant
Histrionic—overdramatic, panicked
Idealistic—aspiring to perfection, hopeful, very optimistic
Incendiary—intentionally and highly provocative, flammable
Incisive—sharp, keen, penetrating
Incredulous—disbelieving, skeptical, doubtful
Indignant—offended, resentful, put-out
Inflammatory—arousing passion or anger
Inspid—lacking distinctive qualities, dull
Ironic—implying meaning beyond the literal, mocking
Irreverent—lacking veneration, disrespectful
Jingoistic—excessively patriotic
Learned—scholarly, educated (pronounced “learn-ed”)
Lofty—high, refined, exalted
Lugubrious—excessively sorrowful or mournful

Maternal—motherly, nurturing
Maudlin—overly or tearfully sentimental
Melancholy—gently sad, depressed
Mellifluous—soothing and sweet, musical
Moralistic—concerned with values of right and wrong
Moralizing—lecturing others on their low morals, superior
Mournful—expressing deep sadness
Mystical—concerned with the spiritual or supernatural
Naïve—unsophisticated, simplistic, overly trusting
Nostalgic—expressing bittersweet or sentimental remembrance of the past
Objective—free from feelings or prejudices, unbiased
Ominous—menacing, suggesting approaching doom
Optimistic—displaying a hopeful view of the future
Partial—showing preference
Paternal—fatherly, protective
Patronizing—condescending, treating as inferior
Pedantic—overly concerned with rules or details
Perverse—intentionally deviating from social norms
Pessimistic—displaying a hopeless view of the future
Petty concerned with narrow or small ideas
Phlegmatic—not easily excited or annoyed
Pompous—overly self-important
Portentous—serious and significant (esp. in regard to the future)
Practical—concerned with actual facts rather than theory
Precious—too carefully refined, “cutesy”
Precocious—wise or skilled beyond one’s age (sometimes negative)
Pretentious—extravagantly and consciously showy
Prosaic—unimaginative, pedestrian, simplistic
Reverent—respectful, awe-filled
Saccharine—excessively sentimental, sickeningly sweet
Salacious—crudely sexual, “sleazy”
Sanguine—cheerfully optimistic
Sardonic—bitterly scornful, mocking, sarcastic
Satiric—humorously critical, ironic
Sensual—relating to physical (esp. sexual) pleasure
Sensuous—pleasurably engaging the senses
Sentimental—unduly emotional
Shrewd—exercising sharp and insightful judgment
Shrewish—quarrelsome and ill-tempered
Shrill—harsh and intense, irritating
Somber—gloomy and serious
Staid—sedate and serious
Stoic—unemotional, patiently enduring hardship
Supercilious—full of contempt and arrogance
Surreal—suggesting the bizarre or fantastic
Taunting—provocatively insulting, sarcastic
Terse—brief and unfriendly
Turgid—pompous and boring
Urbane—sophisticated, refined
Vibrant—lively, energetic, vivid
Visionary—displaying imaginative foresight
Whimsical—given to fanciful ideas
Witty—cleverly using words to amuse