

SKILL 13: DETERMINE THE TONE, PURPOSE, OR COURSE

Other types of review questions occur occasionally in the reading section of both the paper TOEFL test and the computer TOEFL test. Possible questions of this type are multiple-choice questions that ask about (1) the *tone* of the passage, (2) the author's *purpose* in writing the passage, and (3) the *course* in which the passage might be used.

A question about the *tone* is asking if the author is showing any emotion in his or her writing. The majority of the passages on the TOEFL test are factual passages presented without any emotion; the tone of this type of passage could be simply *informational*, *explanatory*, or *factual*. Sometimes the author shows some emotion, and you must be able to recognize that emotion to answer a question about tone correctly. If the author is being funny, then the tone might be *humorous*; if the author is making fun of something, the tone might be *sarcastic*; if the author feels strongly that something is right or wrong, the tone might be *impassioned*. Look at a multiple-choice example from the paper TOEFL test that asks about the *tone* of a passage.

Example from the Paper TOEFL Test

The passage:

Line Military awards have long been considered symbolic of
royalty, and thus when the United States was a young nation
(5) just finished with revolution and eager to distance itself from
anything tasting of monarchy, there was strong sentiment
against military decoration. For a century, from the end of the
Revolutionary War until the Civil War, the United States
awarded no military honors. The institution of the Medal of
Honor in 1861 was a source of great discussion and concern.
(10) From the Civil War until World War I, the Medal of Honor was
the only military award given by the United States
government, and today it is awarded only in the most extreme
cases of heroism. Although the United States is still somewhat
wary of granting military awards, several awards have been
instituted since World War I.


The question:

The *tone* of this passage is

- (A) angered
- (B) humorous
- (C) outraged
- (D) informational

This question asks about the *tone* of the passage. To determine the tone of a passage, you should look for any indications of emotion on the part of the author. In this passage, the author uses historical facts, using time expressions such as *for a century*, *in 1861*, and *since World War I*, to make a point about America's sentiment against military awards; the author does not make any kind of emotional plea. The best answer to this question is therefore answer (D), an *informational* tone. There is nothing in the passage to indicate anger (A), or humor (B), or outrage (C) on the part of the author.

A question about *purpose* is asking what the author is trying to do in the passage. You can draw a conclusion about the author's purpose by referring to the main idea and the organization of details in the passage. For example, if the main idea is that George Washington's early life greatly influenced his later career and if the details give a history of his early life, the author's purpose could be *to show how George Washington's early life influenced his later career*. However, the answer to a purpose question is often considerably more general than the main idea. A more general author's purpose for the main idea about George Washington would be *to demonstrate the influence of early experiences on later life* (without any mention of George Washington). Now look at a multiple-choice example from the computer TOEFL test that asks about the author's *purpose* in writing a passage.

Example from the Computer TOEFL Test 

Reading

Military awards have long been considered symbolic of royalty, and thus when the United States was a young nation just finished with revolution and eager to distance itself from anything tasting of monarchy, there was strong sentiment against military decoration. For a century, from the end of the Revolutionary War until the Civil War, the United States awarded no military honors. The institution of the Medal of Honor in 1861 was a source of great discussion and concern. From the Civil War until World War I, the Medal of Honor was the only military award given by the United States government, and today it is awarded only in the most extreme cases of heroism. Although the United States is still somewhat wary of granting military awards, several awards have been instituted since World War I.


The author's *purpose* in this passage is to

- describe the history of military awards prior to the Civil War
- demonstrate an effect of America's attitude toward royalty
- give an opinion of military awards
- outline various historical symbols of royalty

This question asks about the author's *purpose* in writing the passage. To answer this question correctly, you should refer to the main idea of this passage as outlined in the first sentence. The main idea is that *there was strong sentiment against military awards in the United States because military awards have been considered symbolic of royalty*. The author gives historical facts about military awards as details to support the main idea. Since the purpose is determined from the main idea and overall organization of details, the author's purpose is to describe, explain, or demonstrate that America's sentiment against military awards is because of its negative sentiment against royalty. The second answer is therefore the best answer to this question, so you should click on the second answer. You should notice that the correct answer is considerably more general than the main idea: according to the second answer, the purpose is to *demonstrate an effect* (America's dislike of military awards) *of America's attitude toward royalty*.

A question about the *course* is asking you to decide which university course might have this passage as assigned reading. You should draw a conclusion about the course by referring to the topic of the passage and organization of details. For example, if the passage is about George Washington and the details give historical background on his early life, then this would probably be assigned reading in an American history class. However, if the passage is about George Washington and the details show the various influences that he had

on the formation of the American government, then the passage might be assigned reading in a government or political science class. Now look at a multiple-choice example from the computer TOEFL test that asks about the *course*.

Example from the Computer TOEFL Test 

Reading





Military awards have long been considered symbolic of royalty, and thus when the United States was a young nation just finished with revolution and eager to distance itself from anything tasting of monarchy, there was strong sentiment against military decoration. For a century, from the end of the Revolutionary War until the Civil War, the United States awarded no military honors. The institution of the Medal of Honor in 1861 was a source of great discussion and concern. From the Civil War until World War I, the Medal of Honor was the only military award given by the United States government, and today it is awarded only in the most extreme cases of heroism. Although the United States is still somewhat wary of granting military awards, several awards have been instituted since World War I.

This passage would probably be assigned reading in a **course** on

- military science
- psychology
- American history
- interior decoration

This question asks about the *course* in which you might be assigned this reading passage. To draw a conclusion about the course, you should refer to the topic of the passage and the overall organization of details. Since this passage is about American *military awards* in *the United States*, and the details discuss the history of American military awards using such time expressions as *for a century*, *in 1861*, and *since World War I*, you can determine that this passage might be assigned in a course on *American history*. You should click on the third answer to this question.

The following chart outlines the key information that you should remember about questions on the tone, purpose, or course:

TONE, PURPOSE, OR COURSE  		
HOW TO IDENTIFY THE QUESTION	on both paper and computer tests  	What is the tone of the passage? What is the author's purpose in this passage? In which course would this reading be assigned?
WHERE TO FIND THE ANSWER	<i>tone</i>	Look for clues throughout the passage that show if the author is showing some emotion rather than just presenting facts.
	<i>purpose</i>	Draw a conclusion about the purpose from the main idea and supporting ideas.
	<i>course</i>	Draw a conclusion about the course from the topic of the passage and the supporting ideas.
HOW TO ANSWER THE QUESTION	<i>tone</i>	1. Skim the passage looking for clues that the author is showing some emotion. 2. Choose the answer that identifies the emotion.
	<i>purpose</i>	1. Study the main idea in the topic sentence and the details used to support the main idea. 2. Draw a conclusion about the purpose.
	<i>course</i>	1. Study the main idea in the topic sentence and the details used to support the main idea. 2. Draw a conclusion about the course.

TOEFL EXERCISE 13: Study each of the passages and choose the best answers to the questions that follow.

PASSAGE ONE (Questions 1–3)

Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966) is a well-known example of the "nonfiction novel," a popular type of writing based upon factual events in which the author attempts to describe the underlying forces, thoughts, and emotions that lead to actual events. In Capote's book, the author describes the sadistic murder of a family on a Kansas farm, often showing the point of view of the killers. To research the book, Capote interviewed the murderers, and he maintains that his book presents a faithful reconstruction of the incident.

Line
(5)

1. The purpose of this passage is to
 - (A) discuss an example of a particular literary genre
 - (B) tell the story of *In Cold Blood*
 - (C) explain Truman Capote's reasons for writing *In Cold Blood*
 - (D) describe how Truman Capote researched his nonfiction novel

2. Which of the following best describes the tone of the passage?
 - (A) Cold
 - (B) Sadistic
 - (C) Emotional
 - (D) Descriptive

3. This passage would probably be assigned reading in which of the following courses?
 - (A) Criminal Law
 - (B) American History
 - (C) Modern American Novels
 - (D) Literary Research

PASSAGE TWO (Questions 4–6)

Up to now, confessions that have been obtained from defendants in a hypnotic state have not been admitted into evidence by courts in the United States. Experts in the field of hypnosis have found that such confessions are not completely reliable. Subjects in a hypnotic state may confess to crimes they did not commit for one of two reasons. Either they fantasize that they committed the crimes, or they believe that others want them to confess.

A landmark case concerning a confession obtained under hypnosis went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. In the case of *Layra v. Denno*, a suspect was hypnotized by a psychiatrist for the district attorney; in a posthypnotic state the suspect signed three separate confessions to a murder. The Supreme Court ruled that the confessions were invalid because the confessions had been the only evidence against him.

4. Which of the following best describes the author's purpose in this passage?
 - (A) To explain the details of a specific court case
 - (B) To demonstrate why confessions made under hypnosis are not reliable
 - (C) To clarify the role of the Supreme Court in invalidating confessions from hypnotized subjects
 - (D) To explain the legal status of hypnotically induced confessions

5. The tone of this passage could best be described as
 - (A) outraged
 - (B) judicial
 - (C) hypnotic
 - (D) informative

6. This passage would probably be assigned reading in a course on
 - (A) American law
 - (B) psychiatric healing
 - (C) parapsychology
 - (D) philosophy

PASSAGE THREE (Questions 7–9)

Line The rate at which the deforestation of the world is proceeding is alarming. In 1950
(5) approximately 25 percent of the earth's land surface had been covered with forests, and less than
twenty-five years later the amount of forest land was reduced to 20 percent. This decrease from 25
percent to 20 percent from 1950 to 1973 represents an astounding 20 million square kilometers
of forests. Predictions are that an additional 20 million square kilometers of forest land will be
lost by 2020.

(10) The majority of deforestation is occurring in tropical forests in developing countries, fueled
by the developing countries' need for increased agricultural land and the desire on the part of
developed countries to import wood and wood products. More than 90 percent of the plywood
used in the United States, for example, is imported from developing countries with tropical rain
forests. By the mid-1980s, solutions to this expanding problem were being sought, in the form of
attempts to establish an international regulatory organization to oversee the use of tropical
forests.

7. The author's main purpose in this passage is to
- (A) cite statistics about an improvement on the earth's land surface
 - (B) explain where deforestation is occurring
 - (C) make the reader aware of a worsening world problem
 - (D) blame developing countries for deforestation
8. Which of the following best describes the tone of the passage?
- (A) Concerned
 - (B) Disinterested
 - (C) Placid
 - (D) Exaggerated
9. This passage would probably be assigned reading in which of the following courses?
- (A) Geology
 - (B) Geography
 - (C) Geometry
 - (D) Marine Biology