University of Exeter

Our personality and tone of voice

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Introduction

Welcome to the University of Exeter's personality and tone of voice guide.

If you're a member of staff, you can use this guide to learn more about:

- what we want our written communication to say about us
- how we communicate 'on brand'
- why we use the words we do
- when we should change or adapt the way we write.

If you're a student, you might want to know:

- more about the university and the way we write
- how the university communicates with staff, students and the general public
- what you should expect from our communications.

How to use this guide

We know reading through the whole guide might take some time, but it will help you to identify potential issues in your writing, even if you still need to come back and check. We don't expect you to remember everything!

Throughout the guide we have provided examples of real-world writing using our personality and tone of voice. You can copy the text from these to use in your own writing, or just use them to check you're on the right track.

You might find it useful to make a short list of the most important points to help you remember them, or for quick reference later. The guide itself is written using our personality and tone of voice, so anything you read here is sure to be on brand.

How you can help

We know that language and our reactions to it change over time. We also know that this guide doesn't (and couldn't!) cover every word or phrase, or every type of writing we use. If you have a suggestion, a correction, or a question, please contact **marketing@exeter.ac.uk**

References

Below is a list of sources used to help compile this guide.

New Hart's rules (2014) 2nd edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Orwell, G. (1946; 2013) *Politics and the English language*. London: Penguin.

Pears, R. and Shields, G. (2016) *Cite them right: the essential referencing guide*. 10th edn. London: PALGRAVE.

Plain English Campaign (no date) *How to write in plain English*. Available at: **www.plainenglish.co.uk/files/howto.pdf** (Accessed 20 October 2018).

Plain English Campaign (2001) *The A to Z of alternative words*. Available at: **www.plainenglish.co.uk/files/alternative.pdf** (Accessed 20 October 2018).

Thomas, C. and Saffrey, A. (2018) *Your house style*. 3rd edn. London: Society for Editors and Proofreaders.

Further information

Other resources published by the university and the Communications and Marketing Services team include:

Communication and Marketing Services home page. Available at: **www.exeter.ac.uk/departments/communication/**

Marketing and communications strategy. Available at: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=7jELOahmMCw**

Our mission, vision and values. Available at: **www.exeter.ac.uk/ourstrategy/values/**

Social media guidelines. Available at: **www.exeter.ac.uk/staff/web/social/guidelines/**

University of Exeter style guide. Available at: **www.exeter.ac.uk/staff/web/writing/styleguide/**

Overview

Communications from the University of Exeter should always be clear, professional and distinctive. The aim of this guide is to define, explain and improve the way we write.

Our personality is our character

It might seem strange to think of the university's 'personality', but it makes a lot of sense. If a personality is made up of characteristics, then we should remind ourselves of ours, using our values.

- **Collaboration:** support staff, academics and students – we work together. We're confident in each other, we celebrate our achievements and we include everyone.
- **Ambition:** we create graduates of distinction, conduct ground-breaking research and support the most talented and creative minds from around the world.
- **Community:** we're supportive and nurturing. We care about each other and those around us, in Exeter, Cornwall and at our partner institutions around the world.
- **Impact:** we care about the effect we have on each other, on the environment and on society. We want every interaction to be positive and every problem to be minimised or solved.
- **Rigour:** we stand by what we say. We're confident, meticulous, emphatic. We welcome scrutiny and work transparently. We're research leaders, and our standards are high.
- **Challenge:** we answer difficult questions directly, but with empathy. We work to solve the problems we face, and to prevent the ones we might cause. We push, we strive, we improve.

Our tone of voice is how we express ourselves

How do we use our personality to shape the things we write?

The way we write depends on three things:

1. **Who** we're writing for: think about your audience, what they need, and how you'd like them to think of you.
2. **Where** we're writing: Are you writing an email to one individual, or trying to promote the university in 280 characters? We should always be concise, but we should be adaptable too.
3. **What** we're trying to achieve: be goal oriented. Understand why you're writing and make sure your audience does too.

Tone of voice doesn't mean writing everything the same way, no matter the context. Instead, it means we should always apply our personality, but adapt it for the situation.

The guide

We're confident in each other, we celebrate our achievements and we include everyone

Our students are our greatest asset

I love my course – it's even better than I hoped it would be. The lecturers really care about how you're doing, both academically and mentally. It's a very warm and friendly environment to study in.

Robyn, studying English

I thoroughly enjoy studying English. It has surpassed all my expectations. Tuition and pastoral care are clearly important to the academic staff. There is a real sense of collegiality in the department.

Robyn, studying English

Everything the university does revolves around its diverse and distinguished community of students. Using students' voices is empowering: it strengthens our sense of community, helps students feel heard, and is a great way to highlight academic and extracurricular achievement, as well as the university's research, facilities and points of difference.

Try not to over-edit case studies and testimonials: clarity is important, but authenticity is crucial. When writing to promote the university, always ask yourself: could a student say it better?

Before

The University of Exeter offers an inspiring and collaborative environment in which to pursue a degree. Combining world-class teaching and research in exceptional locations in South West England, the university is home to a supportive community of over 22,500 students across all campuses. Students value the university because it puts them first, helping them to become a graduate with the knowledge, skills and attitude to excel.

After

Graduates from the University of Exeter tell us they'll never forget its inspiring, flexible courses, its beautiful and historic surroundings and its inclusive, close-knit community. Home to 22,500 students on XX courses, our campuses are large enough to offer world-class facilities and small enough to nurture a community based on the pursuit of academic excellence.

Everyone's welcome

At Exeter, we're committed to inclusivity and diversity, and we should uphold and promote this in all our writing. We should always try to give a platform to

people and communities we don't hear from enough.

> **Unconscious bias**
>
> "Gaining work experience, whether in an English or non-English speaking country, will help you to learn valuable skills in today's global workplace."
>
> The above statement is certainly true, and it may have been the author's intention to highlight that a placement in a country where English is commonly spoken will be *different* to one where it is not. However, in this example, it could be read that the language difference might affect the quality of the placement, or even that placements in non-English speaking countries are *inferior*. Instead, consider:
>
> "Gaining work experience will help you to learn valuable skills in today's global workplace."
>
> or:
>
> "International work placements can help you develop a range of valuable skills, and might help you to pick up a new language, learn about different cultures and make lifelong friends around the world."
>
> When reviewing a piece of writing, check that you haven't accidentally reinforced stereotypes, for instance that older people might be less capable of using modern technology, or that one gender may be more or less adept in a particular academic subject.

Avoiding racism, sexism and derogatory language is a must, but we must also take great care not to stereotype, patronise or misrepresent other communities in our writing. Sometimes we make this mistake without even realising – see the 'Unconscious bias' box for advice on how to avoid it.

We must also consider how accessible our writing is to those who might struggle to understand, and avoid alienating or excluding people by accident. For more information, please see the entry for **accessibility** in the University of Exeter style guide.

We create graduates of distinction, conduct ground-breaking research and support the most talented and creative minds from around the world

We all know how important first impressions are, but that can sometimes lead us to neglect the impressions we make later on. Students at the University of Exeter are sometimes with us for many years – from undergraduate degrees right through to PhD programmes, and many of our staff remain with us for much (and sometimes all) of their careers. We should ask ourselves:

- How do we talk to audiences we are not actively marketing to?
- What role does communication play in student and staff retention?
- What do we expect our audience to know (or remember) from previous interactions? Are these expectations reasonable?

Speaking the right language

Should our writing be formal or informal? Personal or professional? Should we write one way for students, and another for staff? Often, the first mistake we make is to think writing should be one way or another: this is called black-and-white thinking. Psychologists call it 'splitting'.

Before you write word one, identify your audience – doing so will help you strike the right balance between the extremes above. This might mean using more formal language with people you don't know personally and being more casual with colleagues and those you have an ongoing relationship with.

We're supportive and nurturing

When you don't know exactly who your audience is, think about how you can include the most people. For instance:

- write in **plain English**
- use numbered lists or bullet points
- consider including images or graphics if they get the message across better.

Plain English isn't about 'dumbing down' – quite the opposite. It's a way of communicating with clarity and precision in a way that is accessible to all. Never patronise your audience, and don't sacrifice important details for fear of sounding too technical. We are a university, after all.

Before

We are writing to introduce our Wellbeing Service, which includes our Mental Health, Psychological Therapies and AccessAbility teams ahead of your arrival.

After

We want to make sure your university experience is positive. That's why we offer all kinds of 'wellbeing' support, including:

- mental health services for students with ongoing mental health concerns
- psychological therapies like counselling, workshops and cognitive behavioural therapy
- AccessAbility – a dedicated team helping students with a disability or long-term health condition.

We want every interaction to be positive and every problem to be minimised or solved

You might have noticed that this guide tends to favour the personal ('we') over the abstract ('the University of Exeter'). This is because we should, wherever possible, take ownership of our communications. For the same reason, you should write in the active, rather than the passive, voice.

Staying active

When we write in the active voice, we make the subject (like you, me, or us) at the centre of the action:

'Your email was received on Friday' becomes 'I received your email on Friday.'

The active voice also makes your message clearer, and less ambiguous:

'Students might want to bring two forms of identification' becomes 'You should bring two forms of identification.

It also brings energy to your writing, which is especially helpful if your text is very dense or instructional:

'Open Days are not mandatory; but it might be useful to attend one to help decide if the university is right for you' becomes 'Why not join us on one of our Open Days? We can't wait to show you around!'

The active voice will almost always make your message more **personal**, **clearer** and more **engaging**.

If you can't help, find help

From time to time, staff and students will ask questions you don't know the answer to. This might be because the question being asked is entirely new, but most of the time, it will be because you weren't the right person to ask – they might have contacted the wrong department or be used to speaking to another member of staff.

A good approach is to assume that if you don't know how to help, your audience won't know who else to ask. Making every interaction positive means finding out who they should turn to next.

We stand by what we say. We're confident, meticulous, emphatic. We welcome scrutiny and work transparently

Tell, don't show

A popular maxim in storytelling is 'show, don't tell'; that is, to rely on the actions, thoughts and words of the characters in a story, rather than the descriptive powers of the story's narrator. This works well in TV and films, but less so in written communications!

Whoever your audience is, remember that the main reason they're reading is to get information, and therefore, your focus should be on providing it as quickly and clearly as possible. Don't *get to* the point, just make it.

Before

Prospective PGR students are invited to this informal session, which is an opportunity to discuss research ideas with DPGRs and supervisors and ask questions about studying a postgraduate research degree.

After

Thinking about doing a PhD?

Join us for a chat about the pros, cons and exciting challenges of pursuing a PhD at Exeter.

Keep it simple

One of the challenges of copywriting is to make what we write feel original and distinctive. This is particularly difficult when writing material that is (often necessarily) repetitive, instructional or laden with detail. Here are some tips:

- **Remember to keep it simple:** always assume your audience is interested and astute, but non-specialist, and always remember their time is precious.
- **Don't litter your text with acronyms and abbreviations:** using too many too often will slow your reader down, rather than speed things up.
- **Avoid clichés (like the plague):** readers tend to switch off when they see them, and they often don't convey the message you intend.

Jargon-busting

Often, new words are introduced into copy because they are fashionable or are thought to express an original idea. These are called **buzzwords**. Some people call them **jargon**.

Buzzwords become cliché through repetition; sometimes the use of a word is mandated, meaning it quickly becomes overused, or it is copy-and-pasted into content that is reproduced annually – like in prospectuses and subject guides – and forms part of the **boilerplate**.

Other clichés include common **expressions** (e.g. 'no pain, no gain'), **idioms** (e.g. 'once in a blue moon') and **sector-specific terms** (e.g. employability).

Some people argue that to improve our writing, we should 'ban' such terms altogether. In fact, this will have the opposite effect, forcing us to abandon expressions that are often helpful to readers *because* of their familiarity. We might also replace a useful term with a less useful one, or one cliché with another!

Below are some of the most common expressions in our (and other universities') writing. You should feel free to use them, but ask yourself: is there another way to say it? Have I used it several times in one document or passage? Is its meaning *exactly* appropriate for my message?

state-of-the-art multi/interdisciplinary wide range; wide-ranging employability

world-class in-depth cutting-edge research-led

broad-based well-[equipped; suited]

For a list of overused terms, see the ‘Jargon-busting’ box.

English idioms

Some English idioms are culturally specific, meaning international readers may struggle to understand them.

For instance, ‘Look after the pennies, and the pounds will look after themselves’ may seem strange to someone unfamiliar with UK currency. Other idioms, like ‘playing Devil’s advocate’, refer to concepts that are not present, or have very different implications, in other cultures.

Take care to ensure that your writing doesn’t alienate or offend, and that any expressions you use make it easier, not harder, for your audience to understand your message.

Statistics

Consider if the statistical information you use in your copy is misleading, or irrelevant to your audience or message. For instance:

‘With alumni in 183 countries worldwide and students from 137 countries, Exeter is a truly international university.’

Certainly, the university is a welcoming and inclusive institution, but with so many UK universities with a much larger international student body, is the information in the example misleading? Furthermore, when directed at prospective international students this information might be useful; buried in the subject information section of a prospectus, it is not.

Try to avoid presenting dense statistical data in body copy. For example:

Before

‘Exeter was named *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* Sports University of the Year 2015/16 acknowledging the university as the best in the country in academic and athletic achievement across a wide range of sports. The university was also voted the *Sunday Times* University of the Year 2012/13. It is also ranked amongst the world’s top 200 universities in the QS and Times Higher Education rankings.’

After

The university has been recognised as:

- Sports University of the Year 2015/16 (*The Times* and *The Sunday Times*)
- University of the Year 2012/13 (*Sunday Times*)
- One of the top 200 universities in the world (QS and Times Higher Education)

We answer difficult questions directly, but with empathy

It’s sometimes tempting to surround bad news with irrelevant, apologetic or otherwise unhelpful writing in the belief that doing so will lessen its impact. Often, we worry that being direct and straightforward will be interpreted as brisk, cold or ‘unfeeling’.

It isn’t always easy, but the best way to serve your audience is to deliver your message (good or bad) quickly and clearly: skirting around the issue is at best annoying, and at worst a distraction from the matter at hand.

When answering difficult questions or providing information that might disappoint or upset your audience, do these three things, in this order:

1. Provide the information in full.
2. Explain the information, including any right to recourse, redress or reconsideration the recipient may have.
3. Offer the appropriate level of support, care and a point of contact for further information.

One last thing: guidelines, not rules

The principles in this guide represent who we are and how we want to be thought of. But that doesn't mean we should think of our communications simply as right and wrong, or good and bad. We know there isn't always going to be time to refer back to this guide, but please take a moment to ask yourself:

- Am I putting my audience first?
- Am I being clear?
- Am I being supportive?
- Am I being helpful and positive?
- Am I being accurate?
- Am I being kind?