

# Neighbourhood Watch: Tone of voice guidelines

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## Why do we have a tone of voice?

Our tone of voice captures Neighbourhood Watch's personality, our attitude and opinions, and helps us to connect with people. It sets our intentions: this is what we're like. And this is how we want the world to see and feel us.

Lots of people write on behalf of Neighbourhood Watch, so these guidelines represent a set of standards for the way we should communicate. They will help our voice to be consistent, credible, and trusted.

To be effective, the tone of voice guidelines should be used across all content – our national website, email marketing, social media, etc.

These guidelines have been produced following research including: an existing copy audit (analysing vocabulary, tone and cadence); a review of the charity's existing user research, brand guidelines and communications strategy; one-on-one interviews about the brand's perception with two volunteers; and an internal stakeholder workshop.

A tone of voice is sometimes called brand voice or brand language. They're all the same thing. The most important thing to understand is that it's not only **what** we say, but **how** we say it. Let's get started.

## Our tone of voice is:

**Friendly:** We are warm, conversational, and down to earth.

*How this shows up in our copy:* We write how we speak, using everyday words. We use contractions. We make the narrative more personal by using 'we' and 'you'.

**Confident:** We are strong, bold, and show our expertise.

*How this shows up in our copy:* We make statements and avoid hedging language like 'we think' or 'possibly'. We get to the point quickly, without fluff.

**Energetic:** We use active words and positive language. We speak with passion and interest.

*How this shows up in our copy:* We pay attention to rhythm. We use shorter sentences. But then we sometimes sprinkle in longer, sometimes overly long sentences. It keeps our writing pacy.

**Authentic:** We are honest and direct. We are clear and dodge jargon.

*How this shows up in our copy:* We talk directly to our audience and consider what the value is for them. We use simple language and don't assume knowledge.

## Friendly

We speak like a friend would, using simple, everyday words. That doesn't mean banning long words, but instead using familiar words over complex ones.

Here are some examples of simpler alternatives:

Wordy	Better
at this point in time	now
in order to	to
utilise	use
a large proportion of	many
assist	help
eliminate	cut, drop, end
actioned	done, completed
due to the fact that	because, as
prior to	before
obtain, require	get

Our tone is not formal or informal – it's natural, which is somewhere in the middle. So the words we use are as natural as when we're talking. Conversational language engages readers more; formality creates distance. If you're not sure whether your writing is the right tone, ask yourself if it's something you'd say in a conversation. And read your copy aloud. You'll spot if it's too formal.

Don't tip over to being too casual, as it can give the impression of being offhand or vague. The word 'stuff' is a good example. It would be too offhand to use in an official document: 'Once you've signed all the stuff, post it back to us.'

**Tip:** Record yourself talking about your subject using a transcription tool like [Otter.ai](https://otter.ai). Your copy will need some editing, but it'll help you to write like you speak.

We use contractions, which make our copy sound more conversational. Plenty of 'we'll', 'isn't' and 'it's' instead of 'we will', 'is not' and 'it is'. And forget what teachers said at school: it's fine to start a sentence with 'and' or 'but'. Like that last one.

We keep it personal by using first-person pronouns (we, us, our) rather than talking about ourselves in the third person (Neighbourhood Watch is). And we use second-person pronouns (you, your) to talk directly to the reader.

### Example of a 404 page:

#### Write like this:

Whoops!

Not sure what happened there. Let's get you back on track.

#### Not like this (current 404 page):

Page not found

The requested page could not be found.

The focus is still on clarity, but the first example has a more conversational, friendly tone.

## Confident

We believe in what we do and why we do it. We share our knowledge to empower communities. And we speak with confidence: We are. We will. We do. We can. We know.

**Write like this:** We **will** fix this.

**Not like this:** We are **hoping to** have this fixed.

So we avoid vague, hedging language that makes us sound uncertain or ambiguous.

### For example:

- Seem
- Should
- Might
- Perhaps
- Probably
- Suppose

Words like this can undermine writing and make our messaging sound a bit wishy-washy.

Being confident also means our copy is succinct and focused. Attention spans are short, especially online where people tend to skim-read. So if the words we're using aren't working hard, we will cut them out or rewrite them.

Shorter sentences are easier to read. Aim for a max of 25 words per sentence in print and 15 words online.

**Don't write like this:** Just a reminder that if you remove all of the unnecessary filler words and auxiliary words you don't really need, it will simplify your writing for the reader. That means your customers won't miss any of the important information.

**Write like this:** Make sure your customers read the important bits by removing words you don't need.

## Energetic

We're an organisation that makes things happen. So we show our energy by using words and phrases that are active. Ones that capture physical actions. Like 'kick off' rather than 'start'. 'Turn up' instead of 'increase' and be 'blown away' rather than 'impressed'.

We use the active voice because it's more engaging, compelling, and easier to understand.

**Tip:** If you're not sure if you've used the passive voice, try the zombie test. If you can add 'by zombies' to the end of a sentence and it still makes sense, it's written in the passive voice.

**Passive:** The dog was taken (... by zombies)

**Active:** An unknown woman took the dog

And here's a rewrite of some copy from our website.

**Write like this:** You can also be a victim 'by association'. For example, if someone racially abuses a friend in front of you and you feel like a victim too.

**Not like this:** Someone can also be a victim 'by association', for example, if a friend is racially abused in your presence and you feel as if you're a victim of that incident as well.

As well as the swap from passive to active, also notice the other tweaks. It's been split into two sentences, it uses 'you' instead of 'someone' and has fewer words.

We pay attention to rhythm. As earlier, short sentences are best, but a combination of long and short sentences create a pace. They keep the reader in the moment and carry them along on a journey.

**Tip:** Look for commas or en dashes that you can turn into full stops to create shorter sentences, and vice versa when you want to create a deliberately long sentence.

Although we often have to write about negative topics, there are instances where we can use positive language that reassures and inspires. We look for ways to add a positive spin by talking about what we **can** do rather than what we can't.

**Negative:** Leaving your dog alone outside a shop is an easy opportunity for a thief, even if you are only away for a minute.

**Positive:** Make sure someone always stays with your dog when you nip into a shop so that your dog is kept safe.

Positive framing is empowering. It can encourage our readers to be proactive. We don't play down bad news, but we're optimistic about change and the support that we offer. We can tell readers the problem and then focus on the solution.

## Authentic

We choose clear over clever. If a reader has to puzzle over a long and convoluted sentence to figure out what we're saying, they probably won't bother.

So we write in a way that is easy for all people to read. Easy to read doesn't mean condescending or unintelligent; it means easy to understand.

**Tip:** You can run some checks for readability in Microsoft Word, or use the Hemingway Editor, which is free to use in a browser. These tools judge the reading age of your content and flag long, complex sentences and common writing errors. Aim for a grade level of around 8, which is age 13–14.

It's fine to use technical terms when we need to, so long as we explain any that may be unfamiliar. Don't assume all readers will know what they are. We want to our audience to feel included and informed. Write acronyms out in full the first time you use them and follow with the acronym in brackets.

**Example:** One of our priorities is to reduce anti-social behaviour (ASB) and hate crime.

We write directly to people as individuals rather than as a group. It makes our copy feel like a one-on-one conversation with one person, which feels more authentic and engaging.

**Write like this:** We'll see **you** tomorrow.

**Not like this:** We'll see **you all** tomorrow.

## Cheat sheet: General copywriting principles

### 1. Front-load your content.

Pop the most important parts at the beginning and then add extra details later on. This is really important when writing for online. More people are using smartphones and tablets, so make key information visible on the first screen. If the content is particularly long, consider also summarising the key details in bullet points at the top.

### 2. Break up the text.

Use subheadings and bullet points to break up the information. Readers should be able to get the gist of the copy just by scanning the headlines, subheadings, and lists.

### 3. Don't include every single detail.

Include only what the reader needs to know.

### 4. Look for long sentences that you can split up.

If you're covering multiple points in one sentence, break them up into two or three sentences.

### 5. Think: 'What's in it for me?'

People don't care about a particular product or service; they care about why it's good for them. So don't focus on why someone should support Neighbourhood Watch. Flip that around: What can they achieve with our support? Why should they care about this? What information is most beneficial to them?

### 6. Change the perspective.

Adjust the wording to focus more on your readers.

Get your copy and highlight all the 'you' words (things like 'you'll' and 'your') in green. This is your **reader-focused** language. Then do the same for the 'we' language but in red. Stuff like 'we're', 'we've', 'our' and 'us'. This is your **organisation-focused** language.

You should have more green words than red. A good rule of thumb is to try to use the word 'you' twice as much as the words 'we' and 'us'. When you do this, you create a more personal connection.

### 7. Add a call to action.

A call to action (CTA) is a suggested action that tells your reader what to do or where to go next. Make sure that CTA is clear and direct.

An effective CTA uses an action verb like 'Subscribe', 'Donate' or 'Download'. But to better align it with your tone of voice, you can add a little energy.

Rather than 'Become a member', you could use 'Get started'.  
Instead of 'Download', you could say 'Grab your copy'.

### 8. Edit, edit, edit.

Is there any flab? Can anything be cut? Is there a way to simplify this sentence so it's shorter by a couple of words?

## How to apply our tone of voice

Make sure that everyone who writes for Neighbourhood Watch has access to this document so it can be applied across the board. Include it in new starters' inductions and give it to freelance writers.

Upload the guidelines to a shared drive.

It can be helpful to name someone who is responsible for making sure the tone of voice is being used.

**Please note:** All external copy such as press releases, articles, and mass emails (to Association Leads, Coordinators, members, etc.) should be reviewed by another member of staff, with our tone of voice and style guide in mind.

As our brand grows, our tone of voice will probably evolve too. So use this as a starting point and arrange to review it again in 12 months to see if it needs adapting or updating.