

Tone of Voice

How to write consistently
and effectively

Introduction

Everything we write sends a signal to someone about Aston University

People from all walks of life learn about Aston University from the words we use in prospectuses, newsletters, emails, presentations, promotional events, business launches and through online communication.

Writing to a wide range of audiences is part of our everyday role and the reputation of the University depends on the things we say in writing. It's important we get it right and these guidelines are here to help us think about what we're writing, who it's for and to what end.

The tone of voice is how we sound in words to an external audience. Is that message consistent? How do we want it to come across? What do we want our readers to know, think, feel or do?



The four elements of the tone of voice

1.

We can relate to you

Whether we intend to inform, educate, persuade or influence, we can only do so if we show we relate to our audience through being engaging and interested in what they are thinking and feeling.

Be straightforward

The academic world often uses formal language which can be a challenge to make concise. Use plain English to involve our audience and get to the point.

Know your audience

When we're communicating with people who understand our subject matter, it's OK to use the terminology we both recognise. It's only jargon when we're using words our audience doesn't understand.

Putting it into practice

Use direct language and write for the specific audience.

3.

We know what we are doing

We believe in what Aston University has to offer the world, so we can communicate it from a position of confidence. First, we need to identify our key messages and make sure we are communicating our strengths and benefits clearly and positively.

Be positive

The best way to sound confident is to know our stuff, understand what we're going to say, who we saying it to and why. Think about the most important point and what information will support this.

Show our strengths

Aston has many excellent selling points. Before writing anything, think about what we're communicating. Through planning communication and finding our facts, we express our strengths clearly.

Putting it into practice

Think before you write, tell a story and say it positively.

2.

We can be trusted

Our words help people to see that we know what we're talking about. We want our various audiences to recognise us as educationally and commercially astute, credible, trustworthy and good to work with.

Be relevant

We prepare people for the real world of work and our tone of voice needs to sound relevant to people entering that world and those already there. When we speak peer to peer, we're not afraid to use technical language. When we need to influence different audiences at the same time, we take care to include everyone.

Use the evidence

We use an evidence-based approach and back up what we say. There's no need for exaggeration or over-claiming and we can show through examples what we're talking about.

Putting it into practice

Use language the audience understands, seek to persuade and support with facts.

4.

We make you think

Sometimes, good content isn't enough and calls out for a stand-out contribution. Use insight and point of view to promote discussion and dialogue.

Be bold

We want to be known for our thought-provoking and insightful contributions. This means doing something a little bit different with our content from time to time – having a point of view, using an intriguing headline or being prepared to challenge conventional thinking.

Make it count

It's how we say what we say that gets the point across. Grab the reader's attention.

Putting it into practice

Write from insights, give a call-to-action and have a point of view.

Think first, write later

Before we write, we need
to ask ourselves several
important questions

1. Who is the audience?

Is it one person or many people? What do they currently know about the subject?

2. What is the point of this communication?

What do you want the audience to know/think/feel/do?

3. What is the context for this communication?

What is the wider background? Is this document related to another document, programme or policy?

4. What are your key messages?

Be clear and brief. Try to keep to no more than three.

5. What information is essential?

What does your target audience really need to know?

6. What type of communication do you have in mind?

Is email really the best approach - how else could you reach and influence your audience?

7. What is the leading element in the tone of voice?

Showing that you can relate to the audience; being trustworthy and credible; demonstrating confidence in what you are doing or, being bold and making the audience think. What, if any, are the supporting elements?

8. Is the language inclusive?

Make sure the language you choose does not constitute any form of harassment or discrimination.

Inclusive language does not stereotype people based on personal characteristics including gender, gender expression, race, ethnicity, economic background, ability/disability status, religion, sexual orientation and so on.

It is good practice to write in gender-neutral terms. For example, 'the typical student knows what he wants to do when he graduates' can be rephrased as 'most students know what they want to do when they graduate.'



Examples showing best practice

Example:
Communication to
schools on clearing

Before

Dear colleague

Aston University: Confirmation, Clearing and Adjustment

This letter outlines contact points and arrangements regarding A Level/ Diploma results and issues related to the Clearing/Adjustment process at Aston University.

Aston is expecting vacancies in August for students who have achieved between BBC and AAB in their A Levels or Triple Distinction at BTEC or equivalent Diploma.

An information sheet with expected vacancies, tips and contact points is enclosed. Students already holding Aston University (UCAS Code A80) as their CF (Conditional Firm) choice will be informed via UCAS Track of their status with us on publication of their A Level Results on Thursday August 13th. If any of your students are holding Aston University as their CF choice and miss out on their grade requirements, we still hope to be able to take them on to their original course, particularly if they have narrowly missed their grade requirements. We will also email/ text successful candidates with the good news so they do not need to contact us. Students who already have their full results in July (BTEC, IB, Access etc) should contact us asap to confirm their place or enquire about vacancies.

Opportunity missed to engage the audience with what we want them to know/think/do.

Passive language sounds corporate and inaccessible.

This long paragraph contains important information that might be lost.

After

Dear colleague

Aston University: updating you on confirmation, clearing and adjustment

As Aston University consistently enrolls students each year from your school/ college, we'd like to let you know about our arrangements for A Level/ Diploma results this year.

I've enclosed an information sheet with expected vacancies, tips and contacts. For now, the main points to take note of are:

- Successful candidates. We will email/text successful candidates with the good news, so they do not need to contact us.
- July results. Please tell students who already have their full results in July (BTEC, IB, Access etc) to contact us asap to confirm their place or enquire about vacancies.
- Conditional offers. Some students already hold Aston University (UCAS Code A80) as their CF (Conditional Firm). Once their A Level results are published on Thursday 13 August, we'll inform them of their status with us via UCAS track.
- Missed grades. If any of your students are holding Aston University as their CF choice and miss out on their grade requirements, we still hope to be able to take them on to their original course, particularly if they have narrowly missed their grade requirements.
- Vacancies. Aston is expecting vacancies in August for students who have achieved between BBC and AAB in their A Levels or Triple Distinction at BTEC or equivalent Diploma.

If there's anything you'd like to discuss, please get in touch.

Tone of voice: engaging, credible and shows we can relate to the audience.

Before

Why you made the right choice

Dear Dawn,

Thank you again for deciding to choose Aston University for your postgraduate studies. You can rest assured that you have made the right choice and we are here to support you every step of the way.

We wanted to take this opportunity to provide you with some information that you may find useful and remind you that we are always here to help. We will be in touch again regarding pre-arrival information and enrolment details but if you have any questions or queries in the meantime please do not hesitate to contact us.

Please remember to quote your application number 1234567 on all correspondence.

'Dear Dawn'... Most comms are less formal today.

It sounds like we're struggling for a good start, so we thank them again.

Stock phrases take up space we don't have. What might we do instead?

The design format means there's only enough room for 100 words of text. Rather than bunch everything up in one paragraph, how could we make these messages more appealing?

After

You've made a great choice

Hi Dawn,

Now you've chosen Aston University for your postgraduate studies, we're here to support you every step of the way.

For starters, here's some useful information about student support and life in the great city of Birmingham.

We'll be in touch again regarding pre-arrival information and enrolment details.

Any questions in the meantime, do get in touch.

Please remember to quote your application number 1234567 on all correspondence.

Tone of voice: engaging and confident.

Before

Aston pioneers new thematic approach to education

Aston University will become the first university to offer its undergraduate students training in how climate change impacts businesses and society, when it hosts Carbon Week in the first week of November.

Businesses are invited to attend Carbon Week's opening event, a conference being held on Monday 2nd November in the Genting Arena, where a range of high profile guests will present on the science, politics and media coverage of climate change, including the Rt Hon. Caroline Spelman MP, Kirsty Lewis of The Met Office and comedian Robin Ince.

What is this short piece really about? It isn't clear from the headline.

The key audience for this piece is business people, yet it leads with the University and undergraduates. Could we address them directly in the first paragraph?

The point of this piece seems to be to invite businesses to the opening event of Carbon Week. Could we make that clearer, earlier?

What will induce business people to attend this event? What can they expect from these guests?

After

Warm up in Carbon Week

As hosts of Carbon Week, Aston University invites business people to experience the energy, opinion and entertainment of our opening event.

Come and see the Rt Hon. Caroline Spelman MP, Kirsty Lewis of The Met Office, comedian Robin Ince and other high profile guests discuss the science, politics and media coverage of climate change.

We're the first University to offer undergraduate students training in how climate change impacts businesses and society. So, expect some heated debate.

When: Monday 2 November 18:30 to 20:00

Where: Genting Arena, Birmingham

Tone of voice: engaging and thought provoking.

Before

Dear Aston graduate,

We'd like to invite you to two upcoming events.

Inside Aston Wednesday 22 June, 9:30 to 16:00 Aston Business School

Are you looking for fresh insight into current challenges in your business? Inside Aston is designed to provide you with new perspectives on major business issues, brought to you by Aston's leading academics. Join us for a day of practical updates, learn more about our leading edge research and network with like-minded professionals.

Brand Sustainability: Measuring and Managing Future Brand Success

Wednesday 29 June, 18:00 to 20:30 Aston Business School

In collaboration, Aston Business School and Harris Interactive have taken a long hard look at what makes a brand relevant and sustainable in a modern day context. The prevailing models for measuring brand effectiveness are largely based on examining indicators of past and present performance, and can fall short of telling brand managers anything about their brand's future potential. Dr Keith Glanfield (Aston Business School, CIM) will present the thinking and research foundations behind the brand sustainability model, to address the question, "How sustainable is your brand?" The event is an ideal opportunity to meet members of CIM's Midland academic panel, formed to pass on key marketing insights that, up until now, have only resided in the region's universities.

For further info and to book your ticket >>

Is there a technical way to enable you to address them by their first name?

Are all alumni the same, or interested in the same things? Engage or intrigue them at the beginning with the subject matter.

'In a modern day context'? How about 'today'?

This description is too long. Make it more engaging.

If we want people to attend, this needs a stronger, more directive call to action.

After

Dear Paul

Are you looking for fresh insight into current challenges in your business?

What makes a brand relevant and sustainable today?

Two great questions. Two great events.

Inside Aston

Wednesday 22 June 9:30 to 16:00 Aston Business School

Get new perspectives on major business issues from Aston's leading academics.

Learn more about our leading edge research and network with like-minded professionals.

Join us for a day of practical updates and fresh insights.

Interested? Book here

Brand sustainability: measuring and managing future brand success

Wednesday 29 June 18:00 to 20:30 Aston Business School

Take a long hard look at brand sustainability with Aston Business School and Harris Interactive.

Get key marketing insights from CIM's Midland academic panel.

Understand why current models fail to tell brand managers about their brand's future potential.

Interested? Book here

Tone of voice lead: Engaging, confident and thought-provoking

For help and advice on the Tone of Voice
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