

UBC BRAND

VOICE AND TONE GUIDE

2018 | VERSION 1.1



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Dear Colleagues,

Communicators have important work to do on behalf of UBC. The speed at which communications now move means we must be highly effective at expressing the value we create in the world and delivering on that promise in all we communicate. The work of creating a world-renowned UBC brand depends upon a collective, tireless effort to communicate, engage and deliver exceptional experiences for all those we come into contact with every day.

Our goal is to ensure UBC is well known, highly valued and deeply connected in British Columbia, Canada and around the world. Our identity is often the most immediate representation of our institution, people and brand to our many audiences. Having a strong brand guideline system allows us to tell our collective story with the power of one voice.

We appreciate your respect and collaboration in maintaining UBC's brand guidelines. We hope this site and guide are helpful for you. I thank all of you for your dedication to supporting UBC.

Rick Hart

Director

Brand and Marketing

Voice and Tone Guide

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Introduction

As communicators, we are accustomed to filling in a creative brief by answering *what is the purpose of this communication?* But how often do we ask ourselves *what is the feeling my reader will experience when they consume my content?* It is an important shift in perspective from ‘me’ to ‘you.’

Smart, modern, engaged communications puts the audience at the heart of its stories. At UBC we seek to evoke and ignite emotions, thoughts and actions in order to collaborate and achieve specific communication goals. The voice and tone of our communications is the subtle — and sometimes not so subtle — delivery that will either create a desired feeling in our audiences, or miss the mark and be swept downstream with a slew of digital detritus.

In other words, our readers’ behaviour is a result of their feelings about the content they consume from us.

The nuances of our brand voice and tone influence everyday choices: choosing not to click on a long generic headline; bouncing off a frustrating page riddled with jargon; or making the life-changing decision *not* to attend UBC because they’ve consumed ubiquitous content that feels like it could be from any university.

But we’re not just any university.

We are UBC, and our voice and tone are unique, compelling and engaging to our diverse audiences. Our communications should inspire emotions that influence change for a better world. Our audiences aren’t an abstract idea — they are real people with whom we collaborate, support, inform and, of course, educate.

Together, we have an important message to share, and a consistent voice and tone help people easily recognize the message as ‘UBC.’ This guide will provide a better understanding of UBC’s voice and tone by offering concrete examples to support you in your communications work at UBC.

UBC BRAND

THE EXPERIENCE OF OUR VOICE



Brand Voice

Understanding how our personality influences our communications increases the potential of the relationships we can have with our desired audiences. Our voice and tone should humanize our brand and inspire empathy, engagement and dialogue.

Our brand voice is not a one-way broadcast: at UBC, collaboration and dialogue are a desired goal for our communications.

Our brand exists in the experiences our audiences have with us on a myriad of platforms. How we speak, behave and respond elevates the integrity and reputation of UBC.





Expressing our Personality

How to bring our character and spirit to life in your communication projects.

The following descriptions express UBC personality traits and can be used as a guide to bring stories about the people of UBC to life.

Innovative

The spirit of innovation at UBC is characterized by intense curiosity and a willingness to explore the unknown with the intention of positively affecting and influencing society.

In writing about innovation, search for the person behind the policy, project or venture. Their unique story of determination and passion to create new knowledge is what makes our collective contribution to the world a story worth telling.

Bold

UBC has never been shy about the importance of academic pursuits and its place in society. Having the freedom to learn, express ideas and pursue new knowledge has been a core value of the university since 1915. Bold is embodied at UBC by courageous exploration of the unknown, a willingness to speak up for inclusion and to go where others have not yet dreamed of exploring. Boldness at UBC is in our people who engineer the impossible.

Entrepreneurial

The first president of UBC, Frank F. Wesbrook, instilled an entrepreneurial mindset when he created the university's motto: *Tuum Est* (It is Yours). The idea was that the university should be created by the people for the people and this spirit has been a foundation ever since.

UBC is a place where students, staff, faculty and alumni all contribute to successful entrepreneurial activities within our local, national and international communities.

We express our entrepreneurial character when we focus on people who challenge the status quo, who collaborate to make 'all boats rise' and who take our talent, inventions and knowledge off campus to serve the global community.

Open

Openness at UBC shows up in an attitude of collaboration, and in the willingness to explore perspectives that are different than our own and to embrace new thinking that contradicts long-held beliefs.

At UBC, the freedom to pursue ideas that can change the world means staying open to new thinking wherever it may come from. This openness is found in how we, as a community, courageously embrace possibility and aspire to share knowledge that creates a better future for the world.



International

In 2017, UBC was ranked the most international university in North America, and 12th in the world. This is a fundamental part of our DNA as a university.

To communicate the personality of our diverse place of learning, we focus on how we welcome ideas from all ethnicities, and respect human rights as a way of being.

Our belief that equity and diversity are integral to university life is a cornerstone of our character. UBC enthusiastically invites the unique talents and contributions of students, staff and faculty from around the world in order to create world-class opportunities for teaching, learning and research.

Sustainable

At UBC, sustainability is a core pillar of who we are and how we learn, teach and utilize our campuses as living laboratories. We believe that sustainability is a societal conversation about the world in which we want to live. Our sustainable personality is that of a change-maker who sees opportunities through education, research, partnerships and operations, to advance sustainability on our campus and beyond.



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HOW OUR TONE SHAPES FEELINGS



Putting Students First

Our motto has helped inform our voice and tone for more than 100 years. Understanding what is special about its inherent message will help you to effectively use it in your communications.

TUUM EST — IT IS YOURS

There's something about tension and obstacle that is inherent in UBC's identity. We were born out of a vision for a provincial university that would serve the people and make lives better for all British Columbians. But it was while we were still under the auspices of McGill University that the students resolved that tension, and overcame obstacles to realize it was a university that was 'theirs'. Hence our motto, *Tuum Est*, It is Yours.

UBC strives for a better future for its students, staff and faculty, and for the world. Our motto is not self-centered. At its heart is a lesson in mentorship, leadership and entrepreneurial destiny.

Tuum Est infuses our voice with a spirit of active encouragement and support for our students as they pursue their dreams.

POWER OF THE PRONOUN

Speaking directly to our students, faculty, staff, partners and collaborators — by using the pronoun 'you' — we remove barriers and avoid sounding like we're communicating from the proverbial ivory tower. It shows we care and puts the focus squarely on our audiences.

Our motto doesn't state "It is **Ours**". *Tuum Est* (It is Yours) differentiates UBC by its bold declaration that it first and foremost serves its students, and supports them in reaching their greatest potential.

The Sound of Clarity

There is a certain elegance in writing simply and directly. For example, instead of saying 'We have a sense of decency' you can simply say 'We are decent.'

How we sound as we string sentences together affects our readers. Is our voice smooth, easy to digest and simple to understand, or is it fractured, choppy or incoherent? Is your language making it easier or more difficult for someone to receive your message? At UBC, we work hard to be inclusive and this should come across in our language.

More like this:

☑ *UBC values the student experience. Whether you study with us in the Okanagan or Vancouver, we will do our best to ensure you have access to great housing opportunities. For our commuter students, we've created Collegia programs on both our campuses which gives you a 'home away from home' so you are instantly part of the UBC community.*

Less like this:

⊕ *Our campuses provide services to a multitude of students each year, with undergraduate housing and graduate accommodation being a foremost priority. For commuter students, there are a variety of services including Collegia, an on-campus space for students that offers a full kitchen, washrooms and study areas.*

CONCRETE OVER ABSTRACT

Our storytelling isn't about creating a false illusion or obscuring reality. It's about revealing real people with authentic experiences that make them human — this enables us to relate to them and see ourselves in UBC's story.

More like this:

☑ *To spend any time with Professor Leonard Foster at the UBC Farm is to see someone truly in their element, even if that means standing in a swarm of bees lopsided with pollen and unaware they are research subjects. It is obvious when you spend time with Foster and his bee 'colleagues' that he genuinely enjoys his work: "Bee research is a lot of fun! There are few other areas of research done at a university where the public is so engaged and passionate about the topic."*

Foster's research hives are producing more than abundant honey — the result from his work could lead to a healthier future for bees and in turn, the planet, by encouraging hygienic behaviours that will allow bees to fend off deadly mites and bacteria.

Less like this:

⊕ *Leonard Foster is a professor in the department of biochemistry and molecular biology and principal investigator at the Next-generation Integrated Pest Management of Honey Bees (Bee IPM) lab. Foster uses molecular diagnostics to selectively breed queen bees with valuable genetic traits. He is also researching ways in which bees can defend themselves against pathogens while encouraging a particular kind of social behaviour in bees, known as hygienic behaviour that enables bees to better fend-off mites and bacteria.*

External and Internal Tone

Our internal and external *tone* changes depending on content types and context. Our *voice* remains consistent.

In other words, we don't change who we are when we meet people in different contexts but we might change our tone. For example, you may alter your tone when speaking to a colleague about an idea versus how you present the same idea to your entire department. Similarly, how we write for our internal audiences versus external audiences, and in which contexts, has some nuances communicators should be aware of.

EXTERNAL TONE

UBC is a leading university that has a lot to offer the world, like solutions to some of the greatest challenges facing our planet. We are an inspiring place where the freedom to pursue open thinking leads to ideas that change the world. What we do in all areas of the university contributes to a better society. We want to collaborate to do better and be better.

Our external tone:

Collegial, engaging, professional, enlightening, inclusive, assured, trustworthy, knowledgeable, expert.

INTERNAL TONE

We are a diverse community full of inspiring, talented people who care deeply about their work. Learning isn't just for students — UBC has a strong culture of people who actively participate in education. We are open-minded and learn from each other as well as all those we come into contact with.

Our internal tone:

Authentic, friendly, conversational, helpful, interesting, welcoming, inspiring, collaborative.

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WHEN WE TELL AND SHARE STORIES



Storytelling: An Invitation to Learn, Discover and Explore with UBC

UBC has more stories than we can tell on any given day. The stories we choose to publish must bring our readers new knowledge, inspiration and open up the world in a way that only UBC can do as a leading research university.

Our storytelling voice is warm, articulate, smart and inspiring.

Our stories take the reader to the unknown, where discoveries are made, and where exploration is an all-consuming passion that inspires a curiosity about the work we do.

Our voice carries within it the hope for a better way, and a true and authentic desire to see real change in the world. Our stories share the possibilities that come out of new knowledge that we, as communicators, have the opportunity to share with the global community.

See how *Catalyst for Innovation* offers an invitation to learn and explore the world with our students and faculty.

[Read *Catalyst for Innovation*](#)

Our stories are smart, confident, open, aware and inquisitive. We don't have all the answers but we're looking for them, and when we find them, the world benefits.

Our stories take a point of view. Note the particular style and viewpoint from beginning to end in *At Home on the Range* that not only makes it fun to read, but also memorable and informative. It also feels very much like a story set in the Okanagan, and gives the reader a strong sense of place.

[Read *At Home on the Range*](#)

Adapting Tone to Content Types and Context

Understanding content types and how to adapt and change our tone for each context type is critical. For example, there are nuances and subtle rules for Twitter versus Instagram, or your faculty landing page versus a media release.

WEB EFFECT: THE SPEED OF STORY

Headlines, paragraph breaks and sentence lengths create an overall story architecture that forms a certain tonality and experience for our readers.

Large, mind-numbing blocks of text are onerous and slow, and state that we're out of touch with our audiences' needs. Many of our students, faculty and staff, as well as broader audience are reading our content on mobile devices. As a result, our stories should respond to different environments and always consider the user experience in these contexts.

Four- to five- sentence paragraphs are better, as are shorter sentences, clear introductions and conclusions, and sub-heads for longer articles. Don't be afraid to use the odd stand-alone sentence or sentence fragments for effect.

More like this:

- ✔ *What path did your food take to your dinner plate? [Fresh from the UBC Farm Market.](#) (link to story)*

Less like this:

- ⊕ *At the UBC Farm, there are a myriad of opportunities for people to learn about how food is grown, and a multitude of disciplines that contribute to a healthy ecosystem that results in the produce the public can buy at their markets. [Fresh from the UBC Farm Market.](#) (link to story)*

BRINGING RESEARCH ALIVE

Our researchers are changing the world through their ground-breaking work. Humanizing their research and using narrative to explain their process helps make the story accessible, engaging and memorable. Keep the person at the heart of the story.

Example:

When Dr. Neil Cashman was a resident neurologist back in the mid 1980s, he served in the ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis) clinic at the University of Chicago. It changed his career path.

"I had one year where I had three patients under my care, three teenage women, who died of ALS — and that just drove me up a wall. After that, I wanted more than anything, to do something that could help people with ALS."

Today, there is still no effective treatment for what Cashman calls "the dreadful disease" which now afflicts approximately 3,000 Canadians and is invariably fatal.

However, as UBC Canada Research Chair in Neurodegeneration and Protein Misfolding, Cashman and his colleagues at the Djeavad Mowafaghian Centre for Brain Health (DMCBH) are closing in on an immunotherapy and a possible cure. As Cashman quietly understates: "It would be huge."



TWEET

More like this:

✔ *Today #UBC welcomed its largest first-year class!*

Less like this:

✘ *Today #UBC welcomed its largest first-year class! #learning #soexcited #party #Vancouver #campuslife #goodtimes*

A note on hashtags: Our audience should understand the point of our communications. Our tone is professional but relaxed and engaging — we don't bombard our users with 14 hashtags and acronyms they don't understand. We're #UBC not #every #single #hashtag #related #to #the #subject. We are an authority — we use our influence and reach strategically rather than grasping for attention or creating murky messages on our channels that may or may not resonate.

UBC BOILERPLATE

More like this:

✔ *The University of British Columbia is a global centre for research and teaching, consistently ranked among the top 20 public universities in the world. Since 1915, UBC's entrepreneurial spirit has embraced innovation and challenged the status quo. UBC encourages its students, faculty and staff to challenge convention, lead discovery and explore new ways of learning. At UBC, bold thinking is given a place to develop into ideas that can change the world.*

Less like this:

✘ *The University of British Columbia is one of North America's largest public research and teaching institutions, and is consistently ranked among the world's 20 best universities. It a national leader in areas as diverse as community service learning, sustainability and research commercialization.*

ADVERTISING

More like this:

✔ *Change is a certainty.
At UBC, we're thrilled to embrace it.
Please join us in welcoming our 15th President and Vice-Chancellor, Dr. Santa Ono, a leading scholar, inspirational leader and passionate educator who believes in the opportunity and potential of change.*

Less like this:

✘ *Announcing The University of British Columbia 15th President and Vice-Chancellor, Dr. Santa Ono.*

INSTRUCTIONS, WARNINGS AND POLICIES

Avoid a punitive tone in your language. Speak directly to the user or audience in an inclusive and positive manner; refrain from being too self-referential or bureaucratic.

More like this:

✔ *We respect your privacy and want to let you know that you are entering an area where UBC Brand photography is being shot. If for any reason you do not wish to appear in the background, it is best to avoid this area.*

We tell visual stories to bring UBC to life and welcome your presence. If you decide to enter this area, it will constitute your full consent to being photographed.

Less like this:

✘ *Do not enter this area if you are not willing to be photographed. UBC is conducting brand photography in this area of the campus. If you choose to enter this area we will assume you have given your full consent to being photographed.*

Tips for Finding the Right Tone

LET THE MEDIUM GUIDE YOU

Is it an official newsletter going out to the entire faculty? Keep the tone professional, and speak on behalf of the faculty using the voice and tone of your specific culture. Tweeting to students to join activities for Imagine Day? Be enthusiastic, welcoming and light-hearted.

Your tone will also change depending on your faculty or department's unique character and personality, however, all UBC communications should be professional in tone and keep grammar at a publishing level at all times.

LET CONTEXT SET THE TONE

In a single day, President Santa Ono might deliver a measured, thoughtful speech to the Vancouver Board of Trade but later post Instagrams with students having fun on Main Mall. Content is not a one size fits all. Adjust your tone to suit the context.

WE/OUR/YOU

If you are speaking on behalf of UBC in any formal context, use the formal name in the first reference, *The University of British Columbia*, and *UBC* thereafter. In less formal contexts, you can use 'we' to represent your faculty, unit or department and if speaking directly to your audience in marketing communications, 'you' is warmer and more engaging than writing in the third person.

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TIPS AND RESOURCES



Voice and Tone Top Ten

- 1 Our voice is an authority in the world but it's not authoritarian. We lead by example.
- 2 Our voice earns respect. It doesn't command or manipulate through overt promotional language.
- 3 Our voice has something important to say but doesn't interrupt, boast or brag.
- 4 We're less your buddy and more your inspiring mentor, teacher or colleague.
- 5 We are conversational but never excessively colloquial.
- 6 Our students have very high grade point averages. We don't need to dumb down, be cute or use slang to be understood.
- 7 Our researchers are changing the world. Our stories open the door for the world to meet them. We're proud but keep our tone one of excited support versus 'we're the only people smart enough to do this.'
- 8 We never generalize—the details matter at UBC. Overstating (*It is a miracle!*), and sweeping, unfounded comments (*Students always learn best in the classroom*), or hackneyed phrases (*It was a win-win for everyone!*) undermine our credibility.
- 9 We love the unknown and are passionate about exploring it. We share our process, including our failures, with a sense of optimism and pride.
- 10 Our voice is always inclusive. Whether it is global or local, we value the conversation with many points of view, even if they're different from ours.

For more writing resources, visit the [Writing page on the UBC Brand Site](#) where you'll find our comprehensive style guide, boilerplate and key considerations for writing on brand at UBC.



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