

UBC BRAND

# VOICE AND TONE GUIDE

2024 | VERSION 1.3



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 each and 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**

Associate Vice-President, Communications

# Voice and Tone Guide

2024 | VERSION 1.3

1.0	Introduction	1
2.0	The experience of our voice	2
3.0	How our tone shapes feelings	7
4.0	Choosing stories to share	11
5.0	Tips for finding the right voice and tone	14

# 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?*

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.



UBC BRAND

# THE EXPERIENCE OF OUR VOICE





# Brand Voice

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, one of the goals of our communication is collaboration and engagement.

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





# Brand Personality

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

---

## Inspiring and optimistic

Whether we're generating a cure for diabetes or mapping the universe, people at UBC are changing the world. Our collective stories leave us in awe—and the way that we tell them inspires others. Our tone evokes a feeling of optimism: we believe that, when provided with opportunity, people with drive and curiosity will change the world.

---

## Curious

People at UBC are doing amazing things, and their research is often driven by curiosity. We are willing to explore the unknown and innovate because we want to positively affect society. We ask “what if” and then we dig deeper to find out.

Our tone reflects our curiosity. What motivates individuals to shape a better world? What drives researchers to keep pursuing their goals, despite obstacles? What's at stake if they don't succeed, and what could be the impact if they do?

Keep asking “why” and you'll find the heart of the story.

---



# Courageous

We're confident that we have the potential to shape a better world, and we have the courage to try. Yet we're never overconfident or boastful. We show our courage quietly.

Having the freedom to learn, express ideas and pursue new knowledge has been a core value of the university since 1915. We explore the unknown and go where others have not yet dreamed of exploring. We speak up and speak out for things that matter.

---

# Driven

UBC's history is rooted in the initiative of students, filled with the desire for a better future. It is the story of a bold new Canadian university striving, against the odds, to be among the very best. Our motto, *Tuum Est* (It is Yours), continues to be a declaration of our drive to develop opportunities for people who want to create a better world.

We don't wait for change to happen; we take the initiative to turn our individual visions into reality. We reframe setbacks as challenges, which make us even more determined to innovate and succeed. We are driven to make a difference.



## Diverse and inclusive

We are a diverse community. Our students, faculty and staff come from around the world, and our international research partnerships and publications help us collaborate on a global scale.

Our belief that equity and diversity are integral to university life is a cornerstone of our character. We strive to elevate the voices of marginalized and equity-deserving communities. Our tone is inclusive and respectful. We follow the latest inclusive language best practices and understand that these are constantly evolving.

For more guidance, see the [Editorial Style Guide for UBC Communicators](#) and the [Indigenous Peoples: Language Guidelines](#).





A photograph of a man and a woman in a crowd, both covered in colorful paint splatters. The man on the right has a wide-eyed, open-mouthed expression of surprise or excitement. The woman on the left is looking down. The background is a blurred crowd of people, suggesting a festival or party atmosphere.

UBC BRAND

# 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, faculty and staff, 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.

### **DIRECT ADDRESS**

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 an 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.



## Clear, Plain Language

At UBC, we work hard to be clear and straightforward with our language. Aim for short, easy-to-read sentences free of academic jargon. Use language that is accessible and relatable for your audience.

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 people to relate to them and see themselves in UBC's story.

# 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 EXAMPLE

*UBC is a leading university that has a lot to offer the world, like solutions to some of the greatest challenges facing our planet. If you have the drive to shape a better world, we will support you in realizing your greatest potential. You will be given opportunities to share knowledge, to be inspired and to shape your future.*

---

*Our external tone sounds:  
Confident, supportive, curious, inspired, inclusive, trustworthy, knowledgeable, expert.*

---

## INTERNAL TONE EXAMPLE

*UBC is 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 with whom we interact.*

---

*Our internal tone sounds:  
Authentic, friendly, conversational, helpful, interesting, welcoming, inspiring, collaborative.*

---

UBC BRAND

# CHOOSING STORIES TO SHARE





## Storytelling: How UBC Stands Out

The stories we choose to publish show how UBC inspires people, ideas and actions for a better world. They must foster a sense of pride in the UBC community and elevate the university's reputation. Above all, they must be interesting and relevant to the target audience.

As communicators, we understand that we're creating and sharing content for a crowded digital playing field. Our audience has unlimited choices of content they could consume, so ours must offer them value, whether that's through new knowledge, inspiration or information on how our people and their research is changing the world.

---

Our storytelling voice is warm, articulate, smart and inspiring. It takes 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 with it the hope for a better way, and a true desire to see real change in the world. Our stories share the possibilities that come out of new knowledge that we, as communicators, can share with the global community.

Our researchers are changing the world through their groundbreaking 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. Elevate their voice. Explore why their work matters and ask them what they think is important to highlight in the piece. Make the story less about the institution of UBC and more about the individuals who are making a difference at UBC, in their own way, for all of us.

## 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 TikTok, or your faculty landing page versus a media release.

---

### WRITING FOR DIGITAL MEDIUMS

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

Large blocks of text are onerous and out of touch with our audiences' needs. Increasingly, consumers are viewing our content on mobile devices, so we must create it with the mobile experience in mind. That means shorter sentences and shorter paragraphs of just a few sentences.

Break up longer articles with subheads, and punctuate text with good images. If using video, keep it short; a minute is plenty for today's attention spans. Be sure to add captions for sound-off viewing.

### WRITING FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

As with all UBC communication, keep your tone warm and professional. Your tone will vary somewhat according to the character of your unit/faculty and may be more relaxed depending on the social media channel, but it must always be "UBC" speaking.

Official UBC social media channels shouldn't be used to "sell." They must meet the same spelling, grammar and punctuation standards as any UBC print communication. If you are in doubt, ask yourself if what you are about to post would make sense coming from one of the top 50 universities in the world.

Resist the urge to create custom hashtags: if you are the only one using your hashtag, you probably shouldn't be using it.

For more social media guidance, see [UBC Brand: Social Media Best Practices](#) on the UBC Brand site.

UBC BRAND

# TIPS FOR FINDING THE RIGHT VOICE AND TONE





## 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 with grammar at a publishing level.

### LET CONTEXT SET THE TONE

In a single day, the UBC president might deliver a measured, thoughtful speech to the Vancouver Board of Trade but later post on Instagram with students having fun on Main Mall. 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.

## Voice and Tone Top 10

- 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 are smart. We don't need to dumb down, be cute or use slang to be understood.
- 7 Our researchers are changing the world. We're proud, but keep our tone one of excited support rather than boastful.
- 8 We never generalize—the details matter. 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. So does excessive enthusiasm: use exclamation marks sparingly.
- 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.



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
Brand and Marketing

