

WATCH YOUR TONE!

Why Your Company's Tone of Voice Matters,
and How to Get it Right



acrolinx



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Tom Albrighton is a professional copywriter, founder of [ABC Copywriting](#), and co-founder of the [Professional Copywriters' Network](#).



Dr. Andrew Bredenkamp is founder and chairman of [Acrolinx](#). He has over 20 years of experience in multilingual content development and holds degrees in technical translation and linguistics, as well as a Ph.D. in computational linguistics.



Harriet Cummings is a copy editor at [Distilled](#). She is the author of an online guide to tone of voice, "[Finding Your Brand's Voice](#)." Before joining Distilled she wrote for Groupon, helping to produce its popular and irreverent subscriber e-mails.



Liz Doig is owner and brand language consultant at [Wordtree](#), a writing and brand language consultancy that helps global clients tell their story more effectively and profitably. She is also the author of [BrandLanguage: Tone of Voice the Wordtree Way](#).



Doug Kessler is co-founder and creative director at [Velocity Partners](#), a B2B content marketing agency based in London. He is a popular speaker on content marketing, and his presentation "[Crap: The Content Marketing Deluge](#)" has gathered over 700,000 views on SlideShare.



Neil Taylor is managing partner at [The Writer](#), the world's largest language consultancy, where he helps leading brands get their words working harder with a combination of writing, thinking, and training. A former senior consultant at Interbrand, he is the author of three books: [Brilliant Business Writing](#), [The Name of the Beast](#), and [Search Me](#).



Chris West is founder and head of voices at [Verbal Identity](#), a transformative strategic consultancy specializing in brand language. A former copywriter at Saatchi & Saatchi, BBH, and Mother, he has written for brands including British Airways, the Conservative Party, adidas, The Guardian, and Patek Philippe.

FOREWORD

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Here’s my hopeful [prediction](#) for the future of B2B marketing, which I first made in the fall of 2014: I look forward to B2B firms prospering with quality content that’s ridiculously useful and valuable.

Because we don’t need more content; we need better content. The future is coming – it always does, of course. And for those of us who work in content, I think the future I describe will be ours. But it’s going to take some work.

I wasn’t itching to write another content marketing book. But I wrote my latest book, [Everybody Writes](#), because I couldn’t not write it. I believe that good writing is something anyone can produce. And we all need to! If quality content is our future, we all need to get on board – not just copywriters and producers and marketers, but anyone who uses words. In other words, this means you!

But here’s the thing. The more people you’ve got writing, the more styles get thrown into the mix. Before you know it, your content’s tone and voice are all over the place. And that’s where this eBook comes in.

Watch Your Tone! offers valuable advice on how you can create your own corporate voice — a unique, instantly recognizable style for all your content, that lets you speak with one voice and stand out from the crowd. The authors, my good friends at Acrolinx, have developed a unique software platform for keeping your tone on point. They know their stuff.

Why should you care? Because more and more B2B brands are realizing the power of tone of voice, and the ones who act first will benefit most. Online fundraising engine Crowdrise, LinkedIn, and my company, MarketingProfs, all have a strong, discernible voice that is a clear advantage in a crowded content world. (Remember: Better content, not more.)

Thanks for reading. Enjoy the eBook. I have a feeling you will.

”

FOREWORD



ANN HANDLEY
Chief Content Officer at
[MarketingProfs](#) and author of
Everybody Writes, a *Wall Street Journal* bestseller

CHAPTER 1

Introducing Tone of Voice

You've probably heard the phrase "corporate tone of voice," especially if you're in marketing or deal with ad agencies. But what exactly is tone of voice, and why is it so important?



Tone of Voice Defined

Tone of voice is how the character of your business comes through in the words you write and speak. It's not about what you say, but the way you say it – and the impression it makes on everyone who reads or hears you.

Think about it. Everybody you meet has their own way of expressing themselves, as unique as their face or fingerprint. Some are pleasant and polite; others are pushy and in-your-face. Some say so much with just a few words; others never seem to get to the point. Companies are no different. Take a look at the examples below.

TEXT	With its industry-leading, massively scalable technology, our web services platform delivers exceptional performance and reliability under the most demanding and highly variable conditions.	Our web services platform delivers 99.99% uptime and adapts to changing loads in less than a second.	Web services that you can start and forget.
TONE OF VOICE	Technical, Verbose, Inwardly focused	Factual, Concise	Informal, Non-technical
POSSIBLE IMPRESSIONS	High-pressure marketing and empty boasts. Beware!	Clear and factual, but what are the company's people like?	You've got my interest, but where's the proof?

All three descriptions mean roughly the same thing, but they're expressed in completely different ways. That affects the impression you get, and how you feel about the person who's speaking.

When you read a company's content, you understand it on two levels. The facts tell the analytical side of your brain what the company does, while the tone tells the creative side what they'd be like to deal with.

Despite its name, tone of voice isn't just about how you speak. It includes all the words you use in your business content, including in your website, sales e-mails, product brochures, call-center scripts, and client presentations, to name just a few examples.

Tone of voice isn't the same as good writing or strong messaging. It's the next level up from those things. It's about using language to give your brand its own distinct and recognizable voice.

All the content you produce should have the same tone of voice. When your tone is consistent, your audience hears the same person speaking whenever and however they deal with you. That shows them you're a consistent, reliable company to deal with, and that every part of their experience with you will be equally good.

More and more B2B companies are getting into tone of voice as a way to engage their customers through language.

For example, leading tone of voice consultancy The Writer has worked with multinationals including Cisco, Unilever, and O2; here at Acrolinx we've served clients including Philips, Yamaha, Google, and Microsoft.

So what are all these companies looking for?

Six Reasons Why You Should Care About Tone of Voice

Let's take a look at some of the benefits of creating and using a tone of voice.

1. It Makes You Human

People like to deal with people. So they like a brand to have a personality they can recognize and bond with.

Sometimes, people assume that B2B buyers work in a completely rational way. But businesspeople are still people. They might have more priorities and stakeholders to think about, but given a choice, they'll go with the firm that they feel good about.

In B2B, the trend is toward more authenticity, honesty, realness, and openness – things that were traditionally seen as B2C values. Buyers of all types are looking for the emotional truth behind an offer or brand, not just rational benefits.

“All else being equal, everyone chooses the business they like,” says Neil Taylor of The Writer. “So if you can use language to position yourself as more trustworthy, or more likeable, or a better partner, why not do it?”

› See “A New Voice for Small Businesses at IBM” on **page 12**.

A New Voice for Small Businesses at IBM

One of the first big companies to wake up to the power of tone of voice was IBM. In the late 1990s, the company decided that it needed to work harder to reach small businesses.

IBM found that many small businesses simply weren't aware of the services that the company could offer them. Small business owners responded best when IBM "spoke in terms of how to use information technology to help somebody solve a problem," commented Robin W. Sternbergh, Global General Manager for Small and Medium Business.¹ Focusing on technical aspects was less effective, because customers "don't have the time or the interest to understand technology. They want to know, is this going to help get rid of paperwork, attract more customers, improve customer relationships, help reduce inventory?"

With the "Solutions for a Small Planet" campaign, IBM adopted a completely new tone that let it position itself as the champion of small-business owners around the world. "IBM stopped being technologists with a 'geeky' tone of voice, and started being people talking to people," says Chris West of Verbal Identity. "In the process, they positioned themselves as global leaders, talking about problems that large- and small-business owners around the world were facing."

¹ Stuart Elliott, [I.B.M.'s multimedia campaign posits that small is beautiful](#), *The New York Times*, August 28, 1997.

2. It Helps You Cut Through

As content marketing becomes more popular, firms are generating more and more writing – but much of it doesn't have a clear voice. A distinctive tone gives you the best chance of connecting with people. Ideally, you want your tone to be immediately recognizable, even if you take the logo off your website or your social media feed – and not sound virtually the same as your competitors.

What's more, an original writing style can compensate when visual techniques aren't available. "Tone of voice has always been important, but it's critical now," says Chris West. "When I started writing ads, an OK ad could be saved by great photography, imaginative art direction, brilliant typography, or occasionally, an engaging tone of voice. But today, eight out of 10 brand channels are dominated by language, so you can't rely on those things any more. You're fighting with one arm tied behind your back, and the arm you have free is tone of voice."

Tone of voice is a force multiplier. Present your content in a flat voice and you might make your budget back. Use a breakthrough voice that draws people in and you're maximizing your ROI.

Doug Kessler, Co-founder and Creative Director, Velocity Partners

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3. It Replaces Face-to-Face Communication

According to Forrester Research, business buyers don't contact suppliers directly until up to 90 percent of the way through the purchase process.² With fewer opportunities to talk face to face, your written words have to work harder than ever.

Prospects know you pretty well from your website and marketing material before they ever pick up the phone. Your tone helps to build trust with them from the start, laying the foundation for a strong working relationship.

We've evolved to be highly attuned to subtle signals such as body language, gesture, voice, and so on. In writing, all those signals are carried by tone of voice, so that's the only way to show your identity, your character, and your intention.

4. It Builds Authority

Think of the killer TED talks or conference presentations you've seen. Did the speakers stand perfectly still, reciting dull but convincing facts in a relentless monotone voice? Or were they lively, funny, and memorable, filling the stage with their passion?

Tone of voice can be a huge carrier of authority and belief. Personality shows you have confidence in what you're saying, and that it therefore has real value.

Tone of voice has always been important, but it's critical now.

Chris West, Founder, Verbal Identity

² Lori Wizdo, [Buyer Behavior Helps B2B Marketers Guide the Buyer's Journey](#), Forrester Blog, October 4, 2012.

5. It Gives You Focus

Working on tone of voice can be an excellent discipline for thinking about your company's identity. You have to boil everything down to something clear and simple that anyone can understand, and that helps to cut through clutter and confusion.

Your tone can even help you set strategic direction. Markets are getting more crowded and competitive, so companies have to decide who they're for. Instead of being all things to all people, they're embracing niche appeal so they can hone in on the most relevant audience. That's not just a marketing trend; it's about product and services too.

6. It Makes You Different

In B2B, tone of voice is a story that's just beginning. Most companies haven't woken up to the idea at all. A few have taken great strides. But almost none have successfully transformed the way they use language – and that opens up a huge opportunity.

“Very few B2B brands have been doing this for long enough that we can say they've definitely nailed it for their whole brand,” says Neil Taylor. “But what that means is that the first people who do nail it, in any sector, will clean up.”

So tone of voice is important, and B2B brands large and small are using it to connect with customers, build authority, and stand out from the crowd. But how do you go about analyzing and refreshing your tone? In the next chapter, we'll find out.

CHAPTER 2

Identifying Your Brand Values

In this chapter, we'll prepare to create your new tone of voice by evaluating your current position and identifying your brand values.



Are You Ready?

Before you embark on changing your tone of voice, it's important to realize that it takes effort and commitment. Some firms make an intense commitment to tone of voice for a certain period, but then the project peters out. The ones who succeed ask on day one what they'll be doing in six months' time, a year's time, or even two years' time.

Ideally, everyone affected by tone of voice should be involved from the beginning. Your customers see all your communications as parts of a whole, so you should too. However, some people may not see right away why changing your tone of voice is a good idea. They may feel things are OK as they are, or that the new tone of voice will limit their freedom. To avoid this, make it clear that this isn't about control, or pretending to be something you're not. It's about showing people what you're all about, why you're different, and what you'll be like to work with.

The reason everyone has to be involved is that (almost) everyone writes. When you change your visual identity, it only affects a handful of people: your own marketers, your agency, and a few suppliers. But everyone uses words, so you have to make sure they all know that language is their responsibility too.

Developing a tone of voice can't just be a box-ticking exercise. You need to anchor your tone in your brand. There has to be a commercial imperative, whether that's increasing revenues or something else. And you have to know how you'll measure success.

Liz Doig, Brand Language Consultant, Wordtree



Excellent

Great

Good

Average

Poor

Bad

Where Are You Now?

The first step is to get a sense of your current tone of voice, and how it's working for your business — or against it.

If you've never thought about tone of voice before, chances are your current tone of voice is one of two things. It could be the standard-issue tone used by most B2B companies — serious, heavy on features, sprinkled with a little jargon. Or, if you have lots of writers, it could be a patchwork quilt of styles, with everyone doing what feels right.

One way to get a quick feel for your tone of voice is to read some of your content aloud — your home page, maybe, or a key sales letter. Now picture the person who's speaking. Is he a vivacious live wire or an uptight buzzkiller? Does she intrigue you, irritate you, or just bore you? Would you want to work with that person?

Sometimes, people are great at speaking to customers, but overthink it when they sit down to write. Reading out loud helps them realize when they've done that.

You can also try recreating the "Pepsi challenge" by comparing your content with a direct competitor's. Take some content from each company, delete the brand names, read them aloud, and see whether people can guess who's talking. If they can't, that's a sign your tone isn't making you stand out.

Or, you could ask customers what they think. Based on letters, e-mails, and your website, how would they describe you? What did they think when they first researched you? Encourage people to be honest, and listen carefully to what they say. If you get different answers, you may have a problem with inconsistent tone.

Even if you do like what you hear, remember that the negative impacts of a poor tone can be invisible. They're the customers who never called you, the visitors who bounced right off your home page, or the sales letters that hit the trash unread. Hard numbers such as bounce rates, time on site, open and click-through rates for marketing e-mails, etc., could give you a clue that your tone needs work.

It All Begins with Your Brand

Tone of voice can't happen in a vacuum. It has to begin with your brand values. Tone of voice is how you communicate your personality in language — it's how your brand sounds when it talks.

You may already have done some work to define your brand values, for example by developing a brand positioning statement, a vision or mission statement, some "brand pillars," or some other document. It doesn't matter what you created — what matters is that you thought seriously about what your brand is all about.

There are two ways to look at your brand values:

1 **outside in**
beginning with your market

or

2 **inside out**
beginning with your company

OR YOU COULD TRY A MIX OF BOTH

"With outside in, you ask what values brands need in order to be considered a part of their market, and internalize them," **explains Chris West of Verbal Identity.**

"But more modern brands work inside out: they define what they stand for without reference to the outside world."

As an example, consider the market for office furniture.

Office DEPOT

Office Depot positions itself very clearly as a cost leader, with a strong low-price message and simple, practical language that focuses on physical features and concrete benefits.

🕒 Herman Miller

Herman Miller puts a strong emphasis on design, ergonomics, and optimizing workspace that's expressed in language that is much quieter, more nurturing, and more refined.

Kinnarps

Kinnarps is different again, drawing on its Swedish heritage to communicate a green message and a minimal, no-nonsense approach with very clean, clipped, and almost scientific language.

Brand Values, Outside In

If you want to work “outside in,” survey some other brands in your market. How do they position themselves? What are their key messages? And how do they use language to get them across?

Surveying your sector in this way has benefits. It reveals the universal values that all companies in your sector must have, just to play in the game. For example, although they may have very different philosophies, all the furniture stores mentioned on the right-hand side of this page project technical product quality, commercial efficiency, and an understanding of customers' workspace needs. And it's hard to imagine a competitor beating them without displaying those values.

However, there may be other values that everyone uses out of habit or groupthink — even though they're not essential. These are your opportunities to do something different. For example, none of our furniture stores shows any trace of humor or playfulness in its tone. That could be an opportunity for a new player to establish a distinctive voice, as long as they can do it without compromising the industry's universal values.

› For simple templates that will help with this process, see the worksheets on industry analysis ([page 54](#)) and competitor analysis ([page 55](#)).

Brand Values, Inside Out

With the “inside out” approach, you start at the core of your business and build outward to values, then on to tone. To get started, consider questions like:

What makes your company unique?

- What do you do for customers that nobody else can?
- What's special about the way you work, your products or services, or anything else about your company?

What unique value do you offer your customers?

- What would your customers say your strengths are?

What is your company's culture like?

- Are you “all business” (like Dell) or are you more playful (like Nintendo)?
- Are you a “tee-shirt and jeans” workplace, or is it more “suit and tie”?
- What do people like most about working at your company?

How do you present yourself to customers?

- Are you respectful and solicitous (like a doctor), practical and hands-on (like a contractor), or familiar and jovial (like a bartender)?

What are the key messages you need to get across?

- What do prospects have to understand about your products or services before they'll buy from you?
- What do they need to understand about you as a company before they'll work with you?



Brainstorming around these questions could generate useful ideas. If the well runs dry, you can always mix things up by using analogies or metaphors: If your company were a person, what would it be like to talk to, or hang out with? What car, film character, restaurant, or clothing brand would it be?

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Three values is a good way to keep things simple and focused. One or two values won't give your brand enough dimension, while more than three risks duplication, or getting into too much detail.

Tom Albrighton, founder of ABC Copywriting and co-founder of the Professional Copywriters' Network

› For a simple template that will help you, see the identifying brand values worksheet on **page 56**.

A Simple Framework for Brand Values

How you capture your findings is up to you. One simple method is to boil everything down to three one-word values that reflect the essence of your brand. The three values need to be distinct, but still complementary – that is, not synonymous, but not total opposites either.

Don't be afraid of using unexpected words — the sort of words you don't normally hear in B2B marketing. If the values are unique, the words to express them should be too. Remember, you're looking for the things that make you different — not things that everyone in your market can lay claim to.




Don't fall into the trap of choosing trite, non-differentiating factors such as “friendly,” “honest,” “reliable,” and so on as brand values. Those attributes are the least you would expect from any provider. They may be important to your service, but they won't help you create a distinctive tone.

Also, avoid B2B buzzwords like “dynamic” or “proactive.” They're clichés, so if you're looking to be different, they put you at a disadvantage right from the start. Plus, they're vague at best and meaningless at worst. Instead, search for sharper, richer, more colorful words that get closer to who you really are, and how you really work.

Abstract words in isolation don't mean that much, so develop some detail around them. Make them real and practical. For example, if one of your values is “creative,” what exactly do you mean? When and how are you creative? What are you creative about? How does your creativity help clients?

Let's look at a fictitious example. Design Station is a web application developer based in Seattle. The company was founded seven years ago by twin brothers Steve and Simon Smith, both of whom loved electronics and computers from an early age. Four years ago, the Smiths started adding more staff, and the company now has a team of five people. It mainly serves small or medium-sized firms that are looking for reliable, easy-to-use ecommerce sites.

Here's a three-value framework for Design Station, with explanations of what each value does and doesn't mean.

			
VALUES	Rigorous	Idealistic	Curious
IT MEANS...	We work hard to build reliable code and test it thoroughly before it goes live.	We really care about writing well-crafted code and finding the simplest, most elegant solution to every problem.	We're always on the lookout for what comes next, so we can be a part of it.
IT DOESN'T MEAN...	We're rigid or uptight.	We don't get the job done.	We're dreamers.

As you develop your values, you build a shared understanding of what they mean. Then you can see more clearly how they'll translate into writing style. And later on, when you're putting your tone of voice into practice, it will be much easier to work out whether things you've written are in line with your tone.

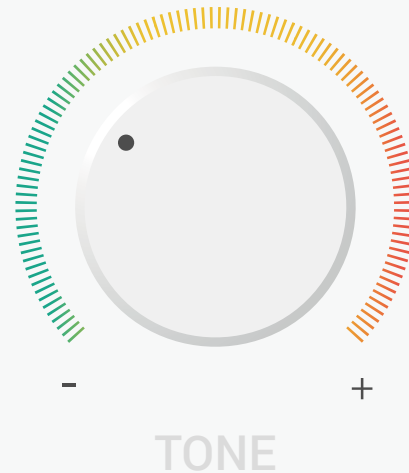
Once you have your brand values nailed down, you need to consider how they translate into writing style.

From Values to Tone

For some more experienced writers, the values alone might be enough of a guide. But if you want everyone to understand how to articulate them, you'll need to build a bridge between your values and your tone. That means thinking about how each value translates into writing style.

“Writers may be very good at writing in a certain way, but not quite so good at explaining how they’re doing it,” says Neil Taylor. “So the trick is to deconstruct the craft, just like scientists on television break down complex ideas so everyone can understand them.”

Let’s return to Design Station and look at how their three values could become tone of voice “do’s and don’ts.” This brand has three versions of its tone, in line with its values: a rigorous one for talking about practicalities, an idealistic one for linking to other people’s ideas, and a curious one for talking about the future.





VALUES

Rigorous



Idealistic



Curious

DO...

Keep your writing clear and concise when specifying projects or explaining ideas.

Stick to shorter words and sentences.

Always give concrete details when you can. Don't generalize.

Use jargon as shorthand when you're sure the reader will understand it.

Say why you're doing what you're doing, using more flowing language.

You can use longer words and sentences here.

Use proven principles and thought leadership to justify your suggestions.

Use questions to talk about the future, product innovations, and anything else forward-looking.

Express excitement about what's coming.

DON'T...

Make the language so clipped that you sound like a robot.

Drift off into abstraction – always link the ideas to what you're actually doing.

Speculate wildly or look too far into the future.

Let your excitement become starry-eyed.

‘Human, warm, friendly, and approachable’ isn’t a tone of voice.

In the same way as you made your brand values specific, make your tone specific. Don’t waste time writing generic or obvious guidance, or saying the same thing over and over. Remember, you’re looking for points of difference. “‘Human, warm, friendly, and approachable’ isn’t a tone of voice,” says Chris West.

› For a simple template that will help you work from values to tone, see the developing your tone of voice worksheet on **page 58**.

Now that you’ve built a bridge from values to tone, you can begin to nail down the specifics of your tone of voice, the focus of the next chapter.

One mistake is to stay too high-level. Businesses choose a set of core values and say ‘go and write like that.’ It gives you some direction, but if one of your values is ‘confidence,’ what does that mean? You can be confident in a down-to-earth, relaxed way, or in an authoritative, confrontational way. Unless you can define the difference and show people how to do it, you won’t get far.

Neil Taylor, Managing Partner, The Writer

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A person wearing a white jacket and a backpack is standing outdoors, holding a tablet computer. The person is looking at the tablet, and their hands are visible. The background is a bright, hazy sunset or sunrise over a field. The overall tone is warm and professional.

CHAPTER 3

Defining Your Tone of Voice

To help you define your own tone of voice, this chapter looks at different types of tone and explores many different aspects of writing style.

Different Types of Tone

One way to think about tone of voice is as a set of sliding controls, like a graphic equalizer. By moving the controls to one extreme or another, you change one aspect of the tone. The table below shows a few examples.

<p>Low reading grade level (age 9) We can fix all your computers and keep them working.</p>	<p>High reading grade level (age 17) We offer hands-on repair and maintenance services for your entire computing infrastructure.</p>
<p>Formal Established in 1878, we remain a family firm with a proud heritage of excellent service and unstinting attention to detail.</p>	<p>Informal We've been around a long time, but we still care about going the extra mile and getting all those little things just right.</p>
<p>Punchy Big, boxy, and unbreakable. That's what people said they wanted from a carrying case. So that's how we built ours.</p>	<p>Flowing When you're looking for the reassurance that your valuable machinery will be safely protected at all times, our solidly built carrying cases are the only realistic option.</p>
<p>Warm Are you sinking under the weight of your admin? Well, stop worrying. Our temps are here to give you all the help you need.</p>	<p>Detached AdminCo's secretarial services have been designed to optimize every aspect of clients' day-to-day operations for efficiency and effectiveness.</p>

Inward-looking/firm-focused

We are a leading authority on e-mail and data security, serving a wide range of blue-chip and multinational clients.

Outward-looking/customer-focused

When you work with us, you can use our proven experience to safeguard your business.

Traditional

If I can be of any further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me at the e-mail address or telephone number below.

Contemporary/colloquial

Still need a little help? Give me a shout and I'll happily lend a hand.

Passionate

We love code. And we love great design. That's why we worked so hard to create Design Station, which combines the very best of both.

Calm

Design Station combines elegant, crafted code and proven design principles in a single integrated platform.

Inspirational

The content revolution is transforming marketing, and it can transform your business too. Are you ready to step into this new world?

Practical

If you want to reach likely prospects and improve your search engine ranking, you really need to consider content marketing.

Academic

Psychological researchers have found that one of the most powerful persuasive techniques is the principle of social proof, whereby decision makers take comfort in emulating others, particularly when dealing with uncertainty, risk, or imperfect knowledge.

Accessible

When you're making a decision in an area you don't know much about, it can be reassuring to "follow the herd." We all feel better when we know other people made the same decision we did.

Verbose

Our consultants are both expert and experienced, offering you the ideal balance of managerial competence, strategic insight, and problem-solving ability.

Concise

We can help you run your business, make plans, and fix problems.

Humorous

If you think cloud computing is something to do with the weather forecast, better grab yourself a knowledge umbrella before the storm breaks.

Serious

Although the popularity of cloud computing has grown dramatically, many businesses are still unclear on what the concept actually means, or how it can benefit them.

› As you consider your own tone, it can be very useful to look at what other people have done – not necessarily in your own industry. For a simple template that will help you examine competitors' tones of voice, see the competitor analysis worksheet on page 55.

12 Elements of Tone

So how does tone of voice translate into hands-on writing style? Here are a few things to think about.

1. Word length

As children, we learn shorter words first, longer ones later. So if you want to be clearly understood by readers of all reading levels, use shorter words.

In terms of tone, short words are simple and direct, while longer ones suggest sophistication and nuance. Shorter words tend to be punchier and harder, while longer words can give a softer, more relaxed effect.

2. Sentence length

Shorter sentences give a concise style, while longer ones are more sedate. A good guide is that you should be able to read the whole sentence out loud in a single breath.

3. Tempo

Using shorter average sentence length is good, but the key word is average. To keep readers interested, vary the length of sentences and paragraphs to give an organic, varied rhythm with its own ebbs and flows.

4. Pronouns

Pronouns are words that stand in place of the names of people or things. Your choice of pronouns can have a big effect on your tone.

For example, when writing about your company, you can use the first person (“we”) or the third person (“Acme Corp”). The first person is more immediate, positioning yourself as a group of people, while the third person is much more detached and abstract, with less clarity as to who is speaking.

When writing for an audience, you can use the second person (“you”) or the third (“customers,” “suppliers”). The second person is direct and engaging, while the third is more distanced. We’ve written this eBook in the first and second person, which makes it very clear we’re addressing you directly.

Sentence length is linked to clarity. Researchers have found that when average sentence length is lower than eight words, readers understand everything you write. At 14 words, they still understand over 90 percent. But when sentences are as long as 43 words, comprehension is lower than 10 percent.³

Andrew Bredenkamp, Founder and CEO, Acrolinx

³ Sara Vincent, [Sentence length: why 25 words is our limit](#), Inside GOV.UK Blog, August 4, 2014.

BAD JARGON



hides the truth and
bamboozles people

GOOD JARGON



signals that you're
part of a community

5. Conciseness

Conciseness is the ratio of ideas to words. The fewer words you use to convey an idea, the more concise you are.

On a practical level, more concise is better. Getting to the point saves time and therefore money. But if you want to adopt a more flowing, rambling, or descriptive tone, you'll need some "extra" words to achieve the laid-back feel you're going for.

6. Jargon

Jargon is specialized language used in a particular professional domain such as law, finance, and engineering, among others.

"There's good and bad jargon, like good and bad cholesterol," says Doug Kessler. "Bad jargon is there to hide the truth and bamboozle people. I think it's going away, because if people don't understand you, they don't blame themselves — they blame you! Good jargon signals that you're part of a community, and saves time too."

7. Buzzwords

Buzzwords are jargon terms that have the attraction of novelty. Some fields, particularly in the tech industry, generate a lot of buzzwords because they need to name innovations (e.g., "millennials," "big data," "Internet of things," etc.).

The same caution applies to buzzwords as to jargon: only use them if you know the audience will understand. Also, remember that today's hot buzzword is tomorrow's embarrassing anachronism. Using buzzwords plants a time bomb under your content, guaranteeing it will sound dated in the future.

You may be tempted to use buzzwords to impress clients, but again, it's a risky strategy. "We have clients in Silicon Valley, and if you take that approach there, someone else will just come along and explain it more simply or clearly, and they'll get your customers," says Neil Taylor. "Because all the research shows that clear communicators are more trusted."

8. Clichés

Clichés are words and phrases that have become worn out through overuse. In B2B, words such as "solution," "proactive," and "leverage" were once new and fresh, but have now become clichéd.

Using clichés will probably make your tone sound stale and dull. There may be times when you need to meet readers where they are by using a cliché you know they will respond to, but you could pay a high price if you wind up sounding like everyone else.

9. Contractions

Contractions are formed of two words combined into one, such as "you're," "don't," or "it's." Most people use contractions all the time when they talk, except in the most formal situations. So using them in writing makes your tone informal, relaxed, and accessible, and gives readers a strong sense of being in a conversation.

10. Colloquialisms

Colloquial language is the language of everyday casual speech – the way we talk when nobody’s watching. It’s a flexible term, because the definition of “casual” varies from speaker to speaker, and from culture to culture. Colloquial language is likely to use contractions (see above) and may also include slang, or even profanity.

Mailchimp is an e-mail marketing company that uses colloquial language a lot. Have a look at this blog post – it includes phrases like “grabbing coffee,” “go look them up,” “bare bones,” “bunch of big buttons,” and “big a-ha moments.”

As this example shows, colloquial doesn’t necessarily mean simple. Writing colloquially doesn’t mean you can’t cover technical features or concepts. It just means you adopt the tone of an expert chatting to a non-expert.

11. Obscure words

Using obscure or unusual words has a similar effect as using jargon – you’re gambling on whether or not the audience will understand what you’re saying.

However, you might want to drop one in from time to time to suggest refinement or a certain type of heritage. If so, try to make it clear from context what the obscure word means. For example, UK cake brand Mr Kipling uses the slogan “Exceedingly good cakes.” Since it’s obvious that “exceedingly” means “very,” anyone can understand the slogan.

12. Mistakes and rule-breaking

Technical problems that can creep into your writing include easily confused words (e.g., “peek one’s interest” instead of “pique one’s interest”), misspellings, and grammar errors.

Most people would agree that using the wrong word, or spelling the right word incorrectly, is undesirable in business writing. Unless it’s part of a deliberate creative strategy (“Beanz Meanz Heinz”), a mistake can only harm your chances of communicating well.

On grammar, the picture is less black and white. The prescriptive view is that we should respect and obey the rules of grammar whether we agree with them or not. The descriptive view is that the right way to use language is the way people actually use it in speech and writing, not as reflected in rules created by academics.

Some grammar rules can be bent or broken. For example, starting a sentence with “and” or “but,” or ending one with a preposition like “on,” may not be strictly correct, but most people do it when they talk. So you might want to do the same if your goal is to achieve a casual or colloquial tone.

Mixing It Up

One of the pitfalls in defining tone of voice is being too rigid. Just like a person, your brand needs to take a different tone in different situations. Even though you might use different language with your family than you would with your boss, you'd still be the same person in both cases.

In the same way, your corporate tone might have to adapt to different situations, but keep the same basic character. For example, an e-mail offering a customer a special discount has to sound different from one responding to a complaint.

“I like to talk in terms of making a perfume from bass notes and accents,” says Doug Kessler. “You need two or three big, strong base notes that don’t change, and context-dependent accents on top.”

Wordtree uses the concept of Volume Control™ to cover variations in tone.⁴ Low volume is for situations where your brand has to be sober and discreet, like writing a condolence letter or chasing a payment, while high volume is for advertisements and celebrations.

To use Volume Control, you need to decide “how high is high?” and “how low is low?” In B2B, most brands don’t want their highest volume as high as, say, Disney or McDonald’s — but they might want it higher than their competitors.

Having done that, consider how your writing will change at different volume levels. For example, low-volume writing might have slightly longer sentences and fewer contractions, while high-volume text will use poetic flourishes like sibilance and consonance, or informal techniques like sentence fragments.

⁴ *Brand Language: Tone of Voice the Wordtree Way*, p. 163.

Realistic or Aspirational?

Your tone of voice has to be real – something that everyone can believe in. That’s why it’s so important to begin with brand values. If you don’t, you risk creating a tone that’s out of step with your company culture and the way you actually work, and people will feel uneasy or embarrassed about using it.

However, changing your tone of voice can also be a catalyst for change. It all depends on whether your new tone shines a light on the right way forward, or leads you astray.

› For an example of a firm using tone of voice to push its business in new directions, see “Sprint Stands Out with its Tone” on **page 40**.

“Talk like you would on your first date,” advises Chris West. “Aim for a mix of charisma, aspiration, friendliness, and warmth. Don’t confide that your life is in a mess, or you haven’t showered today – that would be too much reality.”

If your tone does reflect aspirations, remember they should still be framed in a practical way. For example, if firms in your industry tend to over-promise and under-deliver, you might aspire to be “believable.” But how would you write so that people believe? By using concrete, factual language backed up with third-party authorities, like a journalist for a reputable trade magazine.

So you’ve got in touch with your brand values, and you’ve created a new tone of voice. Now it’s time to take your tone of voice out into the real world, as you roll it out throughout your organization and make sure everyone uses it.



Sprint Stands Out with its Tone

Sprint, the US mobile carrier, overhauled its tone of voice with help from Doug Kessler's company, Velocity Partners. "They used to talk like all telcos talk," explains Kessler. "It wasn't bad, but it was really samey [undifferentiated], and they were never going to jump out of the pack like that. Following a comprehensive rebrand and tone of voice refresh, they started talking a lot more like people. If you compare them with, say, Verizon, you can see a clear difference in messaging and tone."

Sprint's business home page features a powerful, challenging, and very human headline: "What do you come to work for?" Further down the page is the eye-opening line "Empower your weirdos" – which a regular telco would probably have expressed as "Empower your workforce."

Sprint's language establishes clear points of difference from its competitors, creating an expectation of humor and humanity right from the start.

CHAPTER 4

Rolling Out Your Tone of Voice

So, you've identified your brand values and defined a new tone of voice. The final stage is to make sure your new tone is understood and used throughout your organization.



Developing a Tone of Voice Guide

One of the simplest and most effective ways to share your tone of voice is by creating a guide for people to refer to when they write. You'll probably want to include these sections:

1. Positioning statement

Why you've decided to start managing your tone of voice, and how this guide can help people in their writing.

2. Brand values

A summary of the brand values you've identified.

3. Tone of voice

How your brand values translate into writing style.

4. Key phrases

Forms of words that express something crucial about your brand or your values. These could be public content like ad slogans or corporate taglines, or just frequent sayings within your business.

5. Examples

Sample texts showing how your tone of voice works in different situations. You may also want to include illustrations of what not to do (for example, how not to respond to complaints).

6. Hints and tips

Mnemonic devices to help people remember the tone of voice guidelines, or suggestions to help them integrate your tone of voice into their day-to-day writing.

Your guide doesn't need to be a 100-page monster. It should have enough detail to be useful, but not so much that it becomes daunting. Around 10-15 pages should be plenty, depending on how many examples you need to cover.

Your tone guide doesn't have to be all text. Diagrams, illustrations, and infographics might be simpler and clearer. "Some firms are happy to work with three principles," says Neil Taylor. "Others find that a fictional character or a celebrity works better. We've even drawn a picture of a tone of voice."

However, whatever you do write should be in your tone of voice — something some brands forget. "Demo your tone of voice in the guide itself," says Doug Kessler. "Get your best writers on it, and fill it with real-life examples."

Some visual brand guidelines are about rules and control, but a good tone of voice guide helps people to stretch themselves. "Writers tend to fall back into blandness, so your guide should encourage them to go further into your tone," says Kessler.

Publishing your tone guide online makes it easy to access — and easy to update too. It also shows people outside the company that you take communications seriously. You can create a PDF for people to view online or download, or create a microsite.

A good example of an online style guide is Mailchimp's. Their dedicated "[Voice & Tone](#)" website shows exactly how to write in a tone while also writing about it.

10 Tips for Rolling Out Your Tone of Voice Guide

Creating a guide is great, but if it doesn't get used it won't add any value. Here are 10 tips for making sure your tone of voice guide becomes part of day-to-day writing throughout your organization.

1. Make it memorable

For day-to-day writing, you need your guidelines in a form so you can check them quickly and easily. A carefully crafted one-pager, or a well-designed poster, might be more useful than a book – or, at least, a useful complement to a book.

Mnemonics and acronyms are simple, snappy ways to remember tone guidelines. “At Distilled, we use the acronym HEAPS – Humorous, Energetic, Affable, Personable, and Simple,” says Harriet Cummings, copy editor at Distilled. “When people are tempted to use long marketing buzzwords, we say, ‘No, we’ve all agreed to be simple.’ The fact it’s written down makes it more real.”

2. Offer some training

The most obvious way to teach people about your new tone of voice is to train them. You can commission a third-party trainer, or do it yourself. If you have a very large organization, a “train the trainer” approach might work best, whereby experienced writers or trainers work with managers, who then go back and share what they’ve learned with their teams.

Whatever approach you choose, make sure the training involves a lot of hands-on work, not just sitting and listening. Your tone of voice only has value if people actually use it.

Over time, it's easy for people to slip back into old habits. Also, remember that more recent recruits may not be aware of the work you did on tone of voice. For both of these reasons refresher sessions are often a good idea.

Another option to consider is building libraries of examples. Marketing teams don't think twice about having a library of images or digital assets, so extend that idea to include written or spoken materials. They should be easy for everyone in the organization to access as a reference tool.

3. Schedule regular health checks

To see how your tone of voice is getting along, hold a meeting where you review your writing over the last year or so. You can also look at examples from other brands — competitors, or companies in other sectors — that might fire you up to stretch your tone a little bit. You could even build tone of voice into people's formal appraisals, so their performance rating depends on them using your tone in their work.

4. Kill some sacred cows

Every business has its linguistic totems — key documents that everyone sees, and that set the tone for the whole organization. They might be everyday things like login screens, or highly visible publications like annual reports. By finding and changing them, you show everyone that your tone of voice has changed. “They might be sitting in marketing, but they might easily be in finance, or HR,” says Neil Taylor. “But if you change them, hundreds or thousands of people see them.”

5. Appoint tone guardians

To make sure tone of voice is being actively managed, consider appointing a “tone guardian” whose job it is to monitor tone of voice day to day. If it’s everybody’s job to monitor tone of voice, it ends up being nobody’s.

Bear in mind that your change leader or tone guardian doesn’t have to be a writer – in fact, it might be better if they’re not. The people who understand the positive effect, and relish the challenge of making it happen, can be more effective, because they focus on the business benefits without getting bogged down in whether they like a piece of writing or not.

6. Build processes

If you create a lot of text in your company, you’ll need a robust process for commissioning, editing, approving, and publishing your content, or it will be almost impossible to impose your tone of voice. Whoever checks or approves text needs to make sure it’s written in the right tone. If the approval process involves a lot of people commenting or amending, the text may need rechecking to make sure it’s still on tone.

It takes persuasion and persistence to effectively roll out a new tone. You need to identify gatekeepers who can speed new ideas through via internal approvals processes. Then you need to get them on board. It’s not just about having ambassadors and champions within the organization, it’s about identifying and dealing with potential points of resistance early on.

7. Win over the doubters

As with any other type of organizational change, there will be some people who resist your new tone of voice. For example, people might find a way to avoid training sessions, or attend without really getting involved.

Language is an expression of our own personality, so people can get upset when you ask them to use the brand's voice instead of their own. You need to be diplomatic and tactful.

One perspective on brand writing is that it's like being an actor. You temporarily take on the shared personality of the brand, and speak with its voice instead of your own. If actors don't say their lines right, the play will be a disaster. When people see that they're just playing a role, not surrendering their individuality, it helps them get into the swing.

8. Find and fix your pain points

One effective tactic for building commitment is to find your company's pain points, wherever they are, and focus your efforts there. Maybe your website badly needs updating, or you've been using the same lackluster client presentation for too long.

It's good to point to examples where tweaking tone of voice has had a measurable impact. One firm had an e-mail signup page that promised 'no marketing gimmicks.' When they took out the word 'gimmicks,' conversions jumped by 25 percent.

Harriet Cummings · Copy editor, Distilled

”

“Find what needs fixing most, fix that well, and explain what you did,” advises Chris West. “Wally Olins, the visual identity guru, always said that he went in and fixed what was most urgent first. Once people saw it was good, he moved on to the rest.”

9. Grab some quick wins

Another technique is to identify the documents that have the most measurable effect, and change them. This helps you achieve “quick wins” and make a strong case for the rest of your rollout.

10. Share success stories

If someone has written something outstanding in your tone of voice, share it throughout the company. Maybe they found a neat way to express a complicated idea, or they dealt with a sensitive situation, or they developed a great advertising slogan. Whatever it is, it can show people that your new tone of voice is delivering real results, while also giving them another concrete example of how it can work.

When developing examples, remember that there could already be wisdom in your organization, waiting to be unlocked. For example, customer-service teams may already be using very effective language that’s never been written down. If you capture and codify it, others can use it too.

› For a simple template that will help you roll out your tone of voice, see the rollout strategy worksheet on **pages 59 and 60**.

Have Tone, Will Travel

If your company is multinational, you'll need to think through the implications of rolling out your tone of voice in different countries.

People working in sales, customer service, or marketing in your overseas branches will already have a good understanding of these issues, so talk to them for some useful insights.

If you feel that the culture of the target country is similar enough to your own, and your tone of voice is relatively straightforward, you may be able to have your content translated literally, and use it as is. However, if your tone uses elements such as colloquialisms, figures of speech, or metaphors, you'll probably want to engage a localization agency to help you translate it into the local culture.

For example, English and other Northern European languages put a strong emphasis on logical structure. In French or Spanish, however, this style can sound dull, because digressions are seen as a sign of intellect rather than disorganization. In Asian languages, because of concerns about losing face, people talk around the subject to present all sides of the issue without explicitly stating their conclusion.⁵

⁵ *The Little Book of Transcreation*, p. 14. Free download from transcreation agency Mother Tongue (www.mothersong.com).

THREE QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER



First, what is effective and acceptable in the cultures where you work?

Second, what are the issues that customers in your specific market segment care about?

And **third**, what are the practical and political implications of imposing a single tone of voice across your entire international setup?

Since tone of voice is flexible, some documents may need more localization than others. High-profile marketing and advertising, which is much more likely to use tactics such as puns or cultural allusions, almost certainly needs localization. But even purely informational content, such as technical documentation, may suffer if translated literally, because motivations and attitudes differ so much across cultures. For example, while US training tends to be interactive and hands-on, French people tend to prefer more information, less participation.⁶

Measuring Success

It's almost impossible to get pure, scientific feedback on the impact of tone of voice, because you never have a control group and it's hard to isolate tone of voice as a factor. However, looking at changes in metrics like open rates, click-through rates, time on page, page views and so on can give you an idea of how things have changed — particularly if you measured them before you changed your tone. Social likes and shares can be another useful index of how well your content is performing.

Although it's difficult to find hard evidence of the effect of tone of voice, one of our favorite bloggers, Neil Patel, recently discovered the powerful impact that tone of voice can have on website performance. He learned that by making the introductory paragraphs of his blog post more conversational, 247 percent more people read his post.⁷

However, just because you can't measure it, doesn't mean it's not important. Qualitative feedback can also be very powerful, depending on who it's from. If the CEO of a multinational says they love your sales presentation, that's a fantastic sign — particularly when you bear in mind that for everyone who says it out loud, there are probably nine more who are thinking it.

⁶ *The Little Book of Transcreation*, p. 31.

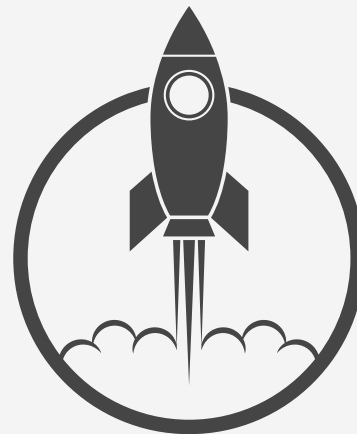
⁷ Neil Patel, [How to get 247% more people to read your content](#), Quicksprout Blog, November 19, 2014.

Internal benefits can also be crucial. “You should see a positive feedback loop where people write better, see the benefit, and feel better about the brand,” says Doug Kessler. “Internally, people start saying ‘this is a company I want to be part of! A great tone might not create a great company culture, but it certainly reflects one.”

Into the Future

You’ve come a long way on your tone of voice journey, from analyzing your brand through to creating your tone and rolling it out. But as we’ve seen, tone of voice isn’t a project, it’s a process — and that process never really ends.

As well as making sure people continue to use your tone, you need to revisit it from time to time to make sure it’s still relevant. Have things moved on in your industry? Have you moved on as a company? Or have new trends in tone of voice emerged? Just as you need to get your tone right at the outset, so you need to make sure it stays right into the future.



End Note

Thanks for reading Watch Your Tone! We hope you found it useful.

We created this eBook because we wanted to share our love of language, and to show B2B companies just how powerful words can be as a marketing tool. Even though more and more firms are getting into tone of voice, writing is still seriously undervalued in comparison with other disciplines, such as graphic design or web development. We'd like to see that change, and we hope this eBook will help.

We've already shared a few ideas for managing your tone of voice, but there's one more we'd like to mention: our own software platform.

Acrolinx rates your content using a variety of indicators, as well as offering suggestions for improvement. You can load your own standards and preferences in areas such as style and tone, SEO, terminology, spelling, and grammar, and Acrolinx will provide all your writers with consistent, actionable feedback and suggestions for improvements.

Acrolinx works with a wide range of authoring tools and content platforms, including Microsoft Office, so everyone can use it without learning new software. For managers, its built-in analytics capabilities let you assess your results, calculate cost savings, and identify problem areas.

To find out more and request a demo, please visit www.acrolinx.com.

APPENDIX

Tone of Voice Worksheets

This appendix contains a set of worksheets you can use to carry out some of the activities and analyses recommended in this eBook.

BEFORE YOU START

Please bear in mind that everybody's situation is different. These worksheets are intended as guides to help you, not rules to constrain you. If you feel your industry, company, brand, or culture doesn't fit the templates given here, go ahead and adapt them as you see fit. The important thing is to consider the questions here in a way that works for you, rather than complete the worksheets for their own sake.

Industry Analysis

Use this worksheet to analyze the prevailing brand values in your industry, as discussed under “Brand Values, Outside In” in Chapter 2 (page 20).

Industry Analysis			
Where you work What industry are you in?	Value 1	Value 2	Value 3
Universal values What three values or qualities must all companies in your industry have?	Value 1	Value 2	Value 3
Other values What other values are projected by some companies in your industry, but not all?	Value 1	Value 2	Value 3
Unused values What values are not being used by any companies, or by very few?	Value 1	Value 2	Value 3

Competitor Analysis

Use this worksheet to analyze the way competitor brands use language, as discussed under “It All Begins with the Brand” in Chapter 2 (page 19) and “Different Types of Tone” in Chapter 3 (page 29).

Competitor Analysis			
	Company 1	Company 2	Company 3
Reference companies Choose three competing or peer companies to analyze			
Reference materials (optional) What did you base your analysis on? (website, printed marketing, ads, etc.)			
Brand positioning How does each company position itself in the market? How does it differentiate itself from peers?			
Use of language How does each company use language to communicate its positioning?			
Type of tone How would you describe this company's tone of voice?			

Identifying Brand Values

Use this questionnaire to work through the process of identifying your own brand values, as discussed under “Brand Values, Inside Out” in Chapter 2 (page 21).

Identifying Brand Values			
Who you are Describe your company in one simple sentence.			
What you do Explain what you do in one simple sentence.			
USPs and differentiators What (if anything) makes you special or unique? List up to three points.			
Messages What are the most important things you want potential customers to know about you? List up to three messages.			
Presentation How do you present yourself to customers? List up to three values or attributes that you aim to project, and say how/why in each case.			

Identifying Brand Values

Perceptions

What do customers think of your company?
List three representative quotes or sentiments from actual customers.

Personality

If your brand were a person, what would they be like? List three personality traits and explain each one.

Values

Based on your answers above, choose the values that sum up your company's brand.
List three values and explain exactly what you mean by each one.

Developing Your Tone of Voice

Use this worksheet to build a bridge from brand values to tone, as described in Chapter 3.

Developing Your Tone of Voice			
Brand values Enter your three brand values.			
How do your values sound? Enter a brief description of how each value sounds when it “speaks.”			
Type(s) of tone Using the content on pages 22-24, enter the type(s) of tone that are appropriate for your values. If you enter more than one type, make sure they’re compatible with each other.			
Elements of tone Using the content on pages 25-30, explain how you’ll deal with whichever elements are relevant to your tone.			

Rollout Strategy

Use this worksheet to record the strategy you'll use to roll out your tone of voice throughout your organization.

Rollout Strategy	
<p>Where will your tone of voice be recorded or published? (Tone of voice guide, website, etc.)</p>	
<p>How will your tone of voice be shared or publicized? (Training, internal communications, etc.)</p>	
<p>What techniques will you use to maintain your tone of voice? (Self-monitoring, automated software, supervisor approval, etc.)</p>	
<p>Who is in overall charge of maintaining and monitoring your tone of voice? (Individual or manager of the relevant team)</p>	

Rollout Strategy

<p>Which individuals or teams are involved in creating content, and who will monitor tone of voice for each? (People can monitor their own tone, as long as they know it is their responsibility.)</p>	Content creator	Content creator	Content creator
	Tone monitor	Tone monitor	Tone monitor
	Content creator	Content creator	Content creator
	Tone monitor	Tone monitor	Tone monitor
<p>Briefly outline the process you'll use for creating and approving content. (Consider stages such as content strategy, content planning, writing, submission, feedback, amends, final approval, publication, revision, etc.)</p>			
<p>How will tone of voice be integrated into your content creation process?</p>			
<p>Which pieces of content will you work on first?</p>			
<p>Which content can be left until later?</p>			

About Acrolinx

Acrolinx technology helps the world's best companies speak with one voice — with content that's more findable, readable, and engaging. Our content optimization capabilities help companies like Adobe, Dell, Cisco, IBM, Philips, and Siemens align, enhance, and enrich their marketing and technical information. Built on a powerful linguistic analytics engine, our technology helps our customers stand apart from their competitors by delivering content with greater warmth, readability, and conciseness.

Please visit our website at www.acrolinx.com for product information, e-mail us at contact@acrolinx.com, or reach us at:

NORTH AMERICA

2025 Gateway #480
San Jose, CA 95110
USA

+1 866 749-3700

EUROPE

Friedrichstraße 100
10117 Berlin
Germany

+49 30 288 848 330

ASIA

Ebisu Garden Place Tower, 18th Floor
Ebisu 4-20-3, Shibuya-ku,
Tokyo 150-6018, Japan

+81 3 5789-5973

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www.acrolinx.com