



# Neighbourhood Watch 'How we Communicate' Guidelines

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These guidelines (also referred to as our tone of voice and style guide) captures Neighbourhood Watch's personality, attitude and opinions, and help us to connect with people. It sets our intentions: this is what we're like. And this is how we want the world to see and feel us.

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

To be effective, our guidelines should be used across all content – websites, emails, social media, etc.

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

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



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## Why do we have a tone of voice?

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

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

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

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

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

## Our tone of voice is:

- **Friendly:** We are warm, conversational, and down to earth.  
*How this shows up in our copy:* We write how we speak, using everyday words. We use contractions. We make the narrative more personal by using 'we' and 'you'.
- **Confident:** We are strong, bold, and show our expertise.  
*How this shows up in our copy:* We make statements and avoid hedging language like 'we think' or 'possibly'. We get to the point quickly, without fluff.
- **Energetic:** We use active words and positive language. We speak with passion and interest.  
*How this shows up in our copy:* We pay attention to rhythm. We use shorter sentences. But then we sometimes sprinkle in longer, sometimes overly long sentences. It keeps our writing pacy.
- **Authentic:** We are honest and direct. We are clear and dodge jargon.  
*How this shows up in our copy:* We talk directly to our audience and consider what the value is for them. We use simple language and don't assume knowledge.



## Friendly

We speak like a friend would, using simple, everyday words. That doesn't mean banning long words, but instead using familiar words over complex ones. Here are some examples of simpler alternatives:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Example of a 404 page: Write like this:

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

Not like this (current 404 page):

Page not found. The requested page could not be found.

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



## Confident

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

Write like this: We will fix this.

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

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

For example:

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

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

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

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

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

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



## Energetic

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

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

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

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

Active: An unknown woman took the dog

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## Authentic

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

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

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

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

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

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

Write like this: We'll see you tomorrow.

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



## Cheat sheet: General copywriting principles

1. **Front-load your content.** Pop the most important parts at the beginning and then add extra details later on. This is really important when writing for online. More people are using smartphones and tablets, so make key information visible on the first screen. If the content is particularly long, consider also summarising the key details in bullet points at the top.
2. **Break up the text.** Use subheadings and bullet points to break up the information. Readers should be able to get the gist of the copy just by scanning the headlines, subheadings, and lists.
3. **Don't include every single detail.** Include only what the reader needs to know.
4. **Look for long sentences that you can split up.** If you're covering multiple points in one sentence, break them up into two or three sentences.
5. **Think: 'What's in it for me?'** People don't care about a particular product or service; they care about why it's good for them. So don't focus on why someone should support Neighbourhood Watch. Flip that around: What can they achieve with our support? Why should they care about this? What information is most beneficial to them?
6. **Change the perspective.** Adjust the wording to focus more on your readers.

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

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

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

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

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

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



## Why do we have a style guide?

Firstly, let's explain what a style guide is.

A style guide or house style is a set of agreed editorial styles and formatting, including how to express times, dates, numbers, and other content where there is a choice of how it can be written.

If we want our communications to be trusted and authoritative, the way in which we write things needs to be consistent. Whether we write co-ordinator or coordinator may seem trivial, but consistency helps people understand and trust us. Just as a consumer expects consistency in a company's branding, a reader expects consistency in a person or organisation's writing. So please regularly refer to this guide when writing – it really does matter. (By the way, it's Coordinator.)

A style guide is always a work in progress. It'll be updated when we come across new issues or stylistic inconsistencies, and we can remove words that become obsolete. So use this as a starting point, and if something's missing, discuss it with the relevant people and update this accordingly.

Neighbourhood Watch uses a friendly, confident, energetic, and authoritative tone – please see our Tone of voice guidelines.

## Abbreviations, acronyms, and contractions

- Where possible, try not to use abbreviations as they can be clunky
- When we do use abbreviations and contractions, we **don't** use full stops: Mr Smith, Dr Jones, mph, BBC, etc.
- The exception to the above is when using e.g., i.e., and etc. we **do** use full stops
- In internal documents, Neighbourhood Watch can be abbreviated to NW and Neighbourhood Watch Network can be abbreviated to NWN. In external documents, our full name should be used
- When you use an acronym that the reader might not immediately know, write it out in full the first time and follow with the acronym in brackets: Neighbourhood Watch's Central Support Team (CST), Multi Scheme Administrator (MSA). You can use the acronym from then onwards

## Capitalisation

- Use sentence case (the first word takes an initial capital, others lower case) for headings and titles
- Use all caps for the headings of press releases: NEW 'SLING YOUR HOOK' FRAUD AWARENESS CAMPAIGN LAUNCHED
- Capitalise Neighbourhood Watch, Neighbourhood Watch Network, and the names of Neighbourhood Watch's departments and teams: Central Support Team
- Use all caps for campaign names: SLING YOUR HOOK
- Proper nouns have initial capital letters (London, Anne, Barclays Bank) unless it's an organisation or product trademark that uses lower case instead: iPad, eBay, easyJet
- Use capitals at the start of each word for job titles: Head of Partnerships and Projects, Head of Fundraising

## Emphasis

- Use bold to emphasise words (not italics or underlining). Please use this type of emphasis sparingly to avoid losing effect

## Inclusive language

Always carefully consider the words you use around disability, age, religion, ethnicity, culture, and gender, etc. Generally, it's best to use language that reflects peoples' own choices in how they talk about themselves. This is not a definitive or exhaustive guide, as language and appropriate terminology continuously evolve.

## Disability and mental health

Disabled people, not the disabled or people with disabilities

For more info visit: [gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-communication/inclusive-language-words-to-use-and-avoid-when-writing-about-disability](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-communication/inclusive-language-words-to-use-and-avoid-when-writing-about-disability)

Various sources overwhelming say mental health conditions for specific diagnosed conditions but **sometimes** say mental health problems in a wider sense, encompassing general mental health difficulties as well as named conditions.

For specific disabilities or mental health queries, look on the appropriate organisations' websites (i.e. Mind, Samaritans, and Time to Change).

## Race and ethnicity

Although BAME has recently been the preferred dominant term to which to refer to Black, Asian, and minority ethnic groups, it's now generally recommended that BAME is avoided (recent research from the Sir Lenny Henry Centre for Media Diversity found that BAME is vague and used as a 'catch all' term that exacerbates a fear that people's identities are being homogenised). Instead, use more specific terms where possible. The following is guidance offered by GOV.uk:

- *In research, 'people from a black Caribbean background', 'the black ethnic group', and 'black people' were all acceptable phrases. 'Blacks' was not*
- *Similarly, 'people from a white British background', 'the white ethnic group', and 'white people' are all acceptable*
- *However, we don't say 'mixed people' or 'mixed race people'. We usually say 'people with a mixed ethnic background' or 'people from the mixed ethnic group'*
- *The words black and Asian should not be used as nouns, but as adjectives: black people rather than 'blacks', an Asian woman rather than 'an Asian', etc.*
- *The government's preferred style is not to capitalise ethnic groups, (such as 'black' or 'white') unless that group's name includes a geographic place (for example, 'Asian', 'Indian' or 'black Caribbean')*

For more info visit: [ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/style-guide/writing-about-ethnicity](https://ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/style-guide/writing-about-ethnicity)

## Sex, gender, and gender identity

Be aware of gendered language and gender labels that reinforce stereotypes. Use gender-neutral terms and gender-neutral pronouns (them, their, they) and expressions.

For example:

- firefighter, not fireman
- staffing, not manpower
- everyone, not ladies and gentlemen

Use the term/s and pronoun/s preferred by people themselves when they have made their preferences clear.

For more info visit: [stonewall.org.uk/help-advice/faqs-and-glossary/list-lgbtq-terms](https://stonewall.org.uk/help-advice/faqs-and-glossary/list-lgbtq-terms)

## Punctuation

### Ampersands

- Ampersands should be avoided within copy and documents, except for job titles, on social media, and in headings if required due to limited space

### Commas

- Use Oxford commas (a comma before 'and' or 'or' in a list of three or more items) to avoid ambiguity and for consistency: We hold meetings every Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday

### Hyphens (-)

- Hyphenate two words (to make a compound adjective) and qualify the next: mid-summer ceremony
- We also hyphenate some other words as standard to avoid confusion in a sentence: multi-disciplinary
- See word list for the spelling of some words that should not be hyphenated

### En dashes (–)

- Use a pair of en dashes with space either side for parenthetical statements. En dashes express a more pronounced break in the sentence than commas, and also

draw more attention to the enclosed phrase than brackets: While I was shopping – wandering aimlessly up and down the aisles, actually – I ran into our old neighbour

- Use a single en dash to introduce a phrase at the end of a sentence instead of a colon: All age groups are vulnerable to consumer fraud – and it's not just your finances at risk of being stolen

## Date and time

- Use the 12-hour clock with am and pm: 2am or 4pm (note no spaces or full stops)
- Dates should be expressed as date, month, and year: 12<sup>th</sup> November 2021 (no commas)
- Financial years should be 2021/22 (not 2021-22, or 2021/2022, or 2021-2022)
- When mentioning decades, use the seventies or the 1970s; not the '70s
- Seasons should be lower case: spring, summer, autumn, winter

## Lists

- Use bullet points for general lists and numbered lists for items in a particular sequence or hierarchy
- Bullet points take a lower-case letter if following an introductory sentence and an upper-case letter if forming a stand-alone sentence. No punctuation should be used at the end of each bullet point or of the full list (no full stop or semicolon). A bulleted list should be introduced with a colon if it's introducing an example or adding information

Example:

- first item
- second item
- third item

## Numbers and units

### Numbers

- Use words from one to nine and numerals from 10 upwards, unless at the start of a sentence
- For a range of numbers, try to keep a consistent format: children aged 1–12, children aged one to twelve
- Use a comma in numbers with more than three digits: 1,000; 47,500
- Use words for million, billion or trillion: two million people, 11 billion stars

- In tables or headings where space is tight, use m (million), bn (billion) and tn (trillion)
- Consider rounding numbers when appropriate: distributed over £5,000 (not distributed £5,398), except in limited financial contexts/documents

### Decimals and fractions

- Spell out fractions: three quarters, except in limited financial contexts/documents
- Do not use decimal places unless needed

### Money

- For currency, use 5p, £1 (not £1.00), £10, £500,000, £1 million

### Percentages

- Use % to express percentages

### Units

- There should be no space between a value and unit of measurement: 2mm, 300cm, 4kg, 7ml

### URLs

- Omit <http://www> from URLs: [ourwatch.org.uk](http://ourwatch.org.uk), not <http://www.ourwatch.org.uk>, or [www.ourwatch.org.uk](http://www.ourwatch.org.uk)
- Use hyperlinks in online content wherever a webpage is referenced

### Titles of published materials

- Use italics for titles of written works, such as books, magazines, films, song titles, and newspapers
- Neighbourhood Watch campaign titles should be written in all capital letters
- Neighbourhood Watch webinar titles should be written in bold

### Quotations

- Use double quotation marks for quotes: John Hayward-Cripps, CEO of Neighbourhood Watch Network said *“Recognising what antisocial behaviour is and isn't can be subjective ...”*
- Use single quotation marks to highlight a word or phrase
- Use italics to display quotes embedded in a document

## Word list: Spelling and formatting of specific words

Use British spelling – this means ‘ise’ instead of ‘ize’ (organise rather than organize).

If a particular spelling is not specified here, look it up on [lexico.com](https://www.lexico.com), which is a trusted, free online dictionary produced by Dictionary.com and Oxford University Press.

### A

- antisocial behaviour (no hyphen)
- Associations as grouped by Force Area or London Borough
- Association Lead (capitalised)

### C

- coordinate (no hyphen)
- Coordinator (capitalised, no hyphen)
- cybercrime (no hyphen)
- cybersecurity (no hyphen)

### E

- email (not e-mail)

### M

- multi-disciplinary
- Multi-Scheme Administrator

### N

- Neighbourhood Watch
- Neighbourhood Watch Network

### O

- online (not on-line)

### W

- website (no hyphen)
- wellbeing (no hyphen)

## Misc

Use one space between sentences.