



Tone of Voice Guidelines March 2015

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1. Developing Our Tone of Voice

1.1 Why do we need a tone of voice?

Our tone of voice is the way in which we write and speak, what we say and how we say it. We use it for everyone we need to communicate with:

- visitors
- supporters
- funders
- the Press
- partner organisations
- each other.

Whoever we're speaking to, we should always sound like us, without always sounding the same. A single tone of voice doesn't mean bland uniformity. The more consistent our tone of voice is, the more likely it is that our audiences will understand what makes us different and special. A consistent tone of voice also has financial and functional benefits, as it reduces the need for interventions and editing.

1.2 Where do we use our tone of voice?

We use it everywhere and every time we communicate, for:

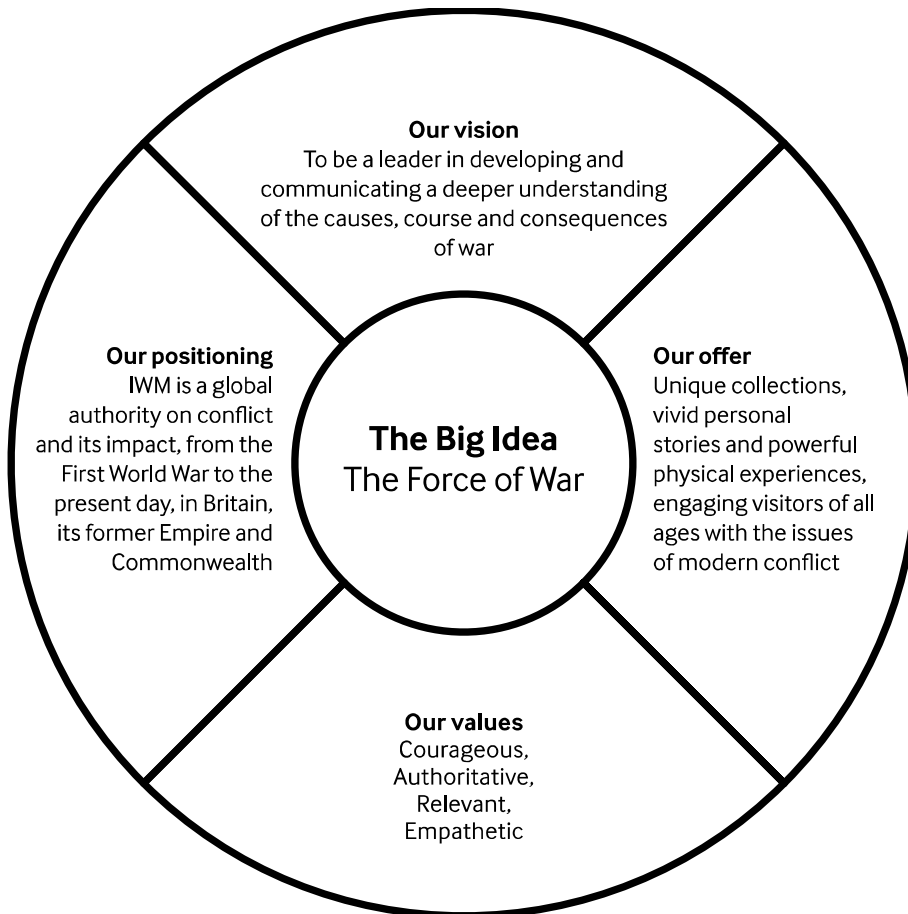
- campaigns and events
- media relations
- leaflets, catalogues, posters, articles
- online and multimedia – including websites and blog
- gallery information – panels and labels
- internal communications, HR communications, job adverts and annual reports
- customer relations – tours and live interpretation
- signs – safety, directional, galleries
- email, email signatures, and voicemail messages.

2. What is Our Tone of Voice?

2.1 Our tone of voice is an expression of our brand

This is summarised in the Brand Platform. The big idea at the heart of our brand is:

The Force of War (the Force of War in running text)



2.2 Our tone of voice supports our big idea

The Force of War should always be our starting point for everything we write.

Our big idea can be interpreted in many different ways, both negative and positive, and inspire many different ideas. For example, war forces us to:

- make difficult decisions
- destroy and create
- divide and unite
- be at our worst and our best
- forget and remember.

We wouldn't necessarily use these exact words in our communications – we'd use them as a springboard for conveying our point of view.

So, for instance, we wouldn't say:

The design of the Libeskind building explores the force of war to shock and destroy.

Instead, we'd use our brand's big idea as a springboard:

Libeskind's design of shards from a broken globe reflects the way war has devastated our world.

2.3 Our tone of voice supports our vision

Our vision is to be a leader in developing and communicating a deeper understanding of the causes, course and consequences of war

Everything we do is focused on the experiences of people in war and, to communicate this, we use vivid personal stories and evoke powerful physical experiences.

For example, this exhibition caption shows how an object can be used to reveal a powerful personal story:

Secret radio made by Captain Ernest Shackleton at Oflag IXA/Z, Rotenburg.

Hidden under the floorboards and operated by knitting needles pushed through the cracks, the core of this radio was made from a German film projector. After his liberation, Shackleton requested permission to return to Rotenburg to retrieve the radio so that he could give it to the Imperial War Museum.

2.4 Our tone of voice supports our values

Thinking about our values will help us to communicate in a distinctive, natural and confident tone.

We are:

Courageous

We're always respectful of people's courage in the face of war, but we're not afraid to be provocative or to challenge established perceptions and ideas.

Authoritative

We're proud of our deep knowledge of our subject and the way we talk is authoritative without being patronising or aloof.

Relevant

It's important to address different audiences in a language that's relevant to them, and to make connections between the subject matter and contemporary life.

Empathetic

War is a highly emotive subject and we need to be sensitive to the feelings of all our audiences, while recognising that they may often experience conflicting emotions.

3. Golden Rules

3.1 Audience: Think yourself into the reader's mind

The most effective way to ensure that we're being relevant is to ask ourselves 'who is this Communication aimed at and is it speaking directly to them?'

To do this, we need to consider how to adapt our tone of voice – in line with our values – for different audiences. Of course, not every piece of communication can be equally and simultaneously Courageous, Authoritative, Relevant and Empathetic. Decide which of the values are best expressed in a particular piece of communication.

For the public (more informal)...

- **Relevant:**

Know who your target audience is and explain what is educational/inspiring/exciting/fun/unique about what you're telling them. If you had one line to tell people why they should visit, explore, enter, buy or book, what would it be? Focus on this and don't mix too many messages in one piece of communication.

Make your message personal and current by speaking directly to your audience and using the active voice.

For example, the marketing copy for the *Terrible Trenches* exhibition was aimed at attracting a family audience:

Test your survival skills in an interactive gallery, which explores the dire details of life in the blood and mud of the Western Front, from both the British and German sides of the barbed wire.

For the Contemporary Conflict programme, the copy was written for an adult audience:

Memory Remains: 9/11 Artifacts at Hangar 17 Francesc Torres

The empty shell of Hangar 17 at JFK Airport became a storehouse of memories when it was filled with the material cleared from the World Trade Center site following the September 11 attacks on New York City. Marking the tenth anniversary of the attacks, Francesc Torres's photographs explore inside the hangar and capture the emotional power of what remained.

- **Empathetic and Authoritative**

Talk about how our collections reveal and relate to people's personal experiences of war and conflict.

- **Courageous**

Don't shy away from making bold statements; check your facts and say things with confidence but also with sensitivity.

For funders, partners and the museum sector (more formal)..

- **Authoritative**

Actively position IWM as a global authority on conflict by communicating clearly and confidently who we are, what we do and how we do it.

For example, in the Annual Review, we could use a key message from our brand guidelines to introduce IWM:

IWM (Imperial War Museums) is the world's leading authority on conflict and its impact, focusing on Britain, its former Empire and the Commonwealth, from the First World War to the present. We record people's experiences of war and safeguard our unique collections for future generations. We make our collections relevant by creating powerful stories and experiences that enrich people's understanding of the causes, course and consequences of war.

- **Courageous**

Where possible and appropriate, speak about what we are doing that is unique/different/challenging/provocative/cutting edge.

- **Relevant**

Explain the importance of our collections to understanding the course of war and its impact on people's lives. Make sure we use the most up-to-date facts and figures in our communications and speak in plain English.

For staff

Empathetic

- **Be open and approachable;** adopt a friendly style, use straightforward language and avoid jargon.

For example, when sending out job offers, we want to make people feel welcome and excited about joining IWM. We might begin a letter by saying:

We are pleased to offer you the role of *<insert job title here>* at HMS *Belfast*, part of the IWM family. IWM is the world's leading authority on conflict and its impact, and we look forward to you joining the *<insert team name here>* team. The salary for this role is *<insert salary here>* and the offer is subject to all the necessary checks as outlined below.

- **Relevant**

Speak directly and use the active voice.

- **Authoritative and Courageous**

Position us as a global authority on conflict and its impact by speaking confidently about who we are and the value of our expertise and collections.

3.2 Language: Aim to be accessible

Avoid language that's impersonal or too academic:

- speak directly to your audience
- use the active voice instead of the passive voice, for example:

'The Spring Air Show launches the flying season at IWM Duxford' rather than 'The flying season is launched at IWM Duxford with the Spring Air Show'

- be concise and straightforward instead of hiding behind jargon and clichés
- explain any specialist language you use
- avoid current slang or 'youth speak' – it goes out of date quickly, can be patronising and we don't want to look like we're trying too hard.

For specific rules on formatting, punctuation and language, please refer to the House Style Guidelines at the end of this document.

3.3 Structure: Grab your reader's attention from the start

When structuring any communication, think of a pyramid: the most important, or enticing, information first; followed by a broader base of detail:

PYRAMID DIAGRAM

Intro (most important/exciting info)

Basic information (who, what, when, where, why)

Secondary information (any other relevant info to develop it further, supporting quotes)

This way, we can make an immediate and vivid impression from the start.

For example, we could start a piece about *The Ministry of Food* exhibition with:

Dried eggs, mock cream and two ounces of tea a week. Ration-hit Britain had to learn to be inventive and resourceful on the kitchen front – find out how in *The Ministry of Food* exhibition.

In an exhibition caption, we might start with a particularly striking or emotive quote:

'Trying to maintain good relations with a communist is like wooing a crocodile. You do not know whether to tickle it under the chin or to beat it over the head.' Winston Churchill

Then we can begin to introduce the basic information the piece needs to convey, while still intriguing the reader.

So, for the Churchill example:

Churchill loathed communism but he was prepared to work with Stalin to win the war against Hitler.

Churchill was a realist, and knew that winning sometimes meant joining forces with old enemies.

When Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, Churchill promised Stalin his support at once.

If the material you're working with doesn't contain any lively detail, approach the piece as a journalist would, and do some research. Use what your source tells you – their detailed knowledge and enthusiasm

will bring the communication to life and help make it relevant to your audience. Try to avoid long and complex sentences and keep to one idea per sentence. A paragraph should express a single theme.

3.4 Style: Tell a story

Show, don't tell

It's more persuasive to coax a response from an audience rather than telling them how to respond. If we entice our audiences with a vivid picture of what they can expect, we don't need to rely so much on telling them to Explore! Discover! Learn! See!

For example, here we simply and effectively describe Churchill's underground bunker:

Deep beneath the bustle of London lie the original Cabinet War Rooms – today part of the Churchill War Rooms – which sheltered the people at the heart of Britain's wartime government during the Blitz.

Let the collections speak for themselves

We can afford to have confidence in the richness of our collections; we don't have to fall back on tired 'hype' words such as fantastic, fascinating, exciting, or nostalgic, which have less and less impact the more we use them. The information we have at our fingertips is enough to effectively convey the personal experiences of war and conflict behind the objects found in our collections.

For example, this caption, which accompanied a letter on display in the *All Aboard: Stories of War at Sea* exhibition at IWM North, uses a simple factual description and a quote from the letter to tell this story of the D-Day landings in 1944. Referencing the film also provides a contemporary access point:

Letter written on 14 June by Lieutenant R Macnab, the Torpedo Officer in cruiser HMS *Glasgow*. He describes how he watched the landings on Omaha Beach, where the American troops suffered heavy casualties. The scene on Omaha was later dramatised in the 1998 feature film *Saving Private Ryan*. 'At 06.40 ... the first wave of the invasion landed – against heavy opposition – and it was here that things first took a more sombre turn. There was rather too much sea and the enemy were strongly positioned in fox holes and in cliffs.'

3.5 Quotes

Using visitors' quotes is a way to show we're relevant, engaging and authoritative, rather than telling our audiences that we are:

- keep them short and unambiguous
- use words that sound more like natural speech instead of stilted and inauthentic.

For example:

'One of the most complete collections on the world wars. You can feel the reality of the trenches and the chaos of the German Blitzkrieg, and see the real objects from the soldiers and civilians.

In Memoriam is simply amazing. It is all personal stories from the First World War, of soldiers and civilians. The exhibition is truly moving and humbling – I spent most of my time in here with tears in my eyes.

The Children's War was like being transported back to 1942.'

In a more formal context, such as the Annual Report, we can be more authoritative and avoid making vague claims like 'the exhibition was popular and critically acclaimed' by giving figures wherever possible and by choosing a concise, engaging quote which proves the point.

For example:

Baghdad, 5 March 2007: A New Display with Jeremy Deller provided a hard-hitting statement on the devastating impact of modern war. In the *Guardian*, Mark Brown wrote: 'A rusting, crumpled car was yesterday placed in the main atrium of IWM London surrounded by some of the most powerful military hardware of the last 100 years. Its message was simple – this is what war does.'

4. Checklist for written communications

1. Write. Re-write. Read it out loud.

When you've written something, read it out loud – it's the perfect way to ensure that it makes sense and sounds natural. If it doesn't immediately flow, take a break and try again later. The right words will come if you let them take a little longer.

2. Avoid bad grammar. Spell check.

Obvious but very important: accuracy is essential to reflect our reputation as a world-leading authority.

3. Test run your work. Does it make sense?

Before 'going to press', always check your facts and then share your copy with a colleague. When returning the favour, if you read something you don't understand, ask the person who wrote it to explain it to you. Then get them to write down what they just said!

4. Refer to the agreed House Style Guidelines, which are available at the end of this document. House Style rules should be followed in all formal communications.

5. Proofread everything.

Always ask someone to proofread what you've written – few of us are infallible.

6. Resolve inconsistencies.

Sometimes House Style will need to be changed for good reasons, but make sure you remain consistent throughout a piece of text.

5. Writing for the web

5.1 Digital content

This is not the same as printed content. People read it differently – **they scan it** – so we have to write it differently:

- use clear headings and sub-headings
- place the most important information at the top of the document
- consider using bulleted or numbered lists to make key information stand out
- for large amounts of text, use short, introductory paragraphs with a click through to bigger chunks or downloads – this avoids too much scrolling
- where appropriate, support your text with relevant and appealing images that have been copyright-cleared.

Language is at its most powerful when we use it economically – and that's doubly true online:

- be succinct – avoid flowery prose and unnecessary words
- write in tabloid-size chunks, using four to six words per headline and subheading, a maximum of 25-30 words per sentence and a couple of sentences per paragraph.

Legibility. It's hard to read off a screen – it's at least 25 per cent slower than print. Help your reader:

- don't overdo bolding, italicising and capitals
- use bold text for emphasis but do so sparingly
- never use underlining to highlight – it will make the text look hyperlinked and confuse your reader
- if using hyperlinks in your copy, avoid the use of 'click here' – choose logical keywords within your copy to serve as the links.

Searchability. Write to be found:

- consider what words people would Google to find your piece – and use them, but don't overuse the same phrase.

Examples

1) Writing for Scanning

Before	After
IWM London can get very busy, particularly at weekends and on school holidays. It's a good idea to visit during the week if you can, or get here early, as mornings can be quieter. At very busy times there are sometimes queues.	When is the best time to visit? IWM London can get very busy, so if you want to plan a quiet visit: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Avoid weekends and school holidays• Visit on a weekday in term time• Arrive early to avoid queues

2) Being succinct:

Before	After
If there are any points on which you require explanation or further particulars we shall be glad to furnish such additional materials as may be required by telephone.	If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to ring.

3) Structure content in smaller chunks and put the most important information first:

Before	After
Plant heritage enters the information age Our aim is to encourage gardeners and other horticulturalists to plant the native trees, shrubs and flowers that are local to their areas. The Postcode Plants Database generates lists of native plants and wildlife for any specified postal district in the UK – users simply type in the first three or four characters of their postcodes. We hope that by using the Postcode Plants Database to identify suitable plants, gardeners and householders can contribute directly to native species conservation in Britain.	Save native gardens with the Postcode Plants Database The Postcode Plants Database identifies the trees, shrubs and flowers that are local to your area. Simply type in the first three or four characters of your post code and you'll get a tailor-made list. We're hoping that the database will give gardeners, schools and councils greater understanding and awareness of the local environment.

4) Hyperlinks

Before	After
For more information, <u>click here</u> to see our most recent annual report.	For more information, see our most recent <u>Annual Report</u> .

5.2 Social Media

Relevant social media channels should be listed on all printed materials under the title 'Connect with us', eg. on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr.

Where space permits, it is recommended, though not mandatory, that the web address or social media account is included on printed materials eg. facebook.com/iwm.london, @I_W_M.

It is not mandatory to include the social media icons/logos on printed materials.

If you have any specific queries regarding social media please contact Allison Fan, afan@iwm.org.uk