Voice and Tone as Information Architecture

by Kate Garklavs

How We Create Meaning

EDITOR'S SUMMARY

Essential components of effective content design in information architecture are the voice and tone of written communications. Voice is a consistent reflection of an organization's unique personality and core values, while tone varies by context and immediate purpose while still conveying a larger meaning. Together, carefully crafted voice and tone help an organization connect emotionally with its audience and convey messages with the appropriate intent. Codifying voice in an editorial style guide helps ensure consistency in content and nurtures audience loyalty. Elements to consider in communicating through the identified voice include sentence length and type, use of modifiers, punctuation and formality of expression. Tone should be tailored to typical user personas. It is useful to link tone to situations, feelings and communication in a table, to test by reading messages aloud to oneself and then share with colleagues and actual users and to vary elements to achieve the desired impact.

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A few months back, I sent a holiday card to an old friend with whom I'd fallen out of contact. (The chance to get in touch with distanced friends and acquaintances – and in a non-creepy way, no less – is just one reason I love the holidays.) To my mild surprise, the friend responded with a detailed letter of her own.

I was stoked to receive the letter; at least one of my intentions in sending the card, aside from spreading glad tidings and good cheer, was to rekindle a friendship that had loosened. After receiving it, I read the letter several times and thought, "Yeah, it was really nice to hear from so-and-so! I'll write back tonight." *Tonight* became *tomorrow night*, and *tomorrow night* became *this weekend*. Hoping to prompt myself to action, I set the envelope on my home office desk where I couldn't ignore it. No dice. I added *RESPOND TO LETTER!* to my to-do list, but still no luck. Long story shorter, my response has now been pending for two months, and my guilt level grows incrementally higher.

Am I a heel of a friend? I like to think I'm not, though that thought could be a delusion rooted in social self-preservation. Having spent time considering my procrastination, I've realized that my reluctance to respond is rooted in fears of miscommunicating and alienating my reader – the selfsame anxieties that underlie so much of the writing we undertake professionally. You might be surprised to hear it, but getting the voice and tone just right for each piece is always a bit nerve wracking, even for those of us who create content professionally.

Fortunately, creating your voice and choosing an appropriate tone aren't as daunting as you think – especially if you have some tips to follow. Familiarizing yourself with these strategies will not only help you feel more confident about writing (and perhaps procrastinate less), but it will also help

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you communicate more clearly with your readership, complementing the information architecture you're working within.

The Root of (Much) Writing-Related Anxiety

Apprehension surrounding content creation is often far more complex than we initially make it out to be. True, there are some folks who simply don't like writing (or editing or doing content audits); they find the process tedious, or they feel the benefits of creating content don't outweigh the costs. That's fair. For many others of us, though, the anxiety that crops up when we're tasked with writing to a new or unfamiliar audience has its source in an entirely different pool. Often, what we perceive as a generalized dislike of writing is, more accurately, a fear of failing to impress our audience – or, worse yet, offending or alienating them.

The failure to connect with one's audience (and, consequently, the failure to communicate your primary message) can be attributed to a number of factors: the topics you do or don't write about in your work, your publication channel and the frequency and assiduousness with which you update your content are all common reasons you might not make a strong authorial impression.

How Voice and Tone Are Central to IA

Central to connecting with and communicating clearly to your readership is your choice of voice and tone. Crafting a voice that reflects your organization's core values – that carries them through each piece of content you create – is one way you can consistently make meaning more visible to your readers. Likewise, selecting a situationally appropriate tone is one way to foster a strong bond with your readership; by acknowledging their emotional state, motivations and desires in a given situation, you're acknowledging their importance to and impact on your organization, along with your desire to help them reach their goals.

Before delving too deeply into this topic, it's worth touching on what differentiates voice from tone and how the two work together to guide a reader's attention. When discussing voice and tone, I like to draw on the example of having an actual, in-person conversation (and this is fitting,

given that the content we create is meant to foster conversation). Voice is an author or organization's unique personality; it's akin to a person's voice. Just like an actual voice, it provides others a quick way to identify the speaker or author. Likewise, just like a human voice, it remains constant in different situations, regardless of the different emotional states they inspire.

Continuing with the conversation analogy, tone is akin to the tone a person uses in a conversation. Unlike voice, tone varies by context and, in this way, communicates the emotional timbre of a given situation. Think of how much a friend's tone differs when you're hearing about last night's promising first date as opposed to a less-than-stellar performance review. Even if your friend says very little about either subject, the tone conveys a larger meaning, drawing your attention to the most salient themes of the conversation (*I'm already planning what to wear on the second date*, and *I might get canned soon so I'm going to start budgeting*, respectively).

Unfortunately, in some cases, voice and tone are given short shrift. Some folks regard them as unnecessary prettification, when in fact nothing is further from the truth. Working in conjunction with the explicit substance of your content, the structure of each piece and your larger IA, your voice and tone act as a sort of emotional shorthand, quickly clueing your readers into who you are as an organization and directing them to the information that's most important to them, given their current situation.

Getting Started: Developing Your Voice

How does one get started, then? If your organization already has a style guide that includes instruction on voice and tone, you're in luck; consult that first, and feel free to skim this section or skip ahead to the next one.

Your organization may not have such guidance, and that's OK. It's not uncommon for organizations, especially young ones, to have a lack of voice guidelines. In some cases, this absence is due to staffing issues (that is, simply not enough folks to take up the task).

In others, it may be due to the idea that the company is small enough not to need such guidelines; the team may have a sense that "everybody knows what we stand for, so we don't need to write it down." True though that may be in the moment, it won't hold true as the company scales and a larger

team of folks is tasked with creating and maintaining content. Codifying your voice is the only way to ensure consistent content in the long run, which, in turn, is one way to facilitate audience loyalty.

To get started with defining your voice, first refresh yourself on your organization's core values: the principles that underlie each decision your organization makes and the value it hopes to deliver to your users. (If your organization hasn't yet defined its core values, you may consider leading a values-definition workshop.) Consider each value individually, and think about stylistic choices that could convey those values; it can help to jot some notes down as you work.

Let's consider an example: Say you lead the content team at a fiscal-living blog. Your company's goal is to provide trustworthy, easy-to-execute strategies to readers who are struggling with their finances and ultimately to help these readers feel empowered over their financial situations. Your company promotes measured decision making, financial awareness, increased transparency in financial information and long-term planning. As you create your voice, you'll need to take all of these factors into account. Spend time considering how you'd like to communicate with your readers and what impression you'd like them to hold of your organization. Framed differently, if your organization were a person, how should your readers describe it – as the witty, gossipy next-door neighbor? The serious older sibling who always has good advice?

In this example, you may choose to describe your organization's voice as authoritative, instructional, trustworthy and friendly without being overly conversational. Due to the comparatively serious subject matter you're concerned with – financial well-being – you don't want to come across as too casual or flippant; to have an informal voice could easily alienate the folks you're trying hardest to target.

Once you've described your voice, brainstorm and record some general guidelines for how to communicate in such a way as to maintain that voice. For instance, if you're striving to create an instructional and trustworthy voice, you'll most likely want to write using short- to mid-length declarative sentences. You may avoid using exclamation points and an unwieldy number of adjectives and adverbs, and you may or may not decide to use contractions, which come across as more conversational.

Work with your team to build out and refine your voice guidelines and review them often to make sure they're still as applicable as they were when you created them. Another thing to note: If your organization experiences a shift in values, however small, return to your voice guidelines to make sure they're still accurate. If you don't update your guidelines as your organization's values subtly shift, you risk alienating your users who now expect a different type of communication from you.

Setting the Tone

With guidelines in place describing your organization's voice, you and your team can begin thinking about situation-specific tones.

Each situation in which your user interacts with your organization – that is, through the product or service you offer – merits content with an appropriate tone. What's an appropriate tone? One that reflects the emotional state the user is most likely experiencing during a given situation.

Consider a well-worn (but nonetheless effective) example: Your best friend's grandmother passes away suddenly and so you decide to send a sympathy card. Before you sit down to write the card, though, you carefully consider what to write: your word choice, sentence length and proper punctuation (the exclamation point is a huge no-no here). To get the tone just right, you put yourself in your friend's shoes and think about what she must be going through. Empathizing with your friend allows you to craft a message that's heartfelt, respectful and appropriately serious.

If you're new to thinking about tone in the context of a user's emotional situation, check out MailChimp's voice and tone guide, which will walk you through different types of corporate communication and, for each, describe the user's feelings and provide some content-creation tips.

You can replicate MailChimp's guide yourself, too. First, focus on one of your target users; if your organization already has user personas, you may choose one of these. (If not, that's OK; create a list of attributes for a typical user and work from there.) Once you've envisioned a user, create a table with four columns. Label them *Situation*, *Feelings*, *Communication and Tone*.

Now, complete your table. Start by listing a situation your users might

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find themselves in. Returning to our financial blog example, you might note that your typical readers have just realized that they have no idea how to budget, and they're too anxious to even open their most recent credit card statement. Under *Feelings*, you might list anxious, nervous, overwhelmed and "feeling like a failure." The *Communication* column is where you can record the type or types of content users in this situation might most appreciate or benefit from; you can also indicate the frequency or interactivity of this communication. Finally, in the *Tone* column, describe the tone your users might most appreciate, bearing in mind the emotional factors they may be grappling with.

If you're part of a larger team, you and your colleagues might consider completing this exercise individually, then reconvening to compare and discuss your results. As your organization introduces new content types, update your tables. And, as you conduct user testing for the first time (or continue previous testing), record your results. Drawing on your users' lived experience, respecting their reactions and conversing with them on their own terms will enable you both to communicate more effectively with one another. As a result, your users will more easily be able to grok your message – they won't be distracted by an inappropriate tone, poor word choice or out-in-left-field punctuation.

Making Sure You're on Track

At this point, I should offer you an asynchronous high-five: You've developed your organization voice, and you're drawing on your users' experience to craft situationally appropriate tones. What's left to do? Test the effectiveness of your work, of course.

Even with great guidelines in place, it makes sense to check your work to make sure you're staying on track. Here are some of my favorite strategies for evaluating the voice and tone of a piece I've written:

Read It Out Loud. Reading a work aloud (instead of silently to yourself) offers a surprisingly fresh perspective on content you've created or read many times. In my fiction master's program, nearly all workshop sessions began with authors reading a page or two of their work before opening the floor to their classmates' comments. Likewise, when I taught composition, I often asked my students to read their essays aloud to gauge the flow and tone of their work. Reading a piece aloud makes it strange to you, in a sense – it positions you as both author and audience and helps you identify places where the tone falters and critical information may be miscommunicated.

Test Content with Your Colleagues. When time allows, I like to share work with my colleagues to get their reactions. Send a draft to one or two of your coworkers and ask them how they'd describe the tone of the piece and what the piece's central message is. If the tone they describe is different from what you're going for, ask them to identify passages they found confusing or unusually divergent; start by revising those sections and work outward.

Vary Your Sentence Length, Word Choice and Punctuation. Staying true to your organization's voice and crafting a spot-on tone are a game of inches, to use the only sports analogy I know – they both rely on the smallest details. Changing your sentence length, word choice and punctuation can dramatically change the feel of a piece and can help you more skillfully draw your readers' attention to the details that matter most. *OMG: I was like, so surprised I almost keeled over!* has a much different tone than *Wow*. When constructing individual sentences, always think back to your users' potential emotional state and what amount of content they may prefer to consider at a given time. Frustrated or anxious users might prefer more direct and reassuring communication, while at-ease users may have a higher tolerance for florid prose.

When all is said and done, voice and tone are a bit squishier than other elements of IA; they aren't as neatly diagrammable, and they involve more subjectivity than working up a new sitemap. Despite their comparative subjectivity, though, they're equally important to successfully directing your users' attention to the most pertinent information within a given interaction. And, like a clear hierarchy, they demonstrate your respect for your user. By conversing with your users on their terms – in other words, by acknowledging your users' needs and current emotional state – you're facilitating a more successful dialogue, which is what great content design is all about. ■