Our tone of voice guidelines

How to talk like Healthwatch

healthwatch

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Introduction

What makes the Healthwatch brand stand out?

We want to be known for providing great service, offering helpful advice and information, and making real change to health and social care services.

To help people see that, and demonstrate the work we do, we need to think about the way we sound and the language we use.

The way we say something – our tone of voice – makes a huge difference to how we come across to our audiences. Our tone of voice is how we project the Healthwatch personality.

No matter who we're talking to or what we say, it should always be obvious it's Healthwatch speaking. The more familiar and consistent we sound, the more trust we build.

That's what these guidelines are for.

These tone of voice guidelines will help you sound like Healthwatch in your writing – whether that's long reports, or short social media posts. And they'll help you talk about your work in a way that informs and engages your audience.

There are lots of other aspects to brand, so don't forget to also take a look at all the other resources on the network site.

Our brand personality

What our writing should tell people about us

Values, attributes and personality points

There are three key aspects to our brand personality.

Our values

Our values underpin everything we do. They guide our behaviour, and they should come through in our work.

We value:

- Equity. We're compassionate and inclusive. We build connections and empower communities.

- Impact. We're ambitious about creating change and hold ourselves and others to account.

- Truth. We work with integrity and honesty, and we speak truth to power.

- Collaboration. We communicate clearly and work with partners to amplify our influence.

- Independence. Our agenda is driven by the public. We're a purposeful, critical friend to decision-makers.

Our brand attributes

We are:

- Strong, because people (especially those who are vulnerable or marginalised) need an advocate.

- Brave, because working within the system to hold decision-makers to account is never easy.

- Effective, because it's vital that people get the advice they need to make informed decisions, and that their valuable feedback is taken on board. There's nothing to be gained from listening if nothing ever changes.

Our personality points

We want our brand attributes to shine through in all our communications. But we have a lot of different comms, and a lot of different audiences.

That's where our personality points come in.

More on personality points

Our personality points

We want to be able to talk as well to members of the public who aren't familiar with the ins and outs of the healthcare system as we do to the decision-makers running it.

So we choose personality points with our content and audience in mind.

We are:

- Evidence-based
- Trustworthy
- On your side
- Supportive
- Insightful
- Caring
- Expert
- Fair
- Curious
- Personable
- Courageous

You don't need to use them all – pick the two or three that suit the comms you're writing.

For example:

- Your advice and information articles could be personable, trustworthy and supportive.

- Your call for feedback could be curious, strong and on your side.

- Your report of your findings could be brave, evidence-based and insightful.

- Your article on your impact could be effective, on your side and courageous.

Choosing the right words

Here are words you can use to help demonstrate our personality points.

Caring

Advice, you, thanks, help, support, join

Courageous

Bold, daring, launch, protect, transform, honest, solution, results

Curious

Fascinating, unveil, discover, learn, harness, uncover, join, interesting, thought-provoking, startling

Evidence-based

According to, best, approved, dependable, proven, professional, reliable, research, safety, tested, track record, studies show

Expert

Authentic, absolute, backed, conclusive, definitive, formula, guaranteed, ironclad, official, legitimate, proven, reliable, report, research, solution

Fair

Just, open-minded, honest, honourable, trustworthy, impartial, independent

Insightful

Better understanding, intuitive, perceptive, revealing

On your side

Advocate, champion, committed, dedicated, encourage, overcome, succeed, achieve, resolve, outcome

Personable

Friendly, engaging, supportive, together, you

Supportive

Always, best, easily, quick, protected, practical, recommend, really, secure, understand, tested, welcome

Trustworthy

Best, expert, evidence-based, genuine, privacy, truly, results, worthwhile, advantage, effective, supported

This is far from a definitive list, but these are a good jumping off point as you're writing.

Top tips for impactful writing

Getting your message across

Know your audience

Before you start, understand who you're writing for.

It's easy to write everything down in a way that makes sense to us. But remember, we know our work inside out. For our audiences, it might be the first time they're hearing about it.

So you need to be clear on who they are and what they're likely to be looking for.

Once you have a good understanding of this, it'll be easier to decide how you should apply any other writing guidance.

You can use the questions opposite as a starting point. Write your understanding of your audience down first if you need to, so you have something to refer back to.

- Who are they?
- What do you want them to learn, think and do?
- What's their reading level likely to be?
- How much do they know already?
- Where and when are they going to read this information?
- How much time are they likely to have to read?
- What kind of mood might they be in?

Keep it clear and focused

Research suggests 84% of people don't read webpages word-for-word.

Most people will skim-read text. So:

- Try to keep your sentences short and easy to read – about 20 words or fewer. For very long sentences, see if there's a way to break them up.

- Use meaningful headings that help your readers understand the main points.

- Always put your most important information at the top of the page.

- Break up your text with paragraphs and bullet points.

- Don't use ten words if one will do – cut the fluff.

At the same time, don't prioritise keeping it brief if it makes your writing sound cold or stilted, leaves out important information, or just doesn't sound as good.

A good trick is to read it out loud to yourself to see how it sounds. And of course, it helps to have another pair of eyes on it.

Think about it from the perspective of your audience – is there anything that would need explaining further to them? Anything that they don't really need to know?

Make your language approachable

Writing as you'd speak

We're talking to everyday people, so we use everyday language. We don't want to confuse or alienate people.

When we talk about writing as you'd speak, we don't mean you have to be casual. You can sound professional and still keep it light, conversational, and in plain English. The key thing is to make sure you're not being overly formal or complex.

That means:

- Avoiding jargon when there's an everyday alternative, and explaining terms people might not understand.

- Looking for appropriate less formal language choices, e.g. "needs" instead of "requirements".

- Using contractions. Often, it's fine to use "you're" rather than "you are", or "didn't" rather than "did not".

Common jargon (and possible swaps)

- Co-production: This is unfamiliar to a lot of lay people. Try "working together", "working with you".

- Lived experience: Just "experience" will often do.

- Seldom heard: "people who have not been asked"/"people whose experiences aren't being heard"/"people who aren't being listened to".

- Primary care: Specify the service(s): GP surgery, pharmacy, dentist

- Secondary care: Specify the service(s): hospital, [specialism] clinic.

Top tip: Read it out loud. If it feels or sounds clunky, stuffy, or confusing, chances are it will come across that way to readers.

Use active language

Active language usually makes the sentence straightforward and concise. It can often sound stronger and more direct. For example:

- Say: 2,000 people joined the event.

- Don't say: The event was joined by 2,000 people.

You can see how the first one focuses on the people, rather than the event.

You can also see that this is shorter, and reads as much sharper and stronger, while the second sentence sounds a little awkward.

Change the sentence around if you need to. For example, this sentence is in active voice, but puts the focus on us:

- We asked 2,000 people to share their views.

This is passive, but puts the focus on the people sharing, which is where we want it most of the time:

- 2,000 people were asked to share their views.

So for a snappy, active sentence that also focuses on the people, we could just say:

- 2,000 people shared their views.

Note: Sometimes active voice just doesn't work. Don't force it – go with what sounds best for the particular content you're writing.

Avoid acronyms

Although it's quicker than saying or writing something in full, don't assume everyone understands an acronym. Acronyms and abbreviations aren't plain English and make it harder for people to translate.

- Acronyms to avoid: HWE, LHW, ICS.

- A few well-known acronyms you're safe to use: NHS, GP, A&E.

Be particularly careful with acronyms you use often in your work. It's easy to forget these aren't in everyday use for most people.

If you do need to use an acronym – e.g. to save space – write it in full the first time you use it, and then use brackets to show what you'll be shortening it to.

For example, write "Your region's Integrated Care Board (ICB)". If your audience won't know what that is, remember to briefly explain this as well.

Sometimes this might even be helpful – for example, if it's an acronym people are likely to come across in other places.

And of course, think of your audience – if you're writing to your local NHS Trust, for example, using the acronym is fine.

Be specific

Remember, scepticism and apathy are issues among our audiences.

So:

- Be exact and be concrete.

- Try not to caveat your work – phrases like "some people" and "may have" can dilute your message, so only use them if they're really the most accurate way to talk about your work.

- Be confident. Where possible, say how many people your work has helped and how this has made a difference.

- Mention the audience's role in the outcome. Did you rely on public feedback, or the support of healthcare staff? Make sure this connection is clear.

People like to see tangible results.

So wherever possible, try to be clear about what those are.

Try to find out concrete figures – if you're writing about wards adding new beds, how many have they added? If you're talking about an increase in waiting times, by how much? How have systems and processes changed as a direct result of people's feedback?

Talk to the reader

Words like "we" and "you" sound much more friendly and approachable than talking about ourselves and the reader in third person. For example:

- Don't say: "Healthwatch would like to hear from people about their experiences."

- Do say: "We'd like to hear from you about your experiences."

The second one is warmer and more personable, and creates a connection between us and the reader.

Try to put people first and the emphasis on their experiences and stories. For example:

- Don't say: "We've changed X after hearing feedback."

- Do say: "After you shared your views with us, X has changed."

Talking about people

Talking to and about the communities we serve

Talking about people

It's important to write about people in a way that's respectful and inclusive. Our language should reflect the communities we serve.

This list isn't definitive – the language we use will keep changing over time. Individual people may also prefer to use different terms to describe themselves.

- Seldom heard: This is mainly used within the healthcare sector and falls under "industry speak". Where possible, avoid it and use phrases like "people whose experiences aren't being heard" or "people who aren't being listened to".

- Ethnic minorities: Use this term to refer to all ethnic groups except the White British group. Ethnic minorities include white minorities, such as Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller groups. We don't say "non-white".

- BAME/BME: Historically, this acronym was used to describe Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups. We don't use this term, as many people dislike it or don't understand what it means.

- Specific ethnic and cultural groups: One of the issues with terms like BAME" is that it's too broad. When planning your work, think about your audience and exactly who you're trying to target and why, and be as specific as possible (e.g. Do you want to hear from the Pakistani community?). If you can't be specific, use "ethnic minorities".

- Age: You don't need to refer to a person's age unless it's relevant to what you're writing. If you're talking about older or younger people, avoid stereotyping these groups (e.g. assuming older people don't use technology).

Talking about people

- Disability: We talk about disability in a positive way, which means not using phrases like "suffers from" or "confined to…".

  We use the term "disabled people", to describe this group. While you might see the term "people with a disability", it's used more by organisations than by people themselves.

- Autism: We say "autistic people" rather than "people with autism", as many consider their autism to be a fundamental part of who they are.

- Mental health: We talk about "people with a mental health condition" or "people with mental health issues". With a handful of exceptions, we use person-first language when referring to specific conditions – e.g. "person with bulimia" rather than "bulimic person" or "they are bulimic".

- Gender and sexuality: When writing about a person, use their preferred pronouns. If you're unsure, just ask or use their name.

  If you're not sure or you're describing a hypothetical person, use "they" rather than, for example, "he or she" or "s/he". This is not only more inclusive, it's shorter, tidier, and more accessible for screen readers.

  If you need to collect information on gender and sexuality, for example as part of a survey, remember that "transgender" is not a sexual orientation or a gender. This shouldn't be listed as an option in questions about either.

  If you need to learn whether someone is transgender, we suggest asking the separate question: "Is your gender the same as the one you were assigned at birth?" with "Yes", "No", and "Prefer not to say" options.

Style guide

Keeping things clear and consistent

Style guide

A consistent way of writing will ensure we always sound like Healthwatch, and help us build trust with our audiences.

- Ampersands (&): Avoid these except in recognised cases (e.g. A&E). Otherwise, use 'and' in full.

- Bullet point lists: For lists where the bullet points are short – like the list of personality points on page 6 – we don't put a full-stop or any other punctuation on the end of each bullet point. If a bullet point is a complete point by itself, add a full-stop on the end.

- Capitalising headings: Only capitalise the first letter of the heading – everything else should be lowercase (e.g. "Our annual report 2023-24"). We don't use title case or caps for headings or subheadings.

- Dashes and hyphens: We use hyphens only to hyphenate words or dates (like in 2023-24 above). In most general writing, we use an en-dash, which is slightly longer – like this.

- Dates: Should be written as 'Friday 11 March 2021'. We don't say 11th, 22nd 23rd, etc. Don't use commas within dates.

- Healthwatch England/local Healthwatch: When we talk about ourselves, say 'we' 'us' 'our', rather than speaking in the third person. If you're using our name, write it in full. We don't use acronyms like HWE or LHW as not everyone will understand.

- Quotes: Make it clear when you've edited quotes. Add ellipses to show you've removed words, and put square brackets around any words you've added in or used to replace something from the original quote.

  You don't need to do this if you can get permission for your edits from the person who originally said the quote. Make sure you send them the edited quote in writing and get written permission back from them.

Style guide

- Talking about local Healthwatch: 'Local' before 'Healthwatch' should only start with a capital letter if at the beginning of a sentence or the start of a title. Otherwise use 'local Healthwatch' or simply 'Healthwatch'.

  If you're talking about a specific local Healthwatch, say, "Healthwatch Anytown" not "local Healthwatch Anytown".

- Talking about more than one Healthwatch: Don't say 'Healthwatches' – it's always 'Healthwatch', e.g. "Healthwatch in Devon worked together on a project..."

- Talking about the Healthwatch network: We don't capitalise the 'n' in network. We say 'our network' or 'the Healthwatch network'.

- Job titles: Should be capitalised. For example, "We are hiring a new Engagement Manager."

- Numbers: Small numbers from one to ten should be written out in full. Larger numbers (i.e. above ten) are written as numerals. But be consistent where numbers are connected, e.g. say "1 in 11" rather than "one in 11".

Remember: consistency is key! We've covered the basics here, but make sure your communications are grammatically consistent. Where there is more than one accepted convention, decide on one and stick to it across your work.

Accessibility

Inclusive writing for all

Accessibility

Accessibility helps everyone.

Not only is writing with accessibility in mind helpful for people who need to take information in in different ways, it tends to make your writing easier for everyone to read.

- Use headings, subheadings, bullet points, numbering consistently to break up text and make it easy to follow for screen readers. If using Microsoft Word or similar, use their built-in headings and styles for ease of navigation.

- Use plain English. You can use online tools like Grammarly to ensure your copy is easy to read. We advise a score of at least 90 before publication.

- Use keywords in title, lead paragraph and within text to support Search Engine Optimisation (SEO). SEO is the process of making your site better for search engines so more people can find your website.

- Ensure links have meaningful text that make it clear where they lead (e.g. "Read our full report" rather than "Click here").

- Keep any text within visuals short and easy to read.

- Use hashtags in moderation when posting to social media. Put them in camel case (e.g. #HealthwatchAnytown rather than #healthwatchanytown).

Accessibility is more than just how you write. Take a look at our full accessibility guidance to learn more.

Any questions?

Get in touch with us at hub@healthwatch.co.uk