whose voice is this ?



01 / THE DECISION

Replace the adjective pile

Friendly. Confident. Human. Bold. A brand can collect all four words and still sound different in every email. The adjectives are too elastic to resolve a real writing choice. One writer hears jokes, another hears short commands, and a third adds exclamation marks to everything. Each can point to the same guide and claim to be following it.

A useful voice guide describes what the brand consistently does with language. Does it state the useful fact first? Does it explain unfamiliar terms? Does it admit uncertainty directly? What kinds of claim can it make, and what kinds of familiarity must it earn? Those decisions can help a writer revise an actual sentence.

This guide builds a small set of verbal boundaries and tests them across contrasting situations. The outcome is not a vocabulary costume or a list of forbidden words. It is an agreement about the relationship the writing creates and the information it owes the reader.

Keep the remit clear. Voice cannot solve an unclear offer or make a poor service trustworthy. Nor does every sentence need to announce the brand's personality. Some copy simply needs to help a person complete a task. A recognisable voice can remain present through consistency, clarity and restraint while the amount of expressive language changes.

02 / FIND THE CONSTANT

Define behaviour, then choose words

Start with existing material that works and material that fails. Gather a small set of real encounters: an introduction, an instruction, a confirmation and a piece of bad news. Include the practical context. A line that feels lively on a poster may be irritating beside a payment error. Judging all copy as if it were advertising hides that difference.

For each sample, ask what the writing helps the reader understand or feel able to do. Then name the repeatable behaviour worth keeping. "We lead with the next useful fact" is more actionable than "we are helpful". "We explain what we know and when we will know more" gives substance to "we are honest".

+ Stable voice: the writing behaviours the brand maintains across ordinary and difficult situations.
+ Situational tone: the degree of warmth, energy, formality or restraint appropriate to this particular moment.
+ Required content: the facts and actions that must survive regardless of personality.
+ Recognition cues: recurring verbal or visual elements worth protecting because they help identify the brand.

Do not confuse a distinctive catchphrase with the entire voice. Repeating it in every message can make the company sound inattentive. Recognition also comes from consistent naming, structure and useful habits. Before replacing an established cue, understand what role it currently plays and whether readers actually associate it with the brand.

03 / WRITE THE RULE

Make each principle testable in a sentence

Limit the first version to a few rules a writer can remember while working. For each rule, describe an observable behaviour, show one good example and name the point where it becomes unhelpful. This keeps the guide from turning into a collection of inspirational labels that cannot settle a disagreement.

01 State the writing action. For example: lead a service update with what changed before explaining the company's process.

02 Show the action in real copy. "Your collection is now expected between 3pm and 4pm" is easier to assess than "be transparent about delays".

03 Name the boundary. Do not present an estimate as a guarantee or use warmth to obscure the fact that something went wrong.

04 Test a second situation. A rule that only works for launch advertising may belong in campaign guidance rather than the enduring voice.

05 Assign a decision owner. When two rules conflict, someone must choose in relation to the reader's task and record the reason.

These are editorial working rules, not validated predictors of commercial performance. Their usefulness lies in producing clearer choices and more consistent work. You should be able to point to a sentence and explain the change a rule requires. If the rule accepts every possible version, sharpen it or remove it.

04 / WORKED EXAMPLE

A voice that earns its confidence

> INVENTED TEACHING CASE
>
> Parcel Desk is a fictional collection and delivery service. Its processes and all sample messages are invented for this guide.

The brand wants people to feel informed about the next stage of a delivery. It provides booking windows, status updates and options when a collection is missed. Its proposed voice is calm and practical. Instead of leaving those adjectives alone, the team writes three operating rules.

+ Put the useful update first. Write "Your collection is booked for Tuesday, 2pm-4pm" before any welcome message. Do not begin with a paragraph about the company being delighted.
+ Explain uncertainty precisely. Write "The driver is delayed. The next update will appear here by 3pm" only when that update commitment is supported. Avoid vague reassurance such as "Everything is under control".
+ Offer the available choice without pressure. Write "Choose another collection time or cancel this booking" when those options exist. Do not turn a service failure into a cheerful opportunity.

The boundary is as important as the preferred wording. Parcel Desk can sound confident about a confirmed booking, careful about an estimate and direct about a mistake. It should not sound as if it has become three different companies. The stable behaviour is giving the person useful information and a clear next step.

A launch headline can be more expressive, but it must survive the same truth check. The phrase "Never wonder where it is" overpromises if tracking has gaps.

05 / TEST THE VOICE

Write the difficult message as carefully

Three connected encounters

Invented Parcel Desk booking confirmation: "Booked for Tuesday, 2pm-4pm. Keep the parcel ready for collection. You can review the address and change the booking from your confirmation page." The key facts come first. The language does not need a joke to become approachable.

Invented missed-collection message: "We missed your collection window. We are sorry. You can choose another available time or cancel the booking from your confirmation page. If neither option works for you, contact the support team." These options are scenario facts; a real service must confirm them. The message names the failure before giving choices, rather than hiding it behind "a small hiccup".

Invented promotional line: "The next step, without the guessing." Supporting copy: "Book a collection window and follow the updates in one place." The line expresses the service idea, while the support gives it substance. It still needs checking against what the actual status system provides.

Place the three messages beside each other. The energy changes, but the writing habit remains: a useful fact, understandable language and a supported next step. If the promotional voice needs exaggerated certainty that the service voice cannot sustain, revise the promotion. Do not force the service messages to imitate an unearned promise simply to make the set look consistent.

06 / TRY IT

Find the personality that should disappear

Invented exercise: a creative workspace has the voice words "playful, generous, straight-talking". A booking error currently reads: "Oopsie! Our little booking gremlins are having a party. Give us another shot, superstar!" The known facts are that the booking was not completed, no payment was taken and the user can try again or contact the desk. Write a replacement and explain which part of the voice you preserved.

A model response

"Your booking was not completed, and no payment was taken. Please try again. If the problem continues, contact the desk and we can help with the booking." This preserves directness and practical help. It removes the performance because the person needs to know what happened to the booking and money before enjoying the brand's personality.

A more playful tone can return in a lower-pressure moment, such as a welcome poster or an invitation to an open studio. The error message does not abandon the voice; it chooses the appropriate expression of it. A voice that only works when everything goes well is not ready for everyday use.

Now rewrite the same facts for a compact mobile error panel. Keep the payment reassurance and the next step. Compare which information survives. That second pass tests whether the rules help when space is limited, rather than merely producing a pleasant paragraph.

07 / WORKSHEET

The small voice agreement

Use this sheet with actual sentences beside you. Write rules a second writer can apply without hearing your explanation. Test the agreement on a routine message and a difficult one before expanding it into a longer brand document.

What should the writing consistently help the reader understand or do?

Which three observable writing behaviours express that relationship?

What sentence shows each behaviour, and where does it go too far?

What changes with the situation, and which facts must always remain?

Which recognition cues and decision owner will keep the guide consistent?

08 / MAINTAIN IT

Use the guide to improve the work

Give two writers the same short task and the proposed guide. Compare their drafts against the actual rules. They do not need to produce identical sentences. They should make compatible choices about facts, relationship and claims. If one becomes flippant and the other bureaucratic, identify which instruction allowed the drift.

+ Keep examples from real use, including revisions and the reason for each change. A before-and-after sentence teaches more than another adjective.
+ Separate mandatory service information from optional brand expression so that writers know what they can change.
+ Review new recurring phrases before treating them as permanent identity cues. Do not mistake the latest campaign line for the whole brand.
+ When writing across languages, preserve the intended relationship and supported meaning while allowing natural expression. Literal word matching is not evidence of a consistent voice.
+ Assign ownership and a review date. Resolve disagreements through the reader's task and the brand's provision, not whichever editor arrives last.

A voice guide is a working aid, not proof that people recognise the brand or trust it. Those are separate questions that need appropriate evidence. It also cannot license claims the organisation cannot support. If a rule repeatedly forces awkward or misleading copy, change the rule.

Your next action is to choose one live piece of writing, apply the agreement and record the revision. Let useful decisions accumulate. The guide becomes valuable through the work it helps people make.

READING / PRACTICE / CONTEXT

Where the thinking starts

The methods, teaching scenarios, exercises and worksheets here are original synthesis. The books below inform particular decisions; their authors do not endorse this guide. Page references locate the supplied PDF editions and may differ from printed page numbers.

Marty Neumeier / The Brand Gap

PDF pp. 25-28

The discussion of coherent brand meaning informed the need for a clear verbal relationship. This guide does not reproduce Neumeier's framework or treat a voice guide as proof of differentiation.

Byron Sharp / How Brands Grow

PDF pp. 10-12

The emphasis on recognition and protecting distinctive assets informed care with recurring cues. Voice rules and fictional messages are original synthesis; consistency alone is not claimed to establish recognition or growth.

Make the tools your own

Read the worked example, try the exercise before its model response, then use the worksheet on a real assignment. Print the worksheet at 100% or annotate a copy digitally. Check your actual product facts, audience context and production conditions before applying the advice.

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