

SOUND [W]RIGHT

UFS student tone and voice guide



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*Inspiring excellence. Transforming lives.
Inspireer uitnemendheid. Verander lewens.*

UNIVERSITY OF THE
FREE STATE
UNIVERSITEIT VAN DIE
VRYSTAAT
YUNIVESITHI YA
FREISTATA



*You can make
anything by
writing*

C.S. Lewis

CONTENT

How does the UFS sound?	4
Who are we?	5
How do we sound?	7
Who are we talking to?	10
How do you talk to Gen-Y	13
How to write?	15
Conclusion	20



How does the UFS sound?

Welcome to this quick-and-easy guide. Here, we will explain to you how the UFS should sound to prospective and current students – and why?

This guide will help you talk to students, so that they will hear. The aim is to create a tone of voice that remains the same across all written platforms: letters, SMSs, emails, etc. Why is this important? Two reasons:

- **To build trust** – honestly, nobody likes someone who is friendly today, but keeps a stiff upper lip tomorrow.
- **To ensure understanding** – it's easy to confuse someone – simply use words they don't understand ... and we DON'T want to do that.

There are also two things that determine the most suitable tone of voice for any institution:

1. Who they are
2. Who they are talking to

The first thing we have to understand is: WHO ARE WE?



1. WHO ARE WE?

UFS vision:

A university recognised across the world for excellence in academic achievement and in human reconciliation

UFS values:

- Superior scholarship
- Human embrace
- Institutional distinctiveness
- Emergent leadership
- Public service

UFS essence:

Inspiring excellence. Transforming lives.

UFS brand personality:

- Inspiring
- Vibrant
- Welcoming
- Creative

We often make the mistake of only 'publishing' our vision, values, essence, and brand personality, instead of 'being' it. Simply publishing these won't make it happen magically. We have to DO it. We have to SHOW it, and we have to SOUND it.

Since this is not a behavioural guide ... we will focus on sounding the way we are.

*The art of writing is
the art of discovering
what you believe*

Gustave Flaubert

1.1 HOW DO WE SOUND?

UFS vision:

A university *recognised* across the world for *excellence* in academic achievement and in human reconciliation.

How does our vision sound?

Confident. We know that students make the right choice when they choose us. We know that we have the best options available. We know that we can prepare them well for work and life. But we are not unrealistic, or take unnecessary risks. We know what we do, and what we don't do – we don't try to be good at everything.

UFS values:

- Superior scholarship
- Human embrace
- Institutional distinctiveness
- Emergent leadership
- Public service

How do our values sound?

Proud. We do not hesitate to put our resources towards teaching and growing our students and our community – because we are very good at that. But we never think that we are untouchable, and always like to learn from others.



UFS essence:

Inspiring excellence. Transforming lives.

How does our essence sound?

Able. We KNOW this about ourselves. Absolutely! But we know that we can always improve.



UFS brand personality:

- Inspiring
- Vibrant
- Welcoming
- Creative

How does our brand personality sound?

Inviting. A campus where students will enjoy a study experience of note. But, we are not a pushover and will never compromise our values just to be a crowd-pleaser.



ASK YOURSELF:

Does the piece of communication that you are about to write sound confident, proud, able, and inviting?

Write: Welcome to the UFS – you made the best decision for you future. Together, we will build a solid platform for your career.

Instead of: Thank you for choosing the UFS as a preferred tertiary institution. We are looking forward to welcome new students on campus

Can you hear the difference? Take some time to familiarise yourself with our vision, values, essence, and brand personality. The better you know and understand these, the easier you will sound right. Remember, we want to ‘be’ it, not merely ‘publish’ it.



2. WHO ARE WE TALKING TO?

The larger part of our students form part of a society referred to as: Generation Y. They are between the ages of 16 and 29. Because we mostly deal with Gen-Y, the larger part of our communication should be aimed at this wonderful and interesting generation. [We suggest that you attend one of the Gen-Y workshops. **Enquiries: Communication and Brand Management.**]

Gen-Y in a nutshell

They are notorious multitaskers. This means that they can text, watch television, eat a sandwich, and talk to you – all at the same time! Let us not debate the successful execution of each task, but simply appreciate that Gen-Y are wired this way.



Whatever they do should matter. And it should matter NOW. No point in telling Gen-Y that ‘one day’ algebra will be useful to them ... They are a just-in-time generation, not a just-in-case generation. They want to know what they are supposed to know just before they need to know it. [VERY important when you consider communication timing.]

Gen-Y like to have an opinion, and they want to get feedback ASAP. They live in an easy-access environment. Most of what they need to know is only a click away ... and thanks to social media, they have open access to voice whatever they think, or whatever they need.



Mmm ... Gen-Y have trouble understanding 'NO'. Simply because they are used to always having an alternative. This does not make them 'difficult' – they are alternative opportunity seekers, a valuable attribute if utilised correctly.

Gen-Y are very connected and are excellent team players – they prefer to operate in groups and teams rather than alone. These teams can also be virtual – i.e. via social media or other electronic media platforms.



*Good writing is
clear thinking
made visible*

Bill Wheeler

2.1 HOW DO YOU TALK TO GEN-Y?

Use technology

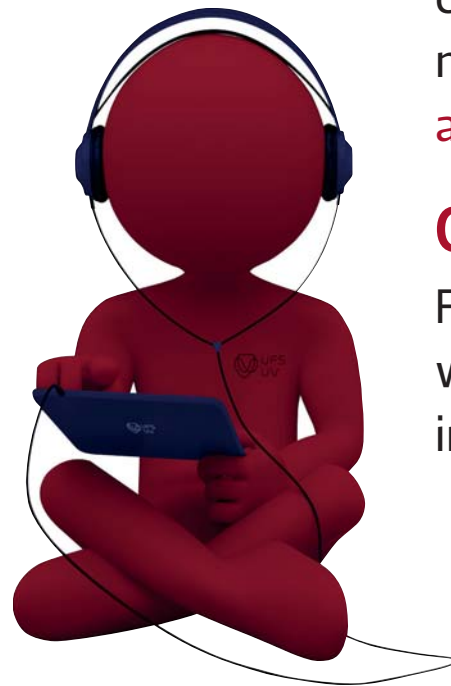
Consider WhatsApp, SMS or email. Be creative with the platform you use – some platforms host broadcast functions or multiple chat functions. Remember, teams are important.

Why?

Indicate why your message is important. Now.

Use pictures and infograms

The more visual you can go, the better. Use icons, flow-charts, graphs, etc. [Contact Communication and Brand Management for assistance.]



Social media, not “slang” media

For social media the law is: LESS. One idea, one post. Your approach may be a little more relaxed, but tidy and double checked. The same tone of voice guidelines apply.

Be quick!

In a letter, you have three sentences to convince them to continue reading. In a text message, three words. [Facetime gives you about 30 seconds before you lose attention...]

Clear instructions

For example, never assume that the student will ‘know’ how to register. Give step by step instructions [infograms work very well].

*Writing is easy. All you
have to do is cross out
the wrong words*

Mark Twain

3. HOW TO WRITE?

3.1 Know what you want to say

Before you can even consider how to say it, you must know WHAT you are going to say. There must be a reason for your communication, so that you can measure the success. For example: students must register. Why? To gain access to studies. How is it measured? Easy, check student registrations. Avoid communicating unimportant information. If students get into the habit of deleting UFS emails or SMSs, they may miss important information.

3.2 Identify yourself

Never assume that the student will know the communication is from the UFS, or from you specifically. If you use a letterhead, the UFS identity is clear – make sure that you sign it from the correct department and person. Should you send a text message, mark it UFS, and appropriate department and/or person.



3.3 Use short words, short sentences, and short paragraphs

Avoid complicated words and jargon. Don't assume that students will understand academic words like *promovandi*, *graduandi*, etc. If you use it, always provide an explanation. Never use a long word if a shorter one would do. For example:

<i>Use</i>	<i>Instead of</i>
End	Terminate
Buy	Purchase
Tell	Advise
Start	Commence
Extra	Additional

You get the picture? Use the thesaurus function to assist you until you get used to the more commonly used and shorter words. Try to keep sentences to a max of 20 words, and paragraphs to five sentences.



3.4 Be straightforward

Do not use metaphors, figures of speech, or idiomatic language. These phrases may be beautiful and poetic, but it is not understood across languages and cultures.

<i>Use</i>	<i>Instead of</i>
You must take the next step	The ball is in your court now
Start again	Back to the drawing board
Very different from	A far cry from, etc.

Being straightforward does not mean that we are dumbing down, or patronising the target audience. It simply means that we are serious to get the correct message across, and we value the receiver's time. Nobody likes to waste time searching through text trying to figure out what the sender meant.



3.5 Use active voice

Passive voice has long been an academic signature ... but is used less and less, even in academic journals. When communicating with students, and especially Gen-y, always use active voice. Instead of: *The application form was sent to you*, write: *We sent the application form to you*.

3.6 Address the person

Use 'you' instead of 'the student' or 'the applicant'. Instead of: *All applicants must report to the admin building*, write: *You must go to the admin building*.

3.7 Communicate ONE idea

An admission letter should not address registration as well. Nor should an exam letter address financial aid, for example. One idea, one piece of communication.

3.8 Organise your communication

Use headings and/or bullets in letters. Nothing is more discouraging than a looooooong letter without any visual breaks. Your communication should never look like hard work to read.

3.9 Check your communication

Make sure that whatever you want to say, is clear. Ask a colleague to read it, or someone without any knowledge of the process. The aim is to get the message across the first time.

3.10 Grammar and style

Please refer to the UFS style guide [not part of tone and voice] to check your style. This guide will clarify using capital letters, generally accepted terms, etc. Where the tone and voice guide helps you to 'sound' right, the style guide will help you to 'look' right. Better yet, get the Department of Communication and Brand Management to proofread your work. Should you have any communication that must be checked for style, tone, and voice, email it to letters@ufs.ac.za.



NB: All communication sent to students must be approved by the Department of Communication and Brand Management. Seek approval at: letters@ufs.ac.za or 051 401 2707/3422.

4. CONCLUSION

Golden rule: When in doubt, ask. We would really like to change, and maintain, the UFS student communication tone of voice into an effective tool – aiming to hit the target every time.

Please note, we know you CAN write ... you're working at a university after all. But we also know that you probably cannot write in Gen-Y, yet. Think of it as translating everything into French. If you want a French-speaking person to understand your writing, you'd have it translated into French, wouldn't you? We need Gen-Y to understand what you are writing, that is why we need to translate it into Gen-Y. And brace yourself ... because the next generation is on its way.

Thank you for paying attention to this guide – together, we can make the UFS sound the way we really are ... supercalifragilisticexpialidocious!

[What we should write is: fantastic.]



*Hard writing makes easy
reading. Easy writing
makes hard reading.*

William Zinsser



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