

Tone of Voice Guide

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Tone of voice is an important part of communicating effectively. It isn't about *what* is said, but *how* it is said. Tone of voice makes up the character – or personality – of the agency. This then goes on to set up the relationship between IP Australia and our key target audiences.

IP Australia needs an agreed tone of voice as part of our agency's brand. This tone of voice will then go on to guide all communication, producing a consistent approach to our customers and stakeholders.

In addition to tone of voice, staff utilise a glossary of terms to use instead of technical jargon and require guidance on how formal tone should sound in different situations and contexts.

What tone of voice means:

[The Australian Government Style Manual](#) defines **tone** as 'the way you express ideas. It includes the words you use, the way you put them together and their level of formality.'

The Style Manual identifies **voice** as 'a persona that people understand when they engage with the content.'

When tone of voice is referred to, it specifies in detail the way language is structured to create our corporate identity. It is the character of our agency coming through in our words, along with other aspects of the content such as font, images and design.

Why tone of voice is important:

While clear messaging and good writing (including spelling, grammar and Plain English) are crucial for understanding dialogue, the tone of voice sets the relationship the agency has with our readers. This goes on to create a particular impression on everyone who reads or hears about IP Australia.

Building on this, consider the following examples:

Think about the impact of formal, often jargon-heavy text that large organisations such as telecommunications and finance corporations tend to use. This type of correspondence focuses on being thorough and correct and often does not include any contractions - instead opting to write all terms out in full. Personal pronouns such as 'you' and 'us' are not often used, preferring definitions of parties to the agreement instead. This type of communication style often uses passive language to avoid putting people into the text at all, and the text is heavy with more formal expressions such as 'ascertain' instead of 'find out'; and 'demonstrate' instead of 'show'. The overall impression from this kind of content is that the organisation is serious, aloof, authoritarian and backed with legal structure and formality. Many of the readers of this type of content will feel intimidated and discouraged about asking questions or raising issues. It might be necessary to use such a tone for legal reasons, but the overall effect is to 'keep us in our place' and maintain a formal boundary.

Since our agency is customer focussed, it's important for our audiences to feel differently. This helps to ensure our customers feel empowered and welcome, strengthening our professional working relationships.

On the other hand - frivolity, quirky humour, irreverence and over-familiarity is not appropriate. This kind of content can be found in meal delivery services, or producers of soft drinks. Organisations like these set out to be appealing to their audience and tend to use conversational, chatty text, where writing occurs informally: as though conversations are happening between a close acquaintance - often without much focus on grammar. This particular style of content will often use a riot of colour, and bold design elements.

At IP Australia, our agency requires a tone of voice that reflects a persona that fits happily somewhere in between the above two examples.

A Personality for IP Australia



To develop a personality to guide agency content, we at IP Australia looked to existing documents and work done internally to determine how we want our agency to be seen, along with internal consultation through workshops.

The Agency's Brand Guidelines

The agency's [Brand Guidelines](#) provide personality traits for the agency, which are consistent with our mission statement.

Specifically:

Personality traits	What we mean
Thinking	We are thoughtful and inquisitive
Approachable	We are friendly and accessible
Open-minded	We are tolerant and curious
Decisive	We are process-oriented and determined

Further, the brand guidelines suggest modifying tone of voice for different kinds of content, as follows:

Content	Tone	What we're not
Knowledgeable and accurate statements	Authoritative	Aloof, jargonistic
Simple and reassuring statements	Friendly, conversational	Colloquial, informal
Optimistic and hopeful statements	Positive, active	Insincere, passive
Decisive and bold statements	Confident	Arrogant, confusing

Internal consultation

In the past year internal consultations were held to determine what characteristics our staff felt were most important for the agency.

Results revealed that the top rating concepts were:

- Professional, world class, knowledgeable.
- Reliable, effective, consistent, high quality, robust, trustworthy, valid, accurate, fair.
- Efficient, value for money.
- Simple, clear, fair, useful, easy to use, seamless, business friendly.
- Empathic, user-friendly, courteous, convenient, responsive, genuine, approachable, contactable.

These conceptualisations give us a starting point for developing principles for the agency's tone of voice.

Emerging themes include expertise, reliability, confidence and trustworthiness, professionalism and value for money, while still being accessible and human.

Key Personality Principles

Given the need for simplicity, these characteristics were grouped to three or fewer adjectives so that staff can readily understand the agency's personality.

This developed to leave the broader concepts of our agency as:

1. Authoritative/learned/expert.

2. Reliable/trustworthy/consistent.
3. Friendly/helpful/approachable.

To choose the best word that describes the agency we have consulted the Macquarie Dictionary for definitions, as well as synonyms from Thesaurus.com.

Authoritative/learned/expert

Authoritative: having due authority, official, authorised, positive; peremptory; dictatorial, domineering.

While having due authority is what we want customers to perceive, the agency is not aiming to be seen as dictatorial or domineering, so another similar word is needed.

Thinking, or thoughtful is another suggestion from the Brand Guide.

Thinking means reasoning, thoughtful; reflective – not quite the nuance the agency needs, given that thoughtful means reflective, meditative and occupied with thoughts.

Reasoning is not quite right either, since anyone could do it - not just an expert.

Learned: well-informed, accomplished, educated, scholarly, well-read, esoteric, sound, solemn.

Also, connotations of lawyers, as in 'a *learned colleague*'.

Expert: knowledgeable, proficient, adept, experienced, skilful, trained, masterful.

Also: a specialist.

Other synonyms:

Knowledgeable: possessing knowledge or understanding; intelligent.

Proficient: well-advanced or expert in a subject; skilled.

Synonyms: accomplished, adept, experienced, qualified, competent, capable.

Of these options, **knowledgeable** seems the best descriptor.

Reliable/trustworthy/consistent

Reliable is potentially also a good fit but as it has so many meanings there is room for misunderstanding.

Among the meanings: decent, dependable, honest, respectable, sincere, solid, careful, devoted, sound, righteous and responsible.

Trustworthy is a better fit: honest, accurate, authoritative, convincing, dependable, ethical, credible, steadfast, straight.

Consistent: unvarying, dependable, uniform, rational, logical, persistent, steady, true

Of these three, **trustworthy** seems to convey the concept best.

Friendly/helpful/approachable

Friendly: cordial, open, receptive, intimate, companionable, amiable, amicable, helpful, beneficial, kind, sociable, welcoming

Helpful: cooperative, supportive, sympathetic, accommodating, usable, accessible, benevolent.

Approachable: Accessible, reachable, attainable and friendly.

There is clearly a great deal of overlap between these terms, but the closest to our suggested terms would be **helpful**.

We therefore recommend using the Three Core Principles of the agency's personality as:

Knowledgeable	We are the acknowledged experts in Australia and well respected around the world.
Trustworthy	You can rely on our integrity, professionalism and top-quality services.
Helpful	We are customer focussed, friendly and here to help.

Applying the three principles to everyday communications

Tone of voice is all about the attitude behind what people are saying. Our tone of voice does not change, but the way we speak or write does. If we are angry, we may be curt; if we are happy, our voice may exude joy. IP Australia's tone of voice should be friendly, professional, and sincere to keep people engaged. Improving our tone can be as simple as smiling, taking a deep breath, and approaching a discussion or writing with a genuine desire to be **knowledgeable, trustworthy, and helpful**.

Key methods to apply when using tone of voice in everyday communication include:

1. Use positive language. That means eliminating words and phrases like "We can't," and "You need to" from your vocabulary and focusing on phrases like "I can" and "We will."
2. Remember you are talking to another human being. Conversation should not be robotic, even if there is a script to follow. Having sincerity and empathy mean that we should strive to speak to others in the way we'd would like to be spoken to.
3. Keep it casual and friendly but assess each situation separately. People may view a casual tone as insulting but being helpful is always welcome.

Applying the Three Core Principles in your communication:

Take a look at the below example responses appropriate to give to a customer who is experiencing difficulties accessing information on our website:

Knowledgeable

'We apologise, we are currently experiencing a problem and our team are working on addressing the outage. We expect to have this resolved shortly but can we assist you in answering a few of your questions.'

Trustworthy

'We're sorry you are experiencing a problem. How can we assist you to find the information you need?'

Helpful

'Oops! We're sorry, but we are experiencing a problem on our end. Let's discuss how we can get you the information need.'

The examples provided above are a guide to assist in applying the three principles. The idea is not to treat the principles in isolation but can be used as a guide to adjust your communication style to suit the audience and the situation. The aim is to empathise with your audience and adjust your style and tone accordingly.

The elements in Tone of Voice

According to the Australian Government Style Guide, tone is created by four elements:

- **Choice of words** – including simple or complex, jargon, inclusivity, use of contractions.
- **Viewpoint** – The pronouns used, such as writing in the second person (using the pronoun 'you') which is active, direct and personal. It can be more engaging for people reading and using government content.
- **Grammar** – long or short sentences are key here.
- **Level of formality** – formal, standard or informal.

Reading level

It is worth noting that while the formality of content may vary depending on the audience, the [reading level](#) should change as little as possible. Both the Australian Government Style Manual and the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines require a lower secondary education reading level, after removal of proper names and titles. This is equivalent to year 7, or between 12 and 14 years old. This considers customers which might include people with little formal education, disabilities or those with English as their second language.

Level of formality is a key component in conveying tone of voice

A **formal** tone creates a distance between the content's persona and the content's reader. Language tends to be stiff, polite with an emphasis on correctness. Formal tone is often used in ceremonies, and as a way of showing respect for someone in authority. Legal writing, policies, reports and ministerial letters often adopt a formal tone. You can also use it in emails and letters when you have not yet met the person you are writing to.

An **informal** tone suggests a relationship that is more casual and intimate, more every day. It is the way we speak to our family and friends. This is often the tone used in social media and blogs, as well as some types of internal communication. Language often becomes more informal as you become more familiar with the person you're writing to.

A **standard** tone sits between these two. The Australian Government Style Manual advises that standard tone is appropriate for most government content. It creates little distance, but not too much familiarity, into the relationship with readers. The Australian Government Style Manual tell us that most people find standard tone easiest to understand. In standard tone, you can use contractions (such as you're, don't and you'll) and personal pronouns.

While IP Australia communicates with various audiences the formality and complexity of the language, we use will vary depending on who we are communicating with and through which channel.

For most audiences, a **standard** tone will be appropriate. There will be times when a formal tone is required and times when an informal tone would be more effective. The level of formality may also vary depending on the communication channel you are using.

Achieving consistency in tone of voice

Having decided on a persona for the agency, any staff who produce content will need to be informed of the persona and how to convey it.

There is a strong link between **familiarity** and **trust**. Something familiar is easier for the brain to process, making us more receptive to communication. This is why creating a specific tone of voice is crucial.

If we use language consistently, our writing will speak directly to our audiences and enhance our relationships. The same tone of voice should be used by all staff, and some consistency is needed across all communication channels.

Included in this guide are three resources which will help a consistency of language used across our communication channels. These resources are:

- A set of language boards to determine **word choice**. These boards list some terms and jargon commonly used across IP Australia. These terms are paired with a simpler alternative word or phrase which is more easily understood by someone outside our organisation.
- A sliding scale of **formality and complexity of language** dependant on the intended audience (and communication channel). For example: a social media post will generally use language that is more conversational and will deal with simple concepts. In contrast, a webpage with information for patent attorneys will use more formal language and deal with more complex legal concepts.
- **A one-page guide** for all staff on how to write in IP Australia's tone of voice. The guide will need to explain IP Australia's persona, along with guidance on how to best achieve it. The guide needs to be brief and simple and should demonstrate the agency's tone of voice itself.

Word Choice



Word choice is important when communicating with our customers, particularly when they are individuals with little knowledge of intellectual property.

We need to avoid using words, phrases and jargon that may not be understood by customers - even if they are commonly used internally.

Below are some language boards which list some words and phrases commonly used across IP Australia, paired with simpler alternatives.

Speaking in the second person:

When we refer to IP Australia as an agency, use pronouns to make the language more familiar and approachable. To reinforce this familiarity, also use pronouns when speaking to our customers.

Example:

Instead of: 'A report was released by IP Australia today. It will benefit our customers and other stakeholders.'

Say: 'We released a report today. It will benefit you.'

If you do need to use IP Australia's official title, only use 'IP Australia'. **Do not** refer to the agency as 'IPA', or the 'Patent (or other IP right) Office'.

Example:

Instead of: 'You only need to pay a fee if the letter comes from IPA.'

Say 'You only need to pay a fee if the letter comes from IP Australia.'

See below for a more complete list.

Instead of

Say

Instead of	Say
IP Australia	Pronouns such as 'we', 'us' or 'our agency' unless it is unavoidable to use our full name 'IP Australia'.
IPA	'We', 'us' or 'our', or use our official name 'IP Australia'.
Commissioner of Patents	'We', 'us' or 'our', or use our official name 'IP Australia'.

Patents/Trademarks/Designs/Plant Breeder's Rights Office	'We', 'us' or 'our', or use our official name 'IP Australia'.
Registrar of Trademarks/Designs/Plant Breeder's Rights	'We', 'us' or 'our', or use our official name 'IP Australia'.

Referring to our agency's systems:

Our customers will generally not be familiar with the names we give to our systems, particularly when they first interact with IP Australia. We should therefore refer to the action our customer will be performing, rather than the name of the system they will use.

Example:

Instead of: 'Use ATMOSS to see if there are any similar trade marks.'

Say: 'Search for trade marks to see if there are any similar to yours.'

Instead of: 'Apply for a patent via Online Services.'

Say: 'Log in to apply for a patent.'

Instead of	Say
ADDS	Search for a design/s OR Australian design search
ATMOSS	Search for a trade mark/s OR Australian trademark search
AUSPAT	Search for a patent/s OR Australian patent search

Australian Official Journal of Designs	Search for a design/s OR Australian design search
Australian Official Journal of Trade marks	Search for a trade mark/s OR Australian trade mark search
Online Services	'Log in'
PBR database	Search for a plant breeder's right/s OR Australian plant breeder's rights search
Register of Trade Marks	Search for a trade mark/s OR Australian trade mark search

Using simpler terms

The table below lists some other terms common to IP Australia and the world of intellectual property, which may be unfamiliar or confusing to our customers. Each term is paired with a simpler alternative.

Instead of:

Use:

Agent	'attorney' or 'legal representative/representation'
Approved form	includes all the required details
Assignment	Change of ownership

Assisted filing service	'TM Headstart' or 'pre-application service'
Basic application/convention application	Overseas application
Complete application	Patent application/standard patent application
Complete specification	Specification
Continuation/maintenance fee	Renewal fee
Child	An application based on a previous application
Click here for more information	Learn more about how to use accessible hyperlinks
Embodiment	An example of your invention
File an application	Apply for a patent/trade mark/design
Filing date/priority date/date of patent/filed your application	When you/the date you applied for a... OR When you/the date you submitted your application
IP Right	IP right
Letter of demand	Also use 'cease and desist'
Multiple design application	Apply for more than one design in a single application.

National phase	Apply in Australia based on an overseas application
Open to public inspection	'Published' or 'publish details of your application'
Oppose	Can also use 'dispute'
Prior art	'a previous/existing invention' or something already 'in the public domain'
Patentee	'Owner of the patent' or 'patent owner'
Parent/priority document	Previous/original application
Registrable/registerable (or patentable)	Eligible for patent/trade mark/design protection
Renewal date/renewal due date	When your renewal fee is due
Representation (designs)	A drawing or photo of your design OR Representing your design with drawings or photos
Seal/sealing (patent)	Grant/granted
SME (for subject-matter expert)	Outside IP Australia, 'SME' is the generally accepted abbreviation for 'small-to-medium enterprises'. When referring to subject-matter experts, spell it out rather than using the abbreviation to avoid confusion.
Trade mark	trade mark

World Intellectual Property Organisation	World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). While we should use the British spelling of organisation/organise in general writing, when you are referring to WIPO, use the agency's official title, with the American spelling of 'Organization'
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Choosing the right level of formality for our key audiences



IP Australia has four key transactional groups and two key non-transactional groups that are recognised as our customer personas. IP Australia staff is the seventh persona. All these groups have different aims and needs, so it is important that we treat them separately and tailor our messaging to suit.

Transactional personas:

- Novice consumer.
- Experienced consumer.
- Novice facilitator.
- Experienced facilitator.

Non-transactional personas:

- Influencer/partner
- Collaborator
- IP Australia staff

Use the below table to determine which level of formality to use in your situation.

Standardising an approach for each audience

The below table lists:

1. Each persona.
2. Person's needs.

3. The channel(s) to use to communicate with them (you may need to use more than one channel to reach your intended audience).
4. The level of formality of language you should use.

Group	Profile	Needs	Channel	Level of formality
Novice consumer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business owners • Researchers/innovators • Self-filers 	Education on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IP processes. • Where IP fits in the bigger picture, e.g. business.gov.au, domain names. • What services IP Australia offers • Explaining technical terms 	Website (understanding IP and IP rights sections)	Standard
			Social media (Facebook and Twitter)	Informal
			Webinars	Informal
Experienced consumer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IP rights holders • Business owners • Researchers/innovators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tips for faster application process. • Support for commercialising and international expansion. • Explanation of technical terms. 	Website (IP rights sections)	Standard
			Social media (Facebook and Twitter)	Informal
			Webinars	Informal
Novice facilitator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Junior trade mark and patent attorneys 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attorney-specific content. • Transparency of the examination process. 	Website (examination, policy, international IP and oppositions sections)	Formal

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> IP attorney support staff QPs for PBR 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regulatory and policy updates. International IP collaboration. Oppositions findings. 	Social media (LinkedIn and Twitter)	Standard
Experienced facilitator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Senior trade mark and patent attorneys IP attorney support staff QPs for PBR 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Updates on examination times. Regulatory and policy updates. International IP collaboration. Oppositions findings. 	Website (examination, policy, international IP and oppositions sections)	Formal
			Consultation groups/round tables	Standard
			Social media (LinkedIn and Twitter)	Standard
Influencer/partner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> International IP organisations Other government departments /agencies University research/IP bodies Policy bodies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information relevant to the individual audiences (for example: the way the Australian IP system works, or the importance of IP). 	Personal contact (email, phone and face-to-face)	Standard or informal
			Conferences	Informal
			Social media (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn)	Informal or standard

Collaborator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tech and other contractors who work with IP Australia to develop products 	<p>Understanding of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The processes at IP Australia. Integration or migration of data on other systems. 	Personal contact (email, phone and face-to-face)	Standard or informal
IP Australia staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Canberra and Melbourne office staff Out Posted Workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information relevant to their work and workplace. Updates on projects and initiatives. 	Intranet, newsletters, emails	Standard or informal

Top 10 tips for IP Australia's Communication Style



All content produced by our agency is written from the perspective of the agency's personality, which is:

Knowledgeable

We are the acknowledged experts in Australia and well respected around the world.

Trustworthy

You can rely on our integrity, professionalism and top-quality services.

Helpful

We are customer focussed, human and here to help.

1. **Use personal pronouns.**

Instead of saying 'IP Australia', say 'us' or 'we'. Refer to our customers as 'you'. This helps to establish a friendly, familiar and approachable relationship with our customers.

Instead of: 'IP Australia values the input of its customers.'

Say: 'We value your input.'

2. **Use simple words.**

While many of us were taught at school that using big words is better than simple ones, this isn't helpful for understanding and is quite an old-fashioned approach. We are not trying to be superior to our customers - we are trying to work with them. It is important to always reject terms that hide meaning.

Example:

Instead of: 'You can file your specification utilising Online Services.'

Say: 'You can apply online here.'

3. **Use short sentences.**

Break it up. It's far easier to write short sentences as well as better for understanding. For lists, try using bullet points to help get your message across succinctly.

Example:

Instead of: 'The invention claimed in a standard patent must be new, involve an inventive step and be able to be made or used in an industry.'

Say: 'The invention claimed in a standard patent must be:

- new
- involve an inventive step
- be able to be made or used in an industry.'

4. **Reject the use of jargon and acronyms.**

These can be handy when your audience knows what they mean and can save time. But if your audience is not familiar with the acronyms you use, they can be a serious obstacle to communication. If you have to use a jargon term, define it straight afterwards to reduce confusion. Acronyms are also convenient at times but be aware that too many in a paragraph will put people off, without even reading it.

Example:

Instead of: 'SMEs often produce patentable subject matter.'

Say: 'Small businesses often invent things that can be protected by a patent.'

5. **Be active.** Passive sentences, where all references to people are missing, sound very formal. Sentences without people in them are more difficult to write and more difficult to understand. Make a habit of saying who is going to do what.

Example:

Instead of: 'Once the application is complete, processes will be followed.'

Say: 'Once you've completed the application, we will begin the process.'

6. **Be customer focused** – wherever you can, take the customer's point of view.

Example:

Instead of: 'Businesses with registered designs are less likely to have people copy them.'

Say: 'If you register your design, there's less chance someone will copy you.'

7. **Be friendly and helpful.**

Even though we are a government agency, we work with our customers, and we want them to feel that they are part of the process and that we are supporting them through it.

8. **Get to the point fast.**

Start with the key message. Put the most important thing in the most noticeable spot which will be read first. Then, make it obvious what the next steps are or what choices are available.

9. **Talk like a person.**

Choose conversational language unless a formal style is required. Use friendly, short, everyday words, and sentence-style capitalisation. In some circumstances, you can use contractions.

Example: 'Don't hesitate to contact us if you need help.'

10. **Use enthusiasm.**

Whilst this isn't advisable in every situation, it is perfectly okay to put some energy into your text. We don't want to be seen as cool, aloof and boring. Even a little humour is okay in some circumstances where formality is low, such as some social media posts.