Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) UK

Style/Tone of Voice Guide

This style and tone of voice guide is designed to provide guidelines for content creators, writers, and editors.

Our goal is to ensure we deliver information, support, and resources in a consistent and accessible way to those seeking help and understanding.

How you communicate contributes to the overall effectiveness of AA, making a positive difference to the lives of those seeking recovery.

"That's all we have, finally, the words, and they had better be the right ones." - Raymond Carver

What is tone of voice?

Tone of voice is the way we communicate our personality, values, and message to our audience. It is not just what we say, but how we say it. It affects the mood, emotion, and impression we create with our words.

Tone of voice changes depending on who you are talking to. When you talk to a toddler, your tone of voice will be different to the one you use when talking to your boss.

For an organisation like AA, our tone of voice should fit with our overall identity, values, and mission.

It's important that tone is consistent across the copy and literature we produce.

Good writing should be clear, easy to read, and easy to understand.

Why is tone of voice important?

A consistent tone of voice can be reassuring. It can help express our values, and speak directly to our target audience.

Tone of voice is important because it helps us to:

- Build trust and credibility.

- Express our empathy and compassion for people who struggle with alcoholism.

- Inspire hope and confidence in recovery.

- Motivate people to act and seek help.

What are the key elements of our tone of voice?

To know your tone of voice, you have to understand the personality of AA.

Our tone of voice is based on four key qualities of our identity:

- **Honest**: We are truthful, transparent, and authentic in everything we say. We do not exaggerate, sugarcoat, or hide the reality of alcoholism and recovery. We admit our mistakes and limitations, and we respect the confidentiality of our members.

- **Supportive**: We are friendly, caring, and respectful in everything we say. We do not judge, blame, or shame anyone for their drinking problem. We offer encouragement, guidance, and

practical help to anyone who wants to stop drinking. We celebrate the achievements and progress of our members.

- **Inclusive**: We are welcoming, diverse, and open-minded in everything we say. We do not discriminate, exclude, or impose our views on anyone. We acknowledge that everyone has their own story, background, and path to recovery. We respect the choices and beliefs of our members, as long as they do not harm themselves or others.

- **Empowering**: We are positive, hopeful, and confident in everything we say. We do not dwell on the past, fear the future or pity ourselves. We focus on the present, the possibilities and the solutions. We encourage our members to take responsibility for their own recovery, and to support each other.

Tone of voice is the foundation for building strong emotional connections with our members and potential members.

How do we apply our tone of voice?

Writing copy for a microsite/website

Our website/microsites are the first point of contact for many people who are looking for information and support about alcoholism and recovery. Content should be clear, informative, and engaging.

How to write well

Whether writing for a microsite, or creating a new piece of literature, there are general guidelines you can follow.

As well as being accessible and inclusive, it's also important to keep in mind that the visitor/reader may be drunk and in distress.

Our words need to be clear and to the point.

Keep it concise. Use short sentences.

Example:

(short): *At AA, alcoholics help each other.*

(long): *At AA, we are all alcoholics or problem drinkers who work together to support and help other alcoholics and problem drinkers.*

You can however vary your writing with a mix of long and short sentences. It can look too staccato if everything is short and blunt. A good guide is to keep to the basic principle of sticking to one main idea in a sentence, plus perhaps one other related point.

Consider reading level: Aim for a reading level suitable for 12-year-olds. Avoid complex sentence structures, idioms, and overly sophisticated vocabulary that may get in the way of understanding.

For web content, keep you page copy short, statistics show that people tend not to scroll below the fold of your web page i.e., the portion of a webpage that a user must scroll to see.

Cut unnecessary words

You don't want people to have to work hard to find the information they need. Keep it concise.

Example:

(concise): We can help. Call the Helpline FREE on 0800 9177 650.

(Unnecessary words): If you are seeking support and help, you can call the AA's National Helpline which is FREE of charge on 0800 9177 650*.*

Examples of words and phrases often used unnecessarily are qualifiers, such as: *very, completely, absolutely, probably, possibly, somewhat, slightly, generally.*

Examples of phrases that have shorter versions:

- Top priority *(priority)*

- Has the ability to *(can)*

- In the event that *(if)*

Don't use jargon or technical terms

Jargon, buzzwords, or acronyms (words formed from initial letters) can be confusing to readers.

Lengthier sentences are fine if you are spelling out an anacronym or explaining jargon.

Don't take it for granted that everyone understands abbreviations, such as 'GSO.' Spell out what GSO is to the reader the first time you refer to it. You can then use the abbreviation going forward.

Example: *Members can make their contribution direct to GSO …*

Spell it out: *Members can make their contribution direct to the General Service Office (GSO). GSO is the charity that oversees the operational running of Alcoholics Anonymous.*

If you're referring to the 'Traditions' or the '12-Steps', your reader may be new to AA and be confused as to what they are.

Example: *To keep to the 7ᵗʰ Tradition, we cannot accept outside donations.*

Spell it out: *Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is underpinned by a set of guidelines, known as the 12 Traditions. The 7ᵗʰ Tradition states every AA group should be self-supporting. As such, we cannot accept outside donations.*

In the above instance, hyperlink to the page that explains all 12 Traditions, so the reader has the option to find out more.

Use every day English whenever possible. Avoid jargon and legalistic words, and always explain any technical terms you have to use.

Be familiar but not flippant

Imagine you are talking to your reader. You don't want to come across as too formal; you want to be reliable, but friendly.

It's good to use 'I'll' 'don't' and 'haven't' which sound closer to natural speech than 'I will' 'I do not' or 'I have not.'

Be clear, helpful, human, and polite.

Always maintain a voice of experience and reliability. Make sure you aren't too over familiar, which can feel flippant, or excitable: *"Hey guys! Check out the LATEST edition of SHARE magazine!!"*

On that point, avoid exclamation marks.

Address the user

It's fine to talk directly to your audience. It's part of being open and friendly.

Addressing your readers as '*you*' and referring to AA as '*us*' or '*we*' can help build familiarity and connection. It also helps with direct appeals.

Example: *If you need help, call us. We're here for you.*

Rather than: *People seeking support can contact the AA.*

Avoid gendered pronouns like *'he'* and *'she'* so not to alienate anyone.

Active voice

Use the active voice rather than passive voice. This helps create concise, clear content.

The passive voice sounds weaker, is less direct and more formal.

Example: *We'll reply as soon as we can.*

Rather than: *Your letter will be replied to in due course*.

American and UK English

Use English spelling. For example, 'organise' not 'organize.'

Give clear instructions

If you want someone to act, don't be afraid to give clear instruction. Adding the word 'please' is fine, but it gives the reader the option to refuse the request.

For example, '*Fill out the form'* not: '*I should be grateful if you could fill out the form'* or *'please consider filling out the form.'*

Use lists

When you're communicating a lot of information, lists can help make it more digestible, and easier to read and absorb.

Introduce each list with a colon (:)

Each point should be a complete sentence, so start with a capital letter and end with a full stop, (or use semi-colons if it's a continuous sentence).

For example.

Service can take many forms, such as:

- *Sharing your experience, strength, and hope with other alcoholics.*
- *Volunteering at a meeting, such as setting up chairs, making coffee, greeting newcomers, or chairing a meeting.*

The only time you don't use full stops is if your list is just for short points. For example.

Helen needed to take:

- A pen
- A pad of paper
- Coffee

Clear headings

If you're writing for a website, digital content is often scanned or scrolled through quickly, so divide content into smaller chunks.

Use descriptive headings and subheadings that clearly indicate the topic of each section. This helps readers navigate the content and find information easily.

Keep your headlines short, between two to five words.

Don't be afraid of white space. It helps readability.

Don't underline words on a web page as it can confuse the reader to think it's a hyperlink. If you want to emphasise a word, use bold or italics.

For writing website copy, in summary:

Do:

- Use simple, direct, and active language.

- Use short sentences and paragraphs.

- Use headings, bullet points and lists to structure your content.

- Use (anonymous) testimonials, stories, and quotes from real members to illustrate your points.

- Use images, videos, and graphics to enhance your content.

- Use links, buttons, and calls to action to guide your visitors.

- Use keywords, titles, and meta descriptions to optimise your content for search engines *(see below)*.

Don't:

- Use jargon, slang or acronyms that may confuse your visitors.

- Use long, complex, or passive sentences that may bore your visitors.

- Use large blocks of text without any breaks or formatting.

- Use generic, vague, or clichéd statements that may undermine your credibility.

- Use irrelevant, outdated, or low-quality images or film.

Writing Blog posts

Writing a blog is a more personal approach. The main guidelines are:

- Write for your audience. As someone who has struggled with alcoholism, you will understand their needs and interests.

- Use empathy and appropriateness when handling sensitive topics.

- As with general web copy, use headings, lists, paragraphs, white space, and other formatting to break up your content and make it scannable.

- Always keep the AA tone of voice in mind: to be accessible, warm, supportive, honest, and empowering.

Blog posts may touch on sensitive topics around addiction. One of the important aspects of AA is sharing experiences.

Always be mindful not to offend or alienate, do:

- Treat the subject with respect; don't make jokes, assumptions or generalisations that belittle the reader or the topic.

- Check your own biases. Be aware of any prejudices that may influence your writing. Always try and see things from both sides.

- If you are going to write something that may be triggering, give the reader a warning.

- If you're bringing in facts and figures, always use credible sources. Provide references and links to data if you can.

- Always remember the person on the other side of the screen. Be empathetic. Don't judge, blame, or shame.

- Be respective of different beliefs, religions, backgrounds. Don't use language intended to shock or upset.

Ethical guidelines for content creation

There are some basic ethical guidelines to consider:

- Plagiarism – do not copy someone else's writing and pass it off as your own. You can however quote, reference, or acknowledge sources, or summarise it in your own words.

- Be mindful of copyright and permissions. This is particularly relevant if using photos. You may need to get permissions, pay, or credit the photographer if you use a photo on your website (or in any promotional materials).

- Write respectfully – be courteous and considerate of your audience, and those affected by alcoholism.

Plain English: Free Guides and Tools

Spelling mistakes and poor grammar can undermine credibility of our organisation.

If you're not a great speller and are writing in Word, it has a host of functions that can help.

If you look at the function box, you'll find:

Accessibility – this tool can check any accessibility issues.

Spelling & Grammar – this tool will run a check for any incorrect spelling as well as suggest punctuation.

If you're seeking advice or clarification on writing, including basic grammar, using apostrophes, hyphens and more, the Plain English Campaign has a number of Free guides here: [Free guides (plainenglish.co.uk)](plainenglish.co.uk)

Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) Guidelines

Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) consists of techniques you can apply to a web-page to make it rank highly in search engines such as Google, Yahoo and Bing, so it is easy to find by people searching for help.

If you're editing or updating a microsite on the AA's website, SEO will help make your web copy more visible.

The AA website uses Yoast - a popular WordPress plugin that helps optimise websites for search engines. Its features are particularly useful for improving on-page SEO.

Content Analysis: Yoast analyses the content on each page of your website, including the page title, meta description, headings, and content itself. It provides suggestions to improve these elements for better SEO.

Focus Keyword: Yoast allows you to set a focus keyword or key phrase for each web page. It then provides feedback on how well you've incorporated the keyword in your copy and suggests improvements. This is illustrated by a traffic light system, red, amber, and green; green signifying excellent SEO.

Readability Analysis: Yoast evaluates the readability of your content, considering factors such as sentence structure, paragraph length and subheadings. It offers suggestions to improve the overall readability of your content.

Content Snippet Preview: Yoast provides a preview of how your page will appear in search engine results. It shows how your page title, meta description, and URL will be displayed, allowing you to change them for maximum click-through rates.

Internal Linking Suggestions: Yoast suggests relevant internal links within your content, helping you create a well-connected website structure. Internal linking improves user navigation and search engine crawlability.

XML Sitemap Generation: Yoast automatically generates an XML sitemap for your website. This sitemap helps search engines discover and index your pages more efficiently, improving visibility in search results.

Social Media Integration: Yoast provides options to customise how your pages appear when shared on social media platforms. You can set custom titles, descriptions, and images for better social media engagement.

Cornerstone Content: Yoast allows you to mark certain pages as cornerstone content, which signifies their importance in the overall structure of your website. This helps search engines understand the significance of these pages and rank them accordingly.

By leveraging the features of Yoast, you can optimise content, improve search engine rankings, and attract more relevant traffic.

However, it's important to note that Yoast is just a tool and should be used in conjunction with a well-rounded SEO strategy and quality content creation.

SEO (Search Engine Optimisation)

Keyword Research: Conduct thorough keyword research to identify relevant keywords and phrases related to alcoholism, recovery, support, and related topics. Incorporate these keywords naturally into the website copy.

Page Titles: Optimise page titles by including relevant keywords and ensuring they accurately describe the content of each page. Keep titles concise and compelling.

Meta Descriptions: Craft unique and engaging meta descriptions that accurately summarize the content of each page. Include relevant keywords while maintaining readability and encouraging click-throughs from search engine result pages.

Heading Tags: Use heading tags (H1, H2, etc.) to structure content hierarchically. Include relevant keywords within headings to signal the importance and relevance of the content to search engines.

Content Optimisation: Create high-quality, informative, and engaging content that is valuable to the target audience. Incorporate relevant keywords naturally throughout the content, while maintaining readability.

URL Structure: Keep URLs concise, descriptive, and keyword-rich. Use hyphens to separate words in the URL structure for improved readability and search engine understanding.

Alt Text: Provide descriptive and keyword-rich text for images used on the website. This helps search engines understand the content of the images and improves accessibility for visually impaired users.

Internal Linking: Implement a strategic internal linking structure that connects relevant pages within the website. Use descriptive anchor text with relevant keywords to enhance the website's overall SEO.

Mobile-Friendliness: Ensure the website is optimised for mobile devices, as mobile-friendly sites tend to rank higher in search engine results. Use responsive design and test the website's performance on various mobile devices.

Site Speed: Optimise website loading speed by compressing images, minifying code, and leveraging caching techniques. A faster website improves user experience and search engine rankings.

Social Media Integration: Incorporate social sharing buttons and encourage users to share content across social media platforms. Social media engagement can indirectly contribute to improved search engine visibility.

Remember, SEO is an ongoing process, and it's essential to stay updated with the latest best practices and algorithm changes to maintain and improve your website's search engine rankings.

Accessibility Guidelines

Add alt text (descriptions) on images. It allows those with poor vision to use screen reading software to hear an image description. To add alt text to an image in WordPress, you can select the image and click on the Block option on the right-hand side. You will see an option for adding alt text under the Image settings. Write your desired alt text in the specified field and click Update.

Make sure your content is clear and concise, it will help ensure your web copy is accessible to users with disabilities.

You could also consider providing a glossary for terms readers may not know, or a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page.

Build a strong page structure using headings, lists, navigation, and landmarks.