Contents

☐ University of Birmingham brand – provoking a reaction – page 2
☐ Tone of voice – page 3
☐ Who are we talking to? – page 3
☐ Clarity, simplicity and elegance – page 4
☐ Formatting – page 5
☐ Show, not tell – page 6
☐ Birmingham local, national and global – page 7
☐ Tips for achieving the right tone of voice – page 7
☐ Proof reading – Page 8
☐ Summary – page 8
☐ Appendices – page 8

These guidelines should assist in creating consistency between our printed and online communications.
University of Birmingham brand – provoking a reaction

The new website has been designed to be consistent with the University’s brand principles and strategic framework, the central concept of which is to ‘provoke’: to provoke action, debate and thought. This is best expressed through our four key values below:

The University –
- Challenges convention
- Encourages inquiring minds
- Makes an impact
- Shapes thoughts and opinions through debate

In keeping with these ideas our communications should provoke a reaction.

We can use the four values to assess whether our ‘copy’ and its messages –
- excite curiosity and encourage people to look into the subject in more detail
- stimulate discussion and debate
- challenge conventional thinking or approaches and take a point of view that is distinctive
- spur people to do something in response

The website is a promotional tool
While there is some informational content (and content which links researcher to researcher where the tone of the content needs to appropriate to the audience) the majority of the higher levels of the website are written for external audiences and is intended to attract prospective partners, students and staff.

Our web presence is global and needs to complement our other promotional activities. These guidelines should assist in creating consistency between our printed and online communications.
Tone of Voice

Visitors to our website are likely to be comparing us with other Higher Education institutions, both in the UK and overseas. The HE sector is becoming increasingly competitive; so now, more than ever, we need to be motivating people to choose Birmingham over our competitors.

Our style of writing should include language that is:

- **Inspiring**
- **Emotive**
- **Precise**
- **Intelligent**
- **Concise**

While the language should be persuasive, it should not be hyperbolic or overuse adjectives or adverbs. We should be able to express our excellence through facts rather than an elaborate use of words.

Neither should the language become over familiar or over formal. The tone of voice should be intelligent, pleasant, interested and interesting.

The content should show that we have aspirations for ourselves, our students and staff, and that we are all –

- Ambitious – and not complacent
- Confident and assured – but not arrogant
- Seek to be excellent, or demonstrate excellence

Who are we talking to?

The website has been designed with the end user in mind.

The website workshops with academic and administrative colleagues identified five priority audience groups –

1. Prospective undergraduates, including international UG students
2. Prospective postgraduates, including international PG students
3. Academic researchers (collaborators and funders)
4. Business organisations (partners, collaborators, graduate employers) and prospective partners

5. Alumni

There will be sections of the site which specifically target these individual groups, while other material will be generic.

Nevertheless, wherever the user is in the site, as content providers you should always be challenging yourself –

- Is this interesting to the audience (s)?
- Is it understandable to the audience (s)?
- What is it telling them?
- Will they remember it?
- Is it something that they really need to know?

If the answer to any of these questions is negative, either remove or review the content.

When writing content it is always important to remember that the reader will be constantly asking the questions, what is this telling me? Also, more importantly, what’s in it for me? Why should I ‘buy’ Birmingham?

**Clarity and simplicity**

The website should reflect the fact that the University is a high quality educational institution.

In accordance with a high quality educational establishment, the website copy should have the following plain English attributes –

- **Clarity** – clear, unambiguous and easily understood sentences that are not overlong or include too many phrases
- **Simplicity** – straightforward but not simplistic messages that are easy to read and can be understood quickly: paragraphs are concise and make the meaning of your sentences clear and unambiguous. Remember that your readers will be intelligent.

- **Honesty** – the best policy: do not make claims that are not true. If we are not world leading in an area, do not say that we are. However, when you DO make claims for our quality, make sure that you back this up with evidence:
  Not simply: ‘We have excellent teaching’
  But rather: ‘Our teaching is excellent because…’

- **Economic language** – Ensure that you edit all unnecessary words out of your sentences, for example:
  Rather than: ‘We are seeking to ensure that we will be…’
  Use: ‘We will be…’

- **First person for general content** – write in the first person: the terms ‘you’ and ‘we’ are the preferred form for addressing the reader.

- **Third person** – write in the third person when creating a staff profile. This allows the University and the author far more flexibility to write widely about the person rather than just from first hand experience. Writing in the third person is considered more academic and it allows us and academics to sell themselves and their work a lot better.

- **Jargon free** – above all, avoid jargon (including Higher Education jargon), slang, acronyms and technical language – as they can all alienate the reader. Test your copy by asking yourself whether an international student would understand what you are writing.

**Formatting**
When writing or preparing text for the website, you need to follow the guidance below.

- Don’t capitalise or italicise text unless referencing a book, journal etc.; it can be difficult to read on screen
- Don’t underline text that isn’t a link, as this can be confusing to your users
- Text and titles should be left-aligned and not centred
- Titles and menu items should be written in sentence case, only capitalising the initial letter and any proper nouns

Headings, subheadings, numbered and bulleted lists should be correctly marked up in the content management system. The main site title is set as ‘Heading 1’. The headings within your body copy should start at ‘Heading 2’. If using the right hand column to add content to a page and it requires a title, use ‘Heading 3’

- Formatting for tables and other objects are pre-set in the content management system. We do however encourage editors to share ideas for improvements to formatting at editorial meetings. Where appropriate these will be taken on board and used across the site.

**Show, not tell**

The new website carries more visual content, pictures and moving images. Therefore, more of our work can be showcased using these media.

Wherever possible, we should be using real examples to demonstrate to our audiences the impact of research and teaching at Birmingham.

If appropriate audio and/or video content are not available, use proven examples when describing the work and attributes of your College, school or department.
Evidence the claims that you make with quotes or fact boxes with case studies. As stated in the University brand guidelines – don’t tell people you’re funny; tell them a joke!

**Example** – from new website

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Research in the community</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Our clinical trials tackle illnesses that include cancer, leukaemia, Alzheimer’s and congenital heart disease. They offer hope to thousands of Midlands’ patients and their families. We work in partnership with one of the largest teaching hospitals in Europe, the new Queen Elizabeth University Hospital Birmingham. Here, our researchers take the latest developments from the laboratory to the patient’s bedside in the quickest time possible.’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The increased use of video and audio also means that the site will use much less written content and therefore the text we do use needs to be concise and impactful.

Consider how your text will display on the screen – long lists must be avoided and/or replaced by written content. Long paragraphs of dense text are also overwhelming on a screen and should be avoided. Keep your copy strong and sparse.

**Birmingham: local, national, global**

The University’s strategic framework considers the impact that we have on a local, national and global level. Therefore, our website should include evidence of our work, locally, nationally and internationally.

Check that the film, pictures, case studies and quotes that you use include elements of each of these themes.

Consider the international audience and our desire to be amongst the leading global institutions – what evidence can we use to demonstrate that we are already an international institution?

**Tips for achieving the right tone of voice**
Always write with your audience in mind

- Communicate with them naturally – on a peer to peer basis
- Treat your reader with respect
- Read what you have written from their point of view
- Read your copy aloud to see if it makes sense aurally
- Use non-discriminatory language
- Avoid idioms – English is a very idiomatic language, which can make it very complex to the international audience
- Use the active voice as often as possible
- Be confident, sincere and proud of your University – you want to reader to catch some of your enthusiasm
- Keep the level of reading difficulty appropriate to your audience – remembering that they are more sophisticated than an ‘average’ audience
- Ask a colleague to read through what you have written: they can spot the typographic mistakes or other errors that the writer’s eye can sometimes miss

Proof reading

Proofread pages carefully. It is generally easier to proof printed versions of your pages, as reading on screen can be hard. If possible get a second person who isn’t familiar with the content to look at the pages as they may pick up issues that you haven’t seen.

Make sure you check –

- Spelling, grammar and punctuation including alt text
- Words that sound the same but are spelt differently eg, ‘they’re’, ‘there’ and ‘their’
- Words that can be easily left out eg, ‘a’, ‘the’ or ‘to’
- Links aren’t broken and go to correct pages – do this regularly
Your users will assume that all online content is current –

- Check content is up-to-date, particularly dates, times and contact information
- Create a publication schedule to help keep information up-to-date
- Remove pages that are no longer needed and set up redirects to these
- You should review your web content regularly

**Consistent**

- Check your content conforms to the University house style guidelines
- Don’t swap between different terms for the same word. For example use ‘undergraduate’, instead of swapping between ‘UG’ and ‘undergraduate’.

**Concise**

Web pages need to be concise and to-the-point as readers tend to skim-read text initially –

- Put conclusions at the beginning. Think of an inverted pyramid when you write – get to the point in the first paragraph, then expand upon it.
- Write only one idea per paragraph and keep your copy short. Paragraphs should not exceed more than about four sentences or around 60 words.
- Write short sentences using only the words you need to get the essential information across. The average sentence length should be between 15 and 20 words.
- Read and re-read text to ensure that every word and every sentence is needed. Cut out all unnecessary words, phrases and sentences.
- Read text out loud to check for any clumsiness and lack of clarity

**Clear**

Your pages need to be able to make sense even when viewed out of context. Users may have jumped directly to one of your web pages via a link or from a search
engine. With this in mind, pages should be self-contained and users must be able to understand the information on each page without having to refer to other pages on your site –

- Make sure each page has a clear title, headings and sub-headings
- Make sure the introduction to each page explains the content and context
- Acronyms, abbreviations or specialist terminology should be explained the first time they are used

Summary
The website is our single worldwide promotional tool. Keep this in mind when writing for the web.

University brand copywriting guidelines are appended to this document

- We are writing for an identified target audience of five groups: if it helps, pin pictures of people who you think typify each group around your computer screen; sounds crazy, but it can help!
- Our text should be both inspirational and aspirational
- Our writing should conform to the description: clear, simple and elegant
- The new site has less written content, relying more on visual material, so make sure that your copy is pared back to essential information and messages.
- Keep your pages short with the most important information in the top part of the screen when the user accesses the webpage.
- The user should be able to glean the most relevant information at a glance and our core messages should be clear throughout
- We need to eradicate material which is repeated elsewhere in the site, before you write a page check to see if the content already exists in the site
- Despite having multiple authors on our complex site, we are aiming for a high level of consistency in the written style

Consider the University’s impact on the local, national and global stage and keep the international user at the forefront of your mind.