



Six objections to a new tone of voice (and how to overcome them)

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Six objections to a new tone of voice – and how to overcome them

We've run hundreds of workshops showing thousands of people how to write well for their organisations. And, as you might imagine, we've come up against resistance here and there to changing to a new tone of voice. So we'd like to share the most common reasons people give for not changing their writing, what lies behind those reasons, and how to overcome them. After all, when you've invested your company's time, best minds and precious cash in creating a good brand tone of voice, you want to see it take hold.

This month we're looking at:

- Common reasons people give for not wanting to use their company's new tone
- What's really behind those reasons
- How to get past objections, and make sure things change for the best

Six reasons people resist, and how to get over them

Here are some warning signals that will show you which people are struggling with the change. Look out for these in training so that you can spot the ones with problems, help them over their objections and make sure it all rolls out smoothly.

1. This is just dumbing down

What's this really about?

This is the big one. So handle carefully.

Some people are used to being the cleverest in the office – the best writers, the ones others go to for advice about long words and where to put an apostrophe.

When these people are confident and secure, your writing workshops will be a delight. Everyone will learn from each other.

But if these people use their writing skills to show how smart they are, rather than to communicate, they'll probably feel threatened by an outsider coming in and challenging their status. They'll come out fighting, and you can be in for a verbal scrap.

So when we suggest that they use a short word that 99% of their readers will understand instead of a long alternative that will leave 15% guessing, out comes the old insult.

'So you just want us to dumb down, then? Do you want our customers to think we're stupid?'

What to do:

Avoid a head-on fight, but do gently challenge their views.

Listen to their points, then show them that it all comes down to clarity. Is it more or less clear to write the way they're used to doing it, or in the new way?

They need to see that the new way is better, and harder to do. It's not easy to write simply.

Have plenty of examples ready. Show how the best experts explain complicated things clearly. Explain that you can still sound intelligent without boring the socks off (or losing) your readers. Show how good writers vary long and short words – and long and short sentences – to make their points clearly.

And always get them thinking about their audience. Every message needs to be as clear as possible. Once they realise that simple, clear language is the best way to get messages across – and that their new tone is all about this – they just might come round.

2. I love it, but my manager would never let me write like this

What's this really about?

There are two reasons that people give this excuse. The first is that their managers really don't like it. The second is that they don't like it and are using their managers as an excuse – see point 3 for advice on this.

We've worked with teams who have taken to their new writing tone brilliantly. They've come out with some fabulous stuff over the two days of training, and are enthused and raring to go.

Then someone sighs, and a wistful voice says, 'But what are we going to do about Caroline and Jon?' There's a collective groan. They fetch you an example of Caroline's report writing, or a letter Jon's written. They're the complete opposite of everything we've been working towards: dull, long, crammed full of business speak and jargon.

Your keen new writers will sometimes have to deal with people who think proper writing has to sound 'professional' and lean towards sounding pompous and tedious. When these people are their managers, you have a problem.

What to do

Get the go-ahead right at the start from the toppest of the top. If you get your CEO to write to the whole organisation using the new tone, then there's no excuse for middle managers to block it. An announcement from a director that sounds as if a real human being wrote it will mean that you can lift this barrier and stick it in the bin.

But you can't go to the CEO every time there's a hitch. You need team leaders and managers on board too.

Get these 'influencers' together for an exclusive demonstration of how and why your new brand tone of voice is important. Show some 'befores and afters' – including a writing style very close to their own – just to make them think.

Run special workshops for team leaders only so that they're ahead of the game (often their reluctance is based on not really understanding what's going on) – and look at how to bring important aspects of your new tone into their QA criteria.

Accept that one or two will never change. One day they'll leave.

Once your top people 'get' the new tone of voice and put their weight behind it, things will take off.

3. I'm fine with it, but my manager/customers/colleagues won't like it at all

What's this really about?

This generally means 'I liked it better before, and I'm not going to change.' Just make sure that it's not real (see the previous point) before you set about fixing things.

The people who tell you this often have strong views about right and wrong, and don't like grey areas. They've been writing correctly all their lives, and now some complete stranger is coming in and saying that it's wrong? That's just not right. But instead of coming out and admitting this, they transfer their dislike to everyone and anyone else (customers, managers, compliance, legal, etc).

They might have some good reasons. They like facts. They're loyal to what they learned at school (even though, thinking back, they often realise that a 24-year-old teacher might sometimes have been wrong).

These are the people who refuse to start a sentence with 'and'. Unlike the 'dumbing down' objectors, they've probably never considered that language can change, and they'd rather not have to think about it now.

And these are the ones who are most likely to go straight back to their desks and do exactly what they've always done. They're not always old and set in their ways, either. We've met 22-year-olds who use formality and long, pompous sentences with skill and dexterity. And they're not giving it up.

If you were to introduce dress-down Fridays, these are the folks who would still turn up in suits.

But they do like clear explanations, and that's how you might win them over.

What to do

Show them how to be clear and give them lots of examples. Give them a structure. People often feel embarrassed at the thought of being creative. They like logical systems and clear instructions.

Don't ask what they don't like about the new tone. They can't tell you to your face. Sometimes they don't know. They just know that it feels all wrong. So they tell you other people won't like it.

The wrong approach is to explain that those other people will be fine. In real life, they probably will be, but this isn't the real problem. The problem is you've got someone in the room who's feeling very uncomfortable. Your task is to figure out who they are and work with them.

Do this by asking, 'What do you think your clients/manager/colleagues will say about this?' Identify your worriers early on, and focus on the details with them. The big picture, the changing brand identity – these are just one huge, terrifying unknown that will make them panic, freeze or both.

Take things step by step. Show them methods. Explain the point of each technique and what you expect the result to be. Give them skills and tools, and the confidence to use them. Give them small things to do. That way it becomes all about each task at hand – and they can get good at them, one by one.

4. Yes, but this doesn't apply to what I do

What's this really about?

There are a few particularly tricky groups to deal with – sometimes senior managers and directors, who have given the project their support, nodded in all the right places and signed a paper that says their team will be going to a writing workshop. Then someone suggests that they might like to join in. As if!

These people can make life very difficult, without realising what they're doing wrong. See point 2 for a solution.

But the other group who can derail your new tone of voice is the compliance, technical or legal folks who have a hand in signing things off. These are people steeped in jargon, who often use language as a badge of honour. Take away their jargon and technical language – write things clearly and simply – and they feel uncomfortably naked.

What to do?

Get these people in a room and work with them – offer a tailored workshop just for them. Doing this at the start, while you're developing your new tone, will save you endless grief down the road. They need to understand why you're doing this, see examples of how it works in their kind of writing and understand why it's better for everyone.

Show 'befores and afters' – including a writing style very close to their own – just to make them think.

Find people in the technical, compliance and legal teams who 'get it' and use them as ambassadors. Showcase good stuff coming out in the new tone that they've written or signed off, just to show them (and the whole business) it can be done.

5. I don't have the time to change – it'll slow me down too much

What's this really about?

There's a point to this one. Changing the way people write means they have to do a bit more thinking each time they sit down at the keyboard, instead of just doing what they've always done. Professional copywriters may be used to starting each piece of writing from scratch, but millions of people who write for work use official templates, or just make small changes to existing documents that their own manager probably copied from the manager before that. Not everyone can start from scratch; some don't have the skills to create new sentences or the time to practise.

And in customer-facing teams, people's bonuses often depend on how fast they can rip through an inbox full of emails. So they're going to fall back on the old style, unless you put the new one right in front of them, ready to go.

What to do

Either have a team of already trained writers working on new templates for everyone to use, or get an agency in to do it for you. We've used both approaches, and even combined the two.

If you have examples of your new writing style waiting for people to use – and give people a running start – they'll adapt more easily.

However you decide to tackle it, it's crucial that people come out of the training and throw themselves into the new tone straight away. If they wait for that perfect day, they'll be waiting a very long time.

6. That was fine, but I need more practise and support

What's this really about?

Well, this one might be true. Unless you're used to thinking about writing, changing to a new brand tone of voice will slow you down at first. Suddenly you're on your own – taking your first stumbling steps. It feels scary and a bit unnatural. You may not be sure that you're doing it right, and the confidence you had with the trainer there to guide you starts to fade.

Can you change in two days of training what you learned from the age of four? Not many people can. They get back to their desks and they're in a hurry – there's a deadline, targets to reach. So they slip straight back into their old ways.

What to do

Help them.

Setting up a tone of voice programme by giving everyone two days' training and then forgetting about it is a bit like getting in the landscape gardeners to give you a new flowerbed, then forgetting to water it. All that preparation, design and money... they both need maintenance. Don't let it die off and have to start all over again.

You can either do it yourself, or get the gardeners back in for regular maintenance. But it does need doing.

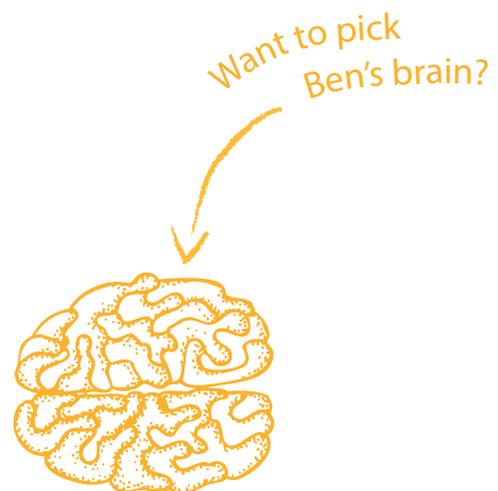
A few ideas:

- Run tone of voice surgeries, in person or online.
- Get your writers together for sessions when they shut out the rest of the world, sit down and scribble. Then talk over each other's work.
- Build time for revision and peer checking into the writing process.
- Create a checklist for people to use – on themselves and on each other.
- Print postcard-sized reminders and stick them all over the building: inside loo doors, on the intranet, on top of your writers' monitors.
- Email regular tone reminders.
- Have a day when everyone plays 'spot the passive language' and earns points for it.
- Give writing awards to people who use your new brand tone well.

Think of yourself as the language gardener, and don't forget your watering can.

Other objections?

So these are a few of the main reasons we've heard people give for not wanting to change how they write. Come across any others? If so, we'd love to hear them (chances are we have, somewhere along the way). Ring Ben on 0709 221130 and he just might give you the answer to help bring people round.



We help companies to be more human

When we talk to someone face-to-face, we instinctively know how to get on with them, don't we?

But when we sit down to write, it somehow seems harder to be ourselves, or our brand.

We'll help your business use the right tone of voice to get and keep more customers.

And have more fun doing it.

We're always happy to get out from behind our desks. So if you'd like to chat or meet up, get in touch with Ben.

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