Tone of voice guidelines
Welcome to the ICSA tone of voice guide. We have developed this document so that anyone writing on behalf of ICSA can do so in a consistent and effective way.

The way we talk, or write, is a key part of ICSA’s personality. ICSA’s ‘voice’ is an important tool for helping people understand who we are and what we do. It allows them to trust us, and inspires them to join us. We put ICSA’s reputation on the line every time we write a letter, report, flyer or email. We need to be consistent and measured in everything we do.

Please use this guide regularly when creating your communications – it really is important to us as we build and develop ICSA’s brand.

We have deliberately kept it short. If you have a question that is not covered your first port of call should be The Economist’s excellent and comprehensive style guide. The Economist is famous for its clarity, style and precision and it is a great place to go if you are interested in developing your business writing skills. We do differ on some points (e.g. we prefer single quotation marks) but on the whole this is a good match to our aims. Visit economist.com/styleguide/introduction.

For the correct spelling of words use Chambers Dictionary chambers.co.uk. Again there may be rare occasions where we differ. If you still have questions after that please speak to ICSA’s style guardian, Kerry Holmes:

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ICSA’s values and tone

ICSA’s brand values underpin everything we say and do, how we work with people, how we behave and how we communicate. Use them as a filter for your writing. Everything we say to a colleague, member or customer should support one or more of these values.

Openness: we are open, accessible and honest in our business and behaviours.

Integrity: we are impartial, independent and informed.

Authority: we speak for our profession with experience and expertise.

Finding the right tone of voice comes from thinking about your reader. This is what you do every day when you speak to someone. You automatically adjust the way you talk – your vocabulary, the rhythm of your speech and the directness of what you say.

You need to understand the thoughts, feelings or actions of the person you want to influence in writing. You will have to work out if they are knowledgeable about the subject and if they have entrenched views. They may be sceptical or even hostile. Are they reading because they need to or because they want to? Everything you know – or deduce or guess to be true – about your reader will help you to find the right tone.

ICSA’s tone of voice demonstrates how we live its values. We sound informed and authoritative, and we use clear, everyday language that can be understood first time. Below we describe how each value connects to tone.

Openness equates to:
- Being easy to deal with. Sounding clear and confident by not using unnecessary jargon or off-putting language.
- Choosing information carefully and then making sure it is easily understood and presented logically and fluently.
- Being as straightforward as possible by using active verbs, ‘we will’, rather than ‘it will be done’.
- Being personal. Sounding natural and conversational, without being overfamiliar. Contractions (‘I’ll, we’ll, you’re, don’t, won’t’) are not a shortcut to informal writing and can make the text harder to read.
- A fresh and contemporary voice. Never distant or old fashioned. We use modern grammar and language.

Integrity equates to:
- Communicating ICSA’s viewpoint with honesty, clarity and consistency.
- Not using words to try to obscure issues that might be uncomfortable to address.
- Displaying a deep knowledge of ICSA’s industry and an understanding of the issues affecting our members.
- Expressing ourselves with dignity, even in challenging situations.

Authority equates to:
- Having a quiet confidence and assurance. Explaining benefits clearly. We are proud of ICSA’s products and services, as well as its point of view.
- Making sure the information we give to members and customers is useful, relevant, respectful and credible.
- Using facts, figures and third-party endorsements to convey ICSA’s achievements and to support its claims.
- Avoiding cliches and gimmicks – e.g. exclamation marks, puns and hackneyed phrases. For example, we would not say ‘it’s FREE!’ or as ‘a valued customer’.
There is much to think about before your hands hit the keyboard. Whether you are writing an email to a member, copywriting a brochure, or drafting an informal blog, there are five things you should consider.

1 Your reader

Start with the clearest possible picture of your reader and keep that picture in your mind as you write. This will help you make a connection and offer something with the desired impact.

Take great care with this step. ICSA’s readers are not all the same. Be very specific about whom you are addressing. If writing to a group, think about the characteristics they share: their needs, motivations and experience, as well as their familiarity with ICSA.

As a membership organisation, we are fortunate to have many opportunities to meet and engage with our members and other stakeholders. Everyone who writes on behalf of ICSA should make the effort to get to know them. If you do not yet know your readers well enough you should speak to a colleague who does – whether you are writing technical guidance or a customer service email.

2 The result you want

The most basic mistake in business writing is to sit down to work without a really clear idea of the intended result. Ask yourself what you are trying to achieve, and stick to that goal.

Every time we write we want to persuade the reader to think, feel or do something.

At the very least we want them to believe:

• this writer knows what they are talking about
• these people understand what I am up against
• I like the sound of this organisation
• this is really useful

Every sentence you write must move you closer to your aim.

3 The content

Most of ICSA’s readers are used to ploughing through dry, complicated documents in search of something they might find useful. When you write, your job is to give them what they need.

It helps if ICSA’s writing is enjoyable too. The writer who presents their case most engagingly will always have the edge.

It is all about answering your reader’s questions: ‘What’s in it for me?’ ‘How does that help?’

Above all, you should match your style of writing to the type of communication you are creating. We have a number of different channels, and the way we write differs for each. For example:

• Governance and Compliance magazine. Here we write with a point of view, offering thought leadership and ICSA’s interpretation of the industry’s key issues to inform and entertain. The magazine also has features which give a broader overview.
Blogs. A blog is a more personal platform. It is less tied to the formal corporate voice but it still needs structure. It is a good way to communicate bite-sized information and comment. Do remember that most readers have not met you; they may not share your cultural references or your sense of humour; and they could be visiting the ICSA site for the first time.

Marketing materials. Clear and compelling messages to persuade and inspire – marketing materials must sell ICSA. Let the content do the convincing. We cannot just tell readers that ICSA is the right organisation for them, we need to demonstrate it. That means keeping the content relevant, and spelling out the benefits.

Technical guidance. These are clear, easy-to-follow reference materials, often guiding practitioners through complex legal text and regulatory frameworks. These documents favour precision over style but should still be clear and readable.

Web. Web copy is scanned more than read. Good web writing is direct, concise and relevant, with clear signposting of the main points.

Presentations. If you are speaking within Saffron House or at an external event you are representing ICSA. The words you say, the slides you present and any materials you hand out should reflect our values, tone, style and branding.

Marketing and customer service emails. Make no mistake about the importance of email communication. Emails often represent members’ most regular contact with ICSA and demand just as much attention to tone and content as showpiece print documents.

Linking this back to content: if you are writing a marketing communication and the information you are giving will not help acquire a new member or sell a product, your reader does not need it or want it. If a technical guide does not explain a problem or give clear advice, it is not doing its job; if a feature in Governance and Compliance magazine is not relevant it should not be in there. By getting rid of any padding, the useful content stands out and your writing is clearer and quicker to read.

The structure

Good writing flows through a clear beginning, middle and end. Always put your most important point first – in the article, in the paragraph and in the sentence. Readers want to know straight away why they are being expected to read this document, email or guidance note.

Make it easy for your readers to grasp your point quickly and want to read on. Persuade them they will get something of value in return for investing their time. Convince them it is relevant, useful and might prove interesting.

Be aware of how you read, or watch others read. You will notice that reading is rarely an uninterrupted, linear process. Our eyes dart about looking for the immediate: the headline, the first few words, a caption, a pull quote or a subheading. We assess whether it is worth reading, what we should read first, what we can scan, when we can skip to the next page, flick from the back to the front or bin it.

Make it easy for your readers. Headlines must be engaging and subheadings, pull quotes, text tables and captions should indicate what comes next. Readers need to be able to scan the page or the screen and pick up enough to get the gist of your message. Then they can decide whether it will be worth reading it in more detail.
Good business writing (continued)

5 The style

Your writing should reflect ICSA’s personality. Think of what you want to say, then say it as simply as possible. This is not dumbing down. We recognise that ICSA’s readers are intelligent and capable of wading through complex, technical prose. This is about respecting that they are busy people. We should put in the work to make things easier, quicker and clearer so they come to us first.

Write naturally, but do not be too chatty. Your writing should have the feeling of speech, but with more clarity and a broader vocabulary. Bear in mind that your reader cannot ask you questions, so your writing needs to be precise, thorough and well-structured.

Here are a few tips for writing the ICSA way.

Choose verbs instead of nouns. For example, we might write ‘we will manage your problem until resolution’. Instead, try ‘we will help you resolve your problem’. Use adjectives and adverbs sparingly. Try taking them all out and then put back the few that you need. Rather than ‘we significantly influenced the government and regulators’ try ‘we influenced the government and regulators’.

Use an active voice (not passive). Say somebody will do something not something will be done by somebody. For example, ‘the regulator has published a useful guide’ rather than ‘a useful guide has been published by the regulator’. It helps your writing to sound personal and it makes somebody responsible for taking an action.

Always choose a short word when you can. This way when you have to use a long word it will make the sense clearer not more obscure.

Do not hedge. By this we mean do not over- qualify or be overly cautious in articulating the claims you make. ICSA’s members expect an opinion, and we should be confident in asserting one. This is easiest if you stick to facts.

Avoid tautology – the needless repetition of the same idea e.g. ‘becoming increasingly more important’. Also resist redundancy – the addition of words that do not add to the sense e.g. ‘a period in excess of the coming five years’.

Finally, keep complicated sentence constructions to a minimum. Long sentences and long paragraphs need re-reading. You should never send your reader back. Every time your reader has to revisit a sentence, you stand a chance of losing them.
Top tip: read your copy aloud
or better still, ask a colleague to read it out aloud

Listen.

You should be able to hear yourself speaking to your reader.

If you sound stuffy, overly formal, pompous, smug or boring, or you sound as if you are making a decree or addressing a crowd in a stadium, it is not ICSA.

There also needs to be a clear train of thought running through your words. Make your points concisely in a logical order, without resorting to cliché or overused phrases.

Beware of the other extreme. Do not be too informal when writing to a member or customer. Certainly not unless you know them well enough to be confident they will not mind. It is worth reflecting: ‘What will a senior colleague think if the person I am writing to decides to circulate what I have written?’
Keeping it simple

Using simple words instead of complex ones can help improve clarity. The list below could go on forever, so we have chosen just a few as examples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Complex word</th>
<th>Simple alternatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>alleviate</td>
<td>ease, lessen, reduce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ascertain</td>
<td>find out, discover, establish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assist</td>
<td>help</td>
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<tr>
<td>attain</td>
<td>reach, achieve</td>
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<tr>
<td>cease</td>
<td>stop</td>
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<tr>
<td>deficiency</td>
<td>lack</td>
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<td>eschew</td>
<td>avoid</td>
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<tr>
<td>endeavour</td>
<td>try</td>
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<tr>
<td>frequently</td>
<td>often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>henceforth</td>
<td>from now on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>initiate</td>
<td>begin, start</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>manifest</td>
<td>show, display</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>necessitate</td>
<td>need, require, demand, involve, call for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parameter</td>
<td>limit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>paradigm</td>
<td>theory, model, assumption, approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>purchase</td>
<td>buy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sufficient</td>
<td>enough</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>utilise</td>
<td>use</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The example below shows how replacing complex words with simple words – and keeping sentences short – can help you convey your message more effectively.

Complex

The training is structured around a multifaceted incremental work plan combining novel content design based on new pedagogical paradigms blended with e-learning environments to facilitate a hybrid mode of delivery.

Simple

The training is structured in stages. The updated content design reflects new approaches to teaching. It also features e-learning elements to allow us to deliver the course through a mix of channels.
Some quick tips from *The Economist*

- Use the language of everyday speech, not that of a spokesman, lawyer or bureaucrat
- Don’t be hectoring or arrogant
- Don’t boast of your own cleverness by telling readers you correctly predicted something or that you have a scoop
- Don’t be too chatty
- Don’t be too didactic
- Don’t be sloppy in the construction of your sentences and paragraphs

George Orwell’s six elementary rules

- Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech that you are used to seeing in print
- Never use a long word where a short word will do
- If it’s possible to cut out a word, always cut it out
- Never use the passive where you can use the active
- Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent
- Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous
ICSA supports governance professionals at all levels with:

- A portfolio of respected professional qualifications
- Authoritative publications and technical guidance
- Breakfast briefings, training courses and national conferences
- CPD and networking events
- Research and advice
- Board evaluation services
- Market-leading entity management and board portal software