Speaking the same language

Developing a tone of voice for ABRSM
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All our communications should convey what we are: an open, rigorous, passionate and bold organisation that has the confidence and gravitas to be the worldwide authority on musical assessment.

We can express these qualities through our tone of voice, which will help everyone in ABRSM to communicate consistently.

Our tone of voice is how we speak to each other, our customers, the press and anyone else with whom we need to communicate. From the written word to the way we answer the phone, everything we say creates a coherent impression of who we are and what we stand for.

A consistent tone of voice is integral to our brand, because it gives us opportunities to express what makes us special, every time and everywhere we communicate, for instance in:

- Internal communications
- Letters and emails
- Campaigns and events
- Leaflets, catalogues, posters, articles, newsletters
- Online and multimedia channels
- Media relations
- Job ads
- Customer and representative relations
- Signage

Because it reduces the need for interventions and editing, speaking coherently and consistently has considerable financial and functional benefits. It also helps emphasise that all our activities – assessment, resources, professional development and giving – are provided by the same organisation.

Having a single tone of voice doesn’t mean bland uniformity - we can use it as a springboard to express what we are: engaging, respected, influential and courteous.
What makes our tone of voice different?

Like every element of our brand, our tone of voice is derived from the ABRSM blueprint:

Our tone of voice is based on our unique brand values. We are:

Open
We believe everyone has the right to enjoy and excel at music and we operate our business in an open, honest and inclusive way.

Rigorous
Our standards are second to none and our success depends on our integrity, impartiality and authority.

Passionate
Our passion for music and its positive impact on society drives everything we do. We share that passion with all our audiences.

Bold
We’re brave enough to try new things and capitalise on technological change. We’re bold enough to speak up for what we believe in.

Not every piece of communication can always be simultaneously open, rigorous, passionate and bold. In assessing what we need to say, we can decide which of the brand values are best expressed in a particular communication. For instance, is a piece about the effect of music on young people’s lives passionate enough? Is a piece about publication sales rigorous enough? It’s always worthwhile to check what we’ve written against the ABRSM blueprint.
In this section, we’ll take a look at some examples from a wide range of our communications. We’ve chosen them not to hold them up to particular criticism (the general standard of ABRSM communications has long been exceptionally high) but because they highlight many of the problems we regularly confront. They are accompanied by suggested rewrites which illustrate how we can improve the way we communicate by taking into consideration three things to help us make our tone of voice more distinctive and effective.

1. Celebrate the subject
As the world’s leading authority on musical assessment, we can have the confidence to talk about ourselves in a way that is not only rigorous but also friendly and enthusiastic.

For instance, when someone is offered a job at ABRSM, instead of only saying:

We are pleased to offer you the position of [job] with ABRSM, subject to satisfactory references. Enclosed are a Written Statement of Employment Particulars and a copy of the grievance and disciplinary policies.

we can take the opportunity to demonstrate to this potential new team member our passion (by conveying our pride in being a world leader) and our openness (by offering practical help):

We’re delighted to offer you the position of [job] with ABRSM, the world’s foremost authority on musical assessment. We’ll do all we can to help you settle into your role.

While we check your references, we’re enclosing some essential information: a written statement of employment particulars (which sets out all you need to know about the job) and a copy of grievance and disciplinary policies (which ensure that any problems that may occur are dealt with fairly and reasonably).

As with the example above, there are circumstances where a few more sentences are necessary to get the message across. However, finding the words that work best will often create more direct and concise communication.
For instance, in this news item:

**India**

Following a huge increase in entries in Southern India over the past few years, an additional regional Coordinator* has been appointed in order to look after the organization* of Kerala region. Gita Chacko, who previously looked after Kerala within her territory, will remain Co-ordinator* for Bangalore and is responsible for the organisation* of the rest of the Southern India area, but the new Regional Coordinator for the Kerala area will be Sebastian Stephen D’Cruz.

[75 words]

the reader is slowed down by unnecessary repetition (‘Kerala’, ‘Southern India’, ‘look after’) and has to read to the end of the second sentence to reach the point of the story. With a little editing and a more journalistic approach to researching, we can tell a bolder, more confident story:

**Additional Co-ordinator for Kerala, India**

Following a 32% increase in entries, we welcome Sebastian Stephen D’Cruz as the additional Co-ordinator for the Kerala region in Southern India. Gita Chacko continues to oversee the rest of the area from her base in Bangalore.

[42 words]

Data gives the story validity, the use of the present tense gives it vitality and the active voice (‘we welcome’), rather than the passive (‘has been appointed’), gives the story energy.

To express our open and welcoming attitude, we refer to ourselves wherever possible in the first person plural: ‘we’, ‘us’, ‘our’.

* Decisions about appropriate spellings should be informed by The Economist Style Guide, now agreed as in use by ABRSM. For this specific example, we would use UK English spelling.

Depending on the audience, we can use a headline that concisely sums up a story (for instance, ‘Success at MIA Awards’), or entices the reader to find out more (‘International web pages go live’).

Headlines used throughout longer communications break up uninvitingly large blocks of text, and can either give the scanning reader an idea of what the piece is about and where to find information: ‘Graded exams’, ‘Music Medals’, ‘Online developments’; or intrigue them into discovering more: ‘Fugues’, ‘Phobias’, ‘Forumites’.

**Speaking the same language**: Celebrate the subject
We should aim to be bold but not over-emphatic (avoiding a flurry of exclamations, for instance). Being friendly may require using a few more words but that is preferable to appearing a little impersonal, as in this extract from the CT ABRSM Handbook:

**PLEASE READ THIS FIRST!!!**
Louisa Thomas is the person to contact for queries concerning a financial or administrative matter. To take any academic problems further than the Course Leader, Course Director Richard Crozier can be contacted via Louisa Thomas:
Tel 020 7467 8257

Addressing our audiences directly expresses our honest and inclusive attitude. Whenever necessary, we should finish a communication with an invitation for people to get in touch with us in whatever way they prefer:

**Resolving problems**
If you have any financial or administrative queries, please contact Louisa Thomas. If you would like to discuss an academic matter that you don’t feel you can approach your Course Leader with, you can get in touch with our Course Director Richard Crozier, via Louisa:

T +44 (0)20 7467 8257
E lthomas@abrsm.ac.uk

Telephone numbers and addresses should always be given in full for the benefit of our international audiences, using the format below:

**ABRSM**
24 Portland Place
London W1B 1LU
United Kingdom

T +44 (0)20 7636 5400
F +44 (0)20 7637 0234
www.abrsm.org
2. Show, don’t tell

A seductive and intelligent way to engage our audiences is to show them our passion for music, rather than tell them about it.

For instance, when describing our publishing activities, instead of beginning with a claim, followed by information that does little to draw the reader in:

ABRSM publishes an enormous range of exam related books alongside some significant other titles.

we could immediately engage the reader by opening with some impressive statistics, followed by some actual examples:

We published 148 new titles in 2007, including new volumes for violin, flute and clarinet in our Time Pieces series. J P E Harper Scott’s Elgar: An extraordinary life, our contribution to the 150th anniversary of the composer’s birth, was described by Gramophone as ‘the best short book on the composer yet.’

Again, more words may be necessary to paint a vivid picture, but they can often be saved elsewhere: in quotations for instance.

As the worldwide authority on musical assessment, we don’t have to say something flattering about ourselves when someone has said it about us. Quotations should represent the full range of our audiences (and perhaps could be stored on the Intranet as a resource for everyone to use).

Short quotations have more vitality than long ones, so we should edit them (without distorting the original), for instance:

Harper-Scott is an unusually perceptive and persuasive advocate, who has something fresh to say about most of the composer’s major works. The best short book on the composer yet. (Gramophone)

could be re-phrased as:

The best short book on the composer yet. (Gramophone)

I thought the Bristol 2007 jazz Taster Day was thoroughly worthwhile. Richard Ingham was very charming and put everyone at their ease very quickly. He helped to demystify the whole jazz/improvisation myth. Thank you for a very informative and enjoyable day. (Linda Harland)

could be shortened to:

A thoroughly worthwhile, informative and enjoyable day... helped to demystify the whole jazz/improvisation myth. (Linda Harland, Bristol 2007 Jazz Taster Day)
3. Be direct and accurate

Jargon is often a symptom of lack of confidence - it’s the language of an organisation talking to itself (for instance ‘a full portfolio of robust initiatives is now in place and will be rolled out in an ongoing programme throughout the current financial year.’)

Because we’re approachable and open, we should always avoid jargon and any other ‘introverted’ language.

We want to attract imaginative and energetic people to work with us, so job ads should avoid ‘HR speak’ such as ‘the post holder’s key task is to underpin the development and delivery of online learning, teaching and assessment strategies.’

To convey exactly what a job will encompass, in language to which prospective employees will respond positively, speak to the appropriate line manager and ask them to describe what the position entails. Use the enthusiasm and detailed knowledge of what they say to add vitality to the ad.

We can expect intelligence but not always expertise in our audiences, so whilst we take every opportunity to share knowledge, we communicate it in a well-informed and approachable way. For instance, for our younger audiences visiting SoundJunction, we could add relevant information and explain specialist language:

In Noye’s Fludde (Noah’s Flood in Medieval English), the instruments in the small orchestra, or concertino, include ‘strung mugs’ (teacups which are struck to give the sound of raindrops!)

Using a direct style doesn’t mean being blunt. Although signage has to convey as much information in as few words as possible, we should be careful to put ourselves in the place of the reader and give the information they are most likely to need.

So for instance, instead of saying:

Exam in progress

a sign accompanying a restricted area could use a few more words to be more generous and helpful:

We are holding exams in this room.
Ask at Reception to find out what parts of the building are open.

As a respected, international organisation, we need to communicate accurately and correctly with people whose first language may not be English. We have an impressive track record in producing communications without spelling and punctuation mistakes, typing errors and poor grammar. We can ensure that our high standards are maintained by careful proofreading (always more effective when done by someone fresh to the piece).

To achieve consistent spelling, punctuation, grammar etc. everyone in the organisation should use The Economist Style Guide. This is available online at http://www.economist.com/research/StyleGuide

A member of each department has a reference copy of the expanded version of the style guide, and can help you with referencing anything you’re unsure about.
Golden rules for written communication

Write. Re-write
When you’ve written something, read it out loud – it’s the perfect way to ensure that it makes sense and sounds natural. If it doesn’t immediately flow, go away and do something else. The right words will come if you take a little longer.

Be clear and concise
Avoid long and complex sentences. Try to keep to one idea per sentence. A paragraph should express a single theme. Avoid using jargon and abbreviations. Explain an acronym the first time you use it.

Avoid bad grammar
Grammatical accuracy is essential to reflect our reputation for being an intelligent and substantial institution. Use an agreed style guide to clarify such problematic details as split infinitives and the position of apostrophes.

Test run your work
Share your copy with other people – and if they show you something you don’t understand, ask the person who wrote it to explain it to you. Then get them to write down what they just said!

Proofread everything
Always ask someone to proof what you’ve written – few of us are infallible. With contentious spellings (such as proof-read/proof read/proofread) refer to The Economist Style Guide.
Writing for the web

Remember that, on average, people take twice as long to read from a screen than the page. You can help them by aiming to edit what you’ve written by 50%. For instance, we could easily avoid the unnecessary repetition in this introduction to SoundJunction:

Whether you want to make your own music, play someone else’s music or just listen, knowing how music works gives you a better experience and helps you understand what’s going on.

On SoundJunction, finding out how music works (sometimes called music theory) is all about experimenting with your own music, and listening to what’s going on inside other music. You don’t need to be able to read music – just listen and play.

Use short, introductory paragraphs with a clickthrough to larger amounts of text. Most people scan a webpage, rather than start reading at the top and working down, so break up slabs of text with bullet points and with headlines that ‘tell the story’, so that the reader gets an idea of what is covered in the piece. Copy that runs over more than a few pages should be made downloadable as a PDF.