



Tone of voice guidelines

May 2014

The power of words

Words are powerful, which is why they need to be chosen carefully. A bad sentence is a wasted opportunity. These guidelines are to help you write better copy for Christian Aid so you can help us deliver on our ambition.

A snapshot of Christian Aid's communications in any given week could look something like this: a web page on the horrors of the civil war in Syria; tweets cajoling churches to hold a bake sale during Christian Aid Week; a report pressing European policy makers to close tax loopholes; a leaflet urging campaigners to discuss climate change with their MP over a cup of tea.

A single tone of voice is obviously not going to cover such a huge range of communications. Our tone needs to flex to fit with the subject matter, the channel and the audience. But, in all of our communications, we should speak in a way that reflects Christian Aid's purpose: to bring about dramatic change in the world.

Aim to inspire

We are not a neutral, dispassionate observer of events and our main aim is not to impart information to our readers. We are here to inspire people to give, act and pray for an end to poverty. So our words have to work harder than those on, say, the BBC website.

Journalistic standards of accuracy and honesty must always underpin our writing. We must always be authentic and credible. But we're moving away from a straight, objective style to one that engages people at an emotional level.

Emotion, passion, faith

Part of this means moving towards a more conversational tone in our writing. Research shows that people tend to switch off when they're addressed in a formal or corporate tone, whereas making people feel like they're part of a conversation – by using less formal language – is much more likely to keep them engaged.

We can also give our words more power by drawing on the depth and passion of the language of faith: Christianity has inspired Christian Aid's work from the beginning and it still moves many of our supporters today.

So here are some techniques to give your writing an emotive and conversational tone, and to use the emotion, immediacy and metaphor of Christianity.

Emotive style

When you sit down to write don't ask yourself 'what do I want the reader to *know* when they read this piece' ask yourself 'what do I want the reader to *feel*'.

People quickly forget factual information, the emotion will stay with them.

Human connection

Our stories need to convey the human drama, building empathy between the reader and those affected – showing what it really means to experience poverty, homelessness, war and grief. This means using your imagination to bring to life what individual people are going through.

Example: Is it the statistic or the description of families waiting for the storm to hit that affects you more?

More than 12 million people are in the path of the Typhoon Haiyan as extreme winds travelling up to 200 miles an hour rip through the Philippines.

Families are huddling in darkness as the storm closes in – hoping their shelters are strong enough to withstand winds of such force.

The more specific to an individual person or family you can make it, the better.

Example: The war in South Sudan killed 2 million people, but the following description is likely to have more emotional impact:

Anoon still finds it difficult to talk about her precious son, David. She has to fight back her anguish when she speaks of her pride in the strong, intelligent young man she lost. 'I will never forget the death of my son,' she says.

Example: The scale of the suffering in Syria is difficult to imagine, but the suffering of this grief-stricken family brings home the human cost of war:

Buotros's house was bombed, killing his wife and unborn child. Brokenhearted, he is now caring for his sons Youssef and Rafah as best as he can in a refugee camp in Lebanon. But life in the camp is hard – especially for young children struggling to make sense of the death of their mother.

Descriptions that really bring to life the personalities of the people we're helping can also help break down the sense of 'them and us', and change the perception that they're passive recipients of aid.

Example

Rojan – a bright, vibrant, joyful 15-year-old – is a whirl of activity: one minute she's cleaning the house, next minute she's tending the animals, next minute she's gathering up vegetables. She's so involved in everything that's going on, you start to wonder whether there is more than one Rojan.

Show the need

Don't shy away from describing the full scale of the need – it's what moves people to give.

Example

As people emerge in shock from the ruins, many are coming to terms with the deaths of loved ones and the fact that everything they own has been swept away.

People are desperately seeking missing friends and family. Hundreds of thousands have no food, no clean water and no shelter. There is nowhere for them to go.

Get angry!

Don't be afraid to show outrage – or be adamant that things have to change.

Example

The number of people driven from their homes by war is on the rise. It stands at 42 million people. An appalling statistic and a stain on the conscience of humanity. We can't turn our backs. We must act now.

Start where your reader is

Remember, your audience is unlikely to have experienced or witnessed anything like the poverty you're describing.

One technique to build empathy is to start in your reader's world and then show, despite the apparent differences, how much they have in common with people in poor countries.

Example: Put your reader in their shoes and create the sense that 'this could so easily be me'.

When your child is ill, you don't expect to travel far to get the help you need. And when you reach your local doctor, you expect to find somewhere clean, sterile and safe. Somewhere that will make your little one feel better. In South Sudan you can expect the opposite.

Have you ever spent a night lying awake listening to the sound of a child coughing? If so, you'll know how distressing it can be. But it becomes even harder to stand if you have no way of making that cough better. And it's completely unbearable if all you can do is watch that child suffer as the cough slowly gets worse and worse. For mothers in South Sudan, their fear is that a cough can become pneumonia.

Emotive words

Using emotive language like 'precious son' builds a sense of emotional connection. Similarly 'appalling violence' shows a feeling of outrage and expresses our passion for change.

Inject urgency

Create the sense that things have reached a critical point in time – eg 'people like this need your help now'. But be wary of writing 'on automatic'. Stop and think: is there a different way to say it? If you've used 'you can make a difference' or 'you can help' too much, try:

You have the power to save a life.

Do something amazing today.

Now is the time for action.

Avoid information for information's sake

A central core of factual reporting is essential. But any detailed information extraneous to the central message and that doesn't significantly add to the reader's understanding – information for information's sake – can be stripped out.

For example:

- Long lists of statistics when one or two key ones would suffice.
- Long lists of organisation or partner names and the inevitable acronyms that go with them, when a single reference to 'our partners' would do.
- Giving very detailed geographical locations – eg 'Namukuse village in Turkana Central District, northern Kenya', rather than the more succinct, more readable and just as useful 'a village in northern Kenya'. Apart from the fact this distracts from the story, research shows that people's brains switch off when confronted by names that are difficult to pronounce.
- Any information that doesn't add to the main narrative of the story you're trying to tell or the message you're trying to convey.

Ask yourself: does the reader really need to know this? Cut anything extraneous. The shorter the copy the more likely it is to be read and the more room for images and engaging design.

Warm, inclusive style

Conversational tone

In our lighter communications particularly – social media, events posters, etc – use a warm, human, conversational tone. If people feel like they're part of a conversation, they tend to be more engaged. Write as if you're speaking to a friend, albeit a mature friend.

Put the reader at the heart of the copy – use 'you' more than 'we' – ie 'you can help more families lift themselves out of poverty.'

In all publications – even reports – write in a less formal, more conversational style and use contractions such as 'we're', 'they're' and 'you're'.

Use 'we' (rather than 'Christian Aid', or 'Christian Aid and our supporters') to create a sense of inclusiveness, and avoid the sense that we're a faceless corporation.

Create a sense of buzz

Make supporters feel they'll be part of something big and exciting.

Example

We want every church in Britain and Ireland to get involved. From holding a bake sale to skydiving from 20,000 feet – anything you do to raise money this Christian Aid Week will make a real difference. Together we can send people living in fear this message: you are not alone.

Put our supporters centre stage and leave them in no doubt they're making a difference – nothing is more motivating.

Example

You did it! Your campaigning helped inspire a historic deal to tackle tax dodging – a huge step that has the potential to lift millions of people out of poverty.

But we need to be careful not to overdo it, particularly given the average age of our readership. Phrases like 'amazing support' are likely to be off-putting for people who view their contribution to our work as part of their Christian duty. Tone it down using phrases such as 'invaluable support' instead.

Make them want to be part of it

We ask people to get involved for a good cause, but your words can make them feel that this is something they'd want to do anyway. Use a playful, humorous tone to give them the sense they'll be doing something enjoyable or exciting, where they'll meet like minded-people and make new friends.

Example

Cycle from London to Paris and arrive on the chic Champs-Élysées after the ride of your life.

Nothing compares to the breath-taking route, the camaraderie and the sheer elation of completing the challenge.

Faith-friendly style

Faith language is rich in emotion, passion and metaphor. It has immediacy and power.

Here we look at how to draw on the depth and the passion of the vocabulary of faith in a way that will connect with the wide range of faith perspectives, while not alienating those less familiar with such references.

Simple and poetic

Again, use faith language that is emotive and conversational, which evokes feelings and passions (an intrinsic part of faith) while also offering something to think about.

It's wise to avoid technical theological terms like 'eschatology' or 'predestination'. Use verbs rather than nouns – talk about 'Jesus dying on the cross' rather than 'the crucifixion' for example.

Writing about God is a bit like writing poetry – it is best done using a simple vocabulary but in striking ways. Jesus was superb at communicating in the language of the everyday, but did so with power, passion and effectiveness.

Example

Jesus took bread, prayed, tore it up and shared it with the people, so that everyone had enough. It was so ordinary and everyday, and yet a miracle that people talked about for years! And ever since, Christians have shared bread, at altar tables and wherever people are hungry. 'Do this' said Jesus, and so we do it... in memory of him.

Think of Jesus, dying on the cross, thirsty, in agony, humiliated. In this death, God suffers with all those who suffer and refuses to abandon them. God is not the God of the ruling powers, but the God of their victims. This is where God chooses to be.

Christians keep hoping, praying and acting for a better world because Jesus promised that God's Kingdom is so close that we can almost see it!

Biblical imagery and phrases

There is a common stock of biblical images, which have become part of common speech and these can be used very effectively.

Example

Selina and Asha are being salt and light in their communities – improving life and showing that there is a way forward, even in difficult circumstances.

Draw on familiar biblical phrases that are recognisable by a church audience but can be used without a chapter and verse reference.

Examples

'casting out fear', 'rivers of justice', 'hunger and thirst for righteousness', 'lifting the humble', 'made in the image of God', 'blessed are the poor', 'breaking bread', 'to let the oppressed go free', 'peace I give to you', 'prepare the way', 'your kingdom come', 'you cannot serve God and wealth', 'life in all its fullness'.

But beware of using too limited a vocabulary so that it becomes overly familiar and loses any immediacy or passion. If faith language slips into cliché it won't evoke a sense of urgency for seeing the world anew.

The Bible is full of powerful images and stories, some of which have become so familiar that we can immediately connect with them. But it will always be important to use a wide range of such images and phrases and to keep renewing Christian Aid's vocabulary. Don't make faith language so safe that it is drained of all passion or impact.

You can always make sure that you speak with your Churches team colleagues to check out how a phrase or image sounds to them or to people they know.

Place our work within the whole story of the Christian faith

It is not only the Bible that we hold in common, but also the Christian story through the centuries. There are saints and inspiring people, Christian practices and festivals, that Christian readers will want to celebrate and share.

Creation

Anything you write about the planet, natural resources, climate change or farming can be framed in terms of God's creation, and the purpose and dignity it has as part of creation. Creation language evokes an understanding of the world as belonging to God, as something which is a gift to us and which is 'good'.

Examples

The Bible tells us that 'the earth is the Lord's', and that human beings like us do not own it. We are part of the community of creation, not above it or in control of it, but part of it, creatures of God.

The call to love God and to love our neighbour isn't only about other human beings, but all of creation.

The earth is beautiful and its fruitfulness is a blessing from God. Creation is a gift that should always be shared with justice and joy!

Suffering

It is helpful to use Christian language to describe the suffering and pain of the world, both to acknowledge that some of this is because of wrongdoing or sin and to recognise the tragedy in which we are all caught up. The Christian faith never lets go of hope that the world is being changed, through the action of God and the work of human hands, but it is never glibly optimistic. It faces sorrow and suffering and 'weeps with those who weep'.

Examples

How can we bear it when God's children are hungry? How long must we weep and mourn?

Who will comfort the suffering and bring an end to crying?

You can say that it's complicated all you like, but when so many are poor, something is wrong... and it's a sin.

The world is broken because people are suffering and you and I can't mend it alone. But with each other, and with God, there is real hope.

Called by God

Christian Aid's work can be framed as joining in with God's work of 'restoring', 'renewing' and 'redeeming' creation. We know we cannot do anything without God, but we are 'called' and given gifts by God to speak for justice and to live and act in ways that change the world for good.

Example

You can do more than you think. God is already at work in the world, using people like you to bring justice and love. Let God inspire you to imagine a different world, and then begin to live in it now!

Jesus

The story of Jesus is the heart of the Christian faith. It offers a rich and vibrant range of stories, and a shaping narrative. There is much from Jesus' teaching which can be readily used or referred to (simple language, vivid metaphors, arresting stories and challenging words), but there is also the story of his coming among us (God with us in human life), his death (suffering with us and for us in order to change the world) and his rising to new life (the first one of a new humanity).

Examples

If God could be known in the child of Nazareth, then every child is a holy child.

When we see so much suffering in the world, we know we need a God who suffers with us.

At the cross, violence is transformed by love. When violence hits so many now, we need those with such courageous love to come and challenge, change and heal.

The story of Jesus did not end with death. It began again and is still being told.

Jesus went through death and every hell that humankind could ever face, and nothing could defeat him. His life and his love are stronger than death.

Christian values

There are common themes that Christians have shaped and spoken of over time and across the world. **Hospitality** is a commonly shared Christian value. Christians share a sense that the material world is **holy** (sacramental), and that ordinary things can become carriers of grace and promise (bread and wine, certainly, but also human love and solidarity, a cup of water, money and resource shared with justice). Christians believe that **healing** is possible, that people can be changed, that there is hope because God never gives up on us.

Show the faith that underpins our work

Every part of Christian Aid's work has its roots in faith. Use language and ideas that show this.

Prayer

A passionate desire for an end to poverty is not only what we act for, it is also what we 'pray for'. Prayer is not an alternative to action, but is what grounds and empowers us to act, inspired by deep faith and meeting with God. Use prayers and reflections alongside stories of our work – the two complement each other.

Prophetic voice

Advocacy and speaking out can be powerfully presented as 'having a prophetic voice in the world' or being part of a 'prophetic tradition', in which Jesus himself also stood. Policy work can also be described in terms of looking for the truth.

Example

At a time when our climate is changing and vulnerable countries are increasingly suffering the effects of global warming, we all need to take up this ancient and prophetic call and become those who will learn how to 'keep' the earth.

Guidelines for editing web copy

In general, the tone for our online editorial should be the same as for all our communications. But there are differences in the way digital content is consumed that have implications for tone and editorial approach, which are outlined below:

- Focus most time and energy on compelling headers and standfirsts that also convey the key info – that’s what counts most for Google search (not puns and clever word play, sadly).
- Start by getting straight into the issue or, ideally, a powerful personal story (which is statistically proven to illicit the greatest response from readers).
- Key or most compelling information nearest the top – the ‘inverse pyramid model’ is even more important online.
- Rewrite for SEO/plain English – use the readers’ words.
- There is even more scope to write in less formal, more conversational style – I, me, you, us, we – and use contractions – you’re, we’re, aren’t etc. Use a warm, human tone.
- ‘De-noun’ copy – strip out or move down names of organisations (including Christian Aid) or geographical regions (eg ‘a village in northern Kenya’ not ‘Namukuse village in Turkana Central District, northern Kenya’), unless there’s a good reason they should stay.*
- Strip out anything extraneous to the central message of the piece – see page 7.
- Short paras – one idea, and usually one sentence, per para.
- Subheads every few paras.
- Use pull quotes.
- Use at least one image, video or a graphic on every page.
- One or two contextual calls to action on every page – early on in the body copy where possible.**
- Anything published on an external website should always link back to a relevant section of the Christian Aid website (eg a blog about tax should link back to our tax campaign pages).***
- Put the reader at the heart of the copy – use ‘you’ more than ‘we’ – ie ‘you can help more families lift themselves out of poverty’ etc.
- Set a specific target where possible – eg ‘we need 10,000 people to take action’. It’s proven to get a better response.
- 400 words maximum (using discretion for reflection or think pieces).

On social media

- Be as conversational as possible, give posts a sense of personality.
- Make content as shareable as possible, content that will allow people to participate. Would your message work better as a meme or infographic? They're much more likely to be shared and aren't difficult to produce.
- 'De-noun' copy where possible (see page 7).
- Make reader the focus where appropriate (see page 6).
- Create a feeling of significance and 'buzz' about our content, eg 'Great piece on the shocking new crisis in Gaza by Antoinette Powell in today's *Times*. Well worth checking out here' rather than the straighter: 'Christian Aid communications officer Antoinette Powell reports on her trip to Gaza'.

* Eg we kept the reference to Uttarakhand in the India floods appeal because it was trending on Twitter and it was getting a good response in SEO keyword research.

** People tune out the donate box on the right because it looks like an ad.

*** This helps both the Christian Aid site and the website to which it's referring.