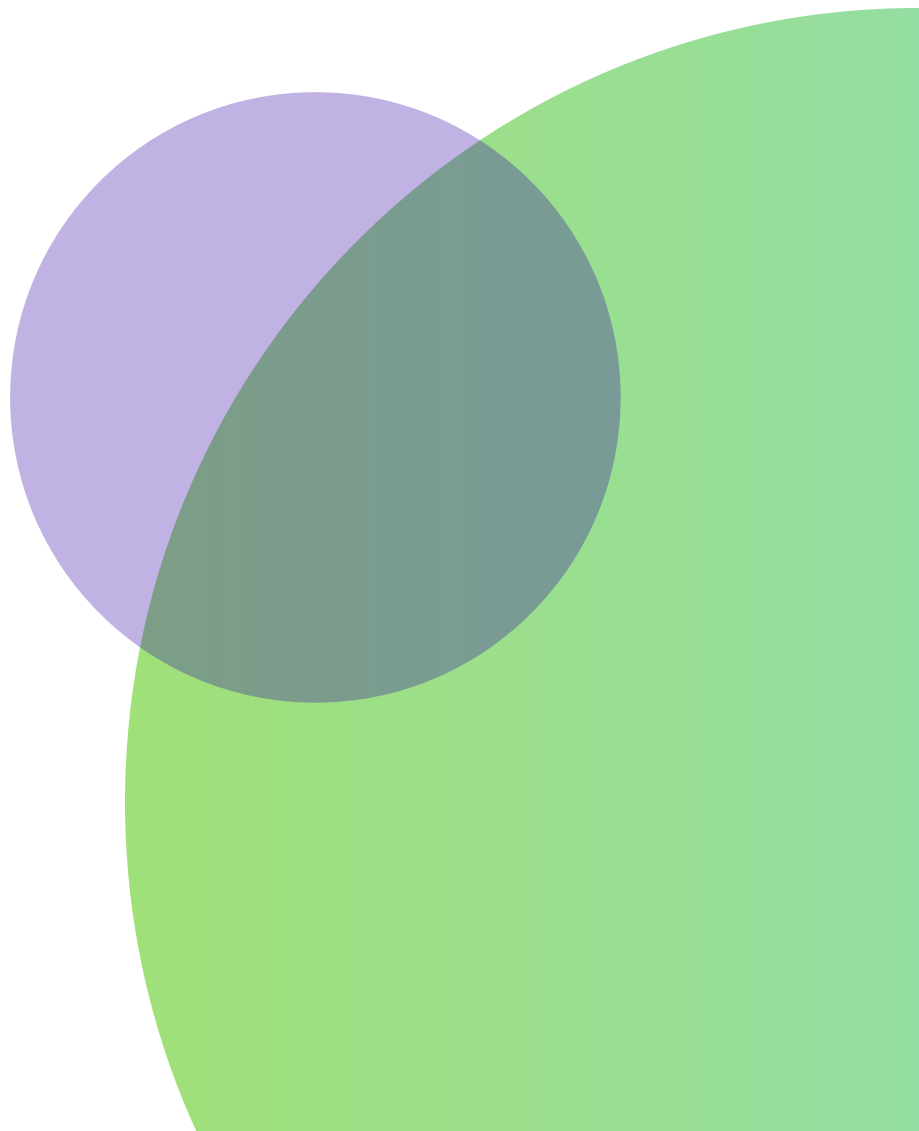


writitude

[Your Company's Name]

Tone of Voice Guide

date/ month/ year



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1. Why are you reading this?

1.1. The purpose of ToV

Tone of Voice guides, or ToVs, as they are commonly known, are designed with one main purpose in mind — to ensure that customers have great experience with a company through time, on all subjects and across all platforms. To achieve this goal, ToV of a company/brand needs to be:

- unique so that it differentiates a company from its competitors (the same function as visual identity);
- consistent so it does not create disruptions and is predictable from the viewpoint of a customer.

This is a reasonable goal for any company, big or small.

1.2. The challenges solved with this document

Yet often even well-meaning teams fail at their corporate ToVs. There are three main challenges to establishing consistent communication:

• **Formalization**

Each company already does have a ToV, even if they have never thought about it. It occurs spontaneously from company's culture and personal traits of people, doing the communication. The problem is, if the rules are not set, they tend to be vague, can be disputed and change easily.

This is why formalization of ToV in the form of detailed guidelines is the best way to ensure that the most important principles (and their practical manifestations!) are clear to everybody.

• **Different registers/genres**

As company's communication serves different purposes (such as sales, customer support, image-building etc.) the style and tone of texts company uses also tends to vary extensively. It is typical of companies to speak in one voice when they are trying to sell a product, and in a completely different one — when troubleshooting issues or dealing with customer complaints.

Setting a minimum subsistence level of basic rules that need to be followed at all times, helps tackle the natural human tendency to switch tone from friendly to defensive when faced with challenging situations.

• **Human factor**

If a company has more than one person doing the communication, in the absence of clearly defined rules it will inevitably vary. People differ not only in terms of their extraversion or agreeableness, they also have surprisingly varied understanding of meanings and connotations of different words or phrases. Another level of human factor challenge occurs when communication/marketing specialists change, and they eventually do in every company.

If the only agreement that binds company's communication is in the form of mutual understanding of certain people, there is a risk of disruptions when new people are hired. It also makes integrating a new employee slower and costlier as unwritten rules are hard to convey.

A good ToV guide solves all of these issues by providing a clear set of rules that can be followed by all communicators across subjects and channels for as long as they fit their company's identity.

The following guidelines are designed to provide not only principles, but a detailed advice on their implementation in real-life texts.

1.3. How to use this template

1.3.1. From abstract to particular

It is as important to understand the rationale behind a ToV as it is to train yourself to solve the practicalities of communication. That is why this guide starts with the abstract (the conceptual rules) and goes on to explain the particularities.

The first part grounds the rules in argumentation, while the second demonstrates how they work on three different levels of language: content, style and grammar. The last part of the document contains a list of control questions that help to understand, if a particular piece of text (an email offer, a Facebook post or a script for cold-calling) is consistent with the ToV of *[your Company]*.

Refer to this guide whenever:

- you have to write a new piece of text in the name of *[your Company]*;
- you have to evaluate the relevance of a text template written some time ago;
- you have to explain to a new colleague “how we do things here at *[your Company]*”;

It is also a good idea to print out the control questions and have them at hand for a quick check-up of texts written by yourself or your colleagues.

2. Who are you talking to?

A corporate ToV development is rooted in understanding your audience, its needs and identities. In order for *[your Company]* to communicate successfully, you need to define personas within the target audience, to make it easier to identify the audience segments you want to reach.

Neither you nor your team members are the target for the texts you’re creating, so don’t judge them by your own standards. Always keep in mind your target audience personas whenever you’re writing a text to a particular market segment.

2.1. Audience description

Describe your audience. Are your buying audience, your stakeholders and your communications audience one and the same? Explain the difference.

2.2. Target audience personas

Every group which *[your Company]* communicates with is described by a target audience persona. Each persona is defined by parameters that are relevant to *[your Company]* and the particularities of the buying process that person goes through.

[Target audience persona 1]

Describe your audience persona

1. Think of a name, age, social status and whether they have kids or not. What is their workplace, lifestyle and hobbies? Try describing in detail the brands of household items that they use. Describe their habits and state of affairs that relate to *[your Company’s]* service or product. What is their main reason for choosing *[your Company’s]* service or product?)

[Target audience persona 2]
(Description)

[Target audience persona 3]
(Description)

[Target audience persona X]
(Description)

A tip!

Don't make things up. Consider talking to your clients and other audience representatives for creating a really insightful audience persona. Interviews and focus groups would also be very beneficial. Also, keep it simple.

Out of a myriad of possible characteristics, choose those that are relevant for your specific case — sometimes it will matter if your customers drive a car or own a cat, sometimes — not so much.

3. [Your Company's] ToV main pillars

A corporate ToV is rooted in the company's philosophy — its mission, vision, values, the stories it has, its team and its product, and of course — its particular relationship with its audience. The ToV of **[your Company]** is based not only on **[your Company]** as a company or **[your Company]** as a product or service, but also a process that evolves around **[your Company]** — a process that **(describe the process that evolves around your product or service from your customer's point of view and benefits)**.

It is important to understand that the descriptions of a company's mission, vision and values are not communicated to the customer directly. They should not be used as talking points. Saying you're a sustainable company doesn't help much — show it in the particulars! Yet, these fundamentals serve an important function in defining your public communication by setting its foundation.

3.1. [Your Company's] identity stories, statements, and values

Brand purpose

(Write here in 1-2 sentences — what's the reason your business exists beyond making money — the WHY of your business)

(Longer description — go deeper into what you meant by that, be more specific)

Vision

(Write here in 1-2 sentences — where you want your brand or business to be in the future)

(Longer description — go deeper into what you meant by that, be more specific)

Mission

(Write here in 1-2 sentences — what (think — specific tactics around your product or service, operations, strategy or communications) should you do in order to get there?)

(Longer description — go deeper into what you meant by that, be more specific)

Our values

[Value 1]

(Description — go deeper into why this value is important and how it is reflected in what you do)

[Value 2]

(Description — go deeper into why this value is important and how it is reflected in what you do)

[Value X]

(Description — go deeper into why this value is important and how it is reflected in what you do)

3.2. [Your Company's] business story

Subtitle 1

Ideas are born in so many different ways. Sometimes it's a long-awaited discovery, sometimes — a pure accident (just ask Newton!). Our idea was born out of a *[your Company's inception story]*.

This is how our company started.

Subtitle 2

(text)

Subtitle X

(text)

3.3. [Your Company's] customer story

(Describe the usual perception of your product or service that you've changed or are about to change)

First, there is [challenge 1]

Second, [challenge 2]

Until one day I saw / met [Your Company or product]

In other words, (Describe why your customers love you)

3.4. [Your Founders'] personal story

Subtitle 1

(text)

Subtitle 2

(text)

Subtitle X

(text)

3.5. [Your Company's] product/ service story

Subtitle 1

(text)

Subtitle 2

(text)

Subtitle X

(text)

3.6. ToV pillars

The three **main pillars (or foundations, or rules)** that guide all communication by [your Company] and its team are based on [your Company's] identity, its stories and its values.

Taken separately, none of these pillars is, strictly speaking, unique — these arguments inform communication practices in many companies. The same as with personality traits — what makes a person unique, is not isolated characteristics, but a particular combination and interpretation of them that persists over time and across different channels.

That is why it is important to regard these pillars as synergetic — a unique [your Company's] ToV occurs when ALL of them are present in communication.

[Pillar 1 — for example, warm-heartedness]

(**Description — for example** Even nice words can be cold and distanced — we make sure it is never so in our case. Whatever text we create, we never forget that we are humans speaking to other humans. Driven by a real passion for what we do, we strive to always be genuine in our communication.)

Pillar 2

(Description)

Pillar 3

(Description)

3.7. Levels of meaning

To understand the real-life manifestation of these principles, let's slice them into three levels. In language, tone and emotion can be conveyed by making certain decisions about the content and structure of a text, by stylistic choices of certain techniques (and conscious avoidance of others), as well as on the level of grammar (words, phrasing and sentences). This is how warm-heartedness, Pillar 2 and Pillar 3 play out on levels of meaning:

ToV pillar	Pillar 1 [forexample, warm-heartedness]	Pillar 2	Pillar 3
Content & structure	Always using personal greetings and non-trivial parting wishes.		
Style	Turning to spoken language as a reference point , never being arrogant or cold in our writing.		
Grammar	Writing in short sentences without unnecessary jargon.		

These rules set out the field where optimal communication occurs. In the next section, you'll find detailed explanations and analysis of examples, both good and bad, that will help you to master **[your Company's]** ToV.

4. Making it fit – calibration of ToV

Each of the communication pillars, laid out in Part 3 of these guidelines, can be implemented in three levels of language.

They can also go wrong in more than one way — putting too much **[for example, warm-heartedness]** into a text can be as harmful as providing too little of it. That is why this section focuses on meticulous balancing of ToV principles and exhaustive analysis of good and bad practices.

Note:

To master this section, you need to do your homework — your Company's communication audit. Read more about it in Writitude blog and download the audit template on writitude.com

4.1. [Pillar 1 — for example, warm-heartedness]

(Explain) Even nice words can be cold and distanced — we make sure it is never so in our case. Whatever text we create, we never forget that **we are humans speaking to other humans**. Driven by a real passion for what we do, we always strive to be **genuine** in our communication.

Content and structure

(Explain in context) The risk of sounding cold is the highest in writing and the lowest — in presence of a communication partner.

Written communication is distanced by definition, it also lacks non-verbal clues (such as intonation, physical distance between speakers, posture, gestures, eye contact), that would make up a large portion of understanding the attitude of a communication partner in person.

As emails are devoid of possibilities to communicate sympathy in a non-verbal way, we have to put extra attention into conveying it verbally.

Lack of non-verbal signals is the reason why corporate written communication often reads cold without any intention of doing so.

Coldness also appears as a side-effect of companies trying to be polite and being afraid of offending people.

Whilst staying on the safe and formal side is a good choice for a bank or a government institution, it is unsuitable for a brand like **[a brand]**. So how do we sound warm and still be polite?

Example from a communication audit: Replying to a customer's inquiry

Bad example: chillingly unsupportive	Good example: still polite, yet warm
Dear Mr. Bond, Thank you for the interest in purchasing [a product]! Below are specifications of our products: the [product 1] and [product 2]. Should you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact our Customer Support team. Your sincerely, Peter Parker Customer Support Team Lead at [a brand]	Hi Peter, We're happy to hear you are thinking of buying [a product]. To make your choice easier, we have created this comparison of the [product 1] and [product 2]. You'll find this comparison in the attachment or just call us, and we'll guide you through choosing the right package for your needs. Cheers, Peter Parker from [a brand] Customer Support

(Explain in a new context)

Greetings and endings are one of the very few places in an email, where emotion and attitude can be expressed directly.

With rare exception of Japan, Korea, China and several others Asian countries, in the majority of cultures we rarely risk offending someone by choosing a less formal greeting, especially, if they know that it is not a personal choice of an employee, but a part of brand's communication style (which they are probably already familiar with at the point of initiating a direct communication via email).

The same applies to endings — as they don't carry any content, their only function is to convey attitude.

By choosing a standardized ending (such as "Best regards", "Regards", "Best wishes" etc.) we communicate unattentiveness. We send a signal of standardized treatment of all customers, of choosing not to make an effort, which also becomes a contradiction in the context of "count-on-me attitude".

Tend to avoid	Substitute with
Dear customer	Hi John!
Regards	How have you been, Eliza?
Best regards	Greetings from [a brand] !
Best wishes	Hope you have a great day
Yours sincerely	Best
Yours faithfully	Cheers
	Enjoy your [a product]
	Enjoy a safe and sound (or other positive characteristics according to the content of your email)
	[a brand] experience!
	Good luck with your event
	Will be great to see you again! (if you plan to see the person on an exhibition, for example)
	Be seeing you
	Take care

(Explain in a new context) Manifestations of gratitude also need to be de-formalized. At **[a brand]** we don't use standardized corporate ways of thanking our customers (such as "Thanks for reaching out", "Thanks for your inquiry" etc.) because that comes across as insincere. Instead, we go for phrases that we would use when thanking someone in spoken language. This will also bring a wider set of variations into our communication, making gratitude more carefully tailored to the exact situation.

Style

(Explain) The opposite of warm-heartedness is cold and distanced communication, speaking from above, arrogant and we-know-it-better attitude that makes a recipient feel small and incompetent. This style of writing is often used deliberately by financial institutions because they believe it delivers better compliance with the rules. In case of **[a brand]** this would be absolutely unacceptable, yet distanced and arrogant communication also often appears involuntary.

(Set a reference) The best way to ensure against formalism and arrogance is **make spoken communication our reference point** instead of navigating with standards of written communication in mind.

Here are the main stylistic differences between spoken and written language:

- Written language is organized by punctuation, while spoken language — by rhythm, speed and tone;
- Speech rarely refers to itself, while in written form expressions such as "as mentioned above" are fairly common;
- Colloquial words and informal expressions are more often used in spoken form, while specific and precise terminology — in writing.

Example from a communication audit: Providing contact requirements to resellers

Too little	Hits the spot	Too much
It is imperative that for successful communication you provide us with three key contacts: 1. A dedicated sales and marketing contact(s) [...] 2. A key purchasing contact [...] 3. A person to handle leads [...]. All of these aforementioned people can be one person, but we require that we have someone to communicate with at all times regarding various topics.	For smooth sales, we'll need three key contacts: 1. for sales and marketing; 2. for managing purchases; 3. for handling leads. One person can take on all of these roles, the only thing we ask is for someone who is available at any time. That way, we won't miss anything important and your sales can go on as planned.	Three contacts are all we need for success. Please, give us one contact for sales and marketing, one for managing purchases and one for handling leads. If one person can do the job of three — great! As long as nothing important is missed, we're good.

(Explain what's wrong) The use of **authoritarian language** (“imperative”, “require”), as well as expressions and words forms used only in written language (“contact(s)”, “aforementioned people”) is what makes the first example sound cold. A few changes in the second example make it sound considerably warmer, while still keeping it in the domain of polite corporate communication:

- Explaining the reason for requiring contacts in the beginning and the end of the text (and not ordering something without explanation);
- Personalizing the request (“we’ll need” instead of abstract “it is imperative”);
- Getting rid of written-only “contact(s)” as unnecessary — the text already mentions three persons in total;
- Changing the balance for humanizing by cutting on the use of “contacts” in the list as it is already mentioned in the beginning.

The “Hits the spot” example also uses **shorter sentences and contractions**, typical of spoken, rather than written language. More on that — in the next section.

At the same time the third example makes overuse of various shortcuts by using numbers instead of words multiple times. It also steps over the line in simplifying the matter — “do the job” does not explain what it means exactly while “nothing important is missed out” and “we’re good” is too abstract.

Grammar

(Explain) In grammar the main differences between spoken and written language are these:

- Spoken language is imperfect — it usually contains unfinished sentences, repetitions etc.;
- Sentences in spoken language tend to be considerably shorter and less complex, while written language can handle many subordinate clauses;
- Spoken language is economical — in direct interactions people opt for contractions that are faster and easier to pronounce (“I’m” instead of “I am”);
- Personal pronouns are used much more frequently in spoken language.

While some of these characteristics mark sharp differences between spoken and written forms of language and would be inappropriate when used in other domain (such as unfinished sentences in writing), most are softer differences that can be applied to written texts to make them sound livelier and less formal. And as we strive to always sound genuine, these latter properties of spoken language (shortness, economy, use of personal pronouns) are exactly what we aim at. Yet they still need to be carefully calibrated.

Example from a communication audit: Providing advice to resellers

Too little	Hits the spot	Too much
Our best-selling partners have achieved a noticeable increase in sales through email campaigns – by urging their existing CAS solution users to upgrade compatible CAS systems with (a product), by showcasing the (pricing program name) pricing or by enabling their corporate clients to upgrade their remote offices with a (product 2).	Do you have a customer that could use a (a product), instead of their current CAS security system? Could they benefit from (pricing program name) pricing? Do they use (a product) in their offices, but not as their remote office solutions? These are all opportunities for increasing your sales.	Want success? Increase your sales now by pitching (a product) to your current customers! Aim at folks, who are still using CAS system products. Offer them special (pricing program name) pricing. Tell them about upgrading their boring offices with (a product).

(Explain the difference in your examples) While the first example features one extra-long sentence, the third example consists of five super-short sentences. The second (Hit the spot) example offers a midway between the two extremes by using 4 sentences, some of them in the form of a question with the average of 11.5 words in each. This makes the first example sound rather heavy (and clearly bound to its written form) and the third example — as too aggressive, because too short sentences resemble shouts.

Another difference is the form of sentences — the first example offers a detached description of possibilities, while the re-written examples go for **direct address**. Yet the third example takes it too far by using order-like phrasing repeatedly (“increase”, “aim”, “offer”, “tell”).

The use of **terminology** should also be carefully calibrated not to be too specific or too informal. While “CAS systems” (specific and formal) is an insider’s way of communication, “CAS security system” makes the term more widely comprehensible by mentioning the security, and still retains the informal approach.

4.2. Pillar 2

(Describe)

Content & structure

(Explain in context)

Example from a communication audit:

(Explain)

Bad example:	Good example:

Style

(Describe)

Avoid	Substitute with

(Explain)

Too little	Hits the spot	Too much

Grammar

(Describe)

Example from a communication audit:

(Explain)

Bad example:	Good example:

(Explain the difference in your examples)

4.3. Pillar 3

(Describe)

Content & structure

(Explain in context)

Example from a communication audit:

(Explain)

Bad example:	Good example:

Style

(Describe)

Avoid	Substitute with

(Explain)

Too little	Hits the spot	Too much

Grammar

(Describe)

Example from a communication audit:

(Explain)

Bad example:	Good example:

(Explain the difference in your examples)

4.4 [Think! Can it be relevant?]

Make a term or phrase out of your brand name. English in particular is perfect for tricks like this as it allows for almost every noun to be transformed into a verb or an adjective, but other languages offer room for creativity as well.

Think of googling it.
I should instagram that.
That's the writitude!

4.5. Differences in [your Company's] tone of voice for different target audience personas

Now that your **[your Company's]** ToV has been lined out and explained in detail through multiple examples, let's outline the possible differences in tone when you're communicating with different segments of your audience. Often these variations match the diversities in products or services you're offering to different customer segments, but sometimes there may be several sub-audiences for one product or service.

(Describe the differences in tone of communication with different target audience personas — on the level of content & structure, style and grammar.)

4.6. English vs American English

We choose to follow the rules of **[your Company's choice] English**. So **[your Company's choice is American English, for example]**, it's sneakers (**not trainers**), french fries (**not chips**), a cookie (**not a biscuit**) and subway (not underground or tube). But most importantly, pay attention to the spelling of similar words like these:

British English	American English
colour, odour, parlour, neighbor, behaviour	color, odor, parlor, neighbor, behavior
aeroplane	airplane
cheque	check
tyre	tire
programme	program
apologise, cosy	apologize, cozy
speciality	specialty

5. Summary & checklist

These control questions are the quickest way to check, if the text you are looking at (whether written by yourself, a colleague in the next room or someone else a long time ago, a copywriting or PR agency or a freelancer) is consistent with **[your Company's]** ToV. They also offer advice on re-writing a text to achieve the best result. The arguments behind these requirements are set out in detail in Parts 2 and 3 of these guidelines.

(We created these recommendations following the examples in this ToV guidelines template document as well as best practice — use your own control questions and answers by following what's important to your own company's brand tone!)

Absolute must

Ask yourself	Recommendations
Do verbs like “do” and “have” prevail in your sentences?	Substitute them with powerful action verbs (throw, ensure, engage, excite etc.). Tip: The table with specific examples can be included in the explanations of section 3 — Making it fit — calibration of ToV.
Can you spot the passive voice (e. g. “it was designed...”) or sentences in the third person (as in “a program enables”) in your text?	Rephrase it into active voice (“we designed it...”/ “we invite you to join the program”).
Can you define the main point of your message in one sentence?	If yes, start your message with stating it clearly in the very beginning. If not, don't write anything until you can.
Does your text use terms that people usually name differently in everyday life (as in “charging unit” vs “charger”)?	Use the everyday equivalent . Or vice versa, depending on the tone you choose!
Can a reader understand the main point of your text in about 5 seconds ?	If not, add a title, use subtitles or bullet-points, format the text or add graphic design elements to make it scannable .
When you read your text aloud to a colleague, does it sound natural?	If it sounds awkward, rewrite it using shorter sentences and simpler words as you would do when speaking and try reading it out loud again. Continue until it feels like a part of a natural lively dialogue .

Cherry on the pie

Ask yourself	Recommendations
Does each of your sentences bring you closer to the customer's desired goal?	If not, make your sentences more goal-directed .
Have you structured your solution into intuitive steps the customer can follow?	If not, take care to do so — it will remarkably improve the customer's experience , especially in cases of troubleshooting.
Have you given a clear call to action whenever you expect it on the part of the client?	If not, spell it out clearly.
Did you use "Dear" or "Mr/Ms" or a person's last name to greet a non-Asian customer?	If yes, change it to "Hi/Hello" and use the person's first name instead. Or vice versa, depending on the tone you choose!
Does your email end with "Best regards", "Regards", "Best wishes" or any other traditional ending ?	If yes, change it to something less usual that is appropriate for the occasion, such as "Cheers" . Or vice versa, depending on the tone you choose!
Does your message contain clichés, pushy adjectives or abstract words ?	If yes, replace them with nouns and verbs carrying a more exact non-trivial meaning . Tip: The table with specific examples can be included in the explanation.
Does your text contain jokes or metaphors ?	If yes, test them on colleagues to ensure they don't sound childish or offensive.

Can slip your mind sometimes (but better — not!)

Ask yourself	Recommendations
Are you sure your message is useful to the recipient?	If not, don't write it.
Are there any words connoting imprecision or uncertainty in your message, such as "XXXXXXXXXX", "XXXXXXXXXX", etc.?	Remove them and be as precise as you can — this will make you sound as the expert you are. Tip: Identify the "uncertainty bringing" words in your communication. The table with specific examples can be included in the explanations of section 3 — Making it fit — calibration of ToV.
Does your sentence consist of more than two clauses (including the main one)?	Rewrite it consider splitting it in two separate sentences.
Have you written " I am ", " we will " etc.?	Change them to " I'm ", " we'll " etc. Or vice versa, depending on the tone you choose!
Does the text contain words that have short forms (e. g. "XXXXXXX")?	If yes, consider using the short form (e. g. "XXX"). Or vice versa, depending on the tone you choose!
How long is the average sentence in your text?	Aim at XX-XX-word long sentences.
Can your text be shortened without the loss of meaning?	If yes, do it!

Need help with developing your company's Tone of Voice guidelines? Drop us a message to hello@writitude.com