

Unifrog House Style

Here are the guidelines that make up our House Style – a set of rules we try to stick to when we communicate with people inside and outside of the Unifrog team. The guidelines are important to us because they help us to speak and write with clarity, integrity, transparency, and respect for the people with whom we're communicating.

In a nutshell

- We're always focused on what matters to people. Everything we do, say and write has to be genuinely useful to our users.
- Our tone of voice is clear and confident. We're transparent about what we're doing and why; we don't hide behind ambiguity.
- We're ambitious and positive, using humour when appropriate.
- We're open, inclusive and welcoming to everyone.

Humour

- We use a tongue-in-cheek tone when appropriate.
- We don't force humour, only using it when it feels natural.
- We never use humour at the expense of clarity – we keep it brief, witty and to the point.
- We check the context. Humour can be used to lighten up a potentially dull topic, like visas and permits, but it should be avoided or used with care for sensitive topics.

Here is an example of where the humour flows naturally and doesn't take attention away from the main point:

Porn often gives a highly inaccurate representation of what real sex is like but many young people use it as a means of sex education. As a result, they have unrealistic expectations when it comes to actually having sex. We like to think our guide on Sex education is far more useful!

Show, don't tell

- Unifrog's positive tone of voice can tempt writers to overuse superlatives and upbeat adjectives such as 'the best' and 'amazing'. However, we want our content to speak for itself, so rather than *telling* readers that something is 'awesome' or 'super useful', we *show* it to them.

Here, instead of telling readers why mindfulness is good, we show them using examples:

Scientists have discovered that mindfulness can help to relieve stress, treat heart disease, lower blood pressure and improve sleep.

- We don't make unsubstantiated claims or sweeping statements such as 'here's everything you need to know', 'this is the best way to overcome anxiety' or 'being a student is tough'. We want our content to be factual and, where relevant, supported with research.

Here's an example from the Know-how library, where the opening statement is supported by research:

As the planet's surface gets warmer, more evaporation occurs and extreme weather events like hurricanes and floods become more frequent. According to the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR), natural disasters like storms, floods and droughts have increased threefold over the past 30 years.

Don't try too hard

- We never want to sound try-hard, so we avoid cliched pop culture references like 'Insta', and slang such as 'dontcha know'.

This example shows awareness of an issue (unprofessional email addresses) without using forced slang or pop culture references:

Remember you're trying to convince an employer that you will be an asset to their organisation. An email address like masterflamez@hotmail.com is not going to achieve this – create a new email address for your applications.

Straightforward and approachable

- We try to use the language we'd use if we were talking to the person who's reading.

Intended reader: partner schools (taken from Unifrog's Horizons blog series)

Despite their recent increase in popularity amongst students, it looks like degree apprenticeships have a way to go before they're as prevalent as university degrees. According to Department for Education data, only 3,100 students under 19 started a higher or degree apprenticeship in England in 2017-18, compared to around 205,000 English 18-year-olds being accepted to UK higher education institutions in 2018.

Intended reader: students (taken from the Know-how library)

With both options, there are loads of variables when it comes to your potential earnings. A Level 2 apprenticeship in Hairdressing, for example, isn't likely to give you the same earning potential as a degree apprenticeship in Engineering. Likewise, a third-class honour's degree in Music from a low-tier university probably won't open as many doors for you as a first in Law from Oxbridge. If earning potential is a key factor in your decision, you need to research your options thoroughly.

- We try to convey complex topics or instructions as simply as possible. Here's an example (where the writer is explaining to students what the political spectrum is):

Think of the political spectrum as a scale with two opposite ends – the left and the right. Each end represents a group of principles, and those on the left tend to oppose those on the right and vice versa. Most of these principles are about the best way to organise society in order for people to thrive.

- We sometimes use direct address to make content feel more personal or conversational. Here's an example from the Gazette, our weekly newsletter to teachers:

What was your greatest achievement by the age of 13? Mine was filling my sister's room with red balloons whilst she watched Stephen King's IT. Pretty impressive, but not a scratch on this young designers' fashion world debut, which takes centre stage for this week's quiz.

Sensitive topics

- Our tone is non-judgmental, empathetic and nuanced. This is especially important when writing about potentially sensitive topics. We are keen to show that some issues are complex.
- All of our content should be inclusive. For example, a student guide on relationships should take into account all different forms of relationships and should avoid implying, however subtly, that there are only two genders.

Language

Plain English

- Clarity is essential, so we avoid using academese. We say 'use' rather than 'utilise', 'let' rather than 'enable' and 'make sure' rather than 'ensure'.
- We always use the active rather than passive voice, e.g. 'take care', not 'care should be taken'.
- We keep in mind who we're talking to. For example, while students and teachers at our partner schools will know what the Know-how library is, the unfortunate people at non-partners might need a brief explanation.

Concision

- If something can be said in fewer words, we use fewer words.

These two examples show how an email can be rewritten using less words to make it easier to follow:

I would very much like to arrange a meeting with you to discuss your ongoing progress with the Unifrog platform and also that of your students, and bring to your attention the fact that we now have some great content on the platform that I feel could be fairly advantageous to your students in the upcoming months.

Which could be re-written as:

I'd like to find out how you and your students have been progressing with Unifrog and show you some new content on the platform that will help you in the coming months.

- Our writing style is punchy; every word needs to pull its weight. When we write a word, we ask '*Why am I writing this word? Is it useful?*' If it's not, we cut it out. For example, we don't add unnecessary phrases such as, 'you've come to the right place' or 'if you're wondering'.
- We avoid over-used phrases such as 'unique insight', 'we're excited to announce', 'packed full of'.

- We avoid vagueness, such as ‘the scope of apprenticeships’, ‘learn even more about...’ and ‘all the great content and tools we have on the platform’. Instead, we’re always specific – we say exactly what the reader will learn.

Sentence length

- We prefer to keep sentences and paragraphs on the shorter side. However, it’s smart to mix up the sentence length to keep the reader interested. This extract from Amazon’s House Style shows why this is important:

This sentence has five words. Here are five more words. Five-word sentences are fine. But several together become monotonous. Listen to what is happening. The writing is getting boring. The sound of it drones. The ear demands some variety.

Now listen. I vary the sentence length, and I create music. Music. The writing sings. It has a pleasant rhythm, a lilt, a harmony. I use short sentences. And I use sentences of medium length.

And sometimes, when I am certain the reader is rested, I will engage him with a sentence of considerable length, a sentence that burns with energy and builds with all the impetus of a crescendo, the roll of the drums, the crash of the cymbal sounds that say listen to this, it is important.