

Our Tone of Voice

A practical guide to writing communications on behalf of Hunter Water



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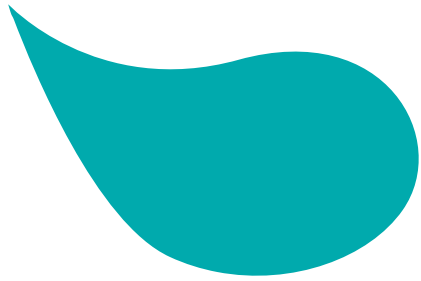
Customers and communities at the heart

Water is precious. We cannot exist without it. It is also vital to enabling quality of life.

Our customers and communities are at the heart of all we do. Hunter Water is trusted to provide safe and reliable supplies of our most precious resource, and to ensure we have a strong water future for our region.

Trust is the platform on which all our relationships are built – and trust is fuelled by good communication. The purpose of this document is to empower you to communicate consistently and effectively whenever you write on Hunter Water's behalf.





Why do we need a 'tone of voice'?

For our customers and communities

Every day, Hunter Water's people send and receive many thousands of emails and letters, and receive hundreds of calls from customers and suppliers across the region.

What we talk to our customers about may differ, but the way we talk to them should be the same. That's our corporate Tone of Voice.

While our customers and communities are diverse, we should try to have a single personality and one way of speaking.

We all know that it's hard to get to know and trust someone who changes in tone each time you talk. Gaining trust becomes much simpler when you communicate with reliable consistency.

For our brand

Successful brands are clearly recognisable wherever they appear, and in whatever context. Think the Nike 'Swoosh' and the 'Just do it' language.

Our Hunter Water brand, and Love Water brand position, reinforce our organisational strengths and the trust our communities have for the services we provide. This trust has been built by our people over the last 130 years.

Maintaining a unified tone of voice across all communications – both internal and external – is key to achieving long-term brand recognition and success, supporting us in the delivery of our operational and strategic goals.



Our personality defines how we speak

When considering how Hunter Water should speak 'as one', it helps to think of the organisation as a person, an individual. What would their personality be like? What would their personal attributes be?

Following a rigorous program of internal and external consultations, we have established that this person would be:

- approachable
- flexible
- confident
- connected
- inclusive.

These are the personality traits that define the Hunter Water tone of voice. Let's explore them in more detail...

Approachable



An approachable person is keen to listen to what you have to say and is empathetic to any issues, concerns or ideas you have.

They are friendly, genuine, welcoming and responsive.

Picture this person responding to a customer struggling to pay a Hunter Water bill. A customer who hopes to talk to someone who understands their problem, is compassionate and on their wavelength.

Flexible



A flexible person is committed to working with you, collaborating to reach a mutually-desirable solution, rather than being 'set in their ways'.

They are open and amenable and are happy to embrace change.

Picture this person responding positively and helpfully to a customer who is hoping that Hunter Water will work with them to creatively resolve a complex issue, though deep down they anticipate a "but this is the way we've been doing it for years" response.

Confident



A confident person is comfortable (though not in an arrogant way) in the knowledge they are well-informed and able to provide you with sound advice and suggestions. They also know when, and how, to refer you to other subject matter experts both internally and externally.

They are honest and genuine in their dealings. They value listening and learning.

Picture this person responding to a customer who is struggling to understand the ramifications of a Hunter Water contract clause and just wants someone who knows what they're talking about to help explain it in simple language.



Connected



A connected person is blessed with a strong sense of community and is proud to be highly responsible and accountable.

They are innovative and broad minded, with the ability to 'think outside the box'.

Picture this person responding to a customer who has concerns about the impact a Hunter Water policy will have on their local environment, and who needs to talk to someone who cares.

Inclusive



An inclusive person embraces all cultures, backgrounds and traditions and will, without pre-judgement, take you at face value.

They relate well with others and are community minded.

Picture this person responding to a customer who looks, thinks and talks differently but wants feedback on their idea.

Use tenses that personalise the conversation

Nowadays – and this is particularly true of online communications – it is quite acceptable to talk with customers and suppliers in a less formal, conversational manner. And even to start sentences with an ‘and’!

Using the first person (‘you’) rather than the third person (‘customers’) immediately helps us engage with the individual we are communicating with, creating a more personal experience.

✓ “You may find this helps...”

✗ “Customers find this helps...”

A word of warning though. Never allow informality to slip into sloppiness. As a highly-respected government-owned organisation providing an essential service, Hunter Water should always write with good grammar, punctuation and sentence structure.

Keep your writing succinct and straightforward

At Hunter Water we talk with our customers and suppliers, not at them or down to them.

That means we respect our customers by making what we have to say simple and understandable – using vocabulary they will feel comfortable with.

Here are a few tips

- Think 'what does the reader need to know?' rather than 'what do I want to tell them?'
- Keep sentences short and based on a single topic.
- Identify and remove superfluous words that add nothing to a sentence.
- Never use three words when one will do.
- Only write with commonly-used words you would be prepared to use in a conversation.
- Use bullet points rather than long lists of words.
- Avoid confusing readers with industry jargon and acronyms.
- Break up text with informative subheadings, helping readers scan the information.

Write to your medium

People read differently according to the medium adopted. Keep these basic guidelines in mind:

Emails

Emails will be read on a screen or scrolled through on a mobile device, so long headlines can be difficult to read and long paragraphs become intimidating. Consider using helpful subheadings to provide an idea of the details available on closer scrutiny.

Website

Pages will likely be viewed on mobile, so the same rules as for emails apply. Break the information into easily digestible chunks to show the reader you care about their experience.

Brochures and leaflets

You can afford to be a little more indulgent with your messaging in these mediums, but you must still help your reader navigate easily through what they need to know.

Letters

Whether it's a simple piece of service advice or a complex communication involving multiple messages, apply the writing rules from page eight to ensure your letter is accessible.

And remember, whatever the medium, every communication should be written in the Hunter Water tone of voice – to ensure consistency across our organisation and the brand strength that results from it.

Social ie: LinkedIn

If you are managing your professional identity through online platforms, you are a reflection of Hunter Water. Any comments about or in connection with Hunter Water must be factual and consistent with our goals and objectives. Staff should use their best judgement in posting material to ensure it is neither inappropriate, nor harmful to Hunter Water, our people, or customers.

Use a proven structure

Write customer correspondence using a proven structure. Hunter Water issues thousands of different communications each year using a variety of mediums, so it's hard to apply a standard formula to their composition. However, the following customer correspondence structure should help you achieve optimum engagement and understanding.

Salutation

If you're writing a letter or email, 'Dear customer' sets an immediate bad impression that the rest of the communication is likely to be generic and impersonal. If possible, use a title and last name. Some of our letters are automated and aren't able to be personalised. In these instances, 'Hello from Hunter Water' is a good alternative. It is friendly and personal in tone.

Helpful headline

State exactly what this communication is about (but no more).

Warm acknowledgement

In a single sentence, establish that you have a relationship with this person. This could be acknowledging the receipt of an enquiry, referencing a service they have asked about, or simply 'knowing' how long they've had an account with us for a particular property.

Subject summary

In the next sentence, summarise exactly what will be covered in the rest of the communication. They may wish to return to it later but will want to know roughly what it's about.

Full information

Apply all the rules listed above and always picture the recipient when writing. Try to place yourself in their shoes - do they have all the information they need? Is it simple and logical?

Call to action

If there's anything the reader needs to do in response to the communication, let them know here.

Sign off

Thank the recipient for reading your communication and invite them to get in touch if anything is not clear.

Signature

Let the recipient know who has written and how they can be contacted if necessary.

Finally - test your writing



Before printing, uploading or sending a communication, carry out these simple tests:

1. Read it out loud.

If something doesn't sound right, there's probably something wrong. You can get Microsoft Word to read it back to you using the *Read Aloud* button under the *Review* tab.

2. Check the tone.

Are you coming over as approachable, flexible, confident, connected and inclusive? If not, adjust your messaging.

3. Edit it then edit it again.

Make it as succinct as is practical, and use everyday language – though without 'dumbing down'.

4. Put yourself in their shoes.

Think how the reader will react to what you have written and adjust if necessary.

5. Double check your grammar.

And your tenses, spelling and punctuation.

6. Give it a break.

Do something else or leave it overnight. Then return to the work and read it again. Adjust if necessary.

Before and after

A few subtle changes in tenses and vocabulary can transform the tone of a communication from stuffy and corporate to friendly and helpful. Here are a few examples.

Response to a customer email

Before

Dear <Salutation> <Last name>

RE: <address/account number>

Thank you for your enquiry.

To ensure we are raising the appropriate request, we do require further information to ascertain the severity of the service fault.

- Can you please advise if the taste and odour are coming from all taps at the property?
- Can you please describe the taste and smell? EG, earthy, metallic, chemical, chlorine etc?
- How long have you experienced this issue?
- Is this from all taps within the property?

Once we receive this information we will raise a service fault in our system and our field staff will attend as quickly as possible to investigate further.

Should you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact Hunter Water on 1300 657 657 during business hours or email enquiries@hunterwater.com.au

After

Dear <Salutation> <Last name>,

Your water quality concern at <address>

Thank you for getting in touch. We're sorry to hear you have noticed a change in your water supply and will investigate the reason without delay.

To help us do so efficiently, could you please reply with a little more information:

- Is the taste/smell coming from all your taps, or just one or two?
Please type your answer here:
- Can you please describe the taste/smell?
For instance, it might be earthy, metallic, chemical, or like the chlorine in a swimming pool.
Please type your answer here:
- How long ago did you start noticing the change in taste/smell?
Please type your answer here:
- Did the change happen first with just one tap, or all taps at the same time?
Please type your answer here:

Once we hear back from you, our field staff will get on the case straight away. Then we'll resolve any problems they find as soon as possible.

In the meantime, if you'd like to know more please don't hesitate to call us on 1300 657 657 (business hours) or email enquiries@hunterwater.com.au

Regards,
The Hunter Water response team

Written approval sent to a plumber

Opening and closing sections

Before

Attention: <Name>

Dear Sir

RE: REMOVAL OF 150mm x 100mm TEE AND CONTROL VALVE FROM THE CORPORATIONS WATERMAIN: Lots1 & 27-38 DP 758233, 37 Darling St, Carrington.

DISCONNECTION METHOD: CONVENTIONAL

We wish to advise that conditional approval has been granted to you as the agent for the removal of a 150mm x 100mm Tee & Control Valve connection from the Hunter Water Corporation's existing 150mm CICL water main located in Darling Street, subject to the following conditions:

Agreement to Hunter Water Corporation's Terms & Conditions covering the removal of Tees and Valves (the details of which are attached).

Note: No works shall commence in respect to the removal of the Tee and Valve or the disconnection of the existing property service until the owner's agent has received a letter of requirements for service disconnections.

Mandatory administrative requirements prior to water disconnection being available:

(insert information as required)

Should you have any further enquiries please contact the enquiries officer below.

Yours faithfully

(Signature)

<Name>

<Job Title>

Enquiries: <Name>

Tel: <Phone Number>

After

Attention: <Name>

Dear Mr Cameron,

Approval for the removal of a 150mm x 100mm tee and control valve from our water main: Lots 1 and 27-38 DP 758233, 37 Darling St, Carrington.

Disconnection method: conventional

I'm pleased to advise you that conditional approval has been granted for you to remove a 150mm x 100mm tee and control valve connection from our 150mm CICL water main located in Darling Street, Carrington, subject to the following conditions:

- Your agreement to Hunter Water's Terms & Conditions covering the removal of tees and valves (please see the attached).
- That no work shall commence in respect of the removal of the tee and valve or the disconnection of the existing property service until the owner's agent has received a letter of requirements for service disconnections.

Please note that the mandatory administrative requirements prior to water disconnection being available are:

(Insert information as required)

If you have any questions about this approval, please don't hesitate to contact me on one of the numbers provided below.

Yours sincerely,

('faithfully' is used if actual name is not used above)

(Signature)

<Name>

<Job Title>

Tel: <Phone Number>

Website 'about us' copy

Before

Our Organisation

Hunter Water is a State Owned Corporation (SOC) providing drinking water, wastewater, recycled water and some stormwater services to a population approaching 600,000 people in homes and businesses across the Lower Hunter.

Hunter Water was the first SOC to be proclaimed within New South Wales pursuant to the State Owned Corporations Act 1989. We are proud of our humble beginnings, starting in the 1880s when water was first delivered to Newcastle from a temporary pumping station on the Hunter River at Oakhampton to Newcastle No 1 Reservoir on Tyrrell Street. Today we operate under the Hunter Water Act 1991 (NSW).

We have 456 employees who are committed to delivering safe, affordable and reliable services to our community. Our employees work closely with contractors, stakeholders and the community to manage an asset base of more than \$2.5 billion worth of water, wastewater and recycled water infrastructure, ensuring a sustainable water future for the Lower Hunter.

After

About Hunter Water

Hunter Water provides the world's most precious resource – clean drinking water – to more than 600,000 people in homes and businesses across the Lower Hunter. Owned by the NSW Government, we also manage wastewater, recycled water and some stormwater services in the region.

Our proud roots go back to the 1880s when water was first delivered to Newcastle from a temporary pumping station on the Hunter River at Oakhampton via Newcastle No. 1 Reservoir on Tyrrell Street. A century later, Hunter Water became the first State Owned Corporation, operating under the *Hunter Water Act 1991* (NSW).

The team at Hunter Water comprises more than 450 highly-trained employees, who share a passionate commitment to providing our community with safe, affordable and reliable services. They work closely with contractors, stakeholders and the community to manage an asset base of more than \$2.5 billion worth of water, wastewater and recycled water infrastructure, ensuring a sustainable water future for the region.

Website 'dispute resolution' copy

Before

Your Account > Managing Your Account >
Dispute Resolution

Dispute Resolution

If you are not satisfied with our response, you can request that your complaint be referred to one of our Managers for review. If you are still unsatisfied, you may refer matters to the Energy and Water Ombudsman NSW.

The Ombudsman provides an independent dispute resolution service for customers of electricity, gas and water providers in NSW. This service is free of charge to you. The Energy & Water Ombudsman of NSW can be contacted on 1800 246 545. However, before going to the Ombudsman, please give us the opportunity to resolve any issues first.

After

Your Account > Managing Your Account > Resolving
Problems

Resolving problems

Your satisfaction as a valued customer is one of our highest priorities. If you have any issues with the service you are receiving please let us know straight away by calling 1300 657 657 (business hours) or by emailing us.

If you feel that your concerns have not been addressed adequately, you can request that your complaint be escalated to one of our managers for review. If you are still not satisfied, please refer the matter to the Energy and Water Ombudsman NSW.

The Ombudsman provides a free and independent dispute resolution service for customers of electricity, gas and water providers in NSW. However, before contacting them, please give us the opportunity to resolve any issues first.

‘Damage to your property’ fact sheet copy

Front page

Before

Damage to your property

From time to time customers may be inconvenienced by unforeseen events relating to Hunter Water’s assets where a water main break or wastewater overflow has occurred.

Hunter Water’s responsibilities to the community are determined by the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal and set out in the Customer Contact and the Operating Licence.

Hunter Water’s responsibilities in the event of an unforeseen asset failure are as follows:

- Upon notification of a suspected asset failure Hunter Water will attend to the incident and undertake repairs and/or maintenance works to our assets as soon as practicable.
- Hunter Water will assist with a clean-up of external areas such as lawns and gardens impacted as a result of the incident.
- Any emergency assistance will be assessed on a case by case basis.

Information for Customers in the event of an unforeseen asset failure is as follows:

- Property owners and/or tenants are responsible for choosing the appropriate level of insurance cover for protection of personal assets.
- You should contact your insurer as soon as practicable should you experience property damage or loss as a result of a water main break or wastewater overflow. Your insurer is able to offer practical advice and assistance.

Continued over page...

After

Damage to your property

Unforeseen events can occasionally result in damage to our water mains or to our sewerage system – which may cause damage to private property. Our priority is to minimise that damage and any inconvenience caused.

Your rights and responsibilities are explained in our Customer Contract. For a full copy, visit hunterwater.com.au/contract

In the event of an unforeseen asset failure, we will attend and carry out repairs and/or maintenance as soon as possible. We may need access to your property for this work to be done.

- For sewer overflows, we will do our best to contain the overflow, and clean up and disinfect the impacted external areas as quickly as possible.
- For water main breaks, we will assist with a clean up of external areas such as lawns and gardens, of rocks, mud and debris.

Things to remember

- As a property owner or tenant, you are responsible for choosing the appropriate level of insurance cover for the protection of your personal assets.
- You should contact your insurer as quickly as possible if your property is damaged as a result of a water main break or wastewater overflow. They will be able to offer practical advice and assistance.

Continued over page...

‘Damage to your property’ fact sheet copy

Front page cont.

- If you are a tenant, notify your property manager/ landlord and contact your insurance company in the instance of damage to contents.
- Hunter Water does not compensate for loss of time or loss of business as a result of a water main break, wastewater overflow or maintenance interruption.
- Contact Hunter Water should you require any further information relating to expected time frames for assistance with a clean-up of external areas such as lawns and gardens.

Overleaf is a summary of Clause 16 of the Customer Contract, ‘Redress’. This explains your rights and responsibilities in more detail. For the full Customer Contract and Hunter Water’s Operating Licence, visit www.hunterwater.com.au

Do you require further information?

Contact us:

Hunter Water

ABN 46 228513 446

Website: www.hunterwater.com.au

Email: enquiries@hunterwater.com.au

Enquiries: 1300 657 657

Emergencies: 1300 657 000

Before and after – example five

- If you are a tenant, let your property manager or landlord know, and contact your insurance company if contents are damaged.
- Any emergency assistance that we provide is assessed on a case by case basis by our Customer Care team. We do not compensate for loss of time or business as a result of a water main break, sewer overflow or maintenance interruption. More information is available in Clause 16 of the Customer Contract, ‘Redress’.

We are here to help

If you’d like to know how long a clean up will take or have any other questions, please don’t hesitate to contact us.

Enquiries: 1300 657 657

Email: enquiries@hunterwater.com.au

Emergencies: 1300 657 000

General rules (and common mistakes)

We have reviewed some of the common mistakes people make when writing communications. For more grammar tips and helpful information, please refer to the [Hunter Water Editorial Guide](#) available on the Reservoir Style Hub.

- Control your punctuation
- Make sure your subjects agree with your verbs
- Make sure your pronouns agree with your nouns
- Choose the correct way to use 'that' and 'which'
- Double check your spelling

Control your punctuation

A statement has to be very spectacular or surprising to merit an exclamation mark. So, use them sparingly, if at all.

While on the subject of punctuation, it's amazing how many unnecessary apostrophes make their way into communications, and how many necessary ones are left out.

Remember, plurals (more than one of something) don't have apostrophes.

✗ The manager's joined the meeting.

✓ The managers joined the meeting.

Apostrophes are used to show ownership. Consider what is doing the owning - the apostrophe goes directly after the answer.

✓ Meters monitor water consumption.
(Using the plural)

✓ A meter's number shows the water consumption.
(Possessive, talking about one meter)

✓ Meters' numbers show the water consumption.
(Possessive talking about multiple meters)

Exceptions are the words 'its' and 'whose' as they both have a "built in" possessive. They only get an apostrophe when it's is an abbreviation of 'it is' and who's is an abbreviation of 'who is'.

✓ The report was judged on its own merits.

Plurals of numbers are still just plurals (not abbreviations) so they do not need apostrophes:

✗ Each week we respond to 100's of enquiries...

✓ Back in the 1970s, Hunter Water was...

When two words are combined to form an adjective, they become hyphenated to become a compound adjective:

✓ three-month program...

✓ cutting-edge technology...

✓ our highly-trained technicians...

Make sure your subjects agree with your verbs

Hunter Water is a single entity and hundreds of people are employed by it.

✗ As a valued customer, Hunter Water is offering you a way to reduce your consumption.

✓ As your local supplier, Hunter Water is offering you a way to reduce your consumption.

Make sure your pronouns agree with your nouns

✗ Hunter Water is a world-class organisation thanks to their talented and resourceful people.

✓ Hunter Water is a world-class organisation thanks to its talented and resourceful people.

Collective nouns should be described as one. A team is singular, regardless of how many individuals are a part of it.

✗ The Civil team are planning...

✓ The Civil team is planning...

Choose the correct way to use ‘that’ and ‘which’

These two sentences are both grammatically correct, but they mean different things:

The most technically-advanced water purification system used by Hunter Water, which is also used by our neighbours in Sydney, is the ACME2020.

The most technically-advanced water purification system used by Hunter Water that is also used by our neighbours in Sydney is the ACME2020.

The first sentence tells us that both companies use the ACME2020, which is the most technically advanced system used by Hunter Water. The second sentence tells us that the most technically advanced system used by both companies is the ACME2020.

Use ‘which’ if a group of words adds information (with commas around that added information). Use ‘that’ if the words restrict the meaning (and there is no ‘pause’ when you say the sentence out loud).

Double check your spelling

When you are rushing to get some correspondence out, errors are easy to make, and with many words - such as homophones (words that sound the same but have different meanings) - spell check won't help.

Your / you're
To / too / two
There / their / they're
New / knew
Effect / affect
No / know
Where / wear

Imagine how hard it is to learn English as a second language!

Use the preferred term

Rather than...	Try this
Hunter Water Corporation, the corporation, the business, HWC	Hunter Water
Whilst	While
Chairperson, Chairman	Chair
Effluent	Wastewater
The commencement	The start
12th of October	12 October
Wastewater is discharged	Wastewater is released
Impacted (we 'impacted' our community)	Try to be more specific. We interrupted your water supply, we created noise and dust
Potable water	Drinking water, drinking quality water
Stakeholder	Try to be more specific. Customer, community, neighbouring residents, government
Write in first person. 'Customers find this helps...'	'You may find this helps...'
Sewermain	Sewer main
Watermain	Water main
Hunter Water are	Hunter Water is
The team are responsible for...	The team is responsible for...
Staff at Hunter Water	We
Due to the fact that	Because
Have the capacity to	Can
In the event that	If
At the time of writing	Currently, now
Made an attempt	Tried
Man hole	Access chamber, maintenance hole

If you have any questions or comments,
please email the Communications and
Engagement team at
communications@hunterwater.com.au

And please remember, we always
welcome your suggestions for improving
the way Hunter Water communicates
with our customers and community.

