Write boldly

How to write with style for the University of Essex
Three indisputable reasons why we need an Essex writing style

1. Our writing is the main way many people interact with us

Put yourself in the shoes of a potential student thinking of coming to Essex. A business partner considering our services. A researcher from another country looking for collaboration opportunities. Or a current student reading a communication from their department.

A huge proportion of your contact with Essex will be through writing. Whether it’s emails, policies, letters, or brochures, the way we write can have a big influence on what people think of us. Your words need to engage people if they’re going to have an impact.

2. There are a lot of other universities out there

The sector is facing some big challenges. Changing tuition fees and uncertainty over Brexit means we can’t just relax and hope people come to us.

We need to stand out and grab people’s attention. We can do that by choosing stories that will captivate our readers, and being really clear about who we are and what we sound like.

3. It just looks more professional

Everyone has their own writing voice, whether they mean to or not. If you’re writing a novel, that’s a good thing. But when we’re trying to be consistent as an organisation? Not so great.

If you’re writing on behalf of Essex, you’re not just writing as yourself. You’re representing the whole University. Whether it’s an admissions email or a funding application, we need all our communications to have that... Essexyness.
Write like Essex

Tone of voice

Unless you’re in marketing or communications, you might be wondering what a Tone of Voice is. Don’t worry – it’s a lot easier to get your head around than you might think.

Things like our values and our four pillars help us define who we are as an organisation and where we’re going. Our voice is much simpler – it’s just what we sound like.

Our tone can change depending on who we’re speaking to. So if you’re writing a serious announcement, it’s OK to dial down the attitude.

We’ve summed it up in one phrase

Our writing style is a result of who we are as an organisation, so it helps to understand our brand. But for everyday writing there’s only one thing you need to remember.

Write boldly.

As a university, we’re confident, ambitious, and always challenging convention. Bold writing is what makes us sound unique. The rest of this writing guide will help you understand how.

Don’t be afraid to break some rules

Forget what you think you know about writing. We’re competing for people’s attention, and the usual rules don’t apply.

Crafting great copy is like painting a masterpiece. If you just stick with tradition, you won’t create anything original. You need the confidence to make a statement, even if it means bending a few rules along the way.

“If proper usage gets in the way, it may have to go. I can’t allow what we learned in English composition to disrupt the sound and rhythm of the narrative.” Elmore Leonard
Being bold means

**Having the confidence to be direct**
Like peeling off a plaster, sometimes it’s best to just jump straight in to something.

**Talking to strangers like you’re an honest friend**
If Essex were a person at a social event, we’d be the one everyone wants to talk to. Not the shy type in the corner standing by the Pringles.

**Being proud of what we do without sounding arrogant**
We know we’re great at what we do. But looking at ourselves in the mirror all day won’t improve world health, or help us understand Brexit.
Rule 1: give the reader lots of detail

It takes courage to be direct.

Bold writing doesn't tick every box. It doesn't list every possible eventuality. Bold writing says exactly what the reader needs to know. And nothing more.

“It is my ambition to say in ten sentences what others say in a whole book”
Friedrich Nietzsche

People add detail to their writing to emphasise their point. Especially in academic writing, or formal documents like policies.

But too much detail is an insult to the reader's intelligence. And it makes writing a chore to read. Here are some more useful guidelines:

1. Stop and think about what information your reader really needs. Anything else is probably unnecessary.
2. Stick to one point per paragraph.
3. Avoid long lists – you don’t need to say everything at once.
Multiple choice question. How direct should Essex be?

1. Our graduates pursue careers in the law and in a wide range of other sectors including business and commerce, accountancy, insurance, banking, central and local government, academia, teaching, social work, the police force, civil service, healthcare, data analysis, human resources, trading standards, project management, consultancy, politics, immigration, and more.

2. Our graduates are making waves in law and a wide range of other sectors, from accountancy to social work.

3. Graduates are lawyers etc.

Answer

Hopefully you picked number 2.

Examples are always good, so number 3 is too short. But we don't need to list every example we can think of. Just enough to give the reader a sense of the range of options.

If a long list is absolutely necessary, think about using bullet points to make it easier to take in.
Rule 2: always use proper English

Don’t use contractions... Don’t start a sentence with a conjunction... Don’t end it with a preposition... Don’t split infinitives...

Everyone has their own idea of “proper” English. But most of those “rules” are just people’s own preferences. Besides, language evolves, and a stickler for tradition can sound stuffy and pompous.

A bold university would have the confidence to talk to a bunch of strangers as if we’re already friends – whether they’re 18-year-old school leavers or 80-year-old Nobel Prize winners.

“It ain’t whatcha write, it’s the way atcha write it” Jack Kerouac

We have great stories to tell. But we can’t engage people in our work unless we tell those stories in a way that people can relate to.

The best way to do that? Imagine your reader. Then write like you’re having a conversation with them.

It’s OK to adapt your writing for different audiences and situations. But don’t get preoccupied with language. Concentrate on how you would engage your reader if they were in front of you and the right words will come to you.

1. Write naturally – if you wouldn’t say it, don’t write it.

2. Vary sentence length – but overall, keep them short.

3. Don’t use a long word if there’s a short one that’s just as good.
Multiple choice question. How would Essex talk to a clearing student?

1. Check our course finder to easily see what's open in Clearing. And if you've found something you like, give us a call or fill in our online form.

2. One can check the Course Finder to see, quite easily, what is open in Clearing; if one finds something of interest, it is possible to telephone the clearing team or fill out an interweb form.

3. Check our course finder. And see what's open in Clearing. And look for something good. And then give us a call. Or fill in our online form.

Answer

Yep, number 1. It might seem like it breaks a few rules, but it sounds like a real person.

Number 2 doesn't sound natural.

Number 3 shows the danger of overdoing it.
Rule 3: write objectively, using the 3rd person and avoiding personal pronouns

In academic writing, we try to avoid sounding too subjective. But for everything else, a bit of personality is a good thing.

We’re proud of what goes on here at Essex. So we should take ownership of the great things we do. That means we need to use the word “we” a lot more. Instead of “it was discovered that” say “we discovered“.

And because we want to engage people in the things we’re proud of, we should also use the word “you” more. Instead of “students will benefit from”, say “you’ll benefit from”.

"A writer without interest or sympathy for the foibles of his fellow man is not conceivable as a writer." Joseph Conrad

Good writing is one person creating a connection with another. Emotions, personal experiences, and empathy are a vital part of communication. So address people directly. Show you’re proud of Essex and interested in what other people have to say.

1. Write like you’re talking to your reader.
2. Write what your reader needs to hear, not what you want to say.
3. Don’t boast if you can’t back up your point.
Multiple choice question. Which exam notification is more Essex?

1. Records indicate that you have NOT PRINTED your EXAM ENTRY FORM (or that the examinations timetable has been updated since it was last viewed/printed). PLEASE NOTE: students will not be allowed into the Examination Room without a printed copy.

2. We see you haven't printed your exam entry form yet. If you don't have a copy, we can't let you in to the exam room. Please login to view your timetable and print off the form before your exam.

3. Honestly mate. Why haven't you printed your exam form? We know it’s just a bloody bit of paper but some geezer decided you need to have it with you to get in the exam room. We told him to chill but you know how it goes.

Answer

Number 2 is what we want to sound like.

Number 1 sounds very formal and not recognisably Essex.

Number 3 would certainly be bold. But the tone isn't appropriate for the subject.

But number 2 is clear and direct, friendly but not overly informal.
Oxford commas or extraordinary stories? We know what we’d choose.

We don’t want to abandon good English. That would be unprofessional. But we think it’s far more important to focus on engaging your reader with the story you’re trying to tell.

“The unread story is not a story; it is little black marks on wood pulp. The reader, reading it, makes it live.” Ursula K. Le Guin

At Essex, our way of engaging people in writing is through our Tone of Voice. Our bold writing style grabs our reader’s attention and makes us stand out from our competition.

Sometimes being bold just means choosing an exciting word every now and then. Like saying “we’re on the side of people with guts” instead of “we’re on the side of people who push boundaries”.

But overall, being bold means having the confidence to go for it and try something new. So what are you waiting for?