

Writing for impact

Tone of voice and
writing principles

In this toolkit

- Introducing our internal brand idea
- Translating our internal brand idea into our writing principles
- Our principles in action

Introducing our internal brand idea:

We all win when science wins

We're all here with the same goal: to beat cancer. It's a cause that unites us all and an ambition that should shine through in everything we say and do.

Our internal brand idea helps us focus that ambition and reminds us why we're all here, working together to improve and save lives.

This idea unites our brand. It's not a strapline we share externally, but it steers the way we think and talk about our work.

The examples you'll read in this document demonstrate how our brand idea forms our writing principles. However, remember examples should not be used externally without sign-off.

We all win when science wins

Cancer is complex. It's not one disease, it's more than 200. But scientific breakthroughs mean every day, people live better with those cancers, go into remission, or have vaccines that prevent some cancers completely.

We make breakthroughs happen

Our scientists are among the best in the world. Together, they're helping us do in hours or days the kind of work that once would have taken us decades. And they've got our whole community behind them: philanthropists, fundraisers, volunteers, policymakers, global partners – all united by a common purpose.

But we need to go further, faster

Despite all this great work, people are still dying sooner than they should. That's what drives us: translating our discoveries into diagnoses and treatments that help more people live longer, healthier lives. Because we all win when science wins.

Contents

01

Introduction.....

2

Introducing our brand idea.....

3

02

Contents.....

4

03

Principles.....

5-6

We all.....

7

Win when.....

8

Science wins.....

9

Quick checks.....

10

04

Bringing it all together.....

11

Individual giving ask.....

12

Campaigning.....

14

Loyalty comms.....

16

News update.....

18

Philanthropy.....

20

Researcher comms.....

22

05

Need any help?.....

24

Principles

Bringing our
brand to life



We’ve underpinned our internal brand idea with a set of practical principles that bring it to life whenever we write and for whoever we’re writing to. Some of these are standard good writing rules, while others are more specific to us.

Combined, they build on and capture our brand idea and personality. Our brand's personality is confident, human, visionary and inclusive. For more information on our personality traits and how they inspire how we look, talk and act, see our [brand guidelines](#).

In this guide, we’ve split our writing principles into three key areas, so we never lose focus on the power of science, the people who make our work possible, or the difference we’re making all the time.

Over the next few pages, we’ll show you how to use each principle.

Brand idea

01

We all

02

Win when

03

Science wins

Principles

Involve everyone
Write like you speak

Principles

Lead with the positive
Be definitive

Principles

Show the impact
Add relatable data

Our personality traits

Confident
Human
Visionary
Inclusive

We all...

People power is so important to our stories. So we always look for places to show the impact of our work on people affected by cancer, and to champion our researchers and the many people, including philanthropists, volunteers and fundraisers, who make that work possible. They're an indispensable part of our success.

To do that, we:

Involve everyone

Beating cancer is a team effort that includes everyone from the researchers in the lab to the volunteers pounding the pavements. Our writing reflects that inclusivity by using ‘you’, ‘we’ and ‘our.’

So, instead of:

Cancer Research UK’s research isn’t possible without the commitment of volunteers.

Try:

Our research isn’t possible without all our volunteers.

Or even:

Our research isn’t possible without you.

Write like you speak

Using everyday language makes our words feel natural and engaging. It doesn’t mean we have to avoid using scientific terminology – instead, by explaining it, we can help promote a better understanding of the work that we do.

What we do want to avoid are empty adjectives. When talking about our work, it’s tempting to reach for the thesaurus to find the most exciting descriptions. But words like ‘groundbreaking’ are so overused they can sound hollow – unless you can back them up quickly.

To inspire and excite, try changing a message like this:

Our latest groundbreaking research has resulted in a unique treatment that will have an unprecedented effect on survival rates.

Into something more concrete, like this:

We’ve made our biggest leap yet in treating lung cancer: based on a very recent trial, our latest treatment looks set to double survival rates for people with stage 2 lung cancer.

One trick to help you do that is to read everything you write out loud. If you can read your words in a natural voice, you’ve probably struck the right tone. But if you sound frightfully formal or like a cheesy gameshow host who’s overdone the adjectives, see if you can rewrite your message so it sounds like something you’d say.

...win when...

Hope is central to everything we do. Hope of new discoveries, hope of better treatments, and hope of more days with friends and families. Promoting that sense of hope – that we’re on the right track and making a real difference – keeps our readers motivated and engaged with what we do.

Here's how:



Lead with the positive

Cancer can be tough to talk about. We’re not here to sugar-coat the truth or minimise how people might feel. But wherever we can, we want to start with and emphasise the positive. We have good news to share, so let’s make sure it gets the prominence it deserves.

Instead of opening a message with:

We know we need more research because 1 in 2 of us will get cancer.

You could choose a positive message, like:

So much of our research involves diagnosing cancer sooner to treat it faster.

Be definitive

Cancer is complex, and we know there will be times when we can’t guarantee a trial will succeed or a particular person with cancer will survive.

But there are plenty of things we can be definitive about. We are making progress. Together we are beating cancer. As long as we’re not making false claims, let’s avoid the ifs and maybe to talk about what we are doing and what we will achieve.

Sometimes being definitive is simply about cutting to the chase with short, punchy sentences. So instead of:

Breakthroughs like this are only possible thanks to monthly donations which allow us to commit to the necessary long-term research.

Try:

When you make regular donations, we fund long-term research. And when we fund long-term research, we make our biggest breakthroughs.

A handy way to keep things on track is to plan ahead: what do you want readers to know, feel and do?

Answering those questions from the start will help you get to the point, with messages that are relevant and engaging for your readers.

Use the active voice to make your words definitive

Here’s a simple grammatical trick. In any sentence, there’s a subject (the one doing the action) and an object (the one having the action done to them). The passive voice puts them in a strange order, so the doer comes last...

You will be sent the latest findings by CRUK

...or doesn’t even appear (which is even more confusing.)

You will be sent the latest findings

If we change voices, we can see straight away how different it sounds:

We’ll send you our latest findings

By using the active voice, we automatically sound more natural. And we own our wins.

...science wins

Science is our USP, and our (hopefully not-so-secret) weapon. We’ll make science a star in our messaging by highlighting the impact it has.

Here’s how:

Show the impact

We champion science, but not for science’s sake. What motivates us – and interests our readers – is the practical difference research makes. So, every time we write about science, we put most of the emphasis on its impact – about 30% for the former and 70% for the latter.

To help get this right, every time you include a piece of data in your message, ask, ‘so what?’ If your reader doesn’t care, they’re unlikely to do what you want.

So instead of focusing on the science:

Scientists at our Cambridge Institute have identified a protein in our cells called NALCN. This is a key regulator of metastasis, the process by which cells from a primary tumour break away via the bloodstream to form a secondary tumour in another organ.

Focus on what it means for people:

Our researchers have identified a new protein which they believe is a key driver of metastasis, the process where cancer spreads to different areas of the body. This discovery will help us to understand how cancer spreads, so we can work on more effective treatments which will help people to live longer.

Add relatable data

Science is all about evidence, facts, and results – and a lot of that boils down to data. By adding in data, we make our work more concrete and tangible – and more likely to prompt the response we want.

But while our readers care about science, many probably aren’t scientists. So we need to make that data as easy to digest as possible, especially if we’re dealing with big numbers.

Every year, around 375,000 people in the UK are diagnosed with cancer.

Even a relatively simple figure like this can wash over us – because it’s hard to picture. Explain it with analogies and comparisons though, and it’ll have instant impact.:

Every year, around 375,000 people in the UK are diagnosed with cancer – enough to fill 10 football stadiums.

Quick checks

That’s a lot to remember.

The next time you’re editing your own work (or reviewing someone else’s), ask these questions to check your words sound like they come from us.



Involve everyone:
Have you used plenty of ‘we’ and ‘you’ to include everyone in our story?

Write human:
Have you used everyday language?



Lead with the positive:
Are you putting the focus on good news?

Be definitive:
Is it clear what you want the reader to know, feel and do?
And have you used the active voice so it’s always clear who’s doing what?



Show the impact:
Are you putting the emphasis on the impact of the science?

Add relatable data:
Have you added easy-to-understand data to clarify?



**Bringing
it all
together
Some examples**



Individual
giving ask



Bringing it all together

Individual giving ask*

Before

How regular giving powers research

Breast cancer survival over the last 40 years has doubled. Thanks, largely, to discoveries funded by Cancer Research UK.

Discoveries like this are only possible thanks to monthly donations which allow us to commit to the necessary long-term research.

Research that helped create the groundbreaking drug carboplatin – which treated Marianne and more than 26,000 NHS patients in England this year.

Research that laid the groundwork that led to the identification of the first faulty BRCA1 gene, a genetic risk factor for breast and ovarian cancers.

Research that means that around 3 in 4 women diagnosed with breast cancer in England are predicted to survive their disease for 10 years or more.

Donate just £3 a month and you could help fund more lifesaving discoveries.

After

You donate, we discover: here’s what happens when you give us £3 a month

When you make regular donations, we fund long-term research. And when we fund long-term research, we make more discoveries.

You’ve just read Marianne’s story. She’s cancer-free, thanks to a chemotherapy drug we developed: carboplatin. Carboplatin interferes with DNA cells to stop them dividing and spreading.

Soon, others may never need chemotherapy at all. That’s because we’ve pinpointed the first faulty gene that tells us whether someone’s at risk of getting ovarian or breast cancer. And the sooner we know someone’s risk, the sooner we can prevent or treat it.

That’s why breast cancer survival over the last 40 years has doubled. And around 3 in 4 women diagnosed with breast cancer will live for 10 years or more.

These are huge wins for us all. By donating £3 a month, you’ll help us have more of them.

What's changed?

We all...

We’ve involved everyone – with 'you donate, we discover' and later 'you’ve just read' and 'these are huge wins for us all'. And we’ve swapped the distant 'regular giving' with 'when you make regular donations'.

We’ve written human – replacing more formal-speak and long sentences. 'Breakthroughs like this are only possible thanks to monthly donations which allow us to commit to the necessary long-term research' became 'When you make regular donations, we fund long-term research. And when we fund long-term research, we make our biggest breakthroughs.'

...win when...

The original already led with the positive – but we’ve made the impact even clearer with the direct 'you donate, we discover' link and by putting the 40-year and 10-year survival stats side by side for extra impact.

We’ve been definitive – 'When we fund long-term research, we make our biggest breakthroughs,' leading with the action, 'give us £3 a month'.

...science wins

We’ve made the research more relatable – explaining how Carboplatin works and telling a clearer BRCA1 story, too.



Campaigning

Before

Everybody has a part to play in beating cancer.

We play our part because 1 in 2 of us will get cancer. We play our part because the pandemic means an estimated 45,000 fewer people have started cancer treatment.* For them the clock is ticking, their cancer likely becoming harder to treat.

The Government must train more NHS staff, tackle the backlog of cancer tests and treatments and find the ‘missing’ cancer patients. Agree?

Add your name

Even before COVID-19, cancer services were at breaking point. The pandemic has made this situation worse. Without urgent action, cancer survival could go backwards for the first time in decades. Play your part and we can make politicians act.

After

To beat cancer, we must treat cancer – add your name to our appeal

So much of our research involves diagnosing cancer sooner to treat it faster. Patrick was 19 when doctors discovered a lump in his throat was thyroid cancer. Early diagnosis massively increased his chance of going on to live a long, healthy life.

But it’s not been easy since the pandemic. Lockdowns meant around 45,000 patients missed out on vital cancer treatments – enough to fill a football stadium. Lots of them are still waiting.

Your MP can help us get back on track.

The Government can help many more people like Patrick get the treatment they need. Add your name to our appeal to ask your MP to act now.

Add your name to help beat the backlog.

What's changed?

We all...

We’ve involved everyone – with ‘your MP’, ‘your name’, ‘us’ and ‘our’.

We’ve written human – cutting the scary copywritten ‘the clock is ticking’ language.

...win when...

The original already led with the positive – emphasising the power of our work to treat cancer sooner rather than focusing on half of us getting it. We’re letting the wins shine through.

We’ve been definitive – the original focused on what might happen without action – cancer survival could go backwards. Now, there’s more positivity and certainty: ‘The Government can help many more people like Patrick get the treatment they need’.

...science wins

We’ve shown the impact – we’ve added the impact of our work to the story.

We’ve made the data relate – ‘enough to fill a football stadium’.



Loyalty
comms

Before

Dear Chris,

The last year has undoubtedly been a tough and unexpected challenge for us all, but in this moment of global crisis we've seen remarkable support and generosity from supporters and fundraisers like you. It's been the greatest challenge we've faced as a charity and our research has inevitably been impacted, but we wanted to say a huge thank you. Because of your continued support we've still been able to fund research that will save lives for years to come.

We've put together a round-up of the progress we've accomplished in beating cancer, with your support, in the last year. Although COVID-19 may have slowed us down, we've still been able to achieve some incredible things – finding new ways to prevent and diagnose cancer and developing exciting new treatments that will see more people survive their disease. Just as research has proven to be the exit strategy from the pandemic, so it will also be the key to improving the lives of people with cancer.

From everyone at Cancer Research UK, thank you for your continued support for over 20 years and especially while we all have endured the challenges of the pandemic.

Together we've continued to make amazing progress in an exceptionally hard year and together we will beat cancer.

The Cancer Research UK Team

After

Thank you for all you've done

Dear Chris,

For the last twenty years, you've done something incredible. You've played a pivotal role in helping us find new ways to prevent, diagnose and treat cancer. And you were there for us during one of the toughest years we've ever faced.

To show how your support during the pandemic has helped, here's a round-up of everything we accomplished last year. Every milestone represents people living longer and better lives, thanks to your generosity and our research.

As you'll see, even Covid-19 couldn't stop us. With you by our side, we'll develop even more treatments and save even more lives in the years to come.

Thank you.

The Cancer Research UK Team

What's changed?

We all...

We've involved everyone – the original already used lots of personal language. We've dialed that up even more, by focusing squarely on what Chris has done rather than on what supporters 'like him' have done.

We've written human – using fewer adjectives to describe our work, like 'exciting'.

...win when...

We've led with the positive – focusing on what Chris has helped us achieve over how the pandemic has slowed us down.

We've been definitive – this is a thank you to a supporter, so now we're leading with that thanks. And shorter sentences make the rewrite feel even more definite: 'For the last 20 years you've done something incredible. Thank you.'

...science wins

We've shown the impact – with 'Every milestone represents people living longer and better lives'.



News update



Before

What are the smokefree ambitions?

The UK Government has set a target for England to be smokefree by 2030. In practice that means reaching a stage where less than 5% of the population smoke in less than 7 years.

Smokefree targets for the other UK nations are the responsibility of devolved governments. Scotland has a target to be tobacco-free by 2034, and the Welsh Government recently set their first ever target to be smoke-free by 2030. Northern Ireland currently has no smokefree target. Progress on these targets so far has been slow, and currently no government across the UK is on track to meet them.

The Welsh and UK Governments are 7 years behind on achieving their 2030 targets.

But while projections estimate that adult smoking prevalence in Wales and England will not reach 5% until 2037, with a 40% increase in that trend, their respective 2030 targets could be achieved. The Scottish target is also not on track to be met currently.

To meet these bold ambitions, the UK needs smokefree action to help make sure young people don't start smoking, and smokefree funding to help people quit.

That's why we were pleased that the Welsh Government's new tobacco control actional plan included measures that will help speed up declines in smoking rates. Other governments across the UK must follow suit.

After

How do we hit our smokefree targets?

The best way to stop young people smoking, help current smokers quit and cut preventable cancer cases, is with a concrete plan. The government's target is a smokefree England by 2030. So we have a destination: under 5% of the population smoking. And a timeframe: less than 7 years.

Like any journey, when you arrive depends on your route and your speed.

Each devolved government is responsible for its own travel arrangements – so how are they getting on?

The good news is that, apart from Northern Ireland, each nation has a target (their route). Wales just set their first target: smoke-free by 2030, the same as England. Scotland aims to join us there in 2034.

But every nation needs to speed up. England and Wales are likely to hit their target 7 years late: 2037. Scotland also isn't on track for its target either.

We can still get there on time

By speeding up the rate people quit smoking by 40% – that's increasing our speed from 50mph to 70mph – England and Wales will hit their target by 2030.

The Welsh government's plan includes measures to boost their speed of travel – giving a blueprint for other UK governments to also reach their destination on time. So, let's hit the accelerator to help the nation quit smoking and cut cancer cases.

What's changed?

We all...

We've involved everyone – there weren't lots of places where we could get personal here, but even small shifts, from 'what are the smokefree targets?' to 'how do we hit our smokefree targets?' feel more personal.

We've written human – with more everyday language. Swapping dry academic predictions – 'But while projections estimate that adult smoking prevalence in Wales and England will not reach 5% until 2037' – for language that's more accessible – 'England and Wales are set to hit their target 7 years late: 2037'.

...win when...

We've led with the positive – putting more emphasis on how we can meet the targets, rather than the likelihood of not reaching them.

We've been definitive – 'England and Wales will hit their target by 2030,' using subheadings to help readers pick up key points quickly. And we've used the active voice, too. The original had 'The Scottish target is also not on track to be met currently,' which absolved the Scottish government of missing its target, so instead we've said 'Scotland also isn't on track to meet its target'.

...science wins

We've shown the impact – remembering to make the link between smoking and preventable cancer cases.

We've made the data relate – using the travelling analogy, including 'if we increased our speed from 50mph to 70mph'.



Philanthropy

Before

Our Annual Report and Accounts 2021/22

Taking great ideas from the lab and translating them into interventions that will benefit people with cancer has always been challenging. Researchers rarely have a medical background and medical doctors rarely have a research background – the gap between the two communities can slow progress considerably.

Cancer Research UK was among the first organisations in the world to address this problem when we merged our two founding organisations 20 years ago. The Cancer Research Campaign was well known for its strong clinical focus, while the Imperial Cancer Research Fund was a world-leader in discovery research. Bringing them together created an environment in which the best ideas from research could flourish into tests and treatments that can save and improve lives. It’s a legacy we’re celebrating in our anniversary year, and it’s one we continue to drive forward today. Our Annual Report and Accounts 2021/22 is a brilliant articulation of the impact our life-saving research has had over the past year, and a chance to recognise the support of our generous philanthropic community.

After

See how far we’ve come: our Annual Report and Accounts 2021/22 is ready

Inside the report, you can read more about the impact we’ve had over the last year – impact you made possible.

Every treatment we’ve developed, and every life we’ve saved, is down to the generosity of our philanthropic community. Thank you.

As this is our anniversary year, we’re also looking back at our legacy

20 years ago, our two founding organisations – the Cancer Research Campaign and the Imperial Cancer Research Fund – merged.

Researchers and medical doctors combined to translate the best ideas from the lab into tests and treatments in a way we’d never seen before. It was a faster, more effective way of working that transformed our research. And, as you’ll see in our annual report, it’s an approach that still helps us save and improve countless lives today.

**We've come a long way
By working together
We're making huge breakthroughs**

What's changed?

We all...

We’ve involved everyone – using 'our' instead of multiple references to CRUK. We’ve also involved the reader more – 'impact you made possible, as you’ll see'.

...win when...

We’ve led with the positive – while the original focused on the challenges facing cancer research, we’ve spent more time on the benefits of overcoming those challenges. And the headline looks at the past positively too – 'see how far we’ve come'.

We’ve been definitive – moving the annual report and accounts from the last paragraph to the first line to make the purpose of the message clear. And we’ve thought about how we want readers to feel – remembering to thank them for their support.

...science wins

We’ve shown the impact – putting less emphasis on the historical choices made by CRUK’s founders, and more emphasis on the practical difference those choices have made.



Researcher
comms

Before

I am pleased to announce the launch of our powerful innovation engine, Cancer Research Horizons. It will combine our commercialisation activities – previously provided via Cancer Research Technology – with our drug discovery laboratories, network of world-class biology, technology platforms and clinical expertise for the first time under a united leadership team.

We will work together with our brilliant research community and partners to harness the potential of the most exciting cancer research happening globally and translate it into tools, tests and treatments through our new approach to therapeutic innovation. We will provide new sources of funding to help catalyse innovations and help them get to market around the world. We will provide training and mentorship opportunities for new scientific entrepreneurs, and we will connect people and their ideas in a diverse ecosystem to help accelerate progress.

You are a valued member of our community, and I encourage you to tap into Cancer Research Horizons’ opportunities for researchers, so that your research has the best path to reach patients. Follow Cancer Research Horizons on Twitter and LinkedIn for updates.

After

Welcome to a new horizon for innovation

I know first-hand the difference researchers like you make. And I know that everything we do to boost the research community you’re a part of helps us to beat cancer. That’s why I wanted to tell you about our new innovation engine, Cancer Research Horizons – and invite you to join in.

Cancer Research Horizons unites our drug discovery labs, tech platforms, biology network and commercial activities of Cancer Research Technology under a single leadership team.

That means we’re combining the latest approach to therapeutic innovation with the best research available, speeding up results. We’re supplying new sources of funding to develop treatments – and get them to market around the world. And we’re connecting, training and mentoring scientific entrepreneurs to support the best ideas, no matter where they come from.

We want you to be a part of this. Follow Cancer Research Horizons on LinkedIn and Twitter to hear the latest updates and opportunities, so your research also has the best path to reach patients.

What's changed?

We all...

We’ve involved everyone – with 'the research community you’re a part of', 'invite you to join in', 'we want you to be part of this'.

We’ve written human – with more everyday language. Instead of being 'pleased to announce' we're 'telling you about'. Instead of 'you are a valued member of our community,' we’ve shown we value researchers with our opening line and wanting them to be part of this.

...win when...

We’ve led with the positive – the original was already positive. Our headline plus the immediate link between researchers’ work and beating cancer makes that even clearer.

We’ve been definitive – 'I know first-hand the difference researchers like you make,' moving the 'do' we want for the reader (getting involved) to the start by referencing the invitation in the first paragraph.

...science wins

We’ve shown the impact – 'everything we do to boost the research community you’re a part of helps us to beat cancer'.

Need any help?

[Introduction](#)[Contents](#)[Principles](#)[Bringing it all together](#)

See our style guide

In addition to our tone of voice, our style guide is a set of conventions about the finer points of how we write. For example, how we write numbers, when to use capital letters and whether we write 'per cent' or %. It also includes guidance on how we talk about ourselves, how we talk about cancer and how to use inclusive language. Our style guide, Writing for Cancer Research UK, can be found [here](#).

Who to contact

If you've got any questions about how to use our new brand idea and principles – or you've spotted some messages we could improve, get in touch with The Studio's Copy team at [**TheStudio@cancer.org.uk**](mailto:TheStudio@cancer.org.uk).