

Style manual for institutional communication

Foreword

The communication of the Scuola Normale must reflect the nature of its community, which is characterised by its high level of scientific qualification, its capacity for dialogue and its attention to the use of a precise, wide-ranging and informed language, mindful of the context and of the relationships that it establishes.

The manual herein contains the basic principles and tools for conveying the above aptitude in a consistent and recognisable form, a shared frame of reference ensuring that the many voices in which the Scuola Normale finds expression all work towards a single idea of authoritativeness, mindfulness and clarity.

The Communications Service adopts these principles in its daily activity, as being fundamental to the editorial work that it carries out on behalf of the institution; the purpose of the manual is to impart these principles to all those who happen to communicate on behalf of the Normale. Anyone who writes a notice, updates a page on an institutional website, manages a social channel or draws up an internal note needs to be aware that he or she is contributing to the definition of the public image of the Scuola Normale and hence must have access to the tools needed to achieve this aim in a consistent and satisfactory manner.

Institutional communication as a shared responsibility

All official communications of the Scuola Normale, independently of who produces them — governing bodies, administrative structures, work groups, individuals — contribute to the definition of the institution's public and cultural identity.

To the reader, in fact, the Scuola Normale comes across as an overall communicative ecosystem, in which every e-mail message, notice, post or internal note implicitly entails a relationship with the community and an idea of authoritativeness, mindfulness and clarity. Every careless message or inappropriate tone will damage the credibility of the whole.

Hence it is important for the various institutional voices to share certain common principles of writing, albeit maintaining the differences linked to the specific contexts and aims of the communications and the inevitable and indeed desirable subjective

stylistic shades of meaning. The aim is not to produce every communication in a rigidly uniform register but to encourage stylistic consistency, linguistic precision, relational clarity and recognisability of the institutional voice.

Internal and external communication

The manual is concerned with the Scuola Normale's internal and external communication.

Internal communication is meant for the community of the Scuola Normale, in the form of notices, official notes, e-mail messages, communications from the governing bodies, service messages and all other texts concerning the daily life of the institution.

External communication is meant for the external public: future students, the national and international scientific community, institutions, the media and the public. It takes place via the institutional websites, social channels, newsletters, official communications and promotional materials.

The distinction does not imply two different languages but the same voice calibrated to the differing contexts and recipients. External communication makes for a more marked narrative component and, when addressing those who do not know the Scuola Normale, requires clarification and contextualisation. It is, however, governed by the same principles of precision, moderation and accessibility, using dedicated tools (in particular the *Social Media Policy*, the *Guida all'identità visiva* (the *Guide to visual identity*) and the *Guida all'uso del linguaggio esteso* [the *Guide to the use of expansive language*]) which regulate the specific aspects.

Those for whom the manual is intended

The manual is meant for anyone communicating on behalf of the Scuola Normale, not only to the personnel of the Communications Service. It thus concerns the following:

- those who draw up notices, notes and service communications meant for its community;
- those who manage or update pages of the institutional websites or of the sns.it domain;
- those who manage social media accounts or contribute to the contents of the institutional channels;
- those who write documents, presentations, communications or texts meant for the community or for the external public.

No specialist editing skills are required; the manual provides shared criteria to those who do not habitually communicate in public form and who thus in good faith might

use registers or automatisms that are not consistent with the identity of the Scuola Normale.

What is not included in the manual

The manual does not deal with the drawing up of deeds, administrative documents or texts of a regulatory or procedural nature (such as calls, regulations, circulars, decrees, reports or contracts). These documents respond to appropriate juridical, formal and conventional restrictions, written or non-written, that determine their form and that go beyond the bounds of the indications herein, with the exception of the use of expansive language.

The distinction does not mean that this type of text is exempt from the need for clarity, given that an administrative deed must also aspire to being comprehensible and accessible.

It does mean, however, that their form is governed by specific rules not dealt with in the manual herein.

The manual in the document ecosystem of the Scuola Normale

The manual herein integrates the document system with which the Scuola Normale orients its communication. It is to be read with the *Guide to the use of expansive language* (for aspects relating to non-discriminatory use of the language), the *Social Media Policy* (for the management of the channels and social content), the *Guide to visual identity* (for graphic and brand aspects) and the *Guidelines for internal communication*. Where a topic is dealt with in a specific manner in one of these documents, the manual directs you to it instead of duplicating it.

Basic elements for stylistic consistency

An institutional message must not sell anything, but must deliver comprehensible, contextualised and relevant content.

Authoritativeness is conveyed by precision, and does not derive from emphasis; “aggressive” punctuation, high-sounding adjectives and an abundance of superlatives weaken a message and take away its authoritativeness, since they engender doubt as to the capacity of the content to speak for itself.

Guiding principles

- Clarity of reasoning
- Accuracy of lexis
- Moderation of expression
- Confidence in the recipient's capacity to interpret

- Balance between accessibility and density of information
- Expansive language

To be avoided

- Motivational or promotional language (university marketing has a code very different from that of company marketing)
- Emphatic tones
- Paternalistic and maternalistic simplifications
- Youth slang
- Clichéd phrases in business communication
- Social media marketing syntax and style

Examples of frequent errors

1. Rhetorical questions

The classic “hook”, imported indiscriminately from the rhetoric of company marketing and from the stereotypes of scientific dissemination, creates an effect of banality and a sensation of standardized communication.

Not: “What does it mean to be entrepreneurial in research?”

Better: “The survey explores the relationship between research, planning capacity [or entrepreneurship] and innovation.”

2. Businesslike or generic lexis

Standardised expressions penalise the incisiveness and pertinence of a text.

Not: “enhance talents”, “develop innovative mindsets”, “increasingly efficacious actions”

Better: “strengthen the educational opportunities”, “nurture planning and interdisciplinary capacities”, “direct the future initiatives of the Scuola Normale”

3. Use of emotional appeal

Emojis, exclamations and emphatic prompts for action grotesquely mime the register of the stereotyped communications published on the social media and in company newsletters, thus reducing the institutional credibility of the text.

Not: “Your contribution in just 10 minutes! ⌚”, “Take part now! 🚀”

Better: “The questionnaire will take around ten minutes to complete.”

4. Choice of interlocution

The management of the interlocution implicitly defines the relationship between writer and reader; in this case between the Scuola Normale and the community.

If the plural interlocution is chosen, a collective and institutional relationship is established; opting for the singular introduces a direct, almost individualised proximity typical of the social media. Both choices are in order, albeit in awareness of the effect that they create and of the relational impact that they establish, and there must be consistency within the text itself and within the channel.

Structure of communications

The principles apply to all channels, although the form is adapted to the medium. An internal note, a post or a web page do not have the same architecture, but they share the need to instantly convey to the reader their meaning and what they are asking.

Regarding e-mail, which is still the most frequently used channel for internal communication, a good SNS e-mail message tends to be divided into four sections:

1. **Context:** the reason for writing.
2. **Meaning:** the reason for the content's relevance to the community.
3. **Operational information:** that which is required or reported.
4. **Closing remarks:** simple thanks or reference to the participation of the community.

Similar criteria apply to the social channels and web pages, albeit calibrated: an essential piece of information placed at the beginning, shorter syntax without recourse to slogans, a title that describes the content instead of promising an effect.

Stylistic principles

Precision: each word must add real information.

Moderation: a measured tone increases credibility.

Syntactic continuity: well-structured paragraphs with apt punctuation facilitating comprehension should be preferred over fragmentation into slogans or stereotyped definitions and formulae.

Expansive language: the language needs to represent the plurality of the community and to be accessible. The Scuola Normale adopts inclusive and non-discriminatory language solutions avoiding both the overextended masculine pronoun and (in Italian texts) the schwa and other non-conventional symbols: the latter are read badly by assistive technologies and are difficult to read for many people and hence need to be excluded for reasons of accessibility. For the concrete solutions to be preferred, please see the *Guide to the use of expansive language*.

Concreteness: whenever possible, favour specific references over abstract formulae, for instance names of programmes, actual activities and verifiable goals.

Accessibility

Accessibility is the prerequisite of any communication. A message that cannot be easily read by a part of its community fails in its purpose. For an institution serving a wide and diversified community, the guarantee of accessibility means that the minimum condition is met for its messages to reach all addressees, above and beyond the precise legal obligations to which public administrations, and hence the Scuola Normale, are in any case bound¹.

Choices that compromise accessibility often arise from an opposite intention: to render a text brighter, less bureaucratic, warmer. Colours, emojis and multiple highlighting are used precisely to approach the reader, with the resulting erection of real barriers. This can be avoided by the adoption of just a few procedures.

Colour must not be the only means of information. To devote a datum exclusively to colour – a title in red or a green tick – renders it inaccessible to those who are not able to distinguish those colours (the most common forms of colour blindness affect around eight per cent of the male population). Information conveyed by colour should always be reaffirmed by the position, a textual label or the structure. In addition, there must be sufficient contrast between text and background: combinations that are too subdued are a struggle for many people, in particular those with very poor eyesight.

The typographic hierarchy must be consistent. Alternating the colour, weight or size of a text without a clear logic does not render the message brighter but increases the cognitive load and penalises in particular those with attention or processing difficulties. A moderate and constant hierarchy, applying a single criterion to the use of highlighting, reduces the strain of reading for all readers.

Emojis are to be avoided. Assistive technologies read them literally — a  becomes “green tick sign” — and when inserted for decorative purposes they become noise that interrupts the flow of reading. In an institutional text they are best left out.

The structure must be linear. A clear logical sequence, avoiding jumps or fragmentation into micro-blocks, facilitates the reading for those with dyslexia and anyone skimming or reading on a small screen: the syntactic continuity recommended in the manual herein is another accessibility factor.

1

The main legislative references are Law 4/2004 (the so-called «Stanca Law»), which obliges administrations to guarantee access to IT services also to those with disabilities; directive (EU) 2016/2102 on the accessibility of web sites and mobile apps of public institutions, acknowledged in Italy by Legislative Decree 106/2018; and the guidelines of the AgID (Agenzia per l'Italia Digitale), which adopt as technical standard the *Web Content Accessibility Guidelines* (WCAG) at level AA conformance.

Links, images and attachments require attention. The text of a link must indicate its purpose (“consult the admission call”) and should not be limited to a generic “click here”. Images that convey information should come with a synthetic alternative text (*alt text*); decorative ones should be marked as such. A PDF sent as an attachment should have a selectable text and a correct structure and must not be a scan of a printed sheet, which is illegible to a screen reader.

The key to a communication that is both accessible and welcoming is to ensure clarity of the structure and to take care with the language.

The use of generative AI

Although generative AI tools can be useful accompaniments to editorial and graphic design work, they carry specific risks for the consistency and quality of an institutional communication. They should therefore be used as a support to the work and not as a substitute for it, and always under the critical eye of the communicator.

1. The texts

If not adequately instructed, generative AI tools tend to produce emphatic, superficial or verbose texts, with artificially enthusiastic tones similar to international corporate language. This inclination reflects the composition of the data on which the models are trained, in which promotional, disseminative and business texts prevail. The moderate and precise register of the university institutional communication is for these tools an exception that must be explicitly requested.

Efficacious indications in prompts

- “Use a moderate but friendly and non-promotional institutional tone”
- “Avoid motivational or corporate language”
- “Do not use emojis, slogans or rhetorical questions”
- “Favour lexical precision and clarity of reasoning”
- “Write for a highly qualified academic community”
- “Maintain a balance between accessibility and conceptual density”
- “Use language that is inclusive, accessible and non-discriminatory; do not use the overextended masculine pronoun or the schwa”
- “Write a succession of paragraphs rather than a bulleted list, except where a list is actually clearer”

It is often more efficacious to provide the model with an example of text already consistent with the tone of the Scuola Normale, asking it to conform to it rather than to describe the style in words.

Good practice

- Use AI to create an initial structure or a draft, not a definitive text.
- Always review the lexis and eliminate rhetorical automatisms.
- Check that each phrase adds real content.
- Check the syntactical consistency and the tone.
- **Check the facts.** Models generate information that is plausible but not guaranteed: dates, figures, names, citations and legislative references should always be checked using reliable sources. A factual error in an institutional communication comes with a high cost in credibility.
- **Protect confidentiality.** Do not insert in generative AI tools personal data, documents not yet made public or confidential institutional information, except in the case of tools expressly authorised by the Scuola Normale and conforming to data processing legislation.

Please note. Those not in the habit of communicating with the public tend to delegate all lexical, stylistic and syntactical choices to AI, in the assumption that the work will be improved, to suspend the use of their own critical capacities and to underestimate their own communicative skills. AI can speed up the editing work but it is no substitute for a human being in the checking of the accuracy of the contents and appropriateness of style. A polished text is not necessarily an exact or adequate one: an apparent fluidity may well conceal content deficiencies. The skill of the writer remains the indispensable filter.

2. Images

Visual representations generated by generative AI are inferred starting from statistical patterns present in the training data and from widely adopted visual conventions: stock photographs, professional iconographies, media narratives or publicity campaigns. In proposing a visual solution, the models rely on these, bringing with them implicit cultural biases and a standardised aesthetic that is hard to reconcile with the identity of the Scuola Normale.

If reproduced without competent supervision, these contents can constitute a serious disservice for communication. In order to check the quality and appropriateness of an AI-generated image, the following are needed:

- a good visual culture;
- familiarity with the main photo editing and graphic design apps, essential for rendering acceptable the aesthetic quality of the products that are generated;
- experience in the use of images to convey communication and information;
- awareness of the impact and the significance that certain images can convey;
- critical attention regarding stereotypes represented and discriminatory models reproduced.

Even with models trained to avoid discriminating stereotypes — Gemini is a case in point — the risk of an artificial and unnatural reproduction, used to represent the possible differences, needs to be stemmed through careful supervision.

Below are listed some additional aspects, specific of an institution such as the Scuola Normale:

- **Authenticity.** The identity of the Scuola Normale is shaped by real places, people and history. A synthetic image that represents non-existent spaces or situations risks sending a false message. Where the subject is the Normale itself, an authentic photograph is almost always preferable to an artificially generated one.
- **Transparency.** It is important to assess whether and in what way to inform users that an image has been generated or modified using AI, above all in contexts in which the observer could reasonably presume that they are looking at a real image.
- **Rights and provenance.** The issue of copyright over generated images and training data is still unresolved; if in doubt, it is best to use sources the ownership of which is clear.
- **Accessibility.** If bearing information, also generated images must come with an alternative text.