Tone & Copy

Last Updated: 8 October 2026, 09:29

Prepared for Albemarle Excellence

Project Albemarle Excellence App

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Contents

Introduction 3
The Voice Is 3
The Voice Is Never 5
Register 8

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Introduction

Voice isn't invented in a room. It surfaces when the right conditions are created for it. What came out of our sessions together wasn't a set of preferences or a creative direction imposed from outside. It was something that was already true about Albemarle Excellence, drawn out through exercises designed to bypass the considered answer and reach the instinctive one.

The process worked through contrast and friction. Copy that felt wrong was rewritten until it felt right, and the gap between the two versions was examined carefully. Samples were read aloud, because rhythm reveals itself in the mouth before it reveals itself on the page. Words were sorted into piles based on gut reaction, not deliberation, and what landed in each pile told us more than any brief could. The voices Albemarle would never want to sound like turned out to be just as clarifying as the ones it admired. By the end, the picture wasn't assembled from opinions. It emerged from pattern, and the pattern was remarkably consistent.

The brand personality document describes who Albemarle Excellence is. This document describes how that person speaks. The two are inseparable, but they serve different purposes. A designer reading the personality document understands the character. A writer reading this document knows exactly what to do.

The Voice Is

What emerged from the sessions was not a single quality. It was a combination of qualities that only work in relationship to each other. Warmth without assurance tips into softness. Assurance without warmth tips into coldness. Attentiveness without restraint tips into surveillance. Any one of these, held alone, describes a different brand entirely. What makes this voice Albemarle's is the particular way they sit together.

Warm without being soft.

The warmth in this voice is specific, not ambient. It doesn't come from exclamation marks or generous adjectives or the word "lovely" scattered through a paragraph. It comes from detail. "You wanted something softer around the face, easy before work." That's warm because it proves someone was listening, not because it tries to be kind. Generic warmth, the kind that could be sent to anyone, reads as performance. The Voice Sort sessions made this clear: words like "we've missed you" and "you deserve it" landed as cold in the room, not warm, because they came from no one in particular and were aimed at no one in particular.

The shadow of warmth is softness, and softness is where this brand goes wrong most quickly. Soft language hedges, apologises in advance, and loses its ability to carry weight. "We hope you might like" is soft. "Daniel's kept Thursday morning free" is warm. The difference is that one sounds as

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though it's trying not to impose, and the other sounds like someone who knows what they're doing and is simply offering it.

Attentive without being watchful.

The Yes pile from the Word Sort was almost entirely made of words that describe how the client feels or what belongs to them: at ease, known, at your usual time, your Albemarle story. Not a single word on it described what Albemarle notices or remembers. That's not an accident. Real attentiveness uses what it knows rather than announcing that it knows it. "Thursday at ten, your usual time with Daniel?" is deeply attentive. "We remember your preferences!" is surveillance dressed as care.

When this voice tips too far, it becomes watchful, which is the most damaging register a brand like this can fall into. The emotional landmines session was precise about this: mentioning a wedding that was called off, a partner who's no longer around, a health situation that's changed. Attentiveness requires constant awareness of what hasn't been said as much as what has. The rule is simple and was stated clearly in the sessions. Use what you know. Never announce that you know it.

Personal without being familiar.

Every message in this voice comes from someone with a name, to someone with a name. Sophie to Claire. Daniel to the client who always books Thursday mornings. The possessive "your" does quiet, significant work throughout, giving ownership of the experience to the client rather than the brand. This voice does not address "our valued clients". It addresses one person, and it sounds like it means it.

The shadow here is familiarity, and it can arrive quickly. "Hey lovely" is familiar. Emojis are familiar. "Babe" is familiar. All of them skip past the stage of the relationship they're assuming and land as presumptuous rather than warm. The dinner party character was described as someone who uses your name early and keeps using it, not as a technique but because they actually learned it. That's the register. First names, real days, genuine pleasure at seeing someone, without the overstep of assuming more intimacy than the relationship has earned. Warmth is built visit by visit. The voice should move at the same pace as the relationship, never ahead of it.

Assured without being boastful.

When Daniel writes "I added a gloss to lift the copper and kept the ends soft", he doesn't say he's an expert colourist. The expertise is in the explanation. That's the quality the sessions kept returning to: authority that comes from precision rather than declaration. "World class stylists", "award winning", "unrivalled expertise" all landed firmly in the No pile, not because they're untrue but because they put the brand at the centre of the sentence. This voice never needs to describe its own quality, because the quality shows in the detail.

The shadow is over-explanation, which is its own form of insecurity. A voice that explains too much signals that it doesn't trust the reader to notice. "Daniel has over fifteen years of experience in colour chemistry" explains. "I kept the ends soft because you wear it up for work" shows. The craft is visible

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in the specificity, not the credential. When something has been done thoughtfully, saying so plainly is enough.

Unhurried without being vague.

The pace of this voice is deliberate. There are no deadlines, no limited availability warnings, no "don't miss out". The Yes pile was full of time words, but they were all about rhythm and continuity: usual time, before Friday, your story. Real days, real rhythms, not urgency. "No rush at all" was identified in the sessions as possibly the most Albemarle phrase in the whole exercise. That's not a coincidence. The whole experience is built around the feeling of being looked after without being hurried, and the voice carries that.

But unhurried is not the same as vague. Vague language leaves people unsure of what happens next, and that's a form of abandonment. "We'll be in touch soon" is vague. "Sophie will message you tomorrow" is unhurried and clear. The voice always offers a real next step, a real name, a real day, and then gives the person plenty of space around it. The calm comes from clarity, not from saying less.

Honest without being blunt.

The sessions were unusually precise about this quality, because several of the emotional landmines were situations where honesty had to be handled very carefully. Prices without explanation. Cancellations. A stylist leaving. A long gap in visits. In every case, the answer was the same: say the plain fact first, then the kindness after. "Daniel's away that week" is direct. "No availability" is blunt. The same information, very different feeling, and the difference is whether a person or a system is speaking.

The shadow of honesty is bluntness, which removes the human from the sentence. "Your appointment has been cancelled" is blunt because it conceals who made the decision and why. "We've had to move your Thursday appointment" with an explanation and an alternative is honest, and it keeps the client in a relationship rather than managing a situation at them. This voice tells the truth. It always tells the truth. But it tells it in the way a trusted host would, with care for what the person on the other end is about to feel.

The Voice Is Never

Understanding what this voice refuses to be matters as much as understanding what it is. These are not soft preferences or stylistic tendencies to be balanced against other considerations. They are hard boundaries, and crossing them doesn't produce a weaker version of this brand's voice. It produces a different voice entirely, one that undoes what the experience in the room works so hard to build.

Boastful.

This is the register the No pile rejected most decisively. "World class stylists." "Unrivalled expertise." "Award winning colour." Every word in that family landed in the same place, not because the claims

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are false but because they put Albemarle at the centre of the sentence where the client should be. When copy describes the brand's own quality, it asks the reader to take its word for it. When copy describes what was done and why, the quality is simply visible. The Word Sort made this distinction without anyone having to explain it: "rigorously trained" belongs in a training manual, not in a message to Claire. The moment this voice tells someone how exceptional it is, it has stopped being exceptional and started being a brochure.

The damage is specific. A client who has trusted Daniel with their hair for six years does not need to be told he is world class. They know. Saying it to them is slightly condescending. Saying it to a new client before they've experienced anything asks them to believe a claim rather than discover a truth. Both undermine the relationship, in different ways and at different stages, but neither serves it. The rule that emerged from the sessions is absolute: never describe our own quality. Show the care in the detail, and let the client arrive at the word themselves.

Salesy.

Copy in this register treats a moment of care as an opportunity for commerce. "While you're here, why not try our Revive Gloss?" "Refer a friend and unlock a reward." "Limited availability this week." Every one of these constructions appeared in the wrong-feeling samples and was rejected immediately, not because offers are inherently wrong but because they arrive in the wrong moment and from the wrong motive. The post-visit note that mentions a product isn't a note anymore. It's a follow-up. The client feels the difference before they can name it.

The sessions were clear about where the line is. A suggestion that arrives because it's genuinely right for this person, "you mentioned a long trip, and a treatment before a flight would help", is care. A suggestion that arrives because there's something to sell is sales, regardless of how it's dressed. What makes the distinction obvious to the reader is whether the suggestion could only have been written for them. If it could appear in any client's inbox, it's marketing. If it couldn't, it might be care. This voice never uses a moment of genuine warmth to move a product.

Anonymous.

Every message in the wrong-feeling sample pile shared one quality: nobody was behind them. "The Albemarle team wishes you a wonderful visit." "Your booking has been confirmed by our reservations system." "As a valued client, you are invited to..." These constructions are not cold by accident. They are cold by design, because they replace a named person with an institutional voice, and institutional voices cannot be warm, no matter how many exclamation marks are added.

The Read It Aloud exercise made this visceral. "The Albemarle team" sounds fine on paper. Read aloud, it sounds like nobody. "Sophie" sounds like someone. The distance between those two is the entire emotional gap the app was built to close, and the copy must never open it again. Every message that leaves Albemarle carries a name, because the care the brand offers is always personal in origin, even when the channels are digital. If a message cannot be attributed to a real person, it should either be rewritten so it can be, or not sent at all.

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Clinical or technical.

The wrong-feeling samples included "scalp health optimised", "underperforming follicles" and "client-facing touchpoints across the customer journey." Each one drifted from hospitality into something closer to a medical report or an internal review document. The effect on the reader is specific and damaging. Clinical language implies a problem. It suggests that something was wrong and has been addressed, which in the context of hair and skin can feel both alarming and slightly humiliating. Nobody wants to be told their follicles are underperforming over a lovely oat latte.

The Word Sort No pile contained every word in this register. What they have in common is that they describe the client's body or the brand's process in language borrowed from a different world entirely. Our service menu does have technical vocabulary, formulas, treatments, tones, but that vocabulary belongs in the chair, in conversation with a stylist who can hold the context around it. In writing, especially in any message a client might read alone, the register has to be plain and personal. "I kept the ends soft because you wear it up for work" is technical knowledge expressed in human terms. "Treatment targets structural integrity of the hair shaft" is technical knowledge expressed as a report. One lands as care. The other lands as a filing system.

Guilt-inducing.

This one has a particular shape. It arrives in copy that is trying to be warm and affectionate but carries a barb underneath. "We've missed you!" means: you haven't been. "You're overdue." means: you've let something slip. "Don't forget your next appointment." means: you were about to forget. Every one of these phrases came up in the Word Sort and was placed firmly in the No pile, and the reason given each time was the same. Our clients already have enough people reminding them of what they haven't done.

The Aspiration Gap sessions described the internal dialogue of a client opening the app. Self-consciousness was already present before the first screen had loaded. A small pang of having let it slip, a flicker of guilt about fitting it in. The voice's job at that moment is to dissolve that feeling, not confirm it. "It's been about six weeks, shall I hold your usual Thursday with Daniel?" does not place blame. It offers a solution. The client feels thought of rather than chased. That is the register. Never guilt, never urgency, never a nudge that lands as a nudge. Just a warm offer with no pressure attached.

Performatively luxurious.

The opening copy the brand had written for itself appeared in the Read It Aloud exercise: "Welcome to Albemarle Excellence. Experience the art of luxury hair care, curated by world class stylists. Select your signature service and begin your bespoke journey today." Read aloud, the room went quiet in the way that rooms go quiet when something lands badly. Not one of those words is wrong individually. Together, they produce a voice that is trying so hard to sound luxurious that it forgets to sound like anyone.

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This register fails for a precise reason. Real luxury, the kind that the dinner party character embodied, is never announced. The person at the party with the best taste doesn't describe their taste. The best hotel in Lisbon doesn't tell you it's the best hotel. It simply sends a message from Inês who noticed you were flying in late. The moment Albemarle reaches for words like "curated", "bespoke", "signature" and "journey", it signals that it is trying to seem like something rather than simply being it. The clients who come to Albemarle are not easily impressed by this vocabulary. They have seen it everywhere. What impresses them is specificity, honesty, and the feeling of being genuinely seen. That cannot be produced by accumulating luxury adjectives. It can only be produced by paying attention to a real person and writing something that could only be for them.

Register

Albemarle Excellence does not operate in a regulated health or clinical context, so the register's relationship with honesty is not a compliance question. It is a character question. And the character that emerged from every session was consistent: this is a voice that tells the truth plainly, trusts the client to receive it, and never reaches for language that makes something sound more impressive, more urgent or more significant than it actually is.

The register sits precisely here. Warm but not soft. Personal but never presumptuous. Assured without needing to declare it. Unhurried in pace, but always clear about what happens next. Educated in sensibility but entirely plain in expression. It is the register of someone who has very good judgement and sees no reason to announce it. Authority arrives through precision, not through vocabulary. When Daniel writes that he kept the ends soft because the client wears it up for work, that is an educated observation delivered in the plainest possible words. That balance is the register.

Where this voice tends to go wrong is not in the direction of dishonesty. It is in the direction of performance. Inflated adjectives, stacked qualifiers, language borrowed from brochures and wellness campaigns. The Word Sort was clear about this tendency, and the Read It Aloud exercise made it audible. Copy that reaches for luxury vocabulary to signal quality ends up signalling the absence of it. The register test is simple. Read the copy aloud. Does it sound like something Sophie would say, or does it sound like something designed to impress someone Sophie has never met? If the latter, rewrite it. And at the copy level, a second test applies equally. Does this leave the reader feeling more at ease and more equipped, or does it leave them with a faint sense that something needs fixing, that they are overdue, behind or falling short? If the latter, that is the wrong register, regardless of how warmly it was intended.

The Copy Handbook contains specific language constructs, annotated examples, preferred phrasings and a full list of words that belong and words that do not. Use it alongside this document as the practical guide for any written output produced in Albemarle's voice.

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