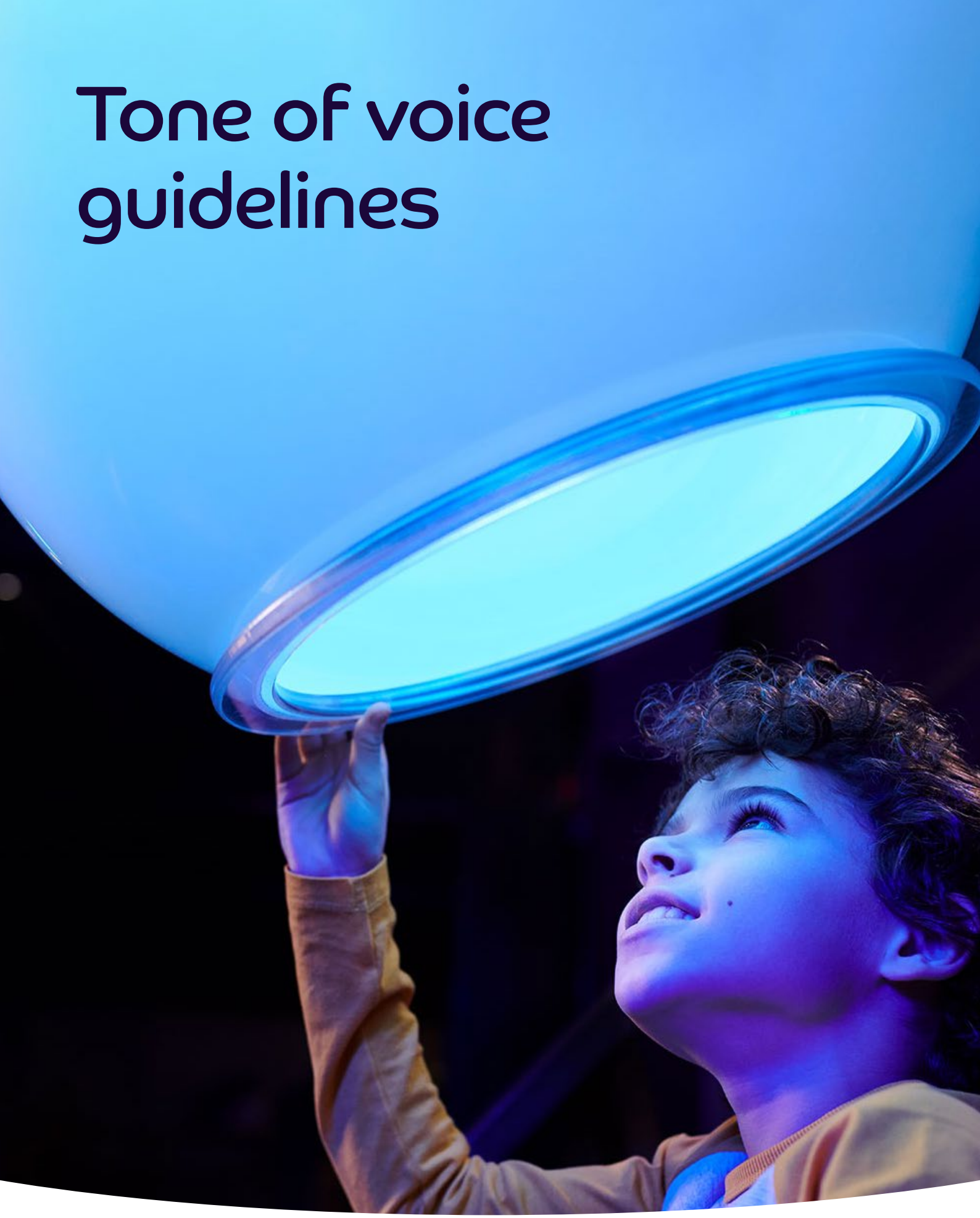
Tone of voice guidelines



octopus

A brighter way



Why is our voice so important?

Our tone of voice brings our personality to life. It takes everything that's great about Octopus, how our people feel, act, think and what they believe in, and transforms it into something shareable. Whenever anyone reads or watches something produced by Octopus, a little bit of our heart should come across in it.

Our personality is what makes us unique. We do things differently. We behave better. We're not afraid to take risks and try new things. We're committed to openness and will admit if we've got something wrong. We're different from other investment companies, real estate brokers and energy providers.

Getting our personality across through our content is what will make our audience believe in us and want to talk to their friends about us. It's what will make people excited to join us on our journey and help make a difference themselves.

Voice vs. style

Our voice, like our personality, doesn't change. That doesn't mean, however, that we always communicate in the same style.

Think of it like this: when you speak to your best friends, you act a certain way. You probably talk quite quickly, address them casually, and use slang. But when you're doing a presentation at work, you adjust your delivery. You might slow down and you'll probably use more formal language too. On both occasions, you're still you. You're the same person with the same voice and the same beliefs driving you; you're simply adjusting your style.

It's the same for us. We are always Octopus, regardless of who we're talking to. Our personality doesn't change. We always believe in the things we hold dear and we will always, broadly, sound the same. It should feel the same for our customers and audiences whether they're interacting with Octopus Group or Octopus Real Estate.

But depending on the audience's needs, we might let our personality shine in different ways. For example, we would need to adopt a more serious style for a communication telling our investors about the performance of their assets, dialing back the playful and energetic sides of our personality. On social media, though, we have the freedom be more casual and conversational.

Throughout this guide, you'll find information about the core traits that make up the Octopus personality, and so our tone of voice for content. Each trait can be flexed to make the most of the channel and audience you're addressing. If you're ever unsure about where to pitch a piece of content, email Charlotte (charlotte.nash@octopusgroup.com) for advice.



The Octopus tone of voice in a sea-shell

Find your human 4

Keep it simple 6

Balance confidence and humility 8

Bubble with ambitious energy 10

Think like an Octopus 12

The details 14



Find your human

Think human-to-human, not business-to-business. At the end of every computer screen or phone is a person. When you write, it should be from one person to another.

This means our voice is warm, genuine and friendly. We're patient and never patronising, especially when we're explaining difficult-to-understand topics. We use straightforward words that come naturally and wouldn't sound out of place if used in conversation (see the Business to Octopus translator at the end of the guide for more on this).

Casual chat with your mates

Two humans, having a conversation

A legal document between two businesses

Find your human

How?

- **Be honest and open.** Even when it feels uncomfortable. Everything we write should come from a good place and a place of hope. Sometimes this means being honest or especially candid.
- **Talk directly to your readers.** Bring your readers into the story by using "you" and "us" instead of "they". Ask rhetorical questions too.
- **Use real words instead of corporate buzzwords and jargon.** Stuffy, business-speak makes our tentacles shudder. Instead, use words that mean something.
- **Refer to people as often as possible.** Instead of talking about Octopus the company, talk about the people who work here, either the teams or the individuals. And when referring to people who work here, please use "Octopus people" rather than "Octopus staff" or "employees". And please, never "Octopods".
- **Start a conversation with readers instead of talking down to them.** We want to have an equal conversation with our readers, not create a parent-child relationship with them.
- **Be conversational, without being over-friendly.** Don't push it too far. We want to be friendly and warm, but still professional.
- **Use humour sparingly.** We love a good pun (especially if it's to do with sea creatures), but think about the channel and audience expectations to make sure humour would be appropriate.
- **Take ownership.** Don't say "it has been decided," or "we would like to apologise. Own it: "we've decided," or "we're sorry," are much better.
- **Use contractions.** It's fine to write "can't" instead of "cannot." It sounds more natural and conversational.

Examples

Instead of

It has come to our attention that there may have been an error in a previous communication. Apologies for the inconvenience. We will reach out when the mistake has been rectified.

We would write

We're really sorry, it looks like we made a mistake in our last email. Our team are looking into it and we'll be back in touch soon.

Instead of

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, our office premises are now closed. This means you must endeavour to post any communications to us at a temporary address, which you can find at:

We would write

Because we've had to close the office, we need to update our postal address. If you need to post anything to us, here's the address you'll need to use for the moment:

Instead of

We had a right laugh this weekend giving Paul and Mary a run for their money and decorating cakes for Easter. Tina from reception made cake in the shape of a little bunny and Pete from accounts almost burnt down his kitchen! Have a gander at what the Octopus staff made.

We would write

Happy Easter! We held an egg-stra special Easter Bake Off for Octopus people to show off their decorating skills. Here are some of their cracking bakes. Which is your favourite?



Keep it simple

Some of our content discusses quite complex themes. It's our job to make sure our writing is simple enough that anyone can understand these topics, even if they're not experts.

Simplicity will allow our stories to shine. We don't want technical jargon to put our readers off. And we don't want waffley language to distract them from the tale we're telling about a charity volunteer.



Functional instructions

Clear and concise

Technical language and specialist words

Keep it simple

How?

- **Assume our audience knows nothing about the topic.** Our writing needs to be easy to understand by everyone. Especially your granny or grandpa who aren't experts in the areas we write about. If you're writing for an audience who are more knowledgeable, it's fine to use specialised words but still try to get your point across as simply as possible.
- **Get to the point quickly.** The fewer words you can use, the better. No waffle.
- **Simplify the language.** Avoid overly-flowery or over-formal language and over-complicated words. When you last went shopping did you buy a pint of milk or did you participate in the acquisition of a pasteurised lactose beverage?
- **Shorten sentences.** There is a place for exposition when it makes the story flow better but our general rule is, if you can split the sentence into two, do. Every time you use "and" or a semi-colon, see if two separate sentences would be better.
- **Use call to actions.** Where appropriate, use call to actions to make it clear what we're asking our audience to do.
- **Don't lose the emotion.** Writing simply doesn't mean losing the feeling of the words in favour of boring, functional copy.
- **It's better to teach the reader something than make them laugh.** As we've mentioned before, there's a time and place for humour. If it's going to get in the way of the point or make it hard to understand, don't use it.
- **Use subheadings where you can.** Blog articles, for example, should always include sub-headings.

Examples

Instead of

Contents page

We would write

Find it fast

Instead of

The global investment community is ready to embrace renewable energy due to external pressures like climate change and net zero targets, and there's an opportunity for companies like Octopus to encourage large institutions to make greater investments into wind and solar in particular. That's the view of Sophie Miggins, Head of Renewable Fund Management at Octopus Investments, anyway.

We would write

Sophie Miggins, our Head of Renewable Fund Management, believes climate change is pushing more investors to back renewable energy. Because of this, companies like Octopus can increasingly encourage institutional investors to put their money into wind and solar energy farms.

Instead of

Our CEO, Simon Rogerson, in his latest blog discusses the notion that an injection of idealism is necessary to reverse the pandemic-caused economic downturn. Click the link.

We would write

Our CEO Simon Rogerson says more optimism and long-term thinking is needed to help the UK's economy recover after coronavirus. Read his latest blog to find out about our government proposal to solve these problems.



Balance confidence and humility

We know our stuff when it comes to doing business better and giving customers the best possible service. And we're not afraid to admit that. At the same time, our confidence gives us the humility to admit what we don't know.

We share our opinions boldly and without hesitation. But we also admit when we're bad at something. Everything we do must be authentic. We're open about the journey we're on. We want to invite others to come with us, rather than brag to them about what we know.

Over-apologising, questioning ourselves and deferring to others

Confident about what we know, open about what we don't

Stating our opinion with no facts or acknowledgment of alternatives

Balance confidence and humility

How?

- **Use proof points.** These back up our claims and add credibility. Always use stats or research to prove why a topic is important. Instead of blowing our own trumpet, source quotes from our partners to show they're pleased with what we've done or achieved.
- **Show not tell.** You've heard it before but it doesn't make it any less true. Don't tell our readers how good we are at investing in renewable energy assets; show them by showcasing stories and facts that prove it.
- **Cut out "think" and "believe".** Overusing qualifiers like "think" and "believe" can make us seem unsure. Plus, it adds unnecessary words. Also try to limit the use of words like "just" or "almost".
- **Make sure your stats are relatable.** No one knows what a wind farm that produces X kwh of energy really means. Instead, convert stats into something people can relate to, e.g. how many homes the wind farm can power each year.
- **Companies can and should be vulnerable.** Not even the majestic octopus, the world's most intelligent invertebrate, knows everything. And we fully acknowledge that. Right now, we don't have all the answers about how we're going to get where we're going, and we're alright with that. A bit of honesty and vulnerability is what makes us human.
- **Don't make it too "me, me, me".** As much as this guide is all about us, we don't want our content to be, too. We always need to focus on the reader and give them a reason to care. This means using "you" more than "I" or "me" (or in our case, "Octopus" or "us").

Examples

Instead of

We're doing a great job at reducing how much plastic waste we produce. You should do the following so you can be as good as us.

We would write

We're trying to cut down how much plastic waste we produce. Here's what we've learned so far that you might find helpful.

Instead of

We own lots of wind farms across the UK, which generate X kwh of energy.

We would write

We own X wind farms in the UK, generating enough energy to power almost 1,000 homes.

Instead of

We're really great to work with as a charity because we do things differently and don't make charities use the money we give them for specific things. Our people also volunteer loads of their time which really helps the charities we work with.

We would write

Choir With no Name said, "Working with Octopus is a breath of fresh air. They're our favourite corporate partners because they give their time freely and they give grants without restricting what we can use the money for."



Bubble with ambitious energy

Hope is at the heart of what we do at Octopus. We know the world is facing problems like climate change and we know certain industries don't look after their customers. We want to do our part to fix these problems and we're committed to finding a better way to do business. Because of this, we look optimistically towards the future.

We focus on the positives and offer solutions, not problems. We don't catastrophise or scaremonger. We state the facts and show progress towards a better future. We give people hope for the future, and hope that our enthusiasm is infectious.

Fixating on all that's wrong with the world right now

Acknowledging problems but focusing on positive progress and solutions

Dreaming about how beautiful the future will be

Bubble with ambitious energy

How?

- **Focus on the positives.** When talking about issues like climate change, it would be easy to default to negativity. Instead, focus on what's going well, the progress that's been made, and the people fighting to make things better. You might need to mention the negatives to present a balanced view, but don't dwell on them.
- **Use the active voice.** Using passive voice takes the energy out of writing and makes it sluggish, so try to avoid it. A good tip (which we've borrowed from Monzo and amended a little) is to try adding "by an octopus" to the end of a sentence if you're worried it might be passive. If it doesn't make sense, it's in the active voice. If not, reword it until it doesn't make sense.
- **Don't trash-talk our competitors.** Try to avoid making comparisons to other companies or saying things like "unlike other investors." Instead, talk about the things we do well and leave the audience to make up their minds.
- **Use metaphors to paint a picture of the future.** But they have to be original.
- **Use energetic language.** Where possible, use verbs instead of nouns. Keep sentences short and sweet.
- **Feature stories and quotes that inspire hope.**

Examples

Instead of

Coronavirus has made it really hard for lots of charities. Many have lost millions of pounds worth of funding, meaning some have had to close for good. This has left lots of vulnerable people without the support they need.

We would write

Coronavirus has had a massive impact on the charity sector. In some cases, it's been really positive; just look at Captain Tom who smashed his target and has raised over £27 million (so far) for the NHS. For many charities though, times have been tough.

Instead of

Octopus Ventures don't follow the "dump and run" investment strategy favoured by most traditional firms. Instead, the team spends time working with each founder, supporting them with everything from business knowledge to their mental health. You won't find this level of attention in any other venture capital firm.

We would write

Octopus Ventures have a hands-on approach to investing. The team spends time working with each founder, supporting them with everything from business knowledge to their mental health.

Instead of

All we need is a bit of investment into renewable energy. Once that happens, every country around the world will easily be able cut their carbon emissions down and the world will be sustainable for future generations.

We would write

There will be lots of challenges as the world works towards cutting carbon emissions down to zero by 2050. But with more investment into renewable energy, we'll be much closer to achieving the target.



Think like an Octopus

You've probably seen the iconic clip from Blue Planet II that shows an octopus sticking shells to her tentacles to make a cunning disguise. Like our namesake, we do things a little bit differently, sometimes because it's the right thing to do and sometimes because it's more fun that way.

A few years ago one of the sales team went home and recorded audio for all Octopus Investments brochures, then sent the recordings to a blind customer so they wouldn't miss out on the information. And when someone's been with the company for eight years (the "full octopus"), they get to choose a famous painting to have recreated in their likeness (among other, useful benefits).

This is the hardest thing to get across in your writing because it's so intangible. But if you follow the principles we've already covered, think a bit differently and don't write as if we're a traditional investment company, you should be on the right track.



Repetitive, full of cliches | **Thinking like an octopus** | **Quirky for the sake of it**

Think like an Octopus

How?

- **Don't just take the easiest route.** Think about the best way to represent what you're trying to get across.
- **Avoid tired cliches.** Metaphors are great, as long as they're new ideas.
- **Has it been done before?** If you're repeating an idea that's been done to death, don't. Find a new way of framing it instead.
- **Think about how most investment companies sound.** Then do the complete opposite.

No examples for this one. Pull together the other principles and you should have your octopus.

The details

A few things to note

- We write in British English at Octopus, so please follow British spelling. This means we use both spellings of words like "practice" and "practise," too. But we prefer "learned" over "learnt".
- When referring to companies, treat them as collective nouns. This means saying, "Octopus are investing in a better future," rather than, "Octopus is investing in a better future." Or "Sainsbury's said they were..." rather than, "Sainsbury's said it was..."
- Use neutral terms rather than gendered ones, e.g. "businessperson" rather than "businessman".
- Never put an apostrophe after Octopus. So instead of writing, "Octopus's impact goals are..." write, "The Octopus impact goals are..."
- Avoid acronyms where possible. If you must use them, write them out in full the first time.
- Only use capital letters at the start of a sentence and for proper nouns (place names, peoples' names, team names and company names). For job titles, we capitalise when they're attached to a person, e.g. "Penelope is an Investment Manager" but, "we're looking for an experienced investment manager to join our team". And we don't capitalise in titles or subheadings, so it's "The future of living in 2030," not "The Future Of Living In 2030".
- Don't use hyphens for asides. Split these sentences instead. Similarly, try and minimise the use of semicolons
- On the subject of hyphens, use them when needed to join up words. The rules can be a bit complicated so if in doubt, check this handy guide.
- Use commas instead of brackets for related points.
- Use double-quotations for quotes. If there's a quote within a quote, use single quotations for the inner quote.
- Write out numbers up to ten. Use digits after that. This applies to large sums of money too, e.g. "£1 million" rather than "one million pounds." If you're writing long-form content, please write out "million" or "billion" in full. But if you need to limit your word count (for social media, for example) it's fine to abbreviate to "mn" or "bn". And where possible, round numbers to nearest whole number, ten, hundred, etc.
- Always use the percentage sign with numerical digits for percentages, e.g. "1%" instead of "one %" or "one percent".
- Write dates in the format "date, month, year," in full rather than shorthand. For example, "3rd August 2020," not "03/07/2020". When referring to a year on its own, right it out in full e.g. "Since 2017".

Specific spellings and words

Do	Don't
Adviser	Advisor
Wind farm	Windfarm
Start up	Start-up or startup
Businessperson	Business person or business-person
Focused	Focussed
Invest in	Invest into
Companies we invest in	Investee companies
Octopus products or services	Octopus's/Octopus' products or services
Acknowledgement	Acknowledgment

Corporate to Octopus translator

Do	Don't
Help	Assist/assistance
Can	Are able to
So	Therefore/thus
Make sure	Ensure
Try	Attempt
Solution	Resolution
Octopus people/our people	Octopus staff or employees/our staff or employees. And please, not Octopods.
We decided to	We made a decision to/it was decided that
Business	Enterprise
If	In the event that
Do/did	Action/actioned
Changed	Pivoted

Rundown of our businesses

"Octopus Group" is the masterbrand that sits above all other Octopus businesses. For the most part, in Octopus Group content we refer to the company as "Octopus." These businesses are:

octopus

A brighter way

octopus investments

A brighter way

octopus real estate

A brighter way

octopus renewables

A brighter way

octopus ventures

A brighter way

octopus wealth

A brighter way

octopus giving

(not a business, but our foundation)