

# Western Oregon University Student Communication Style Guide

## Introduction

Thank you for checking out the first-ever WOU Student Communication Style Guide. In this document you will find many helpful resources that can help you employ the best practices for communicating with students. It is one of the most vital roles you will play as part of the WOU campus community; good communication will empower you to support recruitment, retention and the overall college experience our students have.

This guide is intended to ensure we use consistent, positive and helpful communication practices in all our dealings with students. As a member of the WOU community, you have the power to affect the lives of the people who have entrusted us with their education and their future. It is an important role, and this document provides the guidance to represent WOU in a student-focused manner.

## What we know about WOU students

As with any population, WOU students have a wide variety of backgrounds, socio-economic statuses, beliefs, priorities, identities and aspirations. There is no umbrella description that can possibly cover the diversity of our students. However, there are some factors that can be identified as commonalities among them:

- The vast majority (about 80%) receive some sort of financial aid.
- An increasing number (41% in 2021) identify as being part of a racial or ethnic minority.
- Many are members of the LGBTQIA+ community
- More than 40% are the first in their family to attend college
- They are largely Oregon residents. Other top states are Hawai'i, California and Washington.
- Many transferred to WOU from a community college or another West Coast four-year school
- Although most are traditional age (18-22), many are older or have children or are training for a second career. Graduate students make up 10% of our student population.

Understanding the nuances of these traits helps us develop best practices for communicating effectively with our students. What they all have in common is that they want to improve their lives through the power of education. And we want to help them do that. Every communication you have with students is a chance to support their success and graduation.

## **Achieving the WOU voice**

It is vital to the success of both students and the university that we communicate with a consistent voice, one that is upbeat and positive while also supporting the values detailed in our strategic plan.

The ideal voice is:

- Helpful
- Positive
- Engaged
- Understanding
- Inclusive
- Encouraging
- Nonjudgmental
- Relatable/approachable
- Accurate
- Shows a sense of urgency/responsiveness
- Friendly
- Student-centered

## **Things to remember when communicating with WOU students**

Regardless whether they are first-generation, many students don't have extensive knowledge of how college works. It is our job to explain terms, processes, changes and expectations in a clear way. Jargon and academic language should not be used outside the classroom setting.

You will have a much better outcome if you are explicit in your directions. By choosing a relatable and approachable tone and demeanor, you will help students navigate the university world and grow more confident in their abilities.

Repetition, which can seem tedious to many, is necessary in many cases. Students are inundated with information every day; be prepared to repeat yourself several times—and using different platforms—to ensure students retain the information you are sharing.

Remember that email, a standard in the business world, is not the preferred communication tool for our students. Be prepared to communicate in the way that best suits students, which may be mean text messages, social media posts, phone calls, emails or even "snail mailed" information.

Using the "WOU voice" when communicating with students shouldn't be difficult or forced. The positive and approachable vibe we aim for likely comes naturally to you already! Here are some concepts and tips that may help:

- **Use the second-person point of view:** Sentences can contain “you” as if you are speaking to a student. Example: “You can register for classes starting Monday.”
- **Avoid jargon and “institutional” words.** Students don’t always know what they mean. Even concepts such as office hours can be difficult to understand for students who aren’t used to that structure.
- **Use bullet points, sidebars and featured quotes to share information instead of long paragraphs of prose.** Not only does a varied appearance make a piece of communication seem less daunting, but shorter bites are easier to understand and retain.
- If you have the opportunity to **share information with a video instead of written message**, do it! Our students are very comfortable with screens and video content, so maximize their use. Just be careful to follow accessibility guidelines, such as captioning the content (NOT auto-generated captions) and using highly visible text (no red text).
- When writing communications, **limit the messages to two key points.** Although the inclination to put multiple points in a single email or document is strong, more than about two points will not be retained. Choose the most important points and save the others for a different message.
- **Always include action items or next steps** in your messaging to empower students to make good choices. Never bring up problems without suggesting at least three solutions, resources or actions a student can pursue.
- **Keep language positive, even if the overall message is negative.** Example email response to a student requesting a spot in an already-full class: “Thanks for reaching out about a spot in this course. Although the class is full, there is a short waiting list you can add your name to. As soon as I find out there’s a seat for you, I’ll let you know.”
- **Avoid PDFs for electronic documents.** Screen readers can’t read PDFs, so visually impaired students will not be able to receive the information. If you must use a PDF, be sure to also include the text in the body of the email (or whatever format you are sharing in).

## **In conclusion**

Thanks for your support! By following and practicing this shared WOU voice, you're smoothing the path to a university degree for our students. You will also help WOU retain current students and welcome in new students, which is the goal for all of us!

Don't forget, MarCom has created a whole suite of tools to help you communicate more effectively on behalf of WOU. Please check out our:

- [Visual Identity Guide](#) for best practices for WOU branding (logos, colors, typefaces, sizes, etc.)
- [Editorial Style Guide](#) for grammar, capitalization, punctuation and other rules for university communications
- [Social Media Guide](#) for best practices for starting, using and removing social media platforms
- [Points of Pride](#)
- [WOU Words](#)
- [WOU Boilerplate](#) (standard descriptions of WOU that can go on press releases, slides, grant applications and others)
- Photography Guide
- Coming soon: Signage Guide

(see below for examples of communications)



## Sample Admissions letter, inviting student to an on-campus visit

Dear {mail merge potential student name},

We hear you're interested in visiting our beautiful Western Oregon University campus! You've made the right choice – thousands of WOU alumni have told us that strolling around our welcoming, walkable and gorgeous 156 acres made all the difference in their college-selection process.

We have several ways for you to check WOU out for yourself. Here is a list of our upcoming visitation events:

- Fall Preview Day: Date
- Winter Preview Day: Date
- Spring Break Visit: Date
- (add more events)

Of course, you are welcome to stop by for a tour with one of our awesome Ambassadors at any time, even if no event is happening. Here's how to sign up for a visit:

- (information about how to register to come to campus)
- (information on how to bring a group to campus)

Now, if you just can't get to Monmouth or Salem to visit in person, you can always take a virtual tour. You'll find all kinds of tours on our website:

- Link to long campus tour
- Link to short campus tour
- Link to Spanish tour
- Link to Residence Hall tours
- Link to Dining tours

Alright, that's it for now, {student name}. We can't wait to see you here! We just know WOU will be the right fit for you.

Best wishes,

Admissions team  
Contact info



## Sample Financial Aid letter, telling students how to access their FA files in the Portal

Dear {mail merge student name},

Congratulations on your admission to Western Oregon University! We are happy to have you as part of our pack. We're writing to help you get acquainted with our financial aid process. Here is some information to get you started:

Your student ID number ("V number) is XXXXX.

Your email address is XXXXX. Use this tutorial (link) to set up your student email account. You'll need to have your Portal set up in order to access your financial aid award, so go ahead and get this set up right away. We'll wait!

OK, now that that's done, we can tell you that we have you down to join us in {starting term} and show that you are a {resident or non resident of Oregon student}.

To get started in your Portal, look in the upper right and find the {XXXX} icon. It is the one with the dollar sign (subtle, right?). Click that icon and got to...(instructions continue)

...(instructions continue)

Well, that's it for now. We look forward to seeing that you've accepted all of your financial aid and that you'll be joining us in {term}. It will be fantastic to have you on campus. If you need us once you are here, you'll find our office in the Welcome Center on the north end of campus in Monmouth.

Go Wolves!

Financial Aid team  
Contact info

P.S. Just a reminder: **Neither Financial Aid nor Accounting and Business Services (where you pay your balance) will ever contact anyone other than you about your balance.** Please make sure to open any emails or mail from Financial Aid and share it with your parents, guardian or whoever might be helping you pay for college.

## Sample social media responses

**Facebook:** Hello, my daughter goes to WOU and we just got her bill for spring term. What is the deal with the online fees? Why is she being charged \$500+ when she doesn't even set foot on campus?

**Response:** Thanks so much for getting in touch! Online fees generally help fund the technological infrastructure that's needed to run online courses. However, we understand that you may have additional questions. These resources might help:

- Link to tuition and fee book
- Link to [Accounting and Business Services](#) website

Again, we appreciate you getting in touch with your question. Please feel free to do so if you have additional inquiries. We're here to help!

**Instagram:** Hey, I'm doing a project for a class and would like you to put this link for a survey on your social media accounts. Help me out?

**Response:** Thanks for reaching out! WOU social media accounts aren't used for individual student projects, but the good news is, there are plenty of other ways to get your survey in front of students. Here are some suggestions:

- Share with your own networks on your social accounts
- Send an email to [students@wou.edu](mailto:students@wou.edu) (it will go to current students as well as alumni, but only students who have opted in to receive emails will get it)
- Sign up for a table in the WUC to survey students
- Partner with a student support service, club or organization that is aligned with the topic of your project and see if they will share a link to your survey on their social platforms. For example, if you are doing a project about food insecurity, you could reach out to the Food Pantry or Abby's House.

Best of luck to you on the project!