Australian Government

Australian Government
Style Manual

Government writing handbook

© Commonwealth of Australia 2024

ISBN 978-1-7635508-9-6

This publication must be attributed as the *Government writing handbook*.

NATIONAL
LIBRARY
OF AUSTRALIA

A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

Contents

Foreword by the Hon Patrick Gorman MP v

Introduction vii

Acknowledgements viii

Note on terminology ix

How to cite this publication x

WRITE FOR YOUR READERS 1

- Understand who you are writing for and why 3
- Relate to your readers 5
  - It’s and its 8
- Tell readers what they need to know 9
  - Punctuation and quotation marks 10
- Tell the story and follow the flow 12
  - Paragraphs, structure and narratives that flow 14
- Make the argument 16
  - Positive sentences 18
- The mechanics of writing 19
  - Always use an Australian dictionary 21

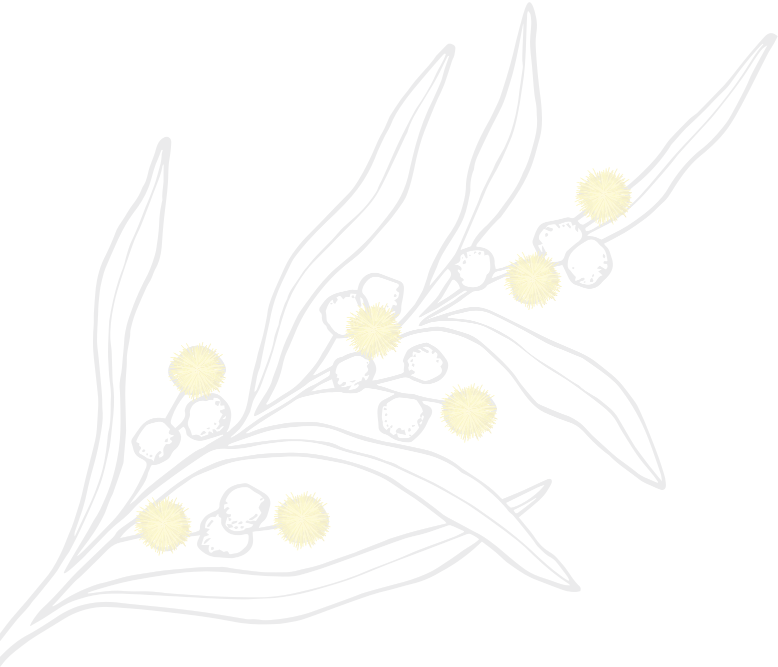
WRITE SO YOUR MEANING IS CLEAR 23

- Be clear by being grammatical 25
  - Word order 28
  - ‘You and me’ or ‘you and I’? 30
- Keep it simple: plain language 32
  - Active and passive voice 35
  - Sentence length 37
- Use structure to make it readable: bullet lists 39
  - Parallel structure for lists 43
  - Headings 45
- Make it accessible and inclusive 48
  - Numbers: choosing numerals or words 52

AFTERWORD 55

- Review your writing effectively 57

INDEX 59



Foreword by the Hon Patrick Gorman MP

Clear and consistent writing is essential. It helps Australia solve the policy challenges of today and tomorrow. And it underpins government content and services that Australians can rely on.

The seventh edition of the *Australian Government Style Manual* (Style Manual) is for everyone who writes, edits or approves Australian Government content. It is the first digital edition.

The Style Manual was first published in 1966. The Australian Government had installed just 34 computers by mid-1967.

Today, most public servants carry a computer in their pockets. It has never been easier to publish and share words with the world. This demands us to take more care over our writing than ever before.

Caring about every word, every sentence, is important. It is how the public service delivers frank, honest and timely advice based on the best-available evidence.

The Style Manual is not for the Australian Public Service alone. The manual is for the Australian people – our audience – who rightly expect clear communication about the policy and actions of the Australian Government.

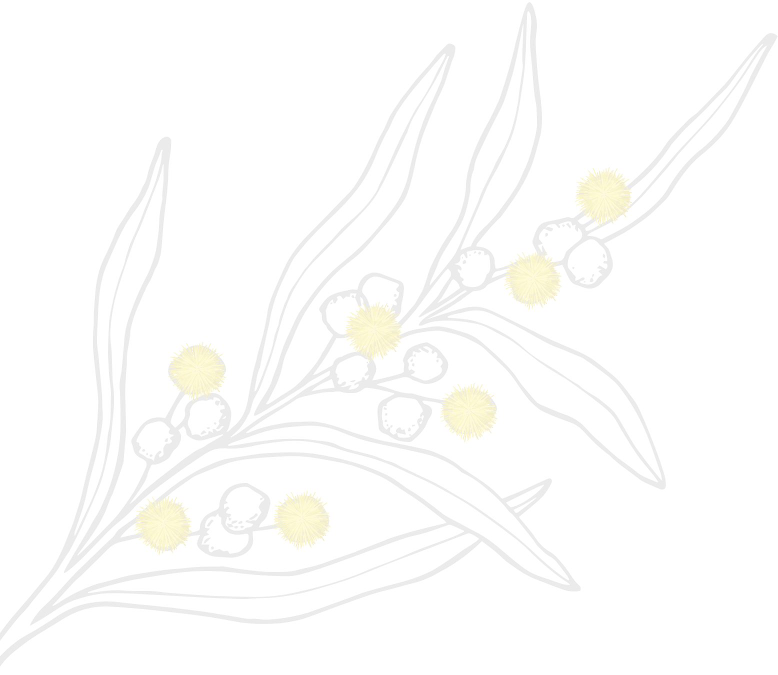
That means thinking about our audience every single time we write.

Put simply, using the Style Manual helps you make an impact.

Happy writing.

Patrick Gorman

The Hon Patrick Gorman MP
Assistant Minister for the Public Service



Introduction

Writing is an important part of working in the Australian Public Service (APS). It is the most common way public servants communicate:

- with executive government
- within the APS
- with the Australian public.

The Style Manual is for everyone who writes, edits or approves Australian Government content. It helps us write clear, concise and consistent content that is fit for purpose.

Our approach

The *Government writing handbook* is a companion to the Style Manual, but with more focus on the craft of writing.

It is a selection of short-format Style Manual guidance with plenty of examples and practical tips. We chose the style elements people use most often in government writing.

How to use the handbook

There are 2 sections and an afterword:

- Section 1: Write for your readers
- Section 2: Write so your meaning is clear
- Afterword: Review your writing effectively.

Each section has a central theme linking the articles within it. Editor’s tips follow the articles. Some tips relate to the articles, while others are more general.

A list of related Style Manual pages follows most topics. We have included definitions for unfamiliar and technical terms.

The afterword helps writers to review their work.

We hope this little handbook makes writing for government easier.

The Style Manual team (supervising editor, L Manthorpe)

Acknowledgements

We thank the following for their contribution to the handbook:

- Susan Baird and Shannon Haintz, our wonderful Style Manual colleagues, who made the handbook better
- Jo Cantle and our colleagues in the APS Professions team for their practical advice and moral support
- Ali Tyler-Parker for her hard work on the first article
- Bree Daniel and Jayne Abel, Engagement and Communications Branch, for their professional advice and coordination
- Leeann Cusack for her work on the launch
- Sherrey Quinn, expert indexer, for her patience and flexibility
- Susannah Bishop and Emily Thorpe who were, as ever, excellent sounding boards on style
- Rebecca Fletcher, copyeditor and Tina Campbell, proofreader
- Dani Schlesier and Dr Subho Banerjee who made it possible for us to complete the handbook in the time available
- The Hon Patrick Gorman MP and Martina Ucnikova who continue to champion use of the Style Manual.

Finally, special thanks to all those who use the Style Manual. Keep this handbook nearby as you write; it’s for you.

Leanne and Cath

Note on terminology

The handbook’s focus is on writing and reading in government. This guided our choice of terms.

We use the noun ‘writing’ more often than ‘content’ (the term prevalent in the Style Manual). Writing is the words that are set down in a document, a draft or a complete written work.

We use ‘content’ in a broader sense. Content is the range of government material (including web content) that includes visual, auditory or interactive elements as well as text.

‘Text’ is a group of words or a written work.

‘Document’ is writing software’s equivalent of paper. It is the thing people write in, amend and send for approval.

We use ‘readers’ throughout the handbook. There are 2 exceptions. In ‘Understand who you are writing for and why’ and ‘Make it accessible and inclusive’, we use the standard term for these topics – ‘users’.

We refer to the ‘APS’, the Australian Public Service, throughout the handbook. This is for convenience. Please read APS to include public servants working for state and territory governments.

How to cite this publication

When you mention the handbook in your content, write the title in italics with an initial capital.

Example: The *Government writing handbook* includes advice about writing good paragraphs.

Always cite the handbook when you paraphrase it or quote it in your content. The following examples show how to do this using our preferred referencing styles.

Author–date

A government source notes that active voice is ‘more direct than the passive voice’ (APSC 2024). [In-text citation]

APSC (Australian Public Service Commission) (2024) *Government writing handbook*, APSC, Canberra. [Full citation in reference list]

Documentary–note

The *Australian Government Style Manual* has a companion publication.[1] [Reference marker]

[1] Australian Public Service Commission (APSC), *Government writing handbook*, APSC, Canberra, 2024. [Footnote or endnote]

Section 1

Write for your readers

Understand who you are writing for and why

It is vital to understand who needs your content and why they need it. This applies whether you're writing a ministerial brief, content for a digital service or instructions in a print brochure.

If you don't understand who you're writing for, you risk writing something that isn't accessible or useful.

Know your obligations

The APS has a legal obligation to provide information that's accessible. We must understand our users' diverse needs before we start writing.

Use inclusive language and follow accessibility guidelines (*see* 'Make it accessible and inclusive'). People bring different perspectives to their interactions with government. It's important to remove any barriers to access and to make content welcoming to all.

Respect people's time

Australians usually engage with government content to get something done. Respect people's time by producing content that is readable and usable.

The same applies when you write for the government and others in the APS. Ask yourself: What do my users need to know? What are they trying to do?

Know your users

One of the best ways to understand users and meet their needs is through user research. It shows whether people understand your content and how they interact with it. Doing user research helps you write and design effective products and services.

There are other ways to make your content relevant to user needs:

- Use existing data.
    - Check if your agency has done research previously. Any insights will help you better understand who you are writing for.
- Encourage users to provide feedback, and monitor analytics data for web-based content.
    - Feedback and analytics help you respond to user needs as they evolve. Use the information to ensure your content remains current and fit for purpose.
- Ask questions and talk to colleagues who engage regularly with your intended users.
    - This can uncover common problems, user queries and any accessibility requirements.
- Follow Style Manual guidance.
    - The manual helps you write content that people can understand.

> ### Style Manual pages
>
> ‘Accessibility requirements’ appear on most Style Manual pages.
>
> ‘User research and content’

See also

Digital inclusion standard Criterion 1 (digital.gov.au)

Digital service standard Criteria 2, 3 and 6 (digital.gov.au)

Relate to your readers

When you write, you create a relationship with your readers. The closely linked concepts of ‘tone’ and ‘voice’ play a big role in shaping this relationship.

Tone describes the level of formality in your writing. It’s related to the words you choose and how you structure sentences.

Voice is the persona or character underlying your writing.

The voice for a document with a formal tone, like a Cabinet brief, will be objective and institutional. For a piece of writing with an informal tone, like a newsletter article, the voice will be warm and friendly.

Tone

Set the formality of your tone to match the relationship you want with your readers.

There are 3 levels of formality:

- Formal creates a distance and sets the relationship as purely professional.
- Standard creates a little distance, but the relationship is friendly – this is the usual tone for writing in the APS.
- Informal suggests a relationship that is personal and casual.

Formal

Legal writing, policies, reports and ministerial briefs are usually written in a formal tone. It is professional, neutral and objective. Avoid contractions, personal pronouns, idioms, metaphors, humour and slang.

Standard

This is the easiest tone for most people to understand and is a good choice for a lot of government writing. It is used for emails and letters, online government services, corporate communications, media releases and articles.

You can use contractions and some personal pronouns. But still avoid idioms, metaphors, humour and slang.

Informal

An informal tone is best used for social media, blogs and some types of newsletter articles. You can use:

- contractions
- personal pronouns
- idioms and metaphors
- humour
- references to popular culture
- personal anecdotes to replace case studies.

Be aware of your cultural assumptions when you write informally. Idioms, metaphors and humour can make your writing engaging but risk excluding some of your readers.

Voice

Basic government voice is a good place to start.

It is:

- clear
- direct
- objective
- impartial.

Use basic government voice as the basis for the many personas that can shape your writing. Different voices are useful for different types of communication.

Communication	Voice
Instructions, guidance, explanations of policy, other external-facing content	Supportive, friendly, positive, empowering
Formal advice, research reports and statutory reports	Expert, factual, balanced
Policy documents, explanations of government decisions, general advice and information	Reasonable, authoritative, measured
Emergency instructions relating to personal or national safety	Calm, authoritative, compliance-based

Definitions

An **idiom** conveys a different meaning from its standard, or literal, meaning. People can't use the meaning of an idiom's individual words to understand its meaning. For example, 'it's a piece of cake' means something that is done or achieved easily.

A **metaphor** calls a thing by the name of something else. Or, it says that a thing *is* something else. The description is imaginative, not literal. For example, in 'I knew he was a rat', the 'rat' is someone who deserts or betrays their friends or associates.

A **simile** uses the words 'as' or 'like' to describe a thing by comparing it to something else. For example, 'my life is like a rollercoaster' compares my life to features of a rollercoaster. Both are fast moving, exciting and have many highs and lows.

Editor’s tip

It’s and its

‘It’s’ and ‘its’ are short words that are easy to use incorrectly. Here are 2 rules to help you.

Rule 1: write ‘it’s’ when you mean ‘it is’

Example

She says it’s hard to concentrate when Mercury is in retrograde.

‘It’s’ is always a grammatical contraction of ‘it is’. A grammatical contraction is when we bring 2 words together to make a shorter word by removing a letter or 2. An apostrophe replaces the missing letters – ‘I’ll’ for ‘I will’ and so on.

While ‘it’s’ and ‘it is’ mean the same, writing ‘it is’ gives your writing a formal tone.

Rule 2: write ‘its’ for the possessive form of the pronoun ‘it’

Example

Put the rabbit back in its cage.

Pronouns stand in for nouns. Here, the pronoun ‘it’ stands in for the noun ‘rabbit’. Because the ‘it’ (rabbit) possesses something (cage), we use the possessive form ‘its’.

If we enjoyed repetition, we’d write: ‘Put the rabbit back in the rabbit’s cage.’

Like ‘rabbit’s’, nouns use an apostrophe to show they possess what follows. But pronouns like the possessive ‘its’ (e.g. my, our, yours, theirs) never have an apostrophe.

Simple trick

If you don’t mean ‘it is’, write ‘its’.

Style Manual pages

‘Apostrophes’

‘Pronouns’

Tell readers what they need to know

A lot of what we write in the APS asks someone to make a decision or do something. Our readers are often very short of time. Don't make them read a lot of writing before they find out why they are reading it.

A good start is to ask 2 questions:

- What do I want my readers to think, feel or do?
- What information will make that as easy as possible?

The answers to these questions should be clear and at the beginning of your document.

Within the workplace, phrases like 'For action', 'For information' and 'For decision' help readers understand what they need to do. In emails, summarise what you need in the subject line.

For readers outside the APS, headings like 'About this service' or 'Submitting your claim' direct them to the information they need.

Write what you know (just not all of it)

The information in everything we write must be accurate. But often we have to write about something that is outside our expertise or that we don't fully understand.

Research is the answer. Find experts to ask, and use trustworthy sources. Check back to make sure your information is correct. Do what you can in the time available, then flag any uncertainties in the document you send for approval.

In other words, don't make stuff up.

On the flip side, you often know far more about a topic than your reader needs to know. Background information should directly help your readers. Resist the temptation to tell them every interesting thing you know about a topic. When in doubt, write less rather than more. If you can't bear to remove the fascinating details, move them to an attachment.

Editor’s tip

Punctuation and quotation marks

Do you put punctuation marks inside quotation marks or outside them?

It depends:

- whether the punctuation mark belongs to the quote
- where the quote appears in the sentence.

The punctuation mark goes inside the closing quotation mark when it belongs to the quote.

Write this

‘Isn’t hickory a type of lettuce?’ Desi asked.

Not this

‘Isn’t hickory a type of lettuce’? Desi asked.

A phrase like ‘Desi asked’, ‘he said’ or ‘they replied’ is called the ‘attribution’.

When you quote a sentence that is followed by an attribution, replace the quote’s full stop with a comma. If the quote finishes the sentence, keep its full stop inside the closing quotation mark.

Write this

‘No, that’s chicory my dear,’ Fiona replied with admirable restraint.

Pete said, ‘Well, I like chickadees.’

Not this

‘No, that’s chicory my dear’, Fiona replied with admirable restraint.

Pete said, ‘Well, I like chickadees’.

The punctuation mark goes outside the closing quotation mark when it belongs to the sentence, not the quote.

Write this

Did you hear him say, 'He's a goner'?

Not this

Did you hear him say, 'He's a goner?'

When there are 2 punctuation marks – one for the quote and one for the sentence – decide which is stronger and use it. Don't use both.

Write this

The Speaker called, 'Order!'

Not this

The Speaker called, 'Order!'.

Style Manual pages

'Accessibility of quotation marks' (blog)

'Quotation marks'

Tell the story and follow the flow

As humans, we’ve been telling each other stories for so long that we tend to think in them. We use stories to understand the world and share information. Stories underpin all our narratives, whether they’re about dragons, people or government policy. This means people respond strongly to certain characteristics of stories.

Stories make sense. Events have meaning and happen for a reason.

Stories have a beginning, a middle and an end. Events happen in a meaningful order, usually chronological.

People focus on facts that support the narrative and ignore those that don’t.

Use these ideas to make your writing easier to read and more engaging.

Tell the story

To tell an effective story, you must understand its primary message – the point of the story. Once you know that, you know the overall goal of your writing.

Work out what structure will lead your reader to the goal.

Here’s a good pattern to follow. Start your document with a brief summary of the most important information. Then go on to explain the information in more detail. The summary helps readers decide if they need to read the detail.

A common structure that works well for the detail is:

- the beginning state or thing we want to change
- one or more events needed to transform it
- the end state where we have the desired outcome.

Follow the flow

Once you have your structure, stick to it. Make sure you tell the story in order and that each paragraph flows into the next. If you forget to include something, go back and put it where it belongs in the structure.

A good technique is to read your writing aloud or use the ‘read aloud’ function in writing software. This usually shows whether you have a clear flow from beginning to end or are jumping backwards and forwards.

Definition

In its broadest sense, a **narrative** is a story that describes and connects a series of things (such as people, events, experiences and concepts). The story can be in any medium and engage any of our senses.

Style Manual pages

‘Hierarchical structure’

‘Inverted pyramid structure’

‘Narrative structure’

‘Sequential structure’

Editor's tip

Paragraphs, structure and narratives that flow

The first part of this tip (Write this) uses a good structure to explain effective paragraphs.

The second part (Not this) uses the same words. However, there are no headings or lists, and it has longer sentences in an illogical order. Paragraphs also appear in the wrong order. The result is a choppy narrative that is hard to understand.

Write this

Paragraphs

Paragraphs are the basic structural units of our writing. This is because they:

- order words into groups of ideas or discussion points
- work together to tell a coherent story.

Readers find it easier to absorb information that is chunked together. And well-written paragraphs create a logical flow of meaning in your narrative.

Start with a heading

A heading says, 'all the paragraphs that follow are related to me by meaning'. It gives readers an inkling of what the paragraphs are about.

Write paragraphs about one topic

Write short paragraphs containing one topic.

The 2 ways to start a paragraph are with a:

- topic sentence that tells readers what the paragraph is about
- transition sentence that smoothly connects the previous paragraph to the new.

After the topic or transition sentence comes the body of the paragraph. It contains sentences in a logical order. Each sentence must contain an idea that develops the topic.

The paragraph's concluding sentence usually does one of these things:

- summarises the topic
- leads into the next paragraph.

Limit the number of sentences in a paragraph

The ideal number of sentences in a paragraph depends on what you are writing. For example, paragraphs for:

- media releases usually have 1 or 2 sentences
- short-form content for mobile screens have 2 or 3 sentences
- long-form content, like a report, have up to 6 sentences.

A paragraph can also be one sentence. But it should never be one *long* sentence.

Not this

Paragraphs

Write paragraphs containing one topic. Well-written paragraphs create a logical flow of meaning in your narrative. Readers find it easier to absorb information that is chunked together. A paragraph can be one sentence; it should never be one *long* sentence.

A heading says, 'all the paragraphs that follow are related to me by meaning'. Now readers have an inkling of what the paragraphs are about. The ideal number of sentences in a paragraph depends on what you are writing – for example, paragraphs for media releases have 1 or 2 sentences, in short-form content for mobile screens, paragraphs have 2 or 3 sentences, and in long-form content, like a report, they have up to 6 sentences.

Paragraphs are the basic structural units of our writing.

The editor intervenes

Let's stop here: I don't need more confusing paragraphs to make the point.

Apply structure to your text. Limit paragraphs to one topic and arrange sentences and paragraphs in logical order. The narrative will flow and make your writing easier to read.

Style Manual pages

'Headings'

'Lists'

'Paragraphs'

'Types of structure' (section)

Make the argument

Much of what we write in our work makes a case for doing something.

Within the APS, we ask for funding, people, time and authority. When we write for people outside the APS, we want them to take action: get a health check, vote or be alert to cybersecurity threats.

In both cases, we are making a persuasive argument for someone to do something.

A good persuasive argument has 3 parts. Each part has a different role, so you need all 3:

- facts and logic – the verified evidence that your argument is true
- emotional appeal – the human side of your argument
- credibility – why you are a trusted source of information.

Facts and logic

Part of being a public servant is giving considered, evidence-based advice. You must back your argument with quantitative or qualitative evidence. Be clear about the relevance and importance of your evidence, as well as how you collected it. Cite any sources you quote.

Emotional appeal

People are strongly influenced by stories about other people. Be sure to describe the impact on people. Explain the impact in terms of the benefits to them, or the human problem you want to solve.

Stories about people also have the most emotional power. This is why case studies are so important.

Credibility

Demonstrate your credibility rather than stating you should be trusted. Make sure your actions reflect your words. For example, if you're trying to persuade people to write in a particular way, demonstrate it in your writing.

Show that you understand and respect readers' values (*see* 'Understand who you are writing for and why').

Use active voice and first person ('I', 'we') to show you take responsibility for your statements (*see* 'Active and passive voice', 'Relate to your readers').

Definitions

An **argument** is a series of reasons and evidence put forward to:

- support a position
- convince others that the position has merit.

Quantitative evidence is found by counting and measuring. The typical output is numbers and graphs.

Qualitative evidence is found by observing and describing. The typical output is words and pictures.

Editor’s tip

Positive sentences

Write in a positive, affirming way, unless research shows there’s a good reason not to.

When you ask people to do something, they are more likely to respond to a positive sentence. You will also use fewer words. Positive sentences are often shorter than their negative counterparts.

Write this

Please enter your email address to receive updates.

Not this

We can’t send updates if you don’t enter your email address.

User research shows when it’s appropriate to use negative sentences. They usually appear in rule-based writing as requests, instructions or commands – known as ‘imperatives’.

Example

Don’t accept friend requests from strangers. [Agency’s research supports using a negative imperative sentence]

Style Manual pages

‘Sentences’

‘The basics of plain language’ (blog)

‘Verbs’

The mechanics of writing

Writing is a skill that gets better with practice. Like any skill, there are ways of working that help you to improve faster.

Get started and keep going

A blank page waiting to be filled with words can be very scary. Equally scary is running out of words halfway through writing something.

Editing text is usually easier than writing it. So, your first step is to come up with words to edit. Here are 2 approaches.

Jump straight in:

- Dump everything out of your brain and onto the page.
- Group ideas and impose a structure on the initial chaos.
- Ditch any clever ideas and favourite phrases that don't fit into your structure (this can hurt).

Write an outline:

- Write down what needs to be in the document.
- Use as few words as possible for each idea.
- Shuffle the ideas around until they are in the right order.

Fact checks

Make sure you know where your facts come from. A quick search online is rarely enough. Find a reputable source and look for robust evidence. If you can't find it, there are 2 options:

- Don't include the material.
- Include the material and be clear about the limitations of its supporting evidence.

Always cite the sources you quote. Reports and briefs usually include citations or a list of references.

Sense checks

The narrative should make sense with your ideas in a logical order (*see* ‘Tell the story and follow the flow’). There must be a clear chain of logic between your facts and your conclusions.

After a while, you stop seeing what you’ve written. Instead, you start seeing what you *think* you’ve written. This makes it hard to know if the writing will make sense to your readers.

The best option is to get someone else to read your work. You can also check by using the ‘read aloud’ function in writing software.

Managing versions

Your working document changes constantly as you draft, get feedback and revise. Most modern file systems look after version control. This makes it easy to go back to an earlier version of the document if you make a mistake.

Follow your agency’s version control rules. You might be required to create a new version at every stage of the drafting process.

At the very least, it’s a good idea to save a separate file each time you reach a major milestone. For example, you could save a new file before and after you incorporate stakeholder feedback. This means you have a record of all comments and changes before accepting or removing them.

Collaboration

Some things make collaboration easier, no matter what writing software you use.

Everyone writes differently, so agree on a tone and voice that all authors should aim for (*see* ‘Relate to your readers’). This makes it much easier to edit the complete document to a consistent style.

How you divide tasks depends on your team’s skills and knowledge. When there is a lot of specialised knowledge, decide on the best expert to write each section. If some team members are better at writing and some at editing, make use of these strengths.

> ### Style Manual pages
>
> ‘Referencing and attribution’ (section)
>
> ‘Reports’

Editor’s tip

Always use an Australian dictionary

When you write for government, use Australian English and use it consistently. This helps readers to focus on the message. It also builds their trust.

Your agency is likely to have a preferred dictionary. We recommend the:

- *Australian concise Oxford dictionary* (ACOD)
- *Macquarie dictionary* (Macquarie).

Dictionaries describe how people use words. They don’t prescribe rules for using them. This means word entries often include more than one way to spell a word.

Our tip is to use the first word in the entry (the headword). The headword is the most common form according to each dictionary’s research.

It’s okay to use another option when it’s your agency’s style. Just make sure you always use that option (*see* ‘Create a word list’ in ‘Review your writing effectively’).

Other reasons to use a dictionary

Dictionaries do more than give the meaning and spelling of words. They help you style words correctly and consistently as you write.

Capitalisation	summer *not* Summer URL *not* url Zen *not* zen
Hyphenation	a blow-out (ACOD) *or* a blowout (Macquarie headword) fact-check the article (verb) *but* a fact check (noun)
Plurals	cacti (headword) *or* cactuses appendices (ACOD headword) *or* appendixes (Macquarie headword)
1 word or 2	webpage *not* web page
Derogatory or offensive use	bogan: ‘usually derogatory’ (ACOD) *or* ‘mildly derogatory’ (Macquarie)

Definition

A **derogatory** term is a word or phrase that is disrespectful and belittling.

Style Manual pages

‘Common misspellings and word confusion’

‘Dictionaries: an indispensable guide for writing and style’ (blog by Dr Amanda Laugesen)

‘Spelling’

Section 2

Write so your meaning is clear

Be clear by being grammatical

Few people get excited at the thought of grammar. Often, it’s seen as a boring set of rules that isn’t relevant to everyday life.

Despite this, grammar is a vital part of written and verbal communication. It shapes how we use words. Most importantly, grammar determines how people process and react to those words.

Grammar is about your readers

There are strong reasons for paying attention to grammar in your writing.

Good grammar respects your readers and their time. It shows them that you’ve made an effort to write something they can understand quickly.

Poor grammar is jarring and likely to distract readers. This makes it harder for them to focus on your meaning. There’s a risk some readers will disengage, believing you lack credibility or aren’t interested in meeting their needs.

Many writers aren’t familiar with grammar rules – through no fault of their own. The Style Manual covers the basics so you can avoid common pitfalls. Here are 2 areas of grammar with pitfalls that can be difficult to avoid in your writing. The writing feels wrong, but it’s hard to say why.

Sentences

Sentences are the building blocks of writing. How you structure them has a big effect on how easy your writing is to understand.

Typically, sentences contain a subject, a verb and an object. A complete sentence can stand alone and retain its meaning – it has a central idea.

An incomplete sentence feels wrong to a reader and is a distracting irritant. For example, ‘Before I go’, ‘Behind the tree’ and ‘Where you walk’ are not complete sentences. They leave you looking for the rest of the idea.

Simple sentences contain one idea. Complex sentences have one idea and extra information that contributes to that idea.

Long rambling sentences are easy to get lost in. By the time your reader gets to the end, they’ve forgotten the beginning. Where possible, keep your sentences to 25 words or fewer. Shorter sentences lighten the reader’s cognitive load.

Subject–verb agreement

In English, the form of a verb changes according to whether the subject is singular or plural. This rule is called ‘subject–verb agreement’: the form of the verb must agree with the form of the subject.

For example:

- The dog runs around the yard.
- The dogs run around the yard.

Native English speakers do this change automatically, but many other languages don’t work like this.

The rule is less obvious when the subject of the sentence is a collective noun. A collective noun is a word that describes a group of things as if they were one thing. Examples include ‘team’, ‘crowd’ and ‘taskforce’. Collective nouns are singular, so they are followed by the singular form of the verb.

This is easy to do for some collective nouns: The pack (of dogs) runs around the yard. But it’s harder to do for others.

Tricky subjects

The nouns ‘staff’, ‘committee’ and ‘department’ are staples of APS writing and they can be tricky.

‘Staff’, ‘committee’ and ‘department’ are nearly always collective nouns in government writing. This means you will use a singular verb.

Write this

The staff was made up of more generalists than specialists.

The committee is meeting on Tuesday.

The department is responsible for aged care services.

Not this

The staff were made up of more generalists than specialists.

The committee are meeting on Tuesday.

The department are responsible for aged care services.

But occasionally, ‘committee’ and ‘staff’ do use a plural verb. This happens when the individual parts of these nouns (e.g. the people) operate independently. The individual parts are implied in the sentence, rather than written.

It is rare for ‘department’ to use a plural verb. Treat it as a collective noun unless you’re sure it isn’t.

Write this

The staff have shared various tasks for the project. [Individual staff are doing different tasks.]

The committee are arriving separately. [Each individual member of the committee will arrive using different means.]

The department work together to improve their governance arrangements. [Individuals or teams within the department are working on their governance arrangements.]

Not this

The staff has shared various tasks for the project.

The committee is arriving separately.

The department works together to improve their governance arrangements.

Definitions

In a typical sentence, the **subject** is the person or thing that does the action.

A **verb** describes an action, an event, a change or a state.

Objects can be ‘direct’ or ‘indirect’. Direct objects receive the action of a verb and usually appear immediately after it: ‘She trains dogs.’ Indirect objects usually follow a preposition: ‘She trains dogs for them.’

Prepositions include: ‘in’, ‘by’, ‘between’, ‘to’, ‘from’ and ‘for’.

Style Manual pages

‘Parts of sentences’

‘Sentences’

‘Transitive and intransitive verbs’ (blog)

‘Types of words’ (section)

Editor’s tip

Word order

The order of words in a sentence is very important to its meaning. A standard sentence uses the order readers expect: subject–verb–object.

It’s easy to misinform readers by getting the word order wrong. If you do get it wrong, you should rewrite or punctuate to impose order and meaning.

Example

I have a meeting that John arranged in the seminar room.

Did John arrange my meeting while he was in the seminar room? Or is my meeting in the seminar room?

Option: rewrite

Example

The meeting that John arranged for me is in the seminar room. [Rewritten to change the word order]

The meaning is clear, but the emphasis has shifted. The original sentence starts with ‘I’, which emphasises my having a meeting. The rewritten sentence emphasises John having arranged the meeting. If the emphasis shift doesn’t suit, then try another option.

Example

I have a meeting in the seminar room. John arranged it for me. [Split into 2 sentences]

We split the 2 ideas in the original sentence into 2 simple sentences and added 2 words. The sentences are easy to read and the meaning is clear. The order of sentences emphasises who is having the meeting over who arranged it.

Option: punctuate

Example

I have a meeting, which John arranged, in the seminar room.

We added a comma pair to mark out the supplementary information in the sentence. The meaning is clear.

If we remove ‘which John arranged’, the sentence that remains is grammatically correct: ‘I have a meeting in the seminar room’. This is how to work out if you can use a comma pair.

Readers will probably untangle a sentence like our original example. But the more complex a sentence is, the more they’ll have to work. Here’s a high-stakes sentence.

Example

The group noted the minister is of concern to the government. [A concerning minister, yikes]

The government is concerned about the group, noted the minister.
[A concerning group, phew]

The group, noted the minister, is of concern to the government. [Yeah, got it]

Style Manual pages

‘Commas’

‘Types of words’ (section)

Editor's tip

'You and me' or 'you and I'?

Here's a tip to help you use 'you and me' and 'you and I' correctly.

Simply take 'you and' out of the sentence. If the sentence still makes sense, then you've used the correct phrase.

Correct

The director prefers the words drafted by you and me.

The director prefers the words drafted by me.

Incorrect

The director prefers the words drafted by you and I.

The director prefers the words drafted by I.

Correct

You and I attended the meeting.

I attended the meeting.

Incorrect

You and me attended the meeting.

Me attended the meeting.

Use a similar approach when writing about yourself and someone or something else.

Correct

People came a long way to meet the secretary and me.

People came a long way to meet me.

Incorrect

People came a long way to meet the secretary and I.

People came a long way to meet I.

Correct

The secretary and I got lots of questions from the audience.

I got lots of questions from the audience.

Incorrect

The secretary and me got lots of questions from the audience.

Me got lots of questions from the audience.

Style Manual page

'Pronouns'

Keep it simple: plain language

Using plain language benefits everyone. It builds trust, improves comprehension and makes content accessible for more people.

Using plain language is not 'dumbing down' your writing – it's opening it up. Using plain language lessens the cognitive load for all readers. This includes people with high literacy levels who are time-poor and have a lot to read.

Basic elements

The most important element of plain language is understanding your readers and their needs (*see* 'Understand who you are writing for and why').

After identifying your readers, we suggest you start with 4 basic elements of plain language:

- structure
- word choice
- active voice
- short sentences.

The Style Manual covers these elements in detail. We've focused this guidance on word choice.

Word choice

When people read your writing, their focus should be on your message, not on trying to decode it. Readers have to decode words before they can decode sentences.

Two things to think about when choosing words are common usage and word length. Most people find:

- common words easier to read than uncommon words
- shorter words easier to read than longer words.

More people will understand short everyday words and phrases. The right words, used in context, can convey complex text in ways that are easy to understand.

Most long complicated words and phrases have simpler alternatives.

Write this

So, the government could decide to keep a lot of the current procedures – if the relevant Act allows it.

Not this

Accordingly, the government may wish to preserve many of the existing procedural processes – in so much as is practicably feasible while still adhering to criteria in provisions of the relevant Act.

Jargon

We all use jargon and technical terms as part of our daily work. But these terms exclude everyone else. Even when readers share your terminology, they can be confused by a term that has different meanings in different contexts.

Avoid jargon unless you're sure readers understand it. If you can't avoid technical terms, make sure you explain them in plain language. Large technical documents should include a glossary.

Example

The forum is looking at digital technologies powered by large language models (LLMs).

LLMs are a type of language model. Language models are the mathematical model of a language showing relationships between characters or words. They underpin some generative AI (artificial intelligence) systems ...

Be concise

Don't use too many words, even if they are short and simple. It's important to be concise.

Imagine you open a document crammed with a poorly structured mass of words. There's a good chance you won't read it.

This is because people equate the number of words with the effort it will take to read and respond.

Having too many words means readers might:

- delay reading your content
- skim and misinterpret your message
- ignore it altogether.

Concise writing is a skill that takes practice. A good first step is to ask, ‘Do I need all these words to make my meaning clear?’

Style Manual pages

‘Clear language and writing style’ (section)

‘Defining words: harder than it sounds’ (blog)

‘How people read’

‘Literacy and access’

‘Parts of sentences’

‘Plain language – the choice is clear’ (blog)

‘Structuring content’ (section)

‘The basics of plain language’ (blog)

‘“Whole-of-government”, a whole can of worms …’ (blog)

Use the pages above as resources for the next 2 editor’s tips.

Editor's tip

Active and passive voice

Using active voice is a plain language principle. We recommend active voice for government writing.

There are 2 voices in sentence construction:

- Active voice emphasises the person or thing doing the action.
- Passive voice emphasises the receiver of the action.

Example

The government adopted the committee's recommendation. [Active voice]

The committee's recommendation was adopted by the government. [Passive voice]

The first example emphasises 'the government', which performs the action 'adopted'. The second example emphasises 'the committee's recommendation', which receives the action.

Benefits

The active voice is more direct than the passive voice. This makes it easier for readers to understand who is doing what.

The examples above also demonstrate 2 other benefits of using active voice. Active sentences speak more to 'you' and are usually shorter.

Agentless passives

Readers often encounter a type of government writing called the 'agentless passive'.

Example

The reform was implemented.

Who implemented the reform? The sentence is missing the 'agent' that performs the action. Frustrated readers must search for some context to work out who's responsible. Make sure you provide that context.

Example

In 2019, the state government implemented the reform with the passage of its legislation through parliament.

When to use passive voice

Sometimes, passive sentences have their place.

You might want to emphasise the receiver of the action.

Example

This week saw thousands of university students continue their protests. On Tuesday, the student protests were endorsed by a Student Assembly resolution.

Here, we want to focus on the students and their protest, not on the resolution.

Even the agentless passive is acceptable when:

- no-one knows who is doing the action
- who is doing the action is implied
- we don’t need to know (or shouldn’t know) who is doing the action.

Example

Her car was stolen. [We don’t know the thief.]

The election was held. [The holder of elections is implied.]

His car was written off. [Bad car week – ‘written off’ tells us all we need to know.]

Editor’s tip

Sentence length

Plain language writing means using short sentences.

Short sentences are easier to:

- read and understand because they limit the scope of an idea
- scan because they have fewer words, phrases and clauses than long sentences.

It’s easy to lose your message in a long sentence.

Rules for sentence length:

- Keep sentences to an average of 15 words and no more than 25 words.
- Break sentences over 25 words long into 2 sentences.
- Start a sentence with ‘And’, ‘Or’ or ‘But’ to make a shorter sentence (it’s allowed).
- Move some of the words into a list if you can’t avoid a long sentence.
- Include a mix of sentence lengths in your document – readers like variety and rhythm.

Using shorter sentences also makes it easier to notice if you left out any important information.

In the following, ‘Not this’ appears before ‘Write this’ to show how we can change wordy sentences into more readable text.

Not this

Because there are criminal elements using techniques they have developed to try to exploit potential weaknesses in AI systems, organisations need to update AI systems on an ongoing basis to meet evolving threats and risks. It’s important for organisations to note that applying traditional IT best practices to AI systems should also occur. [53 words]

Write this

Criminals try to exploit weaknesses in AI technology. This threat evolves as often as the technology does.

Organisations should do 2 things to reduce risks to their AI systems:

- apply traditional IT methods that are best practice
- update AI systems continually. [41 words]

Use structure to make it readable: bullet lists

Structural elements are signposts for readers. Before they read your paragraphs, people will scan headings, tables, lists, images and links.

A successful structure supports:

- navigation
- readability
- understanding
- assistive technologies.

Let's focus on bullet lists. They are everywhere in government writing, and mastering their style will set you free. Well, it will help you to be consistent at least.

A list that is styled correctly is readable and conveys meaning concisely. But don't overdo it. Too many lists will make readers feel like they've run an obstacle race.

Here are examples showing correct style for 3 types of bullet lists:

- sentence lists
- fragment lists
- stand-alone lists.

Sentence lists

They are named ‘sentence lists’ because each list item is a complete sentence.

Each list item has an initial capital and a full stop.

Correct styles	Description
These hints will help your writing: • Be clear about your primary message. • Understand who you are writing for. • Respect people’s time.	Sentence lead-in with a colon
These hints will help your writing. • Research your topic. • Do a content outline. • Write an introduction and a conclusion.	Sentence lead-in with a full stop
To write well: • Use plain language. • Remove redundant words. • Check for omissions. • Listen to the rhythm of your sentences.	Phrase lead-in with a colon
Hints to help your writing • Be respectful and impartial. • Explain technical terms. • Cite the sources you quote.	Heading with no punctuation

You can use any type of sentence in a sentence list. The list items above are all examples of positive ‘imperative’ sentences (*see* ‘Positive sentences’).

Fragment lists

They are named ‘fragment lists’ because each list item is a sentence fragment.

The first word of each list item is in lower case, unless it’s a proper noun.

Only the final list item has a full stop.

Correct styles	Description
My cousin has a bucket list: • swim with cuttlefish • buy rocket boots • skydive over the Swiss Alps • run a marathon.	Sentence lead-in with a colon First word of each list item is in lower case
Visitors enjoy Ballarat’s natural attractions: • Ballarat Botanical Gardens • Lake Wendouree • Yarrowee River Trail.	Sentence lead-in with a colon First word of each list item is a proper noun
Adelaide is famous for its: • food and wine • festivals and sporting events • coastline and hills.	Phrase lead-in with a colon The phrase lead-in and each fragment must make a sentence: • Adelaide is famous for its food and wine. • Adelaide is famous for its festivals and sporting events. • Adelaide is famous for its coastline and hills. Ensure each sentence is 25 words or fewer

Stand-alone lists

They are named ‘stand-alone lists’ because they can stand independently. Brochures, display material and technical content often contain stand-alone lists.

Each list item has an initial capital and no full stop.

Correct styles	Description
Music Mag’s genres Trance House Techno	Heading with no punctuation (no lead-in) List items are words or phrases (not full sentences) List items don’t need indent or bullet
Music Mag’s genres • Trance • House • Techno	Use indent or bullet if it helps people scan

Style Manual pages

‘Lists’

‘Structuring content’ (section)

Editor’s tip

Parallel structure for lists

Please check the examples in ‘Use structure to make it readable: bullet lists’.

The items in each list:

- match the style of the lead-in
- start with the same type of word (e.g. noun or verb)
- have the same tense (e.g. past, present or future)
- are the same type of sentence (e.g. question or statement).

This is called ‘parallel structure’ and it’s very important. It ensures that list items flow logically from the lead-in. And it shows that each item in the list is the same kind of thing. Parallel structure makes lists easier to read.

Correct

When Fred is fed up, he:

- stays in bed
- calls his friends
- goes dancing.

Incorrect

When Fred is fed up:

- he stayed in bed
- he calls his friends
- dancing might be the cure.

Repetition

A parallel structure doesn't mean using the same word to start each list item.

Example

I relax:

- by bushwalking
- by watching movies.

If you find yourself doing this, move the repeated word up to the lead-in.

Example

I relax by:

- bushwalking
- watching movies.

Final word

If you only have one item, you don't need a list.

Style Manual pages

'Lists'

'Structuring content' (section)

Editor’s tip

Headings

Headings are signposts for people. They make content easy to scan. People using assistive technologies can navigate documents and webpages using headings. Search engines use headings to index webpages.

Keywords

Headings state the main point of the content that follows. But the first 2 or 3 words in a heading might be all that people read. It’s important to begin headings with keywords that grab attention.

Heading styles

Always use styles in writing software to format headings; don’t bold and resize ‘normal’ text instead. Heading styles ensure a consistent visual difference between each level of heading. Styles also allow assistive technologies and search engines to identify headings.

Each heading level should differ visually. But use the same format for all headings at the same level.

Rules for writing headings:

- Keep them short – a maximum of 70 characters including spaces.
- Use sentence case and minimal punctuation.
- Avoid questions – they add to the reader’s cognitive load.
- Ensure headings at the same level are parallel (*see* ‘Parallel structure for lists’).

Write this

Write headings that are clear and short [Heading is a statement with 39 characters]

Not this

How can you avoid being confusing and long-winded when writing headings? [Heading is a question with 72 characters]

Heading hierarchy

The heading hierarchy is the arrangement of headings at different levels in logical order. The hierarchy shows how important content is and how it's connected.

Rules for the heading hierarchy:

- Keep the H1 for the title of your document or webpage.
- Use H2 for main headings and H3 and H4 as subheadings and sub-subheadings.
- Try not to go lower than H4.
- Never skip heading levels in your document – for example, don't follow H2 with H4.

Write this

H1: Dates and time

H2: Use numerals for times of day

H3: The 24-hour clock

H3: Coordinated Universal Time

Not this

H1: Dates and time

H2: Use numerals for times of day

H4: The 24-hour clock

H4: Explaining Coordinated Universal Time

[A jump from H2 to H4; H4s don't have parallel structure]

Definitions

Sentence case means using an initial capital for the first word and any proper nouns. All other words in the heading are in lower case.

Proper nouns are the names of people, places, organisations or other things that start with a capital letter.

Style Manual pages

‘Headings’

‘Structuring content’ (section)

Make it accessible and inclusive

Accessibility is about writing and designing content for equal access. Government agencies must produce accessible content.

Equal access to government services and information is an obligation under Australian law (e.g. the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*).

WCAG and user needs

WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) is the baseline accessibility standard for all Australian Government digital content.

We can describe WCAG in terms of user needs:

- I need to find and understand the content.
- I need to operate the navigation and interface.
- My assistive technologies can interpret the content.

Understanding users and their needs is important for all government content (*see* 'Understand who you are writing for and why'). Without this knowledge, we risk creating content that alienates and excludes people.

Inclusive language

Everyone knows that words are powerful. We must use respectful language that talks to the person, not their difference. It's the law (e.g. the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*).

Inclusive language respects our diversity.

Choose your words carefully

Some words carry bias or unintended subtext. When you describe people, only use the terms that are necessary to give context and meaning to your writing.

Subject matter experts from relevant communities developed our inclusive language guidance. We based the following sentences on this guidance. 'Not this' appears before 'Write this' to show how small word changes can make a difference, and why it matters.

Not this

Advertising should show old people as everyday Australians living diverse lives.

The NGO assists youths who want to work in the industry.

Write this

Advertising should show older Australians as everyday people living diverse lives.

The NGO assists young people who want to work in the industry.

‘Old people’ and ‘youths’ convey a stereotype of each age group. Stereotypes are often negative and do not reflect diversity. They can have a harmful effect on people’s wellbeing.

Not this

Everyone should visit the outback to see the landscape and hear the birdlife.

Write this

Everyone should visit the outback to experience the landscape and birdlife.

Not everyone can see and hear.

Not this

Tom, a mature-age student, spoke about using public transport.

Write this

Tom, a student, spoke about using public transport.

Tom’s mature age is relevant only if we’re comparing usage across age cohorts.

Not this

In this report, we discuss people's knowledge of the myths and legends of First Australians.

Write this

In this report, we discuss people's knowledge of the beliefs of First Australians.

The beliefs of First Australians are not myths and legends.

Not this

Jonty wants to explore the concept of 'family' among ethnic groups.

Write this

Jonty wants to explore the concept of 'family' among people from different cultural backgrounds.

Using 'ethnic groups' or 'ethnic Australians' implies that it's unusual to be a migrant, or have migrant heritage, in Australia.

Australians can choose to identify with ethnicity according to their sense of difference. We shouldn't do that for them.

Not this

Without regulation, he/she might not disclose their commission.

Write this

Without regulation, they might not disclose their commission.

Only use gendered terms when gender is important to the topic. Don't use them in general content (like our example) because they:

- exclude people who don't identify with them
- prioritise a gender – why not 'she/he'?
- use more space than 'they' and 'them'.

Please remember that language and its usage evolve, often quickly. Make sure you have an up-to-date understanding of users’ needs.

Style Manual pages

‘Accessibility requirements’ appear on most Style Manual pages.

‘Accessible and inclusive content’ (section)

Editor’s tip

Numbers: choosing numerals or words

The rules for numbers in general (not technical) content are:

- Use words for ‘zero’ and ‘one’.
    - In some typefaces, it’s easy to confuse 0 and 1 with certain letters.
- Use numerals for ‘2’ and above.
    - People find numerals easier to scan than words.
- Use a comma in numbers from 1,000.
    - Screen readers will announce the numerals as a single number.
- Use numerals for large numbers when it’s important to be precise.
- Combine numerals and words for large, rounded numbers from a million.
    - It’s easier to understand 1 million than 1,000,000.

Example

zero one 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

100 ... 4,020 ... 60,250 ... 905,600 ... 3,326,805

1 million ... 4.5 million ... 12 million ... 107 million

1 billion [10^9 1,000 million] ... 1 trillion [10^{12} 1,000 billion]

Exceptions

There are some exceptions to the rule of using numerals for ‘2’ and above.

Journalistic style

Government writing that follows journalistic conventions can use words for numbers below 10. Media releases usually follow journalistic style.

Example

zero one two three four five six seven eight nine 10 11 12 ...

Words to start a sentence

Use words for a number that starts a sentence. You can choose to rewrite the sentence if you want to use a numeral.

Example

Fifty-two people at the festival fainted in the heat.

At the festival, 52 people fainted in the heat.

When to use numerals for ‘0’ and ‘1’, not words

In some contexts, we write ‘zero’ and ‘one’ as numerals, not words. For example, we use numerals for units of measurement (1.05 cm) and times of day (00:45 AEDT). Here are 2 more instances that often appear in your everyday writing.

Write ‘0’ and ‘1’:

- to compare numbers
- in a series of numbers.

Comparisons

Always compare numerals, not words and numerals.

Write this

Our survey shows that 1 in 5 people, and 1 in 7 young people, experienced a mental health disorder.

Not this

Our survey shows that one in 5 people, and one in 7 young people, experienced a mental health disorder.

Series of numbers

Always use numerals for a group of related items.

Write this

Taufa's numbers last week: 26 tackles, 3 tackle breaks, 1 offload and 0 missed tackles.

Not this

Taufa's numbers last week: 26 tackles, 3 tackle breaks, one offload and zero missed tackles.

Style Manual pages

'Choosing numerals or words'

'Numbers and measurements' (section)

Afterword

Review your writing effectively

Footy teams review every aspect of a weekend game and ‘talk about it during the week’. Writing is no different. Review what you’ve written and, ideally, get others to check it too.

Understand your writing tics

With a little self-knowledge, a self-edit can start at the first draft. We all have writing tics. They’re the style habits we pick up and use unconsciously when writing. Granted, they can put the ‘you’ into writing and save it from being drearily bland. But it’s also possible your tics will:

- annoy and distract readers
- make the writing repetitive
- add redundant words
- get in the way of your message.

Be brave and ask your colleagues if you have writing tics that drive them nuts. The Style Manual team is aware of ours, and the list is long. We work on controlling them, but it takes practice. We try to self-edit as we write.

Here’s a de-identified selection of 5 of our tics. It might help you to recognise your own. We:

- write staccato sentences
- overuse idioms and metaphors
- assume technical knowledge
- write things in 3s
- use phrases like ‘I think’ and ‘would you be able to’ rather than being direct.

Use spellcheck and readability tools wisely

Check that your spellcheck is set to Australian spelling (*see* ‘Always use an Australian dictionary’).

In-app ‘Editor’ tools are useful, but some suggested edits differ from Australian Government style. Check any suggestions against Style Manual guidance and follow our style. Using one style across government helps build trust in our content.

There are readability checkers available on the internet. We use one of these tools to ensure our writing meets WCAG’s recommended reading age of lower secondary.

But the readability formulas that are used by today's tools were never intended to be writers' guides. The tools highlight areas where you can improve readability to make your writing easier to understand. Good writing is much more than that.

Don't edit and revise your writing simply to improve a readability score. Use the tool's editing suggestions to identify potential issues, then exercise judgement.

Create a word list

Word lists are alphabetical lists of preferred terms and spelling. They record your decisions about what term to use and when. For example, our word list has these entries:

> **B**
> body text (*use for* running text, paragraph text and general text)
>
> **S**
> subheading (*not* sub-heading *see also* sub-subheading)

A word list saves time. You don't need to keep checking the same word or making the same decision. And you'll use the same word consistently in your writing.

Create your own word list:

- Add every word you check in the dictionary to the list.
- Add acronyms and their long forms.
- Include the meanings of words that trip you up (like 'affect' and 'effect').
- Include terms your stakeholders use or prefer.

Have the word list open as you write, or open it when you review your work. Readers benefit when you invest time in consistency.

Think before hitting send

Walk away from your writing and come back to it with fresh eyes. The genius prose we wrote at 11 pm often fails to impress at 9 am the following day.

Always take a minute to reread your work before you hit send.

Style Manual pages

'Common misspellings and word confusion'

'Editing and proofreading'

'On the level with readability' (blog)

'Shortened words and phrases' (section)

'Spelling'

Index

A

accessibility, 3, 4, 48–51
accuracy, 9, 16, 19
acronyms, abbreviations and contractions
  grammatical contractions, 8
  use of contractions, 5, 6
  word lists for writers, 58
active voice, 16, 32, 35
agentless passives, 35–36
And at start of sentence, 37
apostrophes, 8
appendices/appendixes, 21
argument, 16–18
article writing, tone and voice of, 5–6
attributions in sentences, 10
audience *see* readers' requirements; user needs
APS (Australian Public Service), usage in this handbook, ix
Australian style and spelling, 21, 57, *see also* writing styles
author–date referencing style, x
authoritative information, 9, 16, 19

B

basic government voice, 6
blogs, tone of, 6, *see also* digital content
brevity *see* concise writing
briefs
  citations, 19
  tone and voice, 5–6
bullet lists, 39–44
  fragment lists, 41
  parallel structure, 43–44
  sentence lists, 40
  stand-alone lists, 42
  types of, 39
But at start of sentence, 37

C

Cabinet briefs, tone and voice of, 5, 6
capitalisation
  dictionary guidance, 21
  in headings, 47
  in lists, 40–42
case studies, 6, 16
checking your work, 12, 20, 57–58
citing, x, 16, 19
collaboration, 20
collective nouns, 26
commas
  comma pairs, 29
  in numbers, 52
  in quotations, 10
committee with singular or plural verb, 26–27
communication types and voices, 5–6
comparisons (words/numbers), 53
concise writing, 9, 33–34
  short words and sentences, 25, 32, 37
consistency, 20, 58
content definition, ix, *see also* digital content
contractions *see* acronyms, abbreviations and contractions
corporate communications, tone and voice of, 5–6
credibility in persuasive argument, 16
cultural awareness, 6
  inclusive language, 48–51

D

definitions of terminology in this handbook, ix
department with singular or plural verb, 26–27
derogatory or offensive words
  definition, 22
  dictionary guidance, 21
  stereotypes, 49, 50
dictionaries, 21–22
digital content
  accessibility standard, 3, 4, 48, 57
  short-form content for mobile screens, 14
  tone and voice, 5–6
  user feedback, 4
documentary–note referencing style, x
document, definition, ix

E

editing
  reviewing your own work, 12, 20, 57–58
  tools for, 57–58
emails, tone and voice of, 5–6
emergency instructions, voice of, 6
emotional appeal in persuasive argument, 16
endnotes, x
equal access *see* inclusive language
evidence
  citations, x, 16, 19
  fact checks, 19
  quantitative and qualitative, 16, 17
  see also research
exclamation marks and quotation marks, 11

F

facts and logic, 16, 19–20
feedback on your writing, 4
file and version management, 20
first person (*I*, *we*), 16, 28
footnotes, x

formal writing, 5, 6
fragment lists, 41
full stops and quotation marks, 10

G

gendered terms, 50
glossaries, 33
grammar, 25–31
  importance of, 25
  parts of sentences, definitions, 27
  sentence structure, 25
  subject–verb agreement, 26–27
  word order, 28–29
  see also nouns; pronouns; sentences
grammatical contractions, 8

H

headings
  capitalisation rules, 47
  hierarchy, 46
  in lists, 40, 42
  keywords, 45
  purpose of, 14
  styles, 45
headword in a dictionary, 21
he/she, 50
humour, 5, 6
hyphenation, 21

I

I (pronoun)
  first person, 16, 28
  you and me/you and I, 30–31
idioms, 5, 6, 7
imperatives, 18, 40
inclusive language, 3, 48–51
informal writing, 5, 6
information sources, 9, 19
it is, *it's* and *its*, 8

J

jargon, 33, *see also* slang
journalistic style, 52

K

keywords in headings, 45

L

large numbers, 52
lead-ins, in lists, 40–41
legal obligations of APS writers, 3
legal writing, tone and voice of, 5–6
length of paragraphs, 14
length of sentences, 25, 32, 37–38
letters, tone and voice of, 5–6
lists *see* bullet lists
logic in persuasive arguments, 16, 20

M

main headings, 46
making a case, 16–18
me
  you and me/you and I, 30–31
measurement units, 53
mechanics of writing *see* writing mechanics
media releases
  journalistic style, 52
  number of sentences in a paragraph, 15
  tone, 5
  words used for numbers, 52
metaphors, 5, 6, 7
ministerial briefs, tone and voice of, 5–6
mobile screens, short-form content for, 14

N

narratives
  argument (making a case), 16–18
  definition, 13
  structure and flow, 12–15
negative sentences, 18
neutral language, 5
newsletter articles, tone and voice of, 5, 6
nouns
  collective, 26
  proper nouns, 41, 47
  subject–verb agreement, 26–27
  see also pronouns
numbers, rules for, 52–54

O

object of a sentence, 27
objectivity, 5
offensive words *see* derogatory or offensive words
one (numeral or word), 52, 53
online documents *see* digital content
Or at start of sentence, 37
outlines, 19

P

paragraphs, 14–15
parallel structure for lists, 43–44
passive voice, 16, 35–36
personal anecdotes, 6
personal pronouns, 5, 6
  he/she, *they/them*, 50
  I, 16, 28
  you and me/you and I, 30–31
  we, 16
persuasive argument, 16–18

plain language, 32–38
  active and passive voice, 35–36
  basic elements, 32
  concise writing, 9, 33–34
  sentence length, 37–38
  word choice, 32–33
plurals, 21
policy documents, tone and voice of, 5–6
popular culture references, 6
positive sentences, 18, 40
possessive pronouns, 8
preferred terms and spelling
  Australian usage and spelling, 21, 57
  word lists, 58
prepositions, 27
pronouns
  it is, *it's* and *its*, 8
  personal *see* personal pronouns
  possessive, 8
proofreading *see* reviewing your work
proper nouns
  definition, 47
  in headings, 47
  in lists, 41
punctuation
  for clarity, 28–29
  comma pairs, 29
  with quotation marks, 10–11
purpose
  of this handbook, vii
  of writing, 3, 9, 16

Q

quantitative and qualitative evidence, 16, 17
question marks and quotation marks, 10–11
quotation marks and punctuation, 10–11

R

readability checkers, 57–58
readers, usage in this handbook, ix
readers' requirements, 3, 9, 48
  writing for your reader, 3–4, 9
  see also accessibility; inclusive language; plain language
readers' time, respect for, 3, 9, 25, 32
reference lists and citations, x, 16, 19
relevance *see* user needs
reports
  citations, 19
  glossaries, 33
  tone and voice, 5–6
research
  for accuracy and completeness, 9, 19
  previous work, 4
  user research, 4, 18
  see also evidence
respectful language, 48–51
reviewing your work, 12, 20, 57–58
rule-based writing (imperatives), 18

S

self-editing, 20, 57–58
sense checks, 20
sentence case, 47
sentence lists, 40
sentences
  attribution in, 10
  comparisons in (words/numbers), 53
  length, 25, 32, 37–38
  negative sentences, 18
  number of sentences in a paragraph, 14, 15
  parts of, definitions, 27
  positive sentences, 18, 40
  punctuation and quotation marks, 10–11
  series of numbers, 54
  starting with a number, 53
  starting with *And*, *Or* or *But*, 37
  structure, 25
  subject–verb agreement, 26–27
  topic and transition sentences, 13
  word order, 28–29
series of numbers, 54
she/he, 50
short-form content for mobile screens, 14
similes, 7
slang, 5, *see also* derogatory or offensive words; jargon
social media, tone of, 6, *see also* digital content
software *see* writing software
spellcheck, 57–58
spelling
  Australian spelling, 21, 57
  dictionary guidance, 21–22
  preferred terms and spelling lists, 58
staff with singular or plural verb, 26–27
stand-alone lists, 42
standard writing, 5
stereotypes, 49, 50, *see also* derogatory or offensive words
stories *see* case studies; narratives
structure in plain language, 32
structure of lists *see* bullet lists
structure of narratives, 12–15
structure of sentences, 25
style habits, 57–58
style sheets (word lists), 58
styles
  for headings, 45
  referencing styles (citations), x
  of words (dictionary guidance), 21–22
  of writing *see* writing styles
subheadings and sub-subheadings, 46
subject of a sentence, 27
subject–verb agreement in sentences, 26–27

T

technical documents
  explanations of terms (glossaries), 33
  units of measurement, 53
  see also reports
terminology
  dictionary guidance, 21–22
  explanation of (glossaries), 33
  in this handbook, ix
text, definition, ix
they/them, 50
titles
  heading style, 46
  italic font, x
tone and voice, 5–6, 20
tools, 57–58
topic sentences, 14
transition sentences, 14
trustworthiness of sources, 9, 16, 19

U

units of measurement, 53
user needs
  digital content, 48
  feedback and user research, 4
  writing for your reader, 3–4, 9, 51
  see also accessibility; inclusive language
user research, 4, 18
users, usage in this handbook, ix

V

verbs
  definition, 27
  subject–verb agreement, 26–27
version control, 20
voice and tone, 5–6, 20
voice in sentence construction
  active voice, 16, 32, 35
  agentless passives, 35–36
  passive voice, 35, 36

W

WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines), 48, 57, *see also* digital content
we, 16
web-based content *see* digital content
webpage, 21
word lists, 58
word meanings
  dictionary guidance, 21–22
  in this handbook, ix
words
  Australian usage and spelling, 21, 57
  derogatory or offensive words, 21, 22
  inclusive language, 48–51
  keywords in headings, 45
  number of words in sentences, 25, 37
  for numbers, 52–53
  order of words in sentences, 28–29
  stereotypes, 49
  word choice in plain language, 32–33
writing
  definition, ix
  purpose, 3, 9, 16
  reviewing your writing, 12, 20, 57–58
writing for your readers, 3–4, 9
  accessibility and inclusivity, 48–51
writing mechanics, 19–22
  collaboration, 20
  dictionary use, 21–22
  fact checks, 19
  outlines, 19
  self-editing, 57–58
  sense checks, 20
  spellcheck, 57
  starting, 19
  version control, 20
  word lists, 58
writing software
  editing tools, 57–58
  heading styles, 45
  ‘read aloud’ function, 12, 20
writing styles
  Australian style and spelling, 21, 57
  journalistic, 52
  levels of formality, 5–6
  style habits, 57
  tone and voice, 5–6, 20
writing tics, 57
writing tools, 57–58

Y

you and me/you and I, 30–31

Z

zero, 52, 53