WRITING STYLE GUIDE

Government
of South Australia

Department for Education

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this guide

As a department, we need to communicate in a way that everyone can understand.

If we get it right, people will find the information they need quickly and easily.

This guide helps us put the user at the centre and communicate consistently with one department voice.

Use it to:

- write clearly and concisely
- apply the department's preferred tone, style and language
- write for or about Aboriginal people
- write for or about people with disability
- write for or about children and young people in care
- write without bias and for different levels of knowledge.

Who is this guide for?

This guide is for all Department for Education employees and should be followed for all external and internal communications, including online.

It also applies to external contractors supporting with graphic design, writing or editing tasks.

Useful contacts

Communications Directorate
8226 2885
education.comms@sa.gov.au

Online Communications
8226 0547
education.web@sa.gov.au

Useful resources

Australian Government Style Manual
stylemanual.gov.au

How to guide for creating and editing web content on EDi
edi.sa.edu.au/operations-and-management/communications/social-media-and-web/corporate-website-and-intranet-maintenance/creating-new-webpages-and-editing-web-content-a-how-to-guide

The Macquarie Dictionary
macquariedictionary.com.au

A complete list of acronyms used in public education and care
edi.sa.edu.au/operations-and-management/communications/planning-and-style-guide/common-acronyms

Embedding Aboriginal Voice in your work
edi.sa.edu.au/operations-and-management/legal-and-projects/join-the-aboriginal-voice-register

Understanding user needs
dta.gov.au/help-and-advice/digital-service-standard/digital-service-standard-criteria/1-understand-user-needs

KEY PRINCIPLES

Tone

The Australian Government sets the expectation that <u>government tone</u> should be direct, calm and understated.

Our tone is factual, helpful and trustworthy. It should be authoritative, without being condescending.

We can do this by:

- writing with the reader in mind
- using plain English
- being consistent with preferred language, grammar and punctuation
- being inclusive, positive and respectful.

User-focused content

Before writing, consider:

- who your audience is
- the purpose of the communication
- when and where you're communicating with your reader
- what your reader needs to know or do.

Aim for sentences under 25 words and vary your sentence length.

Readers are more likely to remember the main points when:

- content is specific, informative and concise
- headlines, headings and titles are specified and explanatory
- sections start with the main idea or summary
- large blocks of text are broken up with headings and lists.

You can also help readers access what they need by:

- ordering content by putting the most important information first
- using a progressive approach when providing more details about the information
- using 1 idea per paragraph, grouped by topic, organised under headings
- avoiding duplication by linking to existing content where possible
- using contractions (for example you're, it's)
- avoiding FAQs.

Spelling

The department uses Australian English instead of American English spelling.

A list of commonly used words and terms is at the back of this guide. You can also refer to the <u>Macquarie Dictionary.</u>

Plain language

Plain language (often called plain English) is a writing style that's clear and easy to understand. It helps readers quickly build trust and make decisions.

We communicate with a broad range of people every day. Many are busy and distracted, or they may come from a non-English speaking background.

Additionally, more than half of adult Australians have a reading age of a 12-year-old.

Plain language allows all readers to understand the message after reading it once.

Active voice

Active voice is when the focus is on the subject of a sentence performing the verb. It's direct and provides clarity for the reader.

You can write in active voice by following the order of subject + verb + object in a sentence.

Some examples of active versus passive language are:

Active – The Chief Executive signed the agreement.

Passive – The agreement was signed by the Chief Executive.

Active – Baxter completed his assignment.

Passive – The assignment was completed by Baxter.

There may be times when you can't avoid using passive voice. Use it only when necessary, or when you don't want to attribute a comment to an individual or a department.

Minimal capitalisation and punctuation

Use capitalisation and punctuation sparingly and intentionally.

Overusing these is visually confusing and makes it harder for the reader to understand the content.

The general rules are:

- unless it's a proper noun, sentence case is preferred
- minimal commas
- no semicolons after bullet points
- no double spaces between sentences.

Refer to 'Our style, from A to Z' below for specific advice.

Adaptability

These key principles are the foundation for all department communications. However, tone and style might be adapted depending on the channel and purpose. For example:

EDi (intranet) and our public website – helpful and practical

Written report or framework – analytical or directional

Social media – conversational and engaging

sa.gov.au – helpful and task-focused

OUR STYLE
FROM A TO Z

Abbreviations and acronyms

Only use abbreviations and acronyms if the title it's replacing is long and is referred to more than twice.

Include the full title for the first reference, with the acronym in brackets afterwards.

- The Department of the Premier and Cabinet (DPC), and from then on just DPC
- Our style has no full stops, commas or apostrophes in acronyms or abbreviations. For example:
    - CSIRO instead of C.S.I.R.O
    - Several CEOs attended a conference today.

Refer to our complete list of acronyms used in public education and care.

Alignment

Align text to the left. Justified or centred text creates unnecessary spaces and is difficult to read.

Ampersand (&)

Avoid this symbol and use the full spelling of 'and' unless it's part of a corporate name.

Apostrophes

The main use of the apostrophe is to indicate possession. Not all plurals need an apostrophe.

For example:

- the teacher's apple (singular)
- the teachers' apples (plural)
- we don't use a 's after words ending in s. For example: 'Mr Lyons' request' rather than 'Mr Lyons's request'.

Some phrases are more adjectival than possessive and are written without an apostrophe. For example:

- Drivers license.

Apostrophes are also used to indicate omitted letters or numbers (contractions) in words like don't, it's or couldn't. These should be avoided in formal communications like ministerial briefings or official documents, but are otherwise accepted.

Bias-free

Use language that's respectful of the diversity of Australia's peoples. Consider accessibility for different contexts, such as Aboriginal, cultural, linguistic, age, gender, sexual identity and disability. Use inclusive and respectful language.

Australian versus American English

Use English-based spelling rather than American.

For example:

- 'They organised a flavoursome feast at the festival centre but it was cancelled'.

Instead of:

- 'They organized a flavorsome feast at the festival center but it was canceled'.

Bullet points and lists

Bullets and lists are an effective way of simplifying complex information.

The main bullet point rules are:

- always use lower case when there's introductory text
- always have a full stop at the end of the block (but not after each point)
- where full sentences apply to all bullets, standard grammatical rules apply (capital letter to start and full stop at the end of the sentence).

There are a few types of bullets you can use, such as:

1. A run-on or introductory sentence. For example:

    In an emergency:
    - remain calm
    - contact the fire or emergency warden
    - gather at the nearest refuge area.

There are no semicolons after the phrase points.

2. List-style bullets where each phrase may be an incomplete sentence or single item. For example:

    Stationery needed for the leadership team:
    - whiteboard markers
    - notepads
    - stapler.

3. Full sentence points. For example:

    The plan has 2 critical success factors:

    - We want to provide a better service to stakeholders
    - There should be fewer children in care.

Capital letters

Capital letters and title case are often overused.

Capital letters are used for specific and proper nouns, but never general and common nouns.

Use title case for things like:

- specific units, directorates, government departments and agencies, for example Support and Inclusion
- organisations when they're referred to in full
- people and place names, plus normal conventions for proper nouns.

In general, use lower case (unless used as part of a name or title) for:

- names of services
- professions or positions when pluralised
- school subjects
- governing councils
- registered training organisations (RTO) for both singular and plural

For documents and webpages (including policies) use:

- lower case
- single quotations if the title is not hyperlinked, and only if it's unclear where the title ends – for example, don't use quotation marks if the title is an item in a bullet point list with no surrounding text.

For high-level strategic documents, such as the Strategic Plan or Action Plan:

- use title case when hyperlinked or unlinked
- do not use any quotation marks.

Contact details

Phone: 1234 5678 (no area code necessary, except on interstate sites)

Freecall: 1800 123 456 (specify if the number is a freecall number)

Email:

- education.lowercase@sa.gov.au
- education.MoreThanOneWord@sa.gov.au
- education.MTOW@sa.gov.au.

Dashes and hyphens

Dashes (–) and hyphens (-) are used for different purposes. It's useful to remember that:

- a dash splits
- a hyphen joins.

For accessibility reasons, we use 'to' instead of a hyphen or dash between things like dates, times and numbers. For example:

- Strategic Plan 2023 to 2025 instead of Strategic Plan 2023-2025
- 3.00pm to 5.00pm instead of 3.00pm – 5.00pm.

We can use an en-dash (a longer dash) to connect extra information in a sentence. For example:

The manual – updated monthly – is available on our website.

A hyphen is used in compound expressions to avoid ambiguity or misreading a phrase by connecting descriptors that are bound together. For example:

- high-quality teaching
- day-to-day event.

Hyphens are also used to connect prefixes at the start of a word. For example:

- pre-term
- non-compliant.

Gender-neutral text

Make sure text is gender neutral wherever possible. For example, use 'them', 'their' and 'they'.

This also includes gendered terms, such as policeman vs police officer.

When referring to an individual person, you should use their preferred pronouns.

Headings and structure

All headings should be in sentence case.

Do not put a full stop at the end of your headings or subheadings.

Be clear about the hierarchy of your headings, especially in large documents.

Follow these tips on structure and headings to help people understand online content better.

Use a department template where possible.

Job titles and positions

Use title case for job titles, regardless of whether a person's name is used and always use title case when referring to a Minister or Chief Executive. For example:

- Professor Martin Westwell, Chief Executive, Department for Education
- Executive Director
- Sam Smith, Principal, Everglade Primary School or the Principal.

Use lower case for plurals, for example 'several ministers' or 'a group of directors'.

Numbers

We use a numeral in most instances where numbers are written in print and online. This creates consistency and aligns with best practice for online communication.

Write the number out in full when starting a sentence, or when part of a common phrase. For example:

- there were 59 attendees at the annual meeting
- eighteen people watched 3 movies in a row
- one of a kind.

Always use a numeral when attached to a symbol. For example:

- 2% rainfall
- The school raised $3000.

When using exact numbers with decimal places, take it to no more than 2 places. For example:

- other expenses accounted for 3.5% of total costs.

When referring to dollars, don't include cents unless it's required in a specific circumstance, such as financial statements.

Use a comma to indicate place value where there are 5 or more digits, and no comma for 4 or less digits. For example:

- $450
- $4500
- $45,000
- $45 million, or $45m if writing on social media.

Punctuation

Use minimal punctuation. Keep it sparse and use it only when necessary.

Use commas sparingly and avoid placing full stops in headings, abbreviations or titles.

Oxford commas should only be used to provide clarification when a list would be unclear without one.

Use the symbol (%) except when starting a sentence.

Positive voice

Use the positive rather than the negative voice, and also avoid using double negatives. For example:

- (negative) The manager is not aware that...
- (positive) The manager realises that...
- (double negative) I'm not unhappy about it...

Quotation marks

There are 2 types of quotation marks. Single (also called inverted commas) and double.

We use single quotation marks when referring to a title, term or expression that requires us to establish boundaries.

For example:

- The papers were marked 'top secret'

We also use single quotation marks when quoting from speech or a document. For example:

- The girl exclaimed, 'I'm going to miss soccer practice!'

Double quotation marks are used for a quote within a quote, for example 'At the meeting I asked, "I think we should get lunch," and they all agreed.'

Referencing

The type of referencing used in a document depends on its intended audience and style. It's best to keep the text and message simple.

In a longer report or document intended for a largely academic or professional audience, it may be appropriate to use footnotes or references to back up claims made or figures quoted in text.

The Australian Government Style Manual offers specific guidance on <u>referencing and attribution</u>.

Sentence form

A sentence is clearest when it makes a single statement. If you need to expand on the statement, use bullet points.

This avoids your idea becoming muddled and confusing.

School terms and year level

'Term' and 'year' are written in lowercase in an education context, unless at the start of a sentence.

Terms and year levels are written numerically. Always put the week before term first, for example week 3, term 4.

For example:

*   term 1, 2023 rather than term one or first term
*   year 8 or years 7 to 12 when referring to a range of year levels
*   reception without a capital.

Single spaces

*   Always use single space after full stops in text
*   Double spaces create unsightly 'holes' in documents, especially when designed in a brochure or report. This makes digital documents difficult to read when assistive technology is required by the reader.

Slashes

Backslashes (\) and forward slashes (/) are used to represent different functions or meanings in different disciplines. For example, (/) for division in maths, or (\) to separate elements in a file path.

Use slashes sparingly and not in place of 'and', for example 'parents and carers' not 'parents/carers'.

Time and dates

There's no space between the time and am or pm.

For example:

*   11.00am instead of 11:00 am or any other variation
*   12 noon Monday to Friday
*   8.30am to 4.00pm weekdays.

Use full stops instead of colons between the numerals. Dates are written as:

*   14 July 2023 (dd month yyyy)
*   Friday 14 July 2023 (day dd month yyyy)

instead of:

*   14th of July 2023
*   July 14th, 2023
*   Friday, July 14th 23.

Financial year dates should use a hyphen rather than a slash. For example: 2023-24 rather than 2023/24.

Underline and italics

We underline all hyperlinks in both printed and online documents.

Avoid using underlined type because underline is associated with hyperlinks. This includes in headings.

Italics are difficult for some people to read and should be used sparingly, for emphasis only or to signify foreign words like French. Don't use Italics online except for names of Acts of Parliament (unless they're hyperlinked).

Upper case

Avoid upper case words except for use in design and creative elements.

WRITING FOR OR ABOUT ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

We're committed to using culturally appropriate and respectful language when writing with, for or about Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal nations, cultures and languages across South Australia are diverse and numerous. That means respectful language use depends on what each community finds appropriate.

Preferred use

The department endorses the term 'Aboriginal' to refer to people who identify as:

- Aboriginal
- Torres Strait Islander
- both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

Aboriginal South Australians prefer using this term, and it should be used in department policies and communications. Some formal and legal documents, like enrolment forms, may require identification as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or both.

Where possible, use:

- specific terms (For example, the name of a community) before using broader terms
- plurals when speaking about collectives (peoples, nations, cultures, languages)
- present tense, unless speaking about a past event
- empowering, strengths-based language.

Guiding principles

The Australian Government Style Manual sets out general principles to promote effective and respectful communications with Aboriginal people. Some important points to remember are:

- there's no single Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander identity
- authoritative guidance lives with the relevant community or individual
- respectful language use starts with the basics
- First Nations diversity is reflected throughout Australia
- naming protocols are complicated and specificity is often more respectful
- style for First Australian languages needs to recognise continuing cultures
- First Nations spirituality is easily misused or misrepresented
- strengths-based language respects continuous cultures and connections
- consultation is a must.

Consultation

Respectful content and language use depends on proper consultation with traditional owners, local elders and cultural authorities, community and content experts.

Consultation is essential when writing about complex and sensitive matters like Aboriginal cultures and histories.

Creating resources with Aboriginal language

Resources created to support the Australian Curriculum need to use language consistent with that used in the Australian Curriculum (for example, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures).

Reconciliation Australia's Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education program has produced a useful guide to using respectful and inclusive language and terminology. It gives guidance on a number of areas, including:

- acknowledging the diversity of Aboriginal identities and cultures

- avoiding deficit and dividing language ('us vs them')

- recognising currency and continuity of cultures.

Translation and transliteration

When translating and transliterating Aboriginal languages into English and other languages, be mindful of the different spellings of Aboriginal nations, languages and cultural groups.

Check the preferences of local Aboriginal cultural authorities or with the Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation Division of the Attorney-General's Department.

Use of images to accompany text

The appropriateness of visual representations will depend on context. Wherever possible, images should be specific to the particular nation, region or community and relate to the content (for example, an image of a child is not appropriate if the subject matter relates to Elders).

WRITING FOR OR ABOUT PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY

Language reflects our values and beliefs. Disability is a natural part of human diversity that should be embraced.

Using inclusive language is a way to make sure all children, young people and adults are honoured for their identities and not 'othered 'or excluded based on labels.

Guiding principles

When writing for or about people with disability, you should:

- use strengths-based language by presuming competence
- use person-first language as a general rule, for example person with autism
- consider that identity-first language (autistic person) may be preferred by some people with disability
- ask the person with disability about their language preferences when referring to an individual
- use names and not labels where possible
- avoid the term 'special' where possible
- avoid using abbreviations to refer to children and students with disability, such as IESP children or NCCD children
- try not to quantify disability – it's unnecessary to use phrases like 'severely disabled or 'multiple disabilities'
- avoid redundant descriptions like 'high or low functioning'.

Be mindful that some communities do not identify as having a disability at all, including some members of the Autism community or D/deaf community. Always ask when in doubt.

Impairment or disability?

An impairment is a problem with the structure or function of the body such as an organ. An impairment may or may not lead to a disability. A disability is the result of an interaction with a person and their environment.

Our department refers to the broad definition of disability described by the Disability Discrimination Act 1992.

Consider the following preferred inclusive language to describe impairment:

Try this:	Instead of this:
d/Deaf or hard of hearing (HOH)	deaf/deaf and dumb
blind or vision impaired	visually impaired
person with a disability	handicapped

Accessibility

There are very specific accessibility requirements for:

- online and digital

- communicating with readers with an acquired brain injury or limited cognitive ability.

Find more information in the plink course on writing accessible, plain English webpages and online content and the Department of Premier and Cabinet's content guide and Easy Read guide.

Recommended terms

Below is a list of inclusive alternatives to commonly used and outdated terms.

Try this:	Instead of this:
wheelchair user/person who uses a wheelchair	confined/bound to a wheelchair
child with disability	suffering/victim of disability
barriers the student may experience	students' barriers
autism	high/low functioning autism
acquired brain injury	brain damage
children without disability/non-disabled children	able-bodied children
neurotypical	normal
children and students with disability (CSWD)	disabled/special/special needs children
person of short stature	midget

WRITING FOR OR ABOUT CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN CARE

There are different types of guardianship orders. Sometimes it's necessary to use a legal term for a child or young person in care.

For example, a child might be:

- in care under the guardianship of the Chief Executive, Department for Child Protection
- in care under the guardianship of a Specified Person.

Guiding principles

Keep in mind the following general points when writing for or about children or young people in care:

- The preferred terminology is 'children and young people in care'
- The previous terminology, 'children under the guardianship of the Minister', is incorrect
- Use the term 'under guardianship' when the child or young person's legal status is critical to the context and information
- A child or young person in care often has a carer and a legal guardian. Usually the legal guardian is the Department for Child Protection (DCP).

There are certain decisions that can only be made by the child's legal guardian. This means that our use of 'carer' or 'guardian' must be carefully applied. For example:

- The DCP case worker has the authority to enrol the child, while the carer (kinship carer, foster carer or residential carer) is responsible for making most day-to-day care decisions.

Review the 'Who can say OK?' document for more information about the role of carers and DCP case workers.

Writing online

When referring to children in care the first time online, link to a page that explains the term. For example, 'Schools provide a safe environment for children and young people in care (under guardianship).'

Below are two preferred resources to link to, depending on the audience.

For the public:

childprotection.sa.gov.au/children-care

For our staff:

edi.sa.edu.au/supporting-children/child-protection/children-in-care/child-or-young-person-in-care

COMMON WORDS AND PHRASES

A

Aboriginal – always has a capital letter. When talking about SA, we use the term to include Torres Strait Islander peoples.

about – not around (about 30% not around 30%).

acknowledgement – with an e.

Acts of Parliament – written in full and italicised except when hyperlinked.

analyse – not analyze.

and – do not replace with & (ampersand) unless it's in an official business name or in a table.

agency or department – we are a department, but either of these terms is acceptable.

Australian Government – not Federal Government or Commonwealth Government unless 'Commonwealth' is part of the actual name.

Australian Curriculum – instead of national curriculum.

C

Cabinet – title case.

cancelled – not canceled.

Catholic schools – sentence case.

Chief Executive – title case.

childcare/child care – preferred use is 'education and care services', 'early childhood services' or single word when used as an adjective (eg childcare workers).

children – use this term for children under the age of 12, especially young children, eg attending preschool.

cooperation – no hyphen.

coordinator – no hyphen.

corporate staff – or corporate offices.

D

document names (online) – no decimals or spaces (49KB, 128KB) unless the file is in megabytes (1.3MB). Use sentence case.

Department for Education – the department (note lower case d) or education department for short, or use 'we' and 'us' language if appropriate. Avoid using an acronym.

E

Education and Children's Services Act 2019 - title case, in italics.

eg and etc – avoid using latin terms.

e-business – hyphen.

e-commerce – hyphen.

email – no hyphen.

F

fact sheet – two words.

FAQs – not FAQ's (remember to avoid using FAQs).

flyer – rather than 'flier' to refer to an advertising sheet.

G

governing councils – lower case unless a specific governing council is named.

government

- use title case when using the full name eg State Government of South Australia.

- use lower case when used descriptively (as an adjective) or in shortened form ie 'government schools and preschools.'

government schools – public education or public schools (lower case, not state schools).

H

handout – no hyphen.

homepage – 1 word.

high school – or secondary school (lower case unless a specific school is named).

I

ie – avoid using latin terms.

independent schools – lower case.

M

Minister – title case (unless plural eg several ministers).

mid-year intake - hyphen and lowercase (unless part of a title, ie division, project or policy name).

N

non-government schools – lowercase and hyphenate.

O

online – no hyphen.

organisation – not organization.

P

parent - or guardian is the norm for school forms, parent or carer, and families.

part-time – hyphen only when it comes before a noun (part-time teacher, the teacher is part time).

plink – not Plink (no capital).

preschool – not pre-school.

program – not programme.

pro-rata – hyphen.

R

regions – these are capitalised (first letters only) unless used in plural ('Barossa region' or 'several regions have taken part').

S

school sectors – government schools, Catholic schools and independent schools.

school subjects – in lower case (except for languages like English and French) and unless the names of SACE subjects.

sites – use sites to describe all education settings as a group, once you've specified the group the first time. For example, 'This program is for schools, preschools and children's centres (sites). Sites can apply...'. Do not use sites when referring to 2 or fewer locations.

statewide – (no hyphen), or the state (of SA), in our state the Government of South Australia or state government or government.

students – use this term to describe children and young people attending school. Use children when under the age of 12, use young people when over the age of 12.

the state – lower case unless used in full (the State of South Australia).

V

vocational education and training – lower case unless the name of an organisation or course or acronym (VET).

W

wellbeing – no hyphen.

website – one word.

whole-school – use in reform or policy as an adjective.

workforce – no hyphen.

Y

young people – use young people when describing a student over the age of 12.

Z

zero – use the numeral '0' unless it's at the start of a sentence or could be mistaken for the letter 'O'.

QUICK TIPS

- Always write with the user in mind
- Get straight to the point, with the most important information at the beginning
- Stick to 1 topic or idea per paragraph
- Use everyday words, punchy sentences and short paragraphs
- Address the reader directly (by using words like 'you', 'us' and 'we')
- Use active rather than passive voice
- Avoid jargon and define any technical terms
- Use headings and lists to break up large blocks of text
- Use capital letters and punctuation sparingly
- Avoid duplication.

EDITING CHECKLIST

- ✓ Sentences are short and concise.
- ✓ Paragraphs are clear
- ✓ Bullet points are consistent
- ✓ Information is ordered logically
- ✓ Limited clichés, buzzwords or jargon
- ✓ Active voice is used, passive voice is limited
- ✓ No duplications
- ✓ Instructions are clear
- ✓ Spelling and grammar are correct.