



Writing guide

Digital Transformation Agency writing guide

Digital Transformation Agency



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Voice and writing style

Plain language creates clarity and increases trust. Make sure your writing is easy to understand — even when you're writing for a specialist audience.

- **Accessibility requirement:** Under the [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\)](#) and [Disability Discrimination Act 1992](#), we're required to make information accessible.
- **Australian Government Style Manual:** All government content should follow [the Australian Government Style Manual](#).
- **Web content accessibility guidelines (WCAG):** Aim for the highest level of accessibility for online content WCAG 2.1 Level AAA.

DTA voice

Our brand voice is our persona, it captures who we are and makes our content easy to identify.

Our brand voice is:

1. clear, direct and transparent
2. expert, impartial and balanced
3. respectful, supportive, friendly and empowering.

Clear, direct and transparent

- We use plain language.
- We write in an active voice.
- We are open and honest.
- We keep our content concise.
- We structure our ideas to make information easy to read.

Expert, impartial and balanced

- We are evidence based and rely on facts.
- We don't include our opinion.
- We are balanced and non-biased.

Respectful, supportive, friendly and empowering

- We use inclusive and accessible language.
- We don't speak down.
- We express ideas in everyday words, not jargon.
- We use inviting language that is supportive and inspiring.
- We speak to people using first-person pronouns, for example 'you' and 'your'.

Active voice

Use active voice rather than passive voice. It's more direct, clear and easy to understand.

- **Don't say:** The event will be attended by Sarah.
- **Do say:** Sarah is attending the event.

Our tone

Tone is how formal we are. We should aim for a standard tone in most of our communication. Most people find a standard tone easiest to understand.

- We are literal and use words based on their dictionary meaning, we don't use metaphors, slang or idioms.
- We use contractions or shortened words when appropriate, for example 'do not' becomes 'don't'
- We limit unnecessary acronyms. When we do use acronyms, we write them in full, unless the acronym is more familiar than the word itself, for example **HTML** is more common than **HyperText Markup Language**.

Risks of inconsistent messaging

To gain trust we need to build and maintain credibility through consistent content.

Monotonous content

When we don't use a consistent voice and tone, we risk sounding monotonous and robotic.

Reduced trust and credibility

When we don't speak consistently it reduces our trust and credibility, and increases the risk of negative feedback and scrutiny.

Disjointed and confusing messaging

When our content sounds disjointed or like it is written by different people it confuses and demotivates stakeholders, agencies, the public and employees.

Phishing risks

When we don't speak consistently, it's easy for people to get tricked into thinking they're talking to us. An inconsistent voice and tone makes it harder for people to differentiate our communication from someone pretending to be us. This can leave the public and staff at risk of email scams and phishing attacks.

Legal issues and regulatory problems

If the information we provide is inconsistent, unclear or hard to follow it can lead to legal issues.

Phishing: A [Phishing Attack](#) is when cyber criminals use emails, text messages or phone calls to pretend to be a business or organisation. They do this to trick people into providing sensitive information.

Plain language

Plain English is direct, clear, everyday language. Plain language helps users find and understand our information, regardless of their ability, age, background or location.

Plain language is for everyone, even experts

A common misconception is that experts prefer academic or complex language.

Reading ability in Australia

44% of Australian adults read at a primary school equivalent level. Adults who read at this level understand short sentences.

Experts prefer plain language

Professionals and experts need information that's easy to read, understand and scan. People with the highest levels of English literacy and the greatest expertise tend to be time poor and have the most to read. They don't have time for lengthy, dry or complicated information.

Plain language is more professional

If you can't explain it to a 6-year-old, you don't understand it yourself.

Benefits of plain language

Plain language reduces costs and improves productivity and trust. Findings from *Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please* show some of the real-world benefits of plain language.

Reduce calls and enquiries

The Veterans Benefits Administration revised a single letter. As a result, from one year to the next their phone calls dropped from about 1,110 to about 200.

Save money

After simplifying a billing statement, the Cleveland Clinic recovered an additional \$1 million a month and an 80% increase in patient payments.

Improve user feedback

In Canada, the Digital Transformation Office worked with different agencies to improve website design and content. In prototype testing, the user success jumped from 40% to 85% in one instance.

Risks of unclear language

When people do not understand our content, it doesn't just impact our reputation, it can also lead to legal issues.

Write in plain language

Get rid of what you don't need:

- Eliminate [unnecessary words](#).
- Explain [technical terms and avoid jargon](#).

Do say

- High quality government digital services are necessary to provide a positive experience to all Australians.

Don't say

- Australians need high quality digital services from government.

Use simple words and phrases

- Write using phrases most people understand.
- Choose simple words, not complicated expressions.
- Use short, descriptive headings to make content easy to scan.
- Write to a lower secondary reading level, year 7 or between 12 and 14 years old.

Text length

- Limit each paragraph to one idea and keep paragraphs to 2 to 3 sentences.
- Keep sentences to an average of 15 words and no more than 25 words.

Use words people understand

Use the simplest terms and phrases to get your point across.

Table 1 Provides a list of complex words we should not say and compares them with simpler alternatives we can use.

Don't say	Do say
at a later date	later, soon
a number of	many, some, few
accommodate, assist	help, support
acquire	get
additional	more
adequate	enough
adjudicate	decide, judge
advising in relation to	letting know
aforementioned	mentioned earlier, mentioned previously
amongst	among
authorise	allow, permit
appropriate	set aside, allocate
approximately	about, nearly
as a consequence of	because
ascertain	find out, learn
at this point in time	now
attempt	try
advancing	moving forward
cease	stop
cognisant of	know, aware of
collaborate	work with
commence	start
commensurate	equal, matching, in proportion
comply	follow, do
conceive	think of, imagine

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Don't say	Do say
concerning	about
concur	agree
conduct	do
consequence	result, because of
considerable	a lot, large
consist	made up of
contemplate	think about
contradict	do the opposite
contribute	add, give
convey	show, communicate
create dialogue	talk, discuss
deem	consider
demonstrate	show
depict	show, describe
derive	get, come from
designate	name, assign
delegate	responsible for
deregulate	remove regulations
desire	want, prefer
discretionary	optional
determine	decide, figure out
detrimental	harmful, damaging
deviate	turn away, stray from
dialogue	discussion, conversation
discontinue	stop
disincentivise	discourage
dispatch	send
disseminate	share
distinguish	see, make out, tell apart
drive, drive out	let go, get rid of
elicit	bring out

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Don't say	Do say
eliminate	get rid of, remove
emphasise	highlight, draw attention to
employ	hire, take on, appoint
endeavour	try, attempt, seek to
encounter	experience, come across
engage	involve, take on
enhance	improve, make better
ensure	make sure
entrain	draw in, incorporate
enumerate	list, set out, identify, specify
erroneous	wrong, incorrect, inaccurate, false
establish	set up, begin, create, prove, show
expedite	quickly, hurry, speed up
enquire	ask
give consideration to	consider
implement	do, apply, put into action
incentivise	encourage
in order to	to
in receipt of	receive, get, have
in the event that	if, when
initiate	if, when
inaugural	first
is unable to	can't, cannot
it is requested you declare	declare
leverage	influence
liaise, liaison	work with, go between
make a complaint	complaint
make an application	apply
mandate	require, must
manner	way, approach
methodology	method

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Don't say	Do say
negotiate	discuss, reach an agreement
notwithstanding	despite, although
oversight	supervise, watch over
obtain	get
perceive	think, recognise, understand
perform	do
possess	has, have
reinstate	bring back
transparency	clarity, openness

Avoid filler words

Filler words are words or phrases that don't add meaning to a sentence or emphasise a point.

Avoid words like:

- like
- that
- right
- in terms of
- somehow
- just
- very
- really
- quite
- basically
- of course
- somehow
- anyway
- in order to
- in fact

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- clearly
- generally
- indeed
- therefore
- however
- as well as
- in terms of
- needless to say
- for all intents and purposes
- for the most part
- in light of the fact that
- given the fact that
- in regard to
- in the event that
- under the circumstances
- by means of.

Acronyms and abbreviations

Acronyms and abbreviations are common in government content. It's important to consider when and how to use them.

Understand the difference

Acronyms

Acronyms are a way to shorten a multi-word term or phrase. Acronyms are usually made up of the first letter of each word, written in capitals. For example, the Digital Transformation Agency's acronym is DTA.

Abbreviations

Abbreviations are a shortened form of a word. For example, 'misc.' is commonly used in place of the word 'miscellaneous'.

Familiar acronyms

A familiar acronym is where the shortened form is easier to understand than the word itself. For example, the acronyms HTML, DVD and PDF are familiar because they're more common than the full terms. These kinds of acronyms are encouraged and can be used without a definition.

Unfamiliar acronyms

Acronyms that aren't well known slow readers down and make content harder to understand. When you use unfamiliar acronyms, you force readers to divide their attention between the content and remembering what each acronym means.

Familiar: if the acronym started out as a shortened form but is now considered the most recognisable form of the word to general audiences.

Unfamiliar or 'specialised': if the acronym is only recognisable to a specific user group or specialised audience.

Avoid unfamiliar acronyms

- Acronyms are mentally taxing. Unfamiliar acronyms make information hard to read, skim and understand.
- Unfamiliar acronyms may force readers to scour for definitions on another page or section, such as the glossary or the first place an acronym was used. In most cases, the full term is a better option as people will understand it straight away.
- Most screen readers don't know there's a difference between an acronym and a word. For example, 'ITS' would be read as the word 'It's' and the acronym 'NASA' may be heard as 'Nahsah'.
- Acronyms and abbreviations make life more difficult for people entering a new workplace, changing careers or learning something new. While the meaning of an acronym might be second nature to you, think about the impact it has on others.
- Acronyms can make people feel confused, frustrated and excluded.
- Unfamiliar acronyms can be an obstacle for people with cognitive disabilities or impairments and situational barriers. Consider the impact acronyms have on users. Such as:
 - culturally and linguistically diverse groups
 - people with disability or chronic illness
 - people who are time poor
 - people in a distracting or busy workplace environment
 - people who are new to a topic, role or process.

Use acronyms and abbreviations

Before you use an acronym or abbreviation, consider if it benefits the user.

Don't use abbreviations

Abbreviations are not good for readability and can be misunderstood. Avoid using abbreviations in content.

Don't make up new acronyms

Don't create new acronyms. It's easier for users to read a word in full, than it is to remember a new acronym. Instead of creating an acronym, aim for short and easy to remember naming conventions for new projects, processes or services.

Don't use too many acronyms

Acronyms are mentally taxing. If you include lots of unfamiliar acronyms in your content the information will be hard to read and understand.

Consider the context

Don't use an acronym if it can be confused with a similar word or holds another meaning. Consider the context of what you're writing to decide if an acronym is appropriate or may offend. For example, you shouldn't turn a title like 'Success Happiness Integrity Team' into an acronym.

Format acronyms

If you can't avoid specialised acronyms, make sure you format them correctly.

Spell it out on first use

In most cases, you should explain the term in full the first time you use it. Do this by writing the full word first and including the acronym in round brackets beside it. You don't need to do this if the acronym is familiar.

Spell an acronym in full: Digital Transformation Agency (DTA)

Repeat the full term

Consider writing out the full term more than once. People may come across the shortened form without reading the text where it is first defined.

Include a glossary

If you're using a lot of specialised acronyms, provide a glossary with a list of terms and their meaning. Don't use a glossary if there are only a few abbreviations or acronyms.

Don't use full stops

Don't place a full stop after the acronym or initialism unless it's at the end of a sentence.

Capitalise acronyms

Acronyms are usually all capitals but use lower case for some familiar acronyms (taser, captcha, laser). Use an initial capital for familiar acronyms that are proper nouns (Qantas, Anzac).

Avoid plural and possessive forms on first use

Avoid using the plural or possessive of an acronym or initialism when you define it. This makes it easy for users to recognise the shortened form in later content.

Accessible links

Create descriptive links. Links help people navigate digital services or products. When creating links always use descriptive text.

Only include necessary links

Links can reduce readability and increase cognitive load, only use them when there is a user need:

- use text links in most cases
- use images for links only if they meet a user need.

Be descriptive

We're required to create accessible links. Our link text must be specific and descriptive, so it makes sense when read out of the context of the surrounding information.

Create accessible link text

Write link text that describes the destination in clear language. Match the content on the linked page so the user knows they have reached the right place. Links like 'click here' or 'more information' don't give the user any information about the destination.

Do say

Find out more about [digital security on the cyber security page](#).

Don't say

- click here
- read more
- find out more
- click to download.

Include key words at the start

When you format a text link:

- keep links concise
- put the important or most relevant words at the start of the link
- put the link at the end of the sentence
- if the link makes more sense at the start of a sentence, consider if everything in the sentence is essential.

Link to documents

Where you need to link to a PDF, include:

- the document title
- file type
- the file size in kilobytes (kB) or megabytes (MB).

Example: You can read more about our financial position in the [Digital Transformation Agency Annual Report 2019–20 \[PDF 1.96MB\]](#).

Inclusive language

Inclusive language shows respect. Language is a powerful tool. It's not about being 'politically correct', it is about making sure everyone feels welcomed, valued and respected in all communications and interactions.

Plan your content

Inclusive language makes readers feel valued, respected and understood.

When we create content that's not inclusive, we perpetuate stereotypes, cause harm and make readers feel like an 'outsider'.

Consider the purpose

Consider the purpose of your content and only include what's necessary.

Consult with users

Don't make assumptions. Consult with:

- people with lived experience
- organisations, support services and communities.

Research

Use inclusive language guides, including the Australian Government Style Manual

Create a method for feedback

Make sure people with lived experience can provide anonymous feedback. This should include both generic feedback mechanisms such as a thumbs up or thumbs down and written feedback fields for open comments. It's also helpful to create a plan to monitor, review and prioritise feedback.

Plan for constant improvement

Language is constantly evolving. To make sure your content remains inclusive, plan to review, improve and adapt your content on a regular basis.

Context matters

Be mindful of context. Some people, communities and cultural groups have a range of terms they use for themselves, but the terms are not to be used by people outside these groups.

Dimensions of diversity and identity

No matter who you're writing for use people-centric language, which focuses on the person and reflects the individuality of people. Only mention diversity and identity if it's relevant and necessary.

Age stereotypes

Words that carry stereotypes are not acceptable:

- use the term young people, don't say juniors
- use the term older people or older Australians, don't say elderly or old people
- refer to the level of study when talking about students, for example postgraduate students.

Language, race, ethnicity, nationality and culture

People writing for government sometimes use the term culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD). Avoid using the acronym unless you're speaking to a specialist audience.

- Refer to people living in Australia as Australians.
- Use the general term multicultural communities to write about people from different cultural backgrounds.
- When you specify dual identity, include the term 'Australian' with an en dash. For example the Japanese–Australian community.

- Use the terms given and family name, don't say first and last name. Some cultures write the family name first, so this language can be confusing.

First Nations people

First Nations people are often called Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. There is significant diversity within these 2 groups.

Respectful language use depends on what different communities find appropriate.

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

People with mental illness

Mental illness is a broad term that covers many different conditions that influence the way people act, think, feel or see the world.

- Say people with mental illness, don't say the mentally ill.
- Describe the person as having a mental illness, for example Alice has bipolar disorder, don't say Alice is bipolar.

People with disability or chronic health conditions

- Use person-first language, unless user research says otherwise.
- Describe the person before the characteristic.
- Don't describe people with disability as inspirational.
- Say person with disability or person living with disability, don't say person with a disability or disabled person.
- When making comparisons write person without disability, don't say able-bodied.

Gender and gender diversity

Use terms that recognise gender equality. Avoid terms that discriminate on the basis of a person's gender or sexual identity.

- Respect peoples' preferences around gender and sexual identity with pronoun choice, job titles and personal titles.
- Learn the user's preferred pronoun. If it's not clear and you can't ask them, choose gender-neutral pronouns.
- Don't use gender-specific job titles, for example say police officer not policeman.
- Don't use job terms that specify women, for example say actor not actress.
- Ms is now widely used instead of Mrs or Miss. It does not disclose marital status.
- Mx refers to non-binary people and those who do not wish to be referred to by their gender.

Stay up to date

Don't rely on this guide alone, always conduct user research and check the latest requirements for inclusive language in Australian Government Style Manual.

Government terms and capitalisation

Using and formatting government terms

Correct ways to write government terms

Australian Government

Refer to the national government of Australia as the 'Australian Government'. Use an initial capital for both words only when they occur together.

When you write Australian Government, be clear about whether this means corporate or non-corporate Commonwealth entities or both.

Government on its own

When you write 'government' on its own, use a lowercase 'g'.

Government as a formal title

When you write government as part of a formal name, write each word with a capital letter. For example, Victorian Government.

The Commonwealth of Australia

'The Commonwealth of Australia' is the name of Australia in the Constitution. Use an initial capital for 'Commonwealth'.

Do not use the phrase 'Commonwealth' when you mean 'Australian Government'.

Government programs, agreements and organisations

Use initial capitals for the full names of government programs, protocols and similar agreements.

Government entities and job titles

Use initial capitals only for the formal names and titles of government entities and office holders. Use lower case letters for generic references.

Example of a generic reference:

- the agency
- the authority
- the commission
- the department.

Whole-of-government

Whole-of-government is jargon. Only use 'whole-of-government' when it makes your content clearer. It's important for people to know which of the following you are referring to:

- local
- state
- territory
- Australian Government entities.

When you do write whole-of-government, use lower case letters unless it is the start of a sentence.

Important: Instead of writing whole-of-government initiative, write Australian Government initiative.

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Measure content success

Measure the success of your content

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User needs

Before you create content, it's important to understand and prioritise user needs. If you do not understand what your users need you can't understand if your content is successful.

Quality not quantity

Don't measure success by the amount of content you produce or the speed that you deliver content. Instead think about the value your content brings to the audience.

Quality content meets user needs. It is also accessible and inclusive, readable, consistent and accurate. One way to refine your content is through highlighter testing.

Criteria

Content should have clear success and value criteria based on user research. Not traffic, but tangible user-centred metrics. Once you've outlined what's important, write down specific and measurable goals for success. This can include things like task completion and user satisfaction.

Collect data

Establish a baseline so you can track how your content has improved. Data sources can include:

- website performance
- user feedback
- surveys
- call centre data.

Discoverability

Consider how users find your content. You can test the discoverability of your content by doing:

- tree testing
- card sorting
- click testing.

Improving your content

It's important to use the data you've collected to find ways to improve your content. This can help you identify where there may be gaps in your content or where content may be too hard to read or understand.

Use the Digital Experience Toolkit

You can learn more about user research and data by visiting the [Digital Experience Toolkit](#)

PDF content and documents

PDFs should be used when there is a specific need, determined through research and in line with the [Australian Government Style Manual](#).

HTML by default

When publishing content, the Australian Government should prioritise HTML.

This means wherever possible, publishing content on a webpage, rather than PDFs or Word documents. This is because HTML works better for most users, especially people who use assistive technology.

PDFs should only be used when there is a specific need for this format, determined through research and in line with the Australian Government Style Manual.

PDF usability

Common issues with PDFs:

- Scalability: PDFs don't reflow to fit the user's screen or browser window.
- Speed: PDF files are much larger than optimised HTML pages. They can be harder to use by people with slow internet access.
- Navigation: A webpage cannot link to a section of a PDF. PDFs can cause disorientation when they open in a new tab or different tool.
- Search engine optimisation: When PDFs aren't tagged appropriately it makes it hard for search engines to find the content.
- Maintenance: People can download and share PDFs, which makes version control difficult.

Using PDF documents

You should use a PDF in addition to a webpage, if:

- there is a clear user need for a PDF document
- the content is in an Easy Read format
- the user can't easily navigate the web content, for example where there's no option to sort by chapter or section, or if previous and next buttons are not available
- there is no clean print or 'print this page' option on the website.

Clean printing includes page heading structures and excludes distracting web elements like headers, footers and navigation bars. Users should be able to choose if they prefer to read the information on their screen or cleanly print a single page or multiple related pages.

Creating accessible PDF documents

PDF requirements:

- be PDF/UA compliant
- meet current Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) at level AA
- be tagged and structured correctly
- contain text that is inclusive, accessible and written in plain language
- contain the correct metadata, including a document title
- include descriptive text or alternative text for non-text elements, such as images, charts, infographics and logos
- provide full URLs and email addresses, so links can still be viewed and accessed if the document is printed.

Do not:

- convey information using visual elements alone, for example colour coded images or graphs
- include elements that are small, blurry or otherwise not accessible or legible
- include colours or contrasts that aren't accessible.

Important: PDF documents and non-text elements must also meet brand guidelines.

Content in multidisciplinary teams

Understand different content roles and how they contribute to government content.

Content roles

Content roles and responsibilities can differ by agency, team or business need. While there is no hard line that's drawn between duties, understanding how these roles differ can help you plan and work well in a multidisciplinary team.

Copywriters and content writers

Copywriters and content writers edit and sometimes create content and may work to tight deadlines.

They are often told where the content will appear and the goal of the content. Copywriters conduct research and follow best practice for content, including search engine optimisation and abiding by style guides. They mainly focus on creating content that will appeal to the audience or help them make a decision. They don't typically address what's best for the user journey, however they may at times take on this type of work.

Content designer

Content designers focus on a problem users have, typically this revolves around a product or service the users already use or need.

Unlike a copywriter, a content designer's job isn't to edit final copy or create content to promote an agency, product or service. Content designers champion the user experience and work with subject matter experts to design and iterate content, promoting quality, simplicity and plain language. They understand content patterns and use evidence, data and research to make decisions and find gaps. Content designers typically require longer timeframes to complete their work, as they research, plan, generate user stories and create artefacts like journey maps before they develop, test and revise content.

Like content strategist, content designers may be responsible for developing content strategies and overseeing and steering content alignment within a project or agency.

Content strategist

Content strategists develop a content strategy that steers the creation of unambiguous, meaningful, cohesive, engaging and sustainable content.

They focus on planning, structure, process, creation, delivery and governance of content. Unlike content designers, they usually aren't involved in content creation or content delivery. However, they may sometimes take on these duties.

Working in a multidisciplinary team

Content designers sometimes work in multidisciplinary teams. Their main task is to set up a clear path for the user to achieve their goal.

Tips for working well with a content designer:

- **Engage early:** A content designer should contribute from the start of a project through its life cycle. This includes the project phases of planning, discovery, designing, iterating and improving.
- **Provide information and data:** Provide data, evidence and information and work with content designers to understand the problem that needs to be addressed on behalf of the user.
- **Share user feedback:** Share outcomes and playbacks from usability testing and user research sessions to help the content designer determine how the content needs to change.
- **Be receptive:** Content designers often give feedback on proposed and existing solutions and content. Understand that this feedback is based on data and is not personal — their job is to identify gaps, understand what's not working and champion user needs and plain English content.
- **Ways of working:** Not all content designers work in sprints. It's a good idea to talk through your ways of working and ask how the content designer works.
- **Fact check, don't content check:** Content designers decide the best way to develop and present content based on what the user needs, subject matter experts fact check the

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copy before it's published. Subject experts should not change how the content is written or the style or structure.

- Get the basics early: Content designers often provide basic details of the content early, so when it comes time for subject experts to fact check content, they're already familiar with the aim. This basic information may include:
 - a user or job story
 - high-level page structure
 - acceptance criteria.