

Writing a Submission

A guideline on how to write clear submissions
to government agencies

Acknowledgments

This guideline draws on the experience of many years of reading submissions from government agencies, private companies, community organisations and individuals. I wrote this guideline while working for the NSW Department of Planning. The advice contained in the guideline, however, does not reflect the views of the Department of Planning. I am indebted to Susan Sky, Cathy Donnellan, Sue Findlay and Ian Steep for their time and extremely helpful comments while drafting this document.

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Aims

Communicate through clear writing and good design

This guideline contains tips on writing clear submissions. This advice mostly relates to longer submissions (of more than a page) but should still be helpful for short ones too.

Many people are already practising the principles mentioned in this document. Surprisingly though, even large organisations sometimes produce documents that are confusing and ambiguous.

This guideline is designed to help people to be better communicators: the way you express your message can help to make sure that your message has the desired effect.

Many government departments invite written submissions to collect views on government proposals. Each year government department officers read hundreds of submissions on discussion papers and other publications and proposals.

Clearer submissions will allow you to convey your message quickly and effectively. They will also allow government department staff to provide accurate advice on your views to their management and to their Minister.

In this guideline I have focused on *style and not content*. The two key principles guiding the advice are:

- **plain English** and
- principles of **good document design**.

Anyone making a submission to a government agency should find this guideline useful, whether you are using a word processor, typewriter or writing by hand. You might be writing as an individual or for an organisation. Whoever you are, this document is for you.

I hope that you find these suggestions simple to use and that, as a result, you are pleased with the effect they have on your documents.

'Business documents are read like a map, not like a novel.'¹

Business documents, academic theses, literary art works – they each have a different style particular to their context. They each have different expectations of how the readership approaches the text.

Unless you cheat and skip to the end of your "who-dunnit", you probably start a novel at the beginning and proceed to the end. With business documents, people don't always read from beginning to end. Even when they do, they may pay more attention to certain sections while they skim others. Business documents are often re-read. When we re-read we may only skim through, looking for the important sections or quickly reviewing the document to remind ourselves of certain facts.

With business documents the main thing is to **make the message clear**.

Business documents, like academic works, often try to develop an argument. But for academic works we generally expect the reader to carefully read from beginning to end, perhaps re-reading after the reader has had time to consider the arguments. In the contemporary business environment many people have limited time to read.

For all documents, but especially for business documents, your reader will have a much better chance of understanding your message quickly and free from frustration if they know the overall direction that the document takes. **Try to guide your reader through your submission**; make your main points clear upfront, give your reader a sense of how the document is structured (key points, the subsidiary points etc.). Here are some tips on how you can do this.

Summary of tips for writing clear submissions	
<input type="checkbox"/> Use a consistent, logical structure	Page 7–8
1. Organise your thoughts	
2. Use inverted pyramid structure	
3. Use one point per paragraph	
4. Use informative headings	
5. Summarise the main points	
6. Use lists and tables and other graphical information	

¹ *Good Documents*, http://www.gooddocuments.com/philosophy/skimming_m.htm

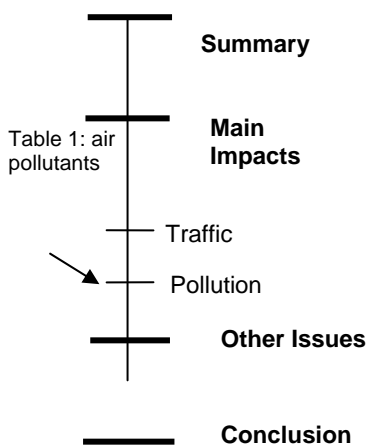
Summary of tips for writing clear submissions

<ul style="list-style-type: none">□ Provide visual cues<ul style="list-style-type: none">1. Use fonts or underlining to highlight main points2. Break-up text with headings	Page 9
<ul style="list-style-type: none">□ Design and Layout<ul style="list-style-type: none">1. Avoid right-margin justification2. Break-up text with white space3. Be consistent4. Use clear fonts	Page 9–10
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Use a consistent, logical structure

Organise your thoughts

It may seem obvious but it's not always easy to do. A well-structured document makes it easier for the reader to quickly understand your views. Having a sound structure and logically ordering your points also makes it easier for people to go back to your document and locate information quickly.

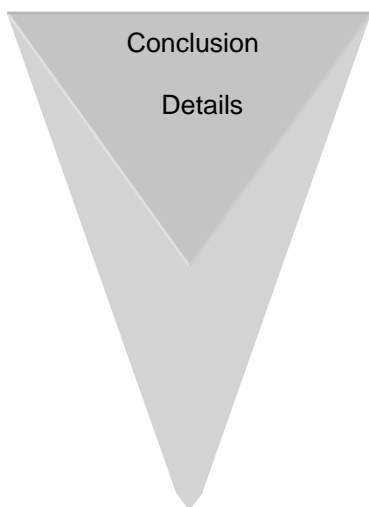


☞ **Tips for discussion papers:** For discussion papers, it's a good idea to organise your response in a similar way to the structure of the discussion paper. Also refer to the sections or recommendations to which you are responding (refer to the recommendation number, page number or use the same subject heading). This will help government department officers to quickly connect your ideas to their proposals.

☞ **Tips on structure:** One way of checking your structure is the spine – vertebrae method. The head of the spine is the beginning of the document. Write along the spine, beside its vertebrae, your headings, subheadings or main points. You can also note where you use figures and tables and check that they relate to the sections in which they are placed.

Using this simple depiction of your document's structure can help you sort out whether your structure makes sense. Do the headings, chapters, main points (vertebrae) follow on from one another well?

Inverted pyramid style



At school we're taught to follow a structure something like 'introduction, body, conclusion'. This structure is not always the best for direct, effective communication. Take newspaper style for example. Journalists often write under the pressure of deadlines; and they write for readers who browse and skim. Newspaper style is typically inverted pyramid style – the conclusion comes first followed by the details.

☞ **Tip for stating your position:** Put your position upfront. State whether you are agreeing, disagreeing or just stating important things the department or government should consider.

Use one point per paragraph

At school we are taught that new paragraphs mark the entry of a new point. This is especially important to practice for longer documents which people might skim read. People could easily miss something crucial if important points are combined in the same paragraph.

☞ **Tip on shorter paragraphs:** Shorter paragraphs help people to quickly find the information they need. This is especially the case when they are reviewing your document to relocate information they have already read.

New paragraphs can help draw attention to important points.

In business writing it is quite acceptable to start new paragraphs more often to create short paragraphs.

Use informative headings

Headings help to break-up the text so that important points stand out. Headings are useful for longer and even relatively short documents of one to two pages. To really highlight your point of view you can create headings that summarise the main point of the text that follows, as in newspaper headings.

Example:

Uninformative heading:

Informative heading:

Noise issues

Unacceptable noise impacts on residential areas

Summarise your main points

For longer documents it is a good idea to write an executive summary (it need not be long) and place it at the front of the document. This will help guide the reader on what to expect from the rest of the document.

Use lists and tables and other graphical information

Where appropriate, lists are a handy way of summarising points, being concise and providing visual cues to important information. Lists stand out from the rest of the text.

Tables, graphs, charts and diagrams can also summarise information well. And they draw attention to themselves.

Provide visual cues

Use fonts or underlining to highlight main points

It is a good idea to use fonts, like bold and italics, to draw attention to main points. If you are handwriting your submission, then underlining works just as well. Be careful not to over use highlighting features. This may reverse the intended effect by making the highlighting the norm rather than the exception.

Example:

To really highlight your point of view you can create **headings that summarise the main point** of the text that follows.

Don't use too much uppercase text, unless for short headings. Too much uppercase is difficult to read.

Depending on the type of information you are presenting, you may want to use other techniques to draw attention to important points. For instance, placing information in text boxes or shading text.

Break-up text with headings

Headings also provide visual cues about where new groups of information start. They make it easier for the reader to navigate their way through your document.

Sub-headings are useful, especially for longer and more complicated documents. But try to not use more than three levels of sub-headings. Too many levels of headings will confuse your reader and make them lose their sense of the document's structure.

Design and layout

Avoid right-margin justification

If you are using a word processor, then you have a range of choices about justification. This document is justified on the left margin but not on the right. Readability is decreased when the right margin is justified because irregular spacing between words can distract the reader.

Break-up the text with white space

For long documents especially, breaking-up text with white space helps make the document look easier to read. Long, dense copy can appear very off-putting indeed.

Be consistent

Whatever style you choose for your document (eg. different font sizes for headings and sub-headings) stick to it.

A consistent style sends a message to your reader about how the document is organised and how information in one section relates to other parts of the text.

Use clear fonts

If you are typing or using a word processor, choose a clear font (for instance, times new roman / sans serif, or ariel / helvetica).

Plain English

A lot could be said about plain English and how to write it. This guideline only covers the main principles. Some books and websites are listed below if you want to investigate this area more.

What is plain English?

Here is what Associate Professor Robert Eagleson states about plain English:

Plain English is clear, straightforward expression, using only as many words as are necessary. It is language that avoids obscurity, inflated vocabulary and convoluted sentence construction. It is not baby talk, nor is it a simplified version of the English language. Writers of plain English let their audience concentrate on the message instead of being distracted by complicated language. They make sure that their audience understands the message easily. This means that writers of plain English vary their documents according to the composition of their audience.²

² Robert Eagleson, *Writing in Plain English*, 1990, p.4

Principles of plain English

Some of the key principles of plain English include:

- knowing your audience and writing for that audience
- organising your thoughts
- avoiding long sentences
- omitting unnecessary words
- being concise and direct eg. try to make definite assertions
- using concrete, specific language
- using active language in sentence construction and choice of words ie. place the person or thing doing the action (the 'do-er') in the sentence in front of the verb
- using familiar words rather than jargon (unless you know that your audience understands your jargon)
- using alternatives to text like diagrams and tables where appropriate eg. tabulate complicated information.

More reading on plain English

Here are some references on plain English. There are many more, these are only a starter.

Eagleson, R., *Writing in Plain English* (Canberra, 1990)

Gowers, E., *The Complete Plain Words* (London, 1986)

The Plain Language Action Network,
<http://plainlanguage.gov/library/ataglanc.htm>

Summary and Checklist

Use a consistent, logical structure

Organise your thoughts

- general: reference the sections, recommendations etc. you are commenting on
- discussion papers: follow the structure of the discussion paper

Inverted pyramid structure

- conclusions (agree, disagree, main issues, recommendations) first, followed by details

Use one point per paragraph

- use short paragraphs

Use informative headings

- really useful for drawing attention to important information

Summarise the main points

- write an executive summary for longer documents

Use lists and tables and other graphical information

- for complicated information

Provide visual cues

Use fonts or underlining to highlight main points

Break-up text with headings

Design and Layout

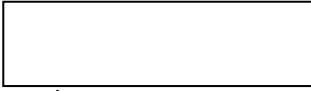
Avoid right margin justification

Break-up text with white space

Be consistent

Use clear fonts

Use plain English



This submission responds to the Department's recent discussion paper *ABC*. Planning Submission Inc. agrees with the main recommendations in the paper but wishes to make the following points.

Informative heading

Land use zoning should be flexible

Sdkfjsdlkjlksdjflksdjlkfajsdkl sdkjfhsdkj skdjfhsdkjfh sdkjfhdkshf skdjfhdksh skdjfhdsjkhf skdjfhdkshf skdjfhdkshf skdjfhksdjhfowirowei owieuroeis kskks kshkjh ksjdhfkjh skdjfhkdhs skdjfhkjsd.

Sdkfhdksjfh ksjdhfksh skdjhfjsd skdjfhjksdhf ks. Ksdjfhkjsdhfslkdjfdklsj.

Sdkfjsdlkjlksdjflksdjlkfajsdkl sdkjfhsdkj skdjfhsdkjfh sdkjfhdkshf skdjfhdksh skdjfhdsjkhf skdjfhdkshf skdjfhdkshf skdjfhksdjhfowirowei owieuroeis kskks kshkjh ksjdhfkjh skdjfhkdhs skdjfhkjsd.

Different style for sub-heading

Right margin is not iustified

Objectives of land use zoning

Sdkfjsdlkjlksdjflksdjlkfajsdkl sdkjfhsdkj skdjfhsdkjfh sdkjfhdkshf skdjfhdksh skdjfhdsjkhf skdjfhdkshf skdjfhdkshf skdjfhksdjhfowirowei owieuroeis kskks kshkjh ksjdhfkjh skdjfhkdhs skdjfhkjsd.

Sdkfhdksjfh ksjdhfksh skdjhfjsd skdjfhjksdhf ks. Ksdjfhkjsdhfslkdjfdklsj.

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Eagleson, R., *Writing in Plain English*, (Canberra: AGPS, 1990)

Strunk, W., *The Elements of Style*, (Massachusetts: Allyn & Bacon, 2000) Fourth edition.

Good Documents. http://www.gooddocuments.com/philosophy/skimming_m.htm

Plain Language Action Network. <http://plainlanguage.gov/libraryataglanc.htm>

Writing User-Friendly Documents. http://www.blm.gov/nhp/NPR/pe_toc.html