



Style guide for policy writing

The [Policy Framework Policy](#) promotes the use of plain English and consistent writing styles.

Where possible, we comply with the [Australian Government Digital Content Guide](#) and the content on this page provides relevant examples.

The latest version of the [Macquarie Dictionary](#) will advise the preferred spelling in policy documents.

Word choice

- Choose the shortest, simplest, least formal word that will convey the meaning, except when you need a different word to avoid repetition, for example:
 - ‘breach defences’ not ‘circumvent defences’;
 - ‘start’ or ‘begin’ not ‘commence’
 - ‘decide’ not ‘determine’ (in most cases)
 - ‘before’ not ‘prior to’.
- Other word choices to be aware of:
 - Criteria is plural; criterion is the singular.
 - Data can be singular or plural depending on context.
 - Dependent where it’s an adjective, dependant where it’s a noun.
 - Use ‘that’ as the pronoun instead of ‘which’ where you’re singling out only some of the class of objects:
 - ‘avoiding linguistic practices that demean, exclude, stereotype or trivialise people’, not, ‘avoiding linguistic practices which demean, exclude, stereotype or trivialise people’

[See more examples of plain English word choices.](#)

Direct phrasing

- Avoid roundabout ways of saying things, for example:
 - ‘must’ instead of ‘have an obligation to’
 - ‘nominate’ not ‘appoint a nominee’.
 - ‘is/are responsible for [participle] when they can mean ‘must [active verb]’, for example:
 - ‘the [authority] will decide all disputes and conflicts on authorship’, not ‘the [authority] is responsible for deciding all disputes and conflicts on authorship’.
- In general it’s better to use a verb instead of a phrase with a noun based on a verb, for example:

- ‘the University will not be associated with ... advertising, endorsing or promoting tobacco products’, not ‘the University will not be associated with ... the advertising, endorsement or promotion of tobacco products’
- ‘what a research partnership agreement must include’, not ‘the expected inclusions of a research partnership agreement’; ‘publishing or supplying’ not ‘making a publication or a supply of’.
- Remove redundant words, for example:
 - ‘require action’ not ‘require specific action’
 - ‘unsure whether to raise an allegation’ not ‘unsure whether there are reasonable grounds to raise an allegation’
 - ‘preliminary investigator’ not ‘designated preliminary investigator’
 - ‘decide whether to take disciplinary action’ not ‘decide whether it is appropriate to take disciplinary action’
 - ‘manage research funds’ not ‘manage and administer research funds’.

In particular watch out for sonorous pairs of nouns where one of the two contributes nothing to the meaning, like the last example here.

Inclusive language

- Avoid using words or phrases that exclude one gender or a particular group, for example:
 - ‘layperson’s’ not ‘layman’s’
 - ‘their’ not ‘his/her’

Syntax (sentence structure)

- When the subject of a sentence is plural (for example, two nouns) make sure the verb is plural too.
- In policy writing, where a sentence contains clauses that are in effect a list of actions, make them crystal-clear by formatting them as a list of subclauses.
- Prefer the active voice, as this is generally more succinct and easier for readers to understand, for example:
 - ‘decides that there is to be an investigation’ not ‘decides that an investigation is to be instigated’
 - ‘before they undertake research’ not ‘prior to research being undertaken’;
 - ‘must retain all relevant data and materials’ not ‘must ensure all relevant data and materials are retained’.
- Only use the passive voice for good reasons such as to vary the syntax, for example:
 - where you are stating a general rule with no specific actor in mind (children should be read to often’)
 - or when the passive is more concise or accurate.
- As a general rule, organise sentences and longer texts in the chronological order in which things typically happen – this is easier to read and understand – it can untangle a tangled sentence.
- Only split an infinitive if you can’t achieve the meaning without splitting it for example:
 - ‘Failure to manage funds responsibly’ not ‘failure to responsibly manage funds’.



Capitalisation

- Minimal capitalisation is used. Words other than proper nouns should not be capitalised unless necessary to the reader's understanding.
- Generic terms such as faculty, school, professor, enrolment form, higher degree by research should be lower case.
- Headings and subheadings within documents should be in sentence case: initial capital, but thereafter only proper names capitalised.
- Use title case for publications, for example policies and procedures.
- CSU style is to punctuate 'University' when CSU is meant – but it shouldn't be capitalised as an adjective. For example;
 - 'the University' but 'university policies' not 'University policies'.
- See the point about list punctuation in the punctuation section below, for capitalisation of list items.

Punctuation

- Use commas minimally. Commas can increase clarity but too many commas are a sign a sentence should be shorter, or needs to be changed into a bullet point list.
- Commas are not needed between two adjectives of different types:
 - 'appropriate written ethics approval' not 'appropriate, written ethics approval'
- Don't use 'Oxford commas', for example 'a, b and c' not 'a, b, and c'.
- Do use full stops for hyperlinks that end sentences.
- Hyphens can change the meaning of a verb, for example:
 - re-form or reform
 - re-dress or redress
- Don't hyphenate login or sign in.
- Some compounds much used in universities are hyphenated as adjectives, but don't have hyphens when used adverbially: e.g., 'full-time student' but 'studying full time'; 'case-by-case basis' but 'considered case by case'; 'up-to-date knowledge' but 'keep up to date'.
- Dashes should be an en-rule with a space on either side – like this. (Word will turn a hyphen into an en-rule if it has a space on either side, and you just continue typing. You can also use Insert/Symbol to insert an en-rule.)
- Remove double spaces – there should only be single spaces in text that uses modern proportionally spaced type.
- Refer to the latest edition of the Macquarie Dictionary on whether an Australian compound will be one word, two words or hyphenated.

Numbers

- Use words for numbers less than 10, except in large sets of numbers such as a table of data.
- Use numbers for 10 or greater.
- Number ranges should have an en-rule, for example 10–12.



Initialisms and acronyms

- Only use initialisms and acronyms where they avoid tedious repetition of a phrase and thus save the reader's time.
- Explain an initialism or acronym the first time you use it in a section of the text.
- Give the full phrase and the initialism or acronym in parentheses (e.g., 'research integrity advisors (RIAs)'). Don't do this if you don't use the acronym again.
- Once you've done it, be consistent and use the initialism/acronym instead of the phrase for the rest of the section. If you're in a new section of the text that readers may read without being aware of the earlier explanation of the acronym, explain it again

Lists

- The Australian Government Digital Content Guide principles of minimal capitalisation and minimal punctuation apply to lists.
- Most lists are words or phrases within a framing sentence. Because they're part of a sentence, they shouldn't start with a capital letter or have punctuation at the end of each item. If the last item ends the sentence, it should have a full-stop at the end.
- Only where a list item is a full sentence in its own right should it have an initial capital and end with a full-stop.
- In policy writing, where a sentence contains clauses that are in effect a list of actions, make them crystal-clear by formatting them as a list of subclauses.

