**Our style guide**

June 2024

Acknowledgement of Country

This guide was written on the lands of the Wurundjeri and Bunurong peoples of the Kulin Nation. We acknowledge and pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and Traditional Custodians throughout Victoria, including Elders past and present. We also acknowledge the strength and resilience of all First Nations people who today are still arrested and imprisoned at rates far higher than other Australians.

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A picture containing clipart

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## What is plain language?

Plain language is clear, simple, modern language. It uses only as many words as necessary. It avoids jargon, unnecessary legal expressions and complex language. Writing in plain language does not mean you need to 'dumb down' the law. It means your writing is clear and concise so your audience can understand it.

You are using plain language if your audience can easily:

* find what they need
* understand what they find
* use what they find to meet their needs.

Some of the key writing techniques of plain language are:

* a logical structure
* everyday, straightforward language
* an active voice
* short sentences
* using 'you' and 'we'.

Read about [The basics of plain language](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/blog/basics-plain-language) on the Australian Government style manual.

## Getting started

Before you start writing, it is important to consider the purpose of the content you are creating and who is your intended audience. Some of the main things you should consider include:

* the key message and call to action
* the delivery method
* the structure and presentation
* the literacy level of your target audience.

### Writing

When writing, always keep in mind our style guide. Keep it simple and avoid technical terms where possible and:

* delete unnecessary expressions
* use concise, simple short sentences (maximum 22 words)
* write short paragraphs (two or three sentences) with one main idea in each
* make sure your tenses are consistent
* use active (rather than passive) language.

### Format

* Use left justified and ragged right alignment.
* Use headings to break up text (one heading is recommended for every eight lines).
* Use bullet lists where possible.

### Know your audience

One of the most important principles of plain language is to write with your reader in mind. This means you need to have a clear understanding of your audience and the purpose of your content.

While our organisation does not collect data about the education or literacy levels of our clients, we know that most of them have circumstances that are linked to low English literacy. These circumstances include unemployment, receipt of government benefits and migration to Australia. There are clear links between these multiple levels of disadvantage and low literacy. Therefore it is important to write your content so that it can be easily understood by the widest possible audience.

### Use short, simple, common words

Use short, simple words wherever possible. There is almost always an alternative to complex words. Use common, everyday language that your reader would use, but avoid slang, clichés, jargon or buzz words.

Read [Plain language and word choice](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/writing-and-designing-content/clear-language-and-writing-style/plain-language-and-word-choice) on the Australian Government style manual.

### Explain legal or difficult terms

Technical language is hard to avoid when writing about the law, but often jargon can creep in. This is called 'legalese'.

It is best to assume that your reader has no prior knowledge of the law. Explain legal terms using plain language.

If you need help to do this there is a list of legal terms and plain language definitions on our website under [Legal words](https://www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/legal-words) and in most publications.

One way to make a legal term clear is to define the term when it first occurs in your writing. For example:

* The magistrate has ordered that you pay the sum of $900 in compensation, with a stay – or extended time – until 20 December 2008
* The magistrate has ordered that you pay the sum of $900 in compensation, with a stay until 20 December 2008. The stay means you will have more time to pay the compensation.

Writing like this may seem overly simple, but there is nothing wrong with that. It is better to make sure the reader understands the legal term.

### Remove unnecessary words and be precise

Use enough words to achieve clarity, but avoid unnecessary words that distract from the main point. Often legalese uses more words than are necessary. Each word has a purpose in effective writing. Be precise – if there is no reason for the word to be there, you should leave it out.

Read more about [simple words](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/writing-and-designing-content/clear-language-and-writing-style/plain-language-and-word-choice#choose_simple_words_not_complicated_expressions) and [unnecessary words](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/writing-and-designing-content/clear-language-and-writing-style/sentences#eliminate_unnecessary_words) on the Australian Government style manual.

### Use short sentences

No-one likes reading material that is difficult to understand. A sentence should express one idea. Sentences that focus on more than one idea can get long and confusing. Use short sentences if possible.

As a guide, all sentences should **not be longer than 22 words.**

Read about [Sentences](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/writing-and-designing-content/clear-language-and-writing-style/sentences) on the Australian Government style manual.

### Use an active voice

Use an active voice instead of a passive voice. It is direct and reduces ambiguity, while adding energy to your writing.

In an **active** sentence, the subject is doing the action. The subject appears near the beginning of the sentence. In this example, the 'lawyer' is the subject and 'represented' is the action:

* The lawyer represented the client.

In **passive** voice the action comes before the subject:

* The client was represented by the lawyer.

Read about [Using active voice](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/writing-and-designing-content/clear-language-and-writing-style/sentences#use_active_voice) on the Australian Government style manual.

### Write positively

Readers find it easier to understand writing that is expressed positively. They want to be told what to do, rather than what not to do. For example:

* You will not be eligible for a licence if you have not paid a fee.

Most will need to read this twice to work out exactly what it means as it contains two negative statements. If phrased positively, it is much clearer:

* You will be eligible for a licence as soon as you have paid a fee.

### Keep tenses consistent

There are three main types of tense when writing:

* Past tense: Rhys wrote a book.
* Present tense: Rhys is writing a book.
* Future tense: Rhys will write a book.

Changing tenses can be confusing for the reader so it is important to keep tenses consistent. When you have finished writing, it is a good idea to check that it is consistent. If it is not, change it. You will immediately notice the improvement in overall expression.

Most of our writing will be about factual, legal information. It does not change, so it should be written in the present tense. For example:

* Consent is when you agree to something.

This is written in the present tense because it is a fact. If it is written in past tense, readers may think the situation is now different, even though it is not.

### Use inclusive language

You should always consider the diversity of your audience and make sure that you use inclusive language. Under federal and state laws it is generally unlawful to discriminate on the grounds of:

* gender
* race
* colour
* national or ethnic origin
* physical or mental capabilities.

Read about [Inclusive language](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/accessible-and-inclusive-content/inclusive-language) on the Australian Government style manual.

## Acronyms and initialisms

Acronyms are groups of initial letters that are pronounced as words. For example:

* NATO
* ANZAC (now commonly used as Anzac).

Initialisms are groups of initial letters that are not pronounced as words. For example:

* VLA
* ASM
* DHHS.

Do not include full stops between letters. Do not end an acronym or initialism with a full stop unless it is at the end of the sentence or a bullet list.

**Avoid using acronyms and initialisms wherever possible**, especially in documents written for an external audience. Your readers may not be familiar with them. They can also be confusing for low literacy readers.

It's especially important to avoid acronyms online as they can be difficult for screen readers to pronounce, and therefore decreases accessibility.

If you do have to use them, always spell out what the acronym or initialism stands for when you first use it, and include the acronym or initialism in brackets after it. After that you can refer to the acronym or initialism on its own.

### Common acronyms and initialisms

| **Acronym/initialism** | **Stands for** |
| --- | --- |
| AAT | Administrative Appeals Tribunal |
| ACCOs | Aboriginal community-controlled organisations |
| AD | associate director |
| ADR | Alternative Dispute Resolution |
| AFP | Australian Federal Police |
| AG | Attorney-General |
| AHRC | Australian Human Rights Commission |
| ARC | Assessment and Referral Court |
| ASM | administrative services manager |
| ATLAS | Australian Total Legal Aid Solution |
| AVITH | adolescent violence in the home |
| BAC | blood alcohol concentration (percentage of alcohol in a sample of breath or blood) |
| BARC | Bail and Remand Court |
| CALD | culturally and linguistically diverse |
| CAV | Consumer Affairs Victoria |
| CAYPINS | Children and Young Persons Infringement Notice System |
| CCO | community corrections order |
| CDSN | Cultural Diversity Staff Network |
| CELI | Communications, Engagement and Legal Information |
| CGT | capital gains tax |
| CJAE | Civil Justice, Access and Equity |
| CJSA | Civil Justice Strategic Advocacy |
| CLC | community legal centre |
| CLE | community legal education |
| CLICS | Community Legal Information and Corporate Services |
| CLICSLG | Community Legal Information and Corporate Services Leadership Group |
| CLM | Criminal Law Melbourne |
| CLS | Criminal Law Services/Corporate Legal Services |
| CPMS | Case and Practice Management System |
| CPSU | Community and Public Sector Union |
| CSA | Child Support Agency |
| CSLG | Corporate Services Leadership Group |
| DAP | Disability Action Plan |
| DATO | Drug and Alcohol Treatment Order |
| DFFH | Department of Families, Fairness and Housing |
| DH | Department of Health |
| D&I | Diversity and Inclusion |
| DHS | Department of Human Services |
| DIABP | Department of Immigration and Border Protection |
| DJCS | Department of Justice and Community Safety |
| DLA | Digital Legal Aid |
| DLH/DLHV | Disaster Legal Help/Disaster Legal Help Victoria |
| DLR | duty lawyer record |
| DML | deputy managing lawyer |
| DOJ | Department of Justice |
| EBS | Equitable Briefing Strategy |
| ED | executive director |
| ELP | Equality Law Program |
| EMG | Executive Management Group |
| ERC | Economic Review Committee |
| ERS | Early Resolution Service |
| ERSC | Expenditure Review Sub-Committee |
| FASS | Family Advocacy and Support Services |
| FCFCOA | Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia |
| FCLC | Federation of Community Legal Centres |
| FDR/FDRS | family dispute resolution/Family Dispute Resolution Service |
| FDRP | family dispute resolution practitioner |
| FPP | Finance, Planning and Projects |
| FYCL | Family, Youth and Children's Law |
| GD&I | Gender, Diversity and Inclusion |
| GEAP | Gender Equality Action Plan |
| GQA | Grants and Quality Assurance |
| HB4C | Help Before Court |
| HRLC | Human Rights Law Centre |
| HSW | Health, Safety and Wellbeing |
| ICAT | Improved Client Access and Triage |
| ICL | independent children's lawyer |
| IFAS | Independent Family Advocacy and Support |
| ILS | Internal Legal Services |
| IMHA | Independent Mental Health Advocacy |
| ISD | Information Systems Division |
| LAB | Legal Aid Brief |
| LAR | legal advice record |
| LASO | Legal Aid Services Online |
| LIV | Law Institute Victoria |
| L&OD | Learning and Organisational Development |
| NJC | Neighbourhood Justice Centre |
| NLA | National Legal Aid |
| OCEO | Office of the Chief Executive Officer |
| OD | organisational development |
| OP | operations manager |
| OPA | Office of the Public Advocate |
| OPP | Office of Public Prosecutions |
| PAWS | People and Workplace Services |
| PCAS | People and Culture Advisory Services |
| PILCH | Public Interest Law Clearing House (now called Justice Connect) |
| PLE | Professional Legal Education |
| PM | program manager |
| PMS | people matter survey |
| POA | power of attorney |
| PP | panel practitioner |
| PSIO | personal safety intervention order |
| RAP | reconciliation action plan |
| PSL | professional support lawyer |
| RDM | Roundtable Dispute Management |
| REAL | Research Evaluation and Library |
| RML | regional managing lawyer |
| SLT | Senior Leadership Team |
| SPI | Strategic Planning and Investment |
| VACCA | Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency |
| VALID | Victorian Advocacy League For Individuals With Disability |
| VALS | Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service |
| VCAT | Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal |
| VEOHRC | Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission |
| VIFM | Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine |
| VLA | Victoria Legal Aid |
| VLAF | Victorian Legal Assistance Forum |
| VLS | Victims Legal Service |
| VOCAT | Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal |
| WLSV | Women's Legal Service Victoria |
| YJ | youth justice |

Read about [acronyms and initialisms](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/grammar-punctuation-and-conventions/shortened-words-and-phrases/acronyms-and-initialisms) in the Australian Government style manual.

## Abbreviations

Abbreviations include the first and some other letters of a word, but not the last letter. A full stop is used at the end to identify it as an abbreviation.

For example:

* p. (page)
* pp. (pages)
* r. (regulation/rule)
* rr. (regulations/rules)
* s. (section)
* ss. (sections)
* sch. (schedule)
* ch. (chapter)
* co. (company)
* cont. (continued)
* fig. (figure)
* para. (paragraph).

While abbreviations are ok for internal documents, avoid using them in writing for an external audience. Readers may not be familiar with them, especially low literacy readers.

Read about [abbreviations](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/grammar-punctuation-and-conventions/shortened-words-and-phrases/abbreviations) in the Australian Government style manual.

### Latin words

Shortened Latin words are often used in writing, but should be avoided wherever possible. Spell the English word out unless space is limited. If you must use them, do not italicise Latin shortened forms, and always use correct punctuation. For example:

* eg (exempli gratia – for example)
* et al (et alii – and others)
* etc. (et cetera – and so forth, and so on)
* ie (id est – that is)
* NB (nota bene – take note)
* v. (versus – against).

Although it is more formal to use full stops to show that these words have been abbreviated, we do not include the full stops as punctuation marks make text more difficult to understand, particularly for low literacy readers.

Read about [Latin shortened forms](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/grammar-punctuation-and-conventions/shortened-words-and-phrases/latin-shortened-forms) on the Australian Government style manual.

## Contractions

Contractions always include the first and last letters of a word and sometimes other letters in between. As the last letter of the contraction is the same as the last letter of the word, contractions do not end with a full stop. For example:

* Dr (Doctor)
* Pty Ltd (Proprietary Limited)
* Rd (Road).

Grammatical contractions are made up of two words, with an apostrophe indicating missing letters, for example, you're. Do not use contractions in external documents. They can be difficult for low literacy readers to understand, especially if English is not their first language.

## Capitals

Sentences always start with a capital letter. Proper nouns (such as names of specific people, places and organisations) also start with a capital letter. However, the general trend is to minimise use of capitals wherever possible. For instance, 'the court' or the ' Magistrates ' Court of Victoria', not 'the Court'.

Avoid using an excessive number of capitals, especially in the body of your text. Too many capitals looks like you are SHOUTING at your reader.

### When to use capitals

* people's names, for example, John Smith
* business names, for example, Origin Energy (as per registered name in certificate of incorporation)
* geographical place names, for example, Ballarat and Dandenong
* buildings, structures and public places
* nationalities, for example, Sudanese and Greek
* languages, for example, French and English
* religions, for example, Islam and Christianity
* names of days and months
* holidays, religious days and public events, for example, Labour Day.

### When not to use capitals

* common words from place names, for example, westernise, venetian blinds, brussels sprouts
* generic references to the court (not 'the Court')
* generic references to position titles, for example, 'the magistrate' or 'the director'
* when referring to documents, for example – 'under the agreement', 'the affidavit', 'the deed', the 'contract of sale'
* when using generic references and not the full capitalised title, for example – 'in the guidelines', 'the policy contains information about ... '
* when referring to a party, for example, 'the plaintiff', 'the defendant', 'the accused'.

### Headings

Only use a capital for the initial letter of a heading unless there are any proper nouns. For example, 'Applying for a grant of legal assistance'.

### Courts, court staff and governments

Proper nouns such as Supreme Court and Family Court of Australia are always capitalised when they are mentioned in full. Court staff's position titles are only capitalised when they refer to a particular person. Generic references to judges, magistrates and courts are not capitalised. For example:

* A magistrate's decision …
* Her Honour Justice Brown
* A court hearing ...
* The Broadmeadows Magistrates' Court.

Court divisions are also capitalised because they are proper nouns. For example:

* The Family Division of the Children's Court.

Similarly, use capitals when spelling out 'Victorian Government' or 'State Government of Victoria' in full. Generic references to 'the government' are not capitalised. For example:

* The Victorian Government has proposed changes to the legislation. The government said …

Always capitalise 'Commonwealth' and when referring to the Commonwealth of Australia, but you do not capitalise 'federal government' unless it forms part of an official title.

### Naming service areas, programs, projects, job titles and policies at our organisation

It is important to make sure there is consistency across the organisation, especially when we are communicating with an external audience.

#### Divisions, services, units and teams

Our organisation's divisions, sections, services, units and teams should always be capitalised.

For up-to-date information about our divisions, services, units and teams, see our [Organisational chart](https://www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/our-organisation#our-organisational-chart).

Our style is to use 'and' rather than an ampersand (&) in program, team and section names.

#### Job titles

Job titles are lower case if they are not current, referring to a general job description or if referring to more than one person working in that role:

* **Write** – A Victoria Legal Aid manager was quoted in The Age.
* **Don't write** – The Legal Help Officers work from 8 am to 6 pm.

If you are referring to a specific person and their specific job title you use capitals. The name comes directly after the title:

* **Write** – Digital Content Manager Jane Smith, from the Digital Communications team, was at the meeting.
* **Don't write** – Contact Jane Smith, manager Digital Communications.

If you are referring to a specific person, but a generic job you do not use capitals:

* **Write** – Jane Smith is the manager of Digital Communications.
* **Don't write** – Jane Smith is a Lawyer in our Morwell office.

Some official titles are always capitalised. For example:

* the Governor-General
* the Attorney-General
* the Leader of the Opposition.

The current Australian prime minister is always referred to in capitals, while former prime ministers are referred to in lower case.

* Yesterday Prime Minister Jane Smith met with former prime minister Jenny Power to discuss the housing crisis.

Formal titles of members of parliament are also capitalised, but generic references are not.

* Jane Smith is the Senator for Victoria.
* The senators will each have a turn to speak at the conference.

Our organisation follows spelling, hyphenation, capitalisation and punctuation listed in the online version of the [Macquarie dictionary](http://www.macquariedictionary.com.au/203.41.246.6%40929FFC53990430/-/p/thes/logged_in.html?) and the Australian Government style manual.

Too much punctuation can be distracting and make it difficult for low literacy readers to understand. Use sentence punctuation to make your meaning clear and reduce unnecessary marks.

## Punctuation

### Full stop .

A full stop should be used:

* at the end of a sentence that is not a question
* after the last point in a bullet list.

Do not use a full stop in headings, subheadings, headers or footers.

Read about [Full stops](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/grammar-punctuation-and-conventions/punctuation-and-capitalisation/full-stops) in the Australian Government style manual.

### Comma ,

Commas indicate a pause in a sentence. They can clarify or alter the meaning of a sentence.

Commas should be used as follows:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Use** | **Example** |
| after an introductory phrase | In October, *Am I old enough?* was published |
| after each item in a list, but only before 'and' in a list of items in a sentence if the meaning is unclear without it | The lawyer reviewed the rulings, legislation, and the Supreme Court hearings. |
| to separate clauses and phrases in sentences | Marketing undertaken without a plan, such as emailing, needs to be evaluated. |
| to introduce direct speech | The chief executive officer said, 'Here is...' |
| before 'which' but not after 'that' | The book, which belongs to ...  The court that she visited ... |

Read more about [Commas](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/grammar-punctuation-and-conventions/punctuation/commas) in the Australian Government style manual.

### Question mark ?

A question mark indicates a query. For example:

* Can you go to the hearing?
* That is your answer?

Read more about [Question marks](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/grammar-punctuation-and-conventions/punctuation-and-capitalisation/question-marks) in the Australian Government style manual.

### Exclamation mark !

Avoid using exclamation marks in all documents and publications. Exclamation marks are not appropriate for professional writing.

Read more about [Exclamation marks](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/grammar-punctuation-and-conventions/punctuation-and-capitalisation/exclamation-marks) in the Australian Government style manual.

### Colon :

Use a colon:

* after the lead-in to a bullet or dot point list like this one (see [Bullet lists](https://viclegalaid.sharepoint.com/sites/intranet/policiesandprocedures/communications/Pages/our-style-guide.aspx?xsdata=MDV8MDJ8S2F0aWUuQmF0dHlAdmxhLnZpYy5nb3YuYXV8MWE1NjljYTVmY2Y5NGVhNzExN2YwOGRjN2EyYTdmNWF8ZjZiZWM3ODBjZDEzNDljZTg0Yzc1ZDdkOTQ4MjE4Nzl8MXwwfDYzODUxOTU3MDE0MjE0Mjk3OXxVbmtub3dufFRXRnBiR1pzYjNkOGV5SldJam9pTUM0d0xqQXdNREFpTENKUUlqb2lWMmx1TXpJaUxDSkJUaUk2SWsxaGFXd2lMQ0pYVkNJNk1uMD18MHx8fA%3d%3d&sdata=K1g2STd5d2RLQkJsd3F0aFBUTDl4bEp1VngyaDBuZy9lQ3pyQXIrS1dJWT0%3d&clickparams=eyAiWC1BcHBOYW1lIiA6ICJNaWNyb3NvZnQgT3V0bG9vayIsICJYLUFwcFZlcnNpb24iIDogIjE2LjAuMTczMjguMjAyODIiLCAiT1MiIDogIldpbmRvd3MiIH0%3D#e7bafbce9deadac0dfd39c41ae4e561e5))
* after a phrase followed by a word, phrase or clause that requires emphasis, for example:
  + There was only one way to describe the defendant: aggressive.
* before a series of items, for example:
  + We have three practice programs: Criminal Law Services, Civil Justice, Access and Equity Services and Family, Youth and Children's Law Services.
* before a blocked quote, that is, a long quote that is indented from the rest of the text.

Read about [Colons](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/grammar-punctuation-and-conventions/punctuation/colons) in the Australian Government style manual.

### Semicolon ;

Semicolons are mainly used to separate individual clauses in the same sentence. For example:

* Australia is the only Western democracy without minimum human rights legislation under international law; this makes the case for a Bill of Rights even more urgent.

Avoid using semicolons where possible. In our example, it would be better to make this a new sentence. You will find that this will help you to keep your sentences shorter too.

Read about [Semicolons](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/grammar-punctuation-and-conventions/punctuation-and-capitalisation/semicolons) in the Australian Government style manual.

### Quotation marks ' '

Use single quotation marks for:

* direct speech and quotations, for example:
  + 'The report deals with the subject in a readable way', said the chief executive officer (CEO).
* references to a chapter in a book or article in a newspaper or magazine.

For direct speech or quoted material, punctuation usually appears outside the quotation marks. For example: The manager noted, 'The report deals with the subject in a readable way'.

Punctuation appears inside the quotation mark if it is part of the quoted material. For example:

* 'Does the report deal with the subject in a readable way?' asked the staff member.
* The staff member asked, 'Does the report deal with the subject in a readable way?'

Only use double quotation marks for quotes within quotes. For example:

* She praised her colleague's report and said that it set 'a "new standard" in service delivery'.

Read about [Quotation marks](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/grammar-punctuation-and-conventions/punctuation/quotation-marks) in the Australian Government style manual.

### Dashes and hyphens

Our style guide uses en dashes and hyphens.

* hyphen: -
* en dash: –

Use a hyphen for compound words such as:

* a high-quality pen
* my 10-year-old destroyed my pen.

Use an en dash for:

* spans of numbers, time and distance:
  + 1–5 April 2007
  + 7–9 am
  + 25–30 km.
* showing an association between two words that retain their separate identities. For example:
  + a 'Commonwealth–state agreement'
* to signify an abrupt change
* to introduce information that you want to emphasise or to provide an explanation, for example:
  + There are two sorts of agreements that are sometimes used to finance vehicle 'purchases' – vehicle leases and hire purchase agreements.
* to isolate a parenthetic expression in a sentence, which can be used as an alternative to brackets, for example:
  + If the lender has taken a 'security interest' – a form of registered interest – over the vehicle in the form of a goods mortgage, then the creditor might seek compensation if you default on payments.

To insert an en dash in Word, choose 'Insert/Symbol/Special Characters/En Dash'. Or hold the Alt key while entering the number 0150 on the numerical keypad.

Read about [hyphens](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/grammar-punctuation-and-conventions/punctuation/hyphens) and [dashes](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/grammar-punctuation-and-conventions/punctuation/dashes) on the Australian Government style manual.

### Brackets ( ) [ ]

Minimise the use of brackets. Try using commas instead. Use square [ ] brackets if you need to bracket something within brackets, or to clarify and point to something missing in the original text.

Read about [Brackets](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/grammar-punctuation-and-conventions/punctuation-and-capitalisation/brackets-and-parentheses) in the Australian Government style manual.

### Ellipsis …

Use only three full stops, even if the ellipsis is at the end of a sentence – you do not need to add an extra full stop. Insert a space before and after the ellipsis if it is preceded and followed by a word. For example:

* 'I saw the client cross the road ... before they entered the shop.' (space before and after)
* 'I saw the client cross the road ...' (no space after)

If you need to add a question mark after the ellipsis, do not insert a full stop between the ellipsis and the question mark (...?).

Read about [Ellipses](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/grammar-punctuation-and-conventions/punctuation-and-capitalisation/ellipses) in the Australian Government style manual.

### Forward slash /

The forward slash should be used for:

* showing alternatives, for example:
  + and/or
* internet addresses, for example:
  + https://www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/fines-and-infringements
* shortened forms of measurement, for example:
  + km/h for kilometres per hour.

Use the forward slash sparingly. Do not include a space on either side of the forward slash.

Read about [Forward slashes](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/grammar-punctuation-and-conventions/punctuation-and-capitalisation/forward-slashes) in the Australian Government style manual.

## Numbers

In general, you should:

* spell out numbers from one to nine in words, and use numerals for 10 and above.
* write the number out in full if it's at the beginning of a sentence, unless it is a large number. Alternatively, you can rearrange the sentence so it does not start with a number.
* write out millions, billions and trillions. For example, 63 million.
* always use numerals in tables, temperatures, measurements, percentages (3%) and equations.
* use as few digits as possible when referencing page numbers. For example, pp. 176–9.
* use 1000 without a comma, but use commas for 10,000 and above (100,000 and 1,000,000).

### Dates and time

In text, spell out dates using numerals and words. Do not abbreviate days or months. Order as day + date + month + year, with no punctuation between each element. For example:

* Friday 1 October 2004
* Friday 1 October
* 1 October 2004
* 1 October

**Do not use ordinal numbers (1st, 1st) for dates.**

If dates need to be expressed in digits – for example, in a table – use two digits for the day and month, and four for the year, and include a forward slash between each element. For example: 01/10/2004.

When referring to time of day, use numerals with a full stop separating the hour and minutes, for example:

Our organisation's core hours are 8 am to 6 pm.

Include a space before 'am' and 'pm' and do not use any punctuation.

Use single digits for round hours, such as 10 am and 3 pm (**not** 10.00 am and 3.00 pm).

Read about [Dates and time](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/grammar-punctuation-and-conventions/numbers-and-measurements/dates-and-time) on the Australian Government style manual.

### Phone numbers

Phone numbers should be presented with the local area code, plus a space after the first four digits. For example, phone (03) 9629 0617.

Mobile numbers should be presented with a space after the first four digits and then after the next three digits. For example, phone 0411 222 333.

### Currency

Use a dollar ($) sign for Australian dollars. Use A$ to refer specifically to Australian dollars when other currencies are also mentioned.

Read about [Currency](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/grammar-punctuation-and-conventions/numbers-and-measurements/currency) in the Australian Government style manual.

### Percentages, fractions and decimals

The percentage symbol % should only be used with numerals, while the word per cent can be used with either words or numerals. When a percentage appears at the beginning of a sentence always use words. For example:

* Thirty per cent of participants agreed that the event was a success.
* Revenue increased by 15 per cent in the last quarter.

Numerals are always used in a table.

Read about [Percentages](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/grammar-punctuation-and-conventions/numbers-and-measurements/percentages), [Fractions and decimals](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/grammar-punctuation-and-conventions/numbers-and-measurements/fractions-and-decimals) in the Australian Government style manual.

## Emphasising text

### Italics

Italics can emphasise a few words, but should not be used for large pieces of text.

Use italics for:

* the full titles of legislation and legal cases
* individual words that must stand out
* words that are not part of the English lexicon, such as guestimate
* titles of publications.

Do not use italics for:

* hyperlinks, even if the link is legislation or a publication.
* quotes – they should use single quotation marks within text.

Read more information about [Italics](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/grammar-punctuation-and-conventions/italics) on the Style Manual website.

### Bold

Bold text stands out on the page, but do not overuse it. We recommend bolding keywords only – never use bold for large sections of text.

### Underlining

Never use underlining for emphasis. Underlining should never be used in online content as users expect underlined text to be a hyperlink. To emphasise words, use bold instead.

## Bullet lists

Reading and understanding text is easier with bullet lists. These highlight important issues and make the page look cleaner. However, too many bullet lists on a page lose their effect.

Our style for standard documents:

* Use the 'Bullet list' style in the 'Styles' pane.
* Each list should be introduced by a lead-in part of a sentence so that the list is properly integrated into the flow of the text and does not read like a series of notes.
* Always place a colon after the lead-in sentence.

Use bullets instead of numbers or letters as they are neater and use less space. Numbers or letters should only be used if:

* you need to show priority or chronology within the list
* the listed items need to be referred to later in the text.

Bullet lists can either use full sentences or sentence fragments.

If using full sentences, each bullet point begins with an upper case and ends with a full stop. For example:

* The committee came to two important conclusions:
  + Officers should investigate the feasibility of developing legislated guidelines for future investigations.
  + Research should be funded.

If using sentence fragments, each bullet point begins with a lower case, has no punctuation at the end of each list item and uses a full stop at the end of the list. For example:

* You must bring:
  + your licence
  + your passport
  + a recent household bill.

Even though legal documents often use words like 'and/or' at the end of phrases or sentences, **this is not part of our style**, especially for external documents. If you want to emphasise the compulsory nature of the list, you can make this clear in a carefully worded lead-in. For example:

* All clients must bring one of the following to their appointment:
  + your licence
  + your passport
  + a recent household bill.

Read more information about [Lists](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/structuring-content/lists) on the Style Manual website.

## Tables, graphs, charts and diagrams

Tables, graphs, charts and diagrams can help break up content, but they'll have to meet accessibility requirements. This means:

* no blank/merged cells
* a descriptive header row.

Do not overuse tables, graphs charts or diagrams, as it can become confusing if there are too many. Do not use them purely for visual purposes – they should predominately be used to display data.

### Example table showing salary packaging expenses

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Date** | **Description** | **Amount** |
| 1 May 2010 | Coffee at the Common | $3.70 |
| 13 June 2010 | Lunch at Crisp salad bar | $18.45 |

## Correspondence

### Format for writing letters

All letters must be presented in a consistent format.

### Addressing correspondence

#### Standard letters

The options for addressing standard letters are:

* Dear Sir/Madam … Yours faithfully
* To whom it may concern … Yours faithfully

#### Letters to the judiciary

Letters to the Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia are addressed:

* Dear Sir/Madam … Yours faithfully

Letters to the Chief Justice of the Federal Court of Australia or the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia are addressed:

* Your Honour … (or 'Dear Chief Justice' which is less formal) ... Yours faithfully

Letters to the Justice of the Federal Court or the Federal Circuit and Family Court are addressed:

* Your Honour ... Yours faithfully

Letters to the president or deputy president of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission are addressed:

* Your Honour ... Yours faithfully

Letters to the Commissioner of the Fair Work Commission are addressed:

* Commissioner … Yours faithfully

Letters to a judge of a state or territory county, magistrates', district or Supreme courts or the registrar or tribunal are addressed:

Your Honour … Yours faithfully

#### Letters to the police

Letters to police may be addressed to the informant including their rank, if known, for example:

* Snr Constable Singh.
* L.Snr Constable Anderson.
* Snr Sergeant Tran.

The salutation is 'Dear sir' or 'Dear madam'.

If you are concerned that the officer may be on leave you can address letters to: Officer in Charge of [name of police station].

#### Letters to politicians

Letters to the Prime Minister of Australia are addressed:

* Dear Prime Minister … Yours faithfully

The form of address is The Hon. (given and family names), MP, Prime Minister of Australia.

Letters to the state premier are addressed:

* Dear Premier … Yours faithfully

The form of address is The Hon. (given and family names), MLA, Premier of Victoria.

Letters to the chief minister are addressed:

* Dear Chief Minister … Yours faithfully

The form of address is Mr/Ms/Dr (given and family names), MLA, Chief Minister of Victoria.

Letters to a minister (federal, state and territory) are addressed:

* Dear Minister … Yours faithfully

The form of address is The Hon. (given and family names), MP, Minister for the Arts.

Letters to a minister who is a member of the Senate are addressed:

* Dear Minister … Yours faithfully

The form of address is Senator the Hon, (given and family names), Minister for Transport.

Letters to a member of the House of Representatives are addressed:

* Dear Sir/Madam … Yours faithfully

The form of address is Mr/Ms/Dr (given and family names), MP.

Letters to a member of the Senate are addressed:

* Dear Senator … Yours faithfully

The form of address is Senator (given and family names).

Letters to the member of state or territory parliament are addressed as standard Mr/Ms/Dr (given and family names). This is followed by the use the initials MLC for Member of the Legislative Council, MLA for Member of the Legislative Assembly and MHA for a Member of the House of Assembly.

Letters to local government are addressed differently. Lord mayors and mayors are addressed according to city and locale.

### Addressing envelopes

Our organisation utilises clean mail to get discounted postage fees. Clean mail is when you send out a letter with the address on the envelope formatted as follows:

* the address must be in 10.5 pt, Arial font
* the address lines must be left justified and single spaced
* you must not use italics, bold, shadowing or underlining
* the second last line of address block must contain the number and name of the street (or PO box or bag number)
* the bottom line must contain in the following order:
  + the locality
  + the state or territory abbreviation
  + the postcode, with one space only between each.
* the bottom line must be printed in CAPITALS with no punctuation and no underlining
* additional address information, such as business or persons name, must be placed above the last two lines of the address and not below, alongside or within these lines
* wherever possible do not send handwritten address lines as Australia Post consider this as 'unclean' mail.

Example:

Jane Smith  
Victoria Legal Aid  
570 Bourke Street  
MELBOURNE VIC 3000

## Referencing

The author-date system is the most widely accepted referencing system because:

* it is easy to use
* readers can make an immediate association between an idea or fact and its authority and when it was published.

We recommend using this system. However, if you are writing for our clients consider whether references are required. Referring to legislation, for example, may be overwhelming for low literacy audiences.

The following examples are based on the author-date system.

### Acts, Ordinances, Bills and Regulations

#### Acts and Ordinances

Use the full title of an Act or Ordinance the first time it appears in your document. This should be in italics and include the year. If you refer to it again in your document, you can use a shortened title. In the shortened title, do not include the date and it is not in italics. For example:

* The *Mental Health Act 2014* commenced on 1 July 2014. This new mental health Act replaces …

If only one Act is referred to in your document, or it is clear which Act you are referring to, you can also refer to it as the Act in any reference after you have used the full title. For example:

* Amendments to the *Fences Act 1968* were introduced on 22 September 2014. These changes to the Act included …

If you are including the jurisdiction, you can add the jurisdiction (abbreviated, not in italics) in brackets after the date, for example *Crimes Act 1959*(Vic). However, it is preferable to make it clear in the text, especially in documents for an external audience who are not familiar with seeing legislation referenced.

For example:

* The Commonwealth *Family Law Act 1975*.
* Victoria's *Criminal Procedure Act 2009*.
* When referring to sections of Acts and Ordinances, use the following abbreviations:
* Single division of an Act and Ordinance – s. 42
* Multiple divisions of Act or Ordinance – ss. 4–5.

When referring to a section at the start of a sentence, spell out the relevant word, for example, Section 4 of the *Legal Aid Act 1978*.

#### Bills

Parliamentary Bills are not italicised.

When referring to the clauses in a Bill, use the following abbreviations:

* Single clause of a Bill – cl. 23
* Multiple clauses of a Bill – cls. 23–37.

#### Regulations

Regulations and other forms of delegated legislation (such as rules and bylaws) are not italicised.

For example: Federal Magistrates Amendment Regulations 2007

When referring to divisions of Regulations, use the following abbreviations:

* Single division of a Regulation – r. 18
* Multiple divisions of a Regulation – rr. 18–19.

### Case law

The name of the case is italicised and the year is placed in parentheses or brackets. This is followed by the volume number if there is more than one volume and the abbreviated name of the report series.

* For example: *The State of New South Wales v. The Commonwealth* (1915) 20 CLR 54

When you need to use a specific page number, use the word 'at' instead of 'p'.

* For example: *The State of New South Wales v. The Commonwealth* (1915) 20 CLR 54 at 181…

When you first mention the case in the text the authority, should be cited in full. After that you can use an abbreviated form or the name by which it is commonly known.

* For example: *The State of New South Wales and The Commonwealth* (1915) 20 CLR 54 (the Wheat Case) … the Wheat Case

#### Referring to a particular part of a judgment citation

Pinpoint citation refers to citation that locates a page under discussion.

For example: *Eastick v Cat Protection Society of Queensland* (1994) 15 QldLawyerReps at 76

Read more about [Referencing and attribution](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/referencing-and-attribution) in the Style Manual.

### Publications

When referring to a book as part of a written text you can include the full title. For example:

* The word 'shall' should be avoided in legal writing, according to Clark-Dickson and MacDonald's *Clear and precise: writing skills for today's lawyers*.

You can also include it as a brief citation. For example:

* The word 'shall' should be avoided in legal writing (Clark-Dickson & Macdonald 2000).

In a bibliography it should be listed like this:

* Clark-Dickson, D & MacDonald, R. 2000, *Clear and precise: writing skills for today's lawyers*, Continuing Legal Education Inc., Brisbane.

References to a section in a publication are capitalised when referring a specific section but not generic terms. For example:

* Information about the Children's Court can be found in Chapter 5.
* Clients can refer to pages one and two for more information.

When 'The' is shown on a periodical's masthead as part of the title – for example, The Age – it can be capitalised when it does not coincide with the ordinary use of the definite article. For example:

* He writes for *The Age*.
* In the *Age* editorial on Monday ...

### Periodical articles

The titles of periodicals – magazines, journals and newspapers – are given maximal capitals. For example, the *Alternative Law Journal*.

Article citations follow the same pattern as books in written text. In a bibliography the title of the article is in single quotation marks and the title of the journal is in italics. For example:

* Silvieri, J 2003, 'The trials of sexual assault victims', *Law Institute Journal*, vol. 77, no. 4, pp. 18–23.

### Forms

When referring to a form in a document capitalise the first letter and write the name of the form in italics. For example:

* You can download the *Application for waiver of application fee form* from the Fair Work Commission website at [www.fwc.gov.au](https://www.fwc.gov.au/).

### Websites

When referring to a website in a sentence do not use brackets, full stops or anything similar. For example:

* More information is on our website at [www.legalaid.vic.gov.au](https://www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/).

When referencing a website, include the:

* author (person or organisation)
* date the site was created or last viewed
* name of sponsor of the source
* date viewed
* URL (either full location details, or main site details).

For example:

* Victoria Legal Aid 2007, Victoria Legal Aid, Victoria, viewed 4 March 2008, <http://www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/>.

When referencing a document within a website include the:

* author
* document date
* document title
* version number (if applicable)
* description of document (if applicable)
* name and place of sponsor of the source
* date viewed
* URL (either full location details, or main site details).

For example:

* Victoria Legal Aid & Office of the Public Advocate 2007, *Take control*, Victoria Legal Aid, Victoria, viewed 4 March 2008, <http://www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/files-local/Publications/cl.take\_control.pdf>.