



Department of Families, Housing,
Community Service
and Indigenous Affairs

Writing to and for Ministers

2011



Australian Government

Department of Families, Housing,
Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

interaction 
consulting group



Workshop: Writing to and for Ministers
Date: 2012
Time: 9am to 5pm
Breaks: 10:30am, 12:30 to 1:30pm and 3pm

Objectives

At the end of the workshop you will :

- have explored the challenges of writing in a complex environment
 - appreciate departmental and ministerial expectations
 - have practised the essentials of effective writing
 - have revised proofreading and editing skills
 - have tools to support successful writing in the Department
 - have applied the skills learned to write Ministerial documents.
-

Program

Introduction and setting personal objectives

The essentials of effective writing

- Content
 - Structure
 - Writing style
 - smart words
 - active sentences
 - focused paragraphs
 - influential tone
-

Proofreading and Editing

- Tools and tips
-

Your Ministers

- Expectations and needs
 - Templates and processes
-

Writing a Ministerial Minute

Writing Ministerial Correspondence

Writing and using a Question Time Brief

Review and personal action planning

Personal learning objectives

1. How would I describe my knowledge of the ministers and their expectations in relation to my writing?

2. Reflecting on my reasons for attending the workshop, any discussions with my supervisor and the objectives and topics we will cover, what would I like to get out of today's course?

Personal action planning

1. Reflecting on the whole course what key messages have I received?

The essentials of effective writing

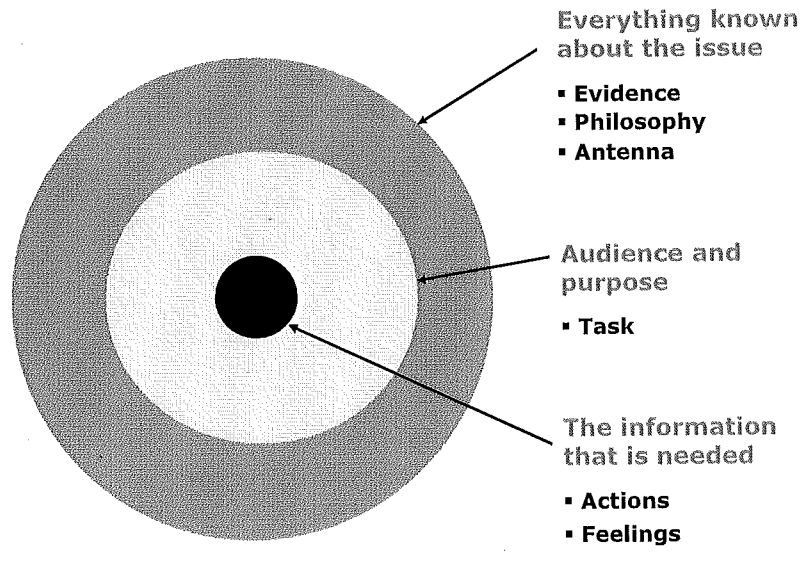
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Effective writing

- Content
- Structure
- Writing style

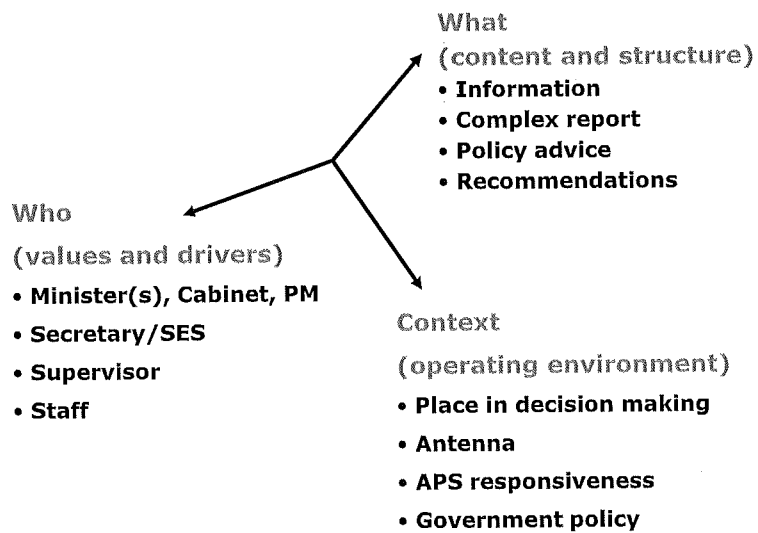
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Content



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Structure



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Writing style

- Smart words
- Active sentences
- Focused paragraphs
- Influential tone
- Proofreading

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Smart words

- Use plain English
- Why?
 - **precision** - expressing exactly what you intend
 - **clarity** - precise writing is usually clear and unambiguous
 - **readability** - good writing is also easy to read and absorb at one sitting
 - **efficiency** - effective writing is succinct
 - **accountability** - using active voice easily identifies the person/people accountable
 - **credibility** - plain English writing strengthens your professional credibility

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Active sentences

- A sentence must have a subject and an action
- A sentence must express a complete thought
- Vary sentence length but aim for a maximum of 22 words per sentence – less is more
- Verbs are better than nouns
 - 'explain' is better than 'provide an explanation'

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Active sentences (cont)

- The active voice creates interest, pace and clarity
 - more likely to hold the reader's attention
 - often shorter
- The active voice links the action directly to the subject of the sentence
 - watch for the word 'by' – it is often used for the passive voice

PASSIVE	ACTIVE
A decision was made to open negotiations	
The contract was signed by the Minister	

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Activity - writing active sentences

- In small groups discuss the sentences provided and rewrite in the active voice and plain English

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Focused paragraphs

- Readers tend to focus on the beginning and end of paragraphs
- The reader should be able to read the first sentence of each paragraph to gain an overview of the document
- Paragraphs should draw the reader's attention from one paragraph to the next

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Focused paragraphs (cont)

- Each paragraph should deal with one point
- Paragraphs should have an obvious structure
- Aim for three to five sentences or approximately six lines of text
- Very short paragraphs are acceptable

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Focused paragraphs (cont)

- **Complete**
 - gives as much information as the reader needs
- **Unified**
 - built around a central idea
 - consistent tone
- **Ordered**
 - coherent – a pattern that makes sense

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Influential tone

- Tone is critical
- Tone is used to influence your audience
- Tone must be appropriate to the audience and the circumstances
- Eliminate the negative
- For Ministers the tone will always be:
 - direct
 - concise
 - professional
 - objective.

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Proofreading and editing

The small stuff makes a big difference

- All your documents should:
 - be grammatically correct
 - use correct punctuation
 - be free of spelling errors
 - be accurate.

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Editing – what is it?

- Always revise your written work
- Consider:
 - content - what your document says
 - structure - how your document is organised
 - style - how you say what you say
 - format - physical arrangement of your document (template)
 - mechanics - are there grammar or spelling errors?

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Proofreading – what is it?

- Reading a draft to detect and correct any errors
- Process of reading written work for “surface errors”
 - spelling
 - punctuation
 - grammar
 - word choice
- Not an innate ability; it is an acquired skill

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Common errors

- Spelling
 - practice or practise
 - effect or affect
 - dependent or dependant
 - there, their or they're
- Punctuation
 - commas
 - apostrophes
- Word choice and sentence structure
 - level of language
 - active voice

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Proofreading – how to do it better

- Familiarise yourself with the errors **you** commonly make
 - make a list of your errors, and check your writing for each of them
- **Carefully** and **slowly** read your writing out loud
 - your ear should hear what your eye did not see
- Read your writing, sentence by sentence, from the last sentence to the first sentence
- Use a dictionary to check any words of which you are unsure, and to check for correct prepositions, verb tenses, and irregular forms
- Use a checklist and tools

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Proofreading and editing tools

- Spelling and grammar check
- A dictionary
- Peer review
- Flesch-Kincaid readability score

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Your Ministers

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How well do you know your Ministers and their world?

- In small groups, answer the following questions
 - in which Houses of Parliament does each Minister and the Parliamentary Secretaries sit?
 - what are they each responsible for?
 - who represents your Ministers in the other house? Why?
 - what are your Ministers' expectations in relation to your writing?

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The Ministers and the Parliamentary Secretaries

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APS responsiveness

- A responsive APS:
 - understands the Government's objectives and the environment in which it operates
 - anticipates, devises and provides options to meet these objectives
 - monitors, and keeps the Government briefed on, the range of developments and contingencies which might affect policy decisions
 - implements Government decisions professionally and with integrity, irrespective of the nature of the advice given earlier
 - provides advice that is frank, honest, comprehensive, accurate, timely and forward-looking, taking into account best practice here and overseas.

<http://www.apsc.gov.au/publications00/values7.htm>

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Ministers' expectations

- Generally speaking Ministers expect departmental writing to be:
 - in plain English
 - free of technical or flowery language
 - concise but sufficiently detailed
 - factual
 - well substantiated – facts and figures
 - accurate.

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The Minister's current needs

- Assume the Minister:
 - has a sound understanding of the Government's policy
 - is interested in the Department applying its expertise to providing a range of options for the minister's consideration and input
 - is interested in the impacts existing programs may have on the Executive Government's policy
 - is keen to understand and meet all ministerial and departmental accountability requirements.

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Templates - types of documents

- Ministerial Correspondence (Ministerials)
- Ministerial Briefs or Minutes
- Question Time Briefs (QTBs)
- emails
- letters
- reports
- speeches
- speaking notes
- media releases and talking points
- estimates briefs
- meeting briefs
- cabinet submissions
- intranet articles
- information brochures

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MPES process

- Consider the Department's processes – they are there for a reason
- MPES deals with a significant number of documents
 - MPES processes about 40,000 pieces of Ministerial Correspondence every year

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Writing Ministerial Correspondence

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Correspondence matters

- Your Ministers and the Secretary place a high premium on correspondence and expect that they will be handled expediently
- The quality (tone and content) of the response to a letter reflects on the Department and the Minister
- The response to a letter may be only direct contact between correspondent and the Minister/Department
- Correspondence may be a significant thing on which the correspondent's opinion of the Government/Department and Government policy may be formed

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Sources of Ministerial correspondence

- Other Ministers
(Commonwealth, State, Territory)
- Members of Parliaments
- Industry bodies
- Companies (enterprises)
- Local Government representatives and officials
- Unions
- Academics
- Constituents
- Other members of the public

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Ministers' expectations

- In general Ministers have a preference for replies to:
 - be respectful and helpful
 - be expressed in a positive and encouraging tone
 - engage with policy issues raised in an apolitical way
 - offer ways to move forward.

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FaHCSIA style

- Use the correct template
- Refer to FaHCSIA Style Guide
- Keep to one page if possible
 - provided all issues raised are adequately addressed
- No subject heading, minimise dot points
- Order
 - standard opening paragraph
 - get directly to why recipient is receiving the letter
 - argument, explanation etc to then follow in logical order

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FaHCSIA style (cont)

- Left justify text, right unjustified
- All pages are numbered on the bottom in the centre
- Check title of recipient
- Double check the reference date
- Dates - 24 August 2007
- Paragraphs are never numbered
- Never date the draft

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Helpful ministerial phrases

- Some useful phrases:
 - "Thank you for your letter of ... (date) concerning/about ... (subject) ..."
 - "Thank you for your letter of ... (date) to the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the Hon Jenny Macklin MP..."
 - "Thank you for your letter of ... (date) to my colleague, ..."
 - "Thank you for bringing this matter/your concerns to my attention and for your interest in ..."

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Writing a Ministerial Minute

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What is a Ministerial Minute?

- Document initiated in the Department
- Provides background/advice on specific issues
- May seek Minister's approval (a decision)
- Are prepared and handled in hard copy

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A good Minute

- Demonstrates rigorous analysis
- Contains sufficient background and contextual information to support decision-making
- Is concise and unambiguous
- Is succinct and uses plain English
- Provides the most important information on first page
- Is well-structured
- Provides clear recommendations
- Considers Whole-of-Government issues

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Write and using a QTB

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Purpose

- To provide a Minister with information that is:
 - in the public realm
 - factual
 - easy to access
 - relevant to any question that is likely to be asked **without** notice during question time
 - apolitical and impartial.

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Context

- Parliamentary environment
- What does the Minister need?
 - three most important messages
- Easy to access and read
- Strong arguments and rebuttals

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Department's expectations

- Self-contained
- Concise
- Critical key points
- Focused – tightly argued
- Accurate – information correct and up-to-date
- Timely – deadlines not negotiable
- Easy to read and in spoken format
- Error free – grammar, typos, spelling
- Reviewed

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Ministers' expectations

- One dot point for each talking point
- Talking points sentence spacing 1.5 (16 point Arial)
- Should be four pages
- Two spaces between sentences
- Single spacing in background (12 point)
- No underlining

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Formula

- Three clear points in the following order:
 - Government policy position
 - \$\$\$\$
 - what does it mean to “the man on the street”.

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Activity - write a QTB

- Read the information provided
- Using the template provided, prepare a question time brief for the Minister
- Your facilitator will give you feedback on your draft as you go
- Be prepared to use your QTB in a mock question time session

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