

DIA Style Guide

Guide to writing plain English for print and web

The Style Guide may be updated at any time – download the latest version

Contact DIA's [Design and Channels Team](#)

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Visual design and page layout

Visual design

The [Visual Identity Guide](#) is a manual for graphic designers and a resource for staff to create DIA material that is visually consistent. The guide is updated periodically, so please refer only to the latest online version.

Selecting a graphic design agency

The [Design and Channels Team](#) provides in-house design, print and web uploading services. When outsourcing we use design agencies from the All-of-Government panel. [Select a graphic design agency](#) from DIA's intranet.

Word templates

To ensure consistency between Ministry documents created in Word, please use these templates, which include our logo, font styles and colours already set up.

Open Word and select "Templates" in the ribbon.

DIA logos

Request DIA logos from the [Design and Channels Team](#).

[Download the Visual Identity Guide](#) for instructions on using the DIA logo.

Why proofreading is important

I cnduo't bvlieie taht I culod aulacly uesdtannrd waht I was rdnaieg. Unisg the icndeblire pweor of the hmuan mnid, aocdcrnig to rsecrah at Cmabrigde Uinervtisy, it dseno't mtttaer in waht oderr the lterets in a wrod are, the olny irpoamtnt tihng is taht the frsit and lsat ltteer be in the rhgit pclae. The rset can be a taotl mses and you can sitll raed it whoutit a pboerlm. Tihs is bucseae the huamn mnid deos not raed ervey ltteer by istlef, but the wrod as a wlohe. Aaznmig, huh? Yaeh and I awlyas tghhuot slelinpg was ipmorantt! See if yuor fdreins can raed tihs too.

Style Guide

Addresses

New Zealand Post prefers no full stops, commas or spaces between numbers in addresses:

Correct	Incorrect
PO Box 16100	P.O. Box 16 100,
Private Bag 1666	Private Bag 16 66
DX Box SR51201	DX Box SR 51201
Exception: Use “R D” not “RD” for Rural Delivery to avoid confusion with the abbreviation for road (Rd)	

New Zealand Post prefers street number ranges are not used. Use the first number only:

Correct	Incorrect
45 Pipitea Street	45-47 Pipitea Street

Use a postcode at the end of towns or cities. Addresses without postcodes can cause delivery delays.

Web addresses and emails

Don't underline website and email addresses on printed material

- Though Word inserts underlines automatically, remove this function by right clicking on them and selecting “Remove Hyperlink”.
- Only use underline in electronic Word documents
- If a website or email address ends a sentence, use a fullstop as normal.

Don't use http:// if there is a www in the website address.

Correct	Incorrect
www.dia.govt.nz	http://www.dia.govt.nz
dia.govt.nz	

Age and gender

Age

Reference people by their age range, not age group.

Correct	Incorrect
Children aged 5 and younger	The under 5s
People aged from 13 to 19	Teenagers
People aged 20 and older	The over 20s
Older people, people in later life	The over 60s

Gender

Use terms that are gender neutral.

Correct	Incorrect
They	He or she
Artificial	Manmade
Staff the phones	Man the phones
Workforce	Workmen

Apostrophes

Possessive apostrophes – something belongs to someone or something. If something belongs to one person, then put the apostrophe before the “s”.

Correct	Incorrect
The Minister’s portfolio	The Ministers portfolio The Ministers’ portfolio

Contraction apostrophes – shows letters are missing

The apostrophe replaces the missing letters when two words are written as one word, eg, I’m, you’ve, he’ll, she’d, hasn’t

Don’t use an apostrophe in plurals, unless something belongs to that plural

- Plurals that aren’t owners, like FAQs
- Decades that aren’t owners, like the 1990s
- Made up words, like ifs and buts, and Ps and Qs

Acronyms with plural apostrophes

The same rules apply as to normal words

Brackets

Round brackets

Use round brackets () to add definition, clarification or comment. They also help to break up a long sentence and minimise overusing commas. Don't use brackets within brackets – use commas or en dashes (not hyphens). Type an en dash by holding the Ctrl button and the minus key on the number pad on your keyboard.

Square brackets

Only use in quotations to add clarity to somebody's quote or to avoid confusion:

- “Though I live in Petone, I am originally from Mt Cook [Wellington]”
- Do not use angle < > or curly brackets { }

Bulletpoints

When we're writing a list, we:

- Start with a stem sentence that all the list items have in common
- Use capital letters, with no full stops at the end
- Sometimes use “and” or “or” on the second-to-last item
- Check that each list item makes a full sentence with the stem

If a list has no stem sentence, each step should start with a capital letter with no full stop at the end.

- Each point is at least one full sentence
- Each point begins with a capital letter
- Each point ends with a full stop

If you need a list within a list:

- Use en dashes – hold down CTRL key and press minus key on number pad – rather than another set of bullet points
- Never mix styles of bullet within a list

Capital letters

Capitalise proper nouns only

Proper nouns are people and place names. If a noun is plural or preceded by “a” or “an”, it is not a proper noun.

Capitalise job titles and locations when referring to a named person or place

Give the name of the person or place the first time you refer to them.

Use lower case for job titles and locations in subsequent references to the same person or place.

Example:

- Jenny Smith, Senior Advisor – then the senior adviser

Government

Use uppercase when referring to the Government of the day.

Correct	Incorrect
The Government will release its budget today	The government will release its budget today

- The Crown
- Parliament
- The House (of Representatives)
- The Cabinet
- An Act
- A Bill
- A Budget
- A Minister

If in doubt, don't capitalise

Capitalising a word or term does not make it more important – it only makes it harder to read.

Commas

Commas group and separate words, phrases and clauses to make the meaning of their sentences clear.

Use commas only for clarity

If the meaning of a sentence would be clear without commas, don't use them.

Separate each item in a simple list with a comma, except the last two items

“And” does the work of a comma at the end of a list.

Correct	Incorrect
My favourite sandwiches are chicken and avocado	My favourite sandwiches are chicken, and avocado

Add a comma before the final “and” for clarity

If the list is too complex to make clear with commas, you should rewrite the list or turn it into a bulleted list.

Correct	Incorrect
My favourite sandwiches are chicken and avocado, bacon, lettuce and tomato, and pastrami, cheese and pickle on rye.	My favourite sandwiches are chicken and avocado, bacon, lettuce and tomato and pastrami, cheese and pickle on rye.

My favourite sandwiches are:

- Chicken and avocado
- Bacon, lettuce and tomato
- Pastrami, cheese and pickle on rye

Use commas to separate information that is not essential to the meaning

Separate a phrase or clause when the sentence would have the same meaning with or without that information.

Example:

- Mary, who has two young children, has a part-time job
- Mary has a part-time job as a teacher’s aide

Use colons before and after quoted speech

A comma before the first quotation marks introduces quoted speech.

Examples:

- He said, “Tomorrow we’ll go to the cafe.”
- “I’ll be there at one,” said Mavis.

Don’t use a comma after direct speech that ends with an exclamation or question mark

“Did you see that?” he asked.

Contractions

Its and it's

“It’s” is a shortened form of “it is”

Correct	Incorrect
It’s one of the remaining salt marshes	Its one of the remaining salt marshes

“Its” is a possessive form and denotes something belonging to “it”

Correct	Incorrect
The Select Committee will vote at its next meeting	The Select Committee will vote at it’s next meeting

Dashes

Use an en dash (–) when breaking up a sentence. Always leave a space before and after the en dash. Create an en dash by holding Ctrl and pressing the minus symbol of the number pad.

Don’t use hyphens (-) in this context and never use em dashes (—) because they are a USA standard.

Dates and time

Write dates in full and day, month and year order

Correct	Incorrect
11 November 2011	November 11 2011
Wednesday 25 June 2014	Wed 25 Jun 14
25 June	25th of June

Financial year vs calendar year

Use a forward slash for financial years (include the words “financial year”).

Use a hyphen when writing about a period of two years.

Correct	Incorrect
2014/15 financial year	2014-2015 financial year
The years 2014-15	The years 2014/15

Use the 12 hour clock

Write “am” and “pm” in lower case, with no full stops or space after the hour.

Use a full stop, not a colon, between the hour and minutes.

Don’t include minutes when they aren’t needed.

Correct	Incorrect
5pm	5.00pm , 5:pm, 5 P.M. 17:00
12noon	12.00pm

Show start and end times in full

Use “to” to separate date ranges in proper sentences.

Use a dash in tables, graphs, infographics or incomplete sentence.

Sentences	Graphs, tables, etc
6am to 9am	6-9am
6am to 7.30pm	6am–7.30pm

Ellipses

Ellipses indicate more information before or after a sentence:

Correct	Incorrect
If indicating more information after a sentence, place the ellipses at the end of the sentence with no gap... Then have a space before starting the next sentence.	If indicating more information after a sentence, place the ellipses at the end of the sentence with no gap ... Then have a space before starting the next sentence.
...If indicating more information before a sentence, place the ellipses at the beginning of the sentence with no gap (have a space before the start of the ellipses).	... If indicating more information before a sentence, place the ellipses at the beginning of the sentence with no gap (have a space before the start of the ellipses).

Don’t place a fullstop after an ellipses:

Correct	Incorrect
Don’t place a fullstop after ellipses...	Don’t place a fullstop after ellipses....

Footnotes and references

Don’t use footnotes to add information

Add the information to the main content or leave it out.

Don’t use footnotes in web content

Use links instead. Footnotes in print work in a similar way to links in web content.

Reference the sources of your information

Include enough information in each reference for our customers to identify and retrieve your source.

For more about references, see the American Psychological Association style for references (American Psychological Association website).

Acknowledge your source in the main content

Acknowledge your source whether you are paraphrasing or quoting directly.

Examples:

- “... can be viewed as the catalyst for an emerging analysis of practices” (Smith 2016, p288)
- Smith says that the events can be viewed as the catalyst for an emerging analysis of practices (Smith 2016, p288)

Fullstops

Use fullstops at the end of sentences in the main content only

Don't use fullstops in page names, photo captions, headings, subheadings, bullet points or initials.

Use fullstops after web addresses if they are at the end of a sentence.

Hyphens

Hyphens are used to join:

- Separate words in compound words
- Prefixes and suffixes to words

Avoid using hyphens in compound words

The trend is to minimise punctuation that isn't critical. Only use hyphens if the meaning would be unclear without them.

Write compound words as one word

Many compound words can be written as one word – without a hyphen.

Correct	Incorrect
Online, broadband	On-line, broad-band

Try leaving separate words separate instead of hyphenating them

If a compound word can't be written as one word, try writing it as separate words without a hyphen.

- 3 dimensional, full time, long service, long term, up to date

Join prefixes and suffixes directly to words

Prefixes and suffixes are increasingly joined directly to other words. See how e-mail became email.

- Childlike
- Egovernment
- Enewsletter
- Socioeconomic
- Sublevel
- Email

Exceptions:

Use a hyphen to separate a prefix from a name used as an adjective, or from a numeral – post-Freudian, pre-1990.

Use hyphens to avoid confusion with another word

Re-cover, recover

Jargon, initials and acronyms

Avoid using jargon, initials and acronyms

Don't assume that our customers understand our jargon and acronyms. Explain it in plain English.

Use a term in full instead of its initials or acronym

Use part of the full term after its first use.

Examples:

- Department of Internal Affairs – then the department
- Ministry of Education – then the Ministry

Write an acronym that can be read as a word with an initial capital letter followed by lower case letters.

Example:

- Nasa

Write a plain English equivalent to a legal or technical document

In the plain English equivalent, give just enough information for our customers to act.

Support this information with the full story in plain English, separately, for customers who need it.

Make the original document available as the “fine print”.

Use “must” if a requirement is mandatory

Refer or link to information about the penalty for not meeting it.

Example:

- Your employer must pay you at least the minimum wage.

Use “need” if a requirement is administrative

An administrative requirement has no penalty in law for not meeting it.

Refer or link to information about any cost associated with not meeting the requirement.

Example:

- You’ll need to provide a copy of your birth certificate.

Latin forms (eg, ie, etc)

Place a comma before and after a Latin form without using use fullstops. Don’t use “etc” if there’s an “eg” before it in the sentence

Correct	Incorrect
The letter should state what type of school, eg, primary or secondary, the continuing school would be	The letter should state what type of school e.g. primary or secondary, the continuing school would be etc

Legal term abbreviations

Long form	Abbreviation
section	s 1, s 9(2)(a)
subsection	subs (1)
paragraph	para (a), paras (a) and (b)
subparagraph	subpara (i)
clause	clause 1
regulations	reg 234, regs 65-7

Measurements

Generally abbreviate commonly used measurements, with no space between number and measurement:

Correct	Incorrect
100km	100km/h
10cm	10 cm, 10 centimetres
80%	80 percent, 80 per cent, 80 %, 80.0%
10°C	10 degrees Celsius
Correct	Incorrect

Generally don't abbreviate less common measurements:

Correct	Incorrect
66 hectares	66ha
13 kilojoules	13kJ

Financial measurements

Correct	Incorrect
\$5 million (use in sentences)	\$5million, \$5.0 million
\$5m (use in tables and graphs)	\$5M, \$5 m

Numbers

Write numbers in full from one to nine in proper sentences (this only applies to writing for print).

Use numerals only in graphs, tables and infographics.

Exception:

- If a number begins a sentence, page name, image title, or subheading, write the number out in full. Or try to reword the text so it doesn't begin with a number.

Don't use superscript

Correct	Incorrect
21st	21 st

Writing number ranges

Correct	Incorrect
From 14 to 21 (in sentences)	From 14-21
14-21 (in graphs, tables and infographics)	

Units and currency

In main text	In graphs, tables and infographics
\$43 million (in full)	\$43m
\$43m (when using often in main text)	

International currencies

NZ\$100, AU\$100, US\$100, etc.

Use a comma to separate thousands

\$1,012.65

Official titles

Title	Refer to as	Begin letters with
Ministers	Hon Peter Dunne, MP	Dear Minister Dunne
Prime Minister	Rt Hon John Key	Dear Prime Minister
Governor-General	His/Her Excellency the Governor-General	Your Excellency
Knights	Sir Edmund Hillary	Dear Sir Edmund
Dames	Dame Augusta Wallace	Dear Dame Augusta
Ambassador	Your Excellency or Ambassador	Your Excellency or Dear Ambassador
Mayors	The Mayor of Auckland	Dear Mayor or Dear Len Brown (“Your Worship” is considered archaic and individual Mayors usually make it known how they wish to be styled)
High Court Judges	The Hon Justice Allen	Dear Judge or Dear Sir
	The Hon Justice Cartwright	Dear Judge or Dear Madam
Chief Justice	The Chief Justice, Dame Sian Elias	Dear Chief Justice
Councillors	Councillor John Pertwee	Dear Mr Pertwee

Organisation and company names

Organisations should always be spelled as they want to be spelled.

Organisation names can be written in full first, with the accepted abbreviation in brackets. The abbreviation is used from then on, for example “the Department of Internal Affairs (DIA)”, then “DIA”.

Write from the DIA’s viewpoint

Use the first person plural. You are representing the DIA, not yourself.

Correct	Incorrect
The Ministry believes its purpose is to “Lift aspiration, raise educational achievement for every New Zealander”	I believe our purpose is to “Lift aspiration, raise educational achievement for every New Zealander”
We believe our purpose is to “Lift aspiration, raise educational achievement for every New Zealander”	

Place names

Refer to all place names by their official names. For information on official names, see the [LINZ website’s Gazetteer of place names](#).

Page number references

Correct	Incorrect
p43	p 43
p43-44	pp 43-44

Phone numbers

National and international format

Domestic – 01 234 5678. Do not use dashes to separate numbers.

International – +64 1 234 5678.

0800 numbers – 0800 123 456.

Show numbers in brackets for word numbers

0508 FAMILY (326 459)

Use the word “phone” for landlines and “mobile” for cellphone numbers

Don’t use a colon after “phone” or “mobile”.

Examples:

- Phone +64 4 123 4567
- Mobile +64 21 234 5678

Plain English

The DIA’s style is to write in plain English.

Plain English means that something can be instantly understood and meets the needs of its audience. It is achieved by using language, structure and design so clearly and effectively that the audience has the best possible chance of readily finding what they need, understanding it and using it.

Add the [Word Readability Index](#) to your Word and Outlook ribbons.

Use language that our customers will understand

Avoid language that is bureaucratic, academic, wordy or imprecise.

Use everyday terms instead, eg:

Use	Avoid
with	accompanying
extra	additional
promote, encourage	advance
helpful, useful	advantageous

Quotation marks

Use “double quotation” marks. Use ‘single quotation’ for quotes within quotes.

Correct	Incorrect
“Getting an online passport was ‘super easy,’” says John Smith.	‘Students love becoming “data detectives”. It helps them engage with statistics,’ says John Smith.

Don’t use quotation marks for the titles of publications

Use *italics* instead.

Semicolons

Do not separate sentences with semicolons – rewrite the sentences using fullstops, commas or en dashes:

Correct	Incorrect
Do not separate sentences with semicolons – rewrite them to include fullstops or en dashes. Do not separate sentences with semicolons. It’s better to rewrite them to include fullstops or en dashes. Do not separate sentences with semicolons, as it’s better to rewrite them to include fullstops or en dashes.	Do not separate sentences with semicolons; rewrite them to include fullstops commas or en dashes.

Use a bulleted list to differentiate items in a complex sentence instead of using semicolons.

Sentence spacing

Use single spaces between sentences. Don’t use double spaces.

Double spacing was a necessary practice based on the limitations of typewriters, specifically typewriter fonts.

Typewriter fonts are monospaced, which means that every letter, whether it’s a wide letter such as “m” or a narrow letter like “i”, takes up the same amount of space. This makes for very open-looking spacing, so the convention of adding an extra space between sentences was established to achieve a noticeable separation between sentences.

Conversely, nearly all computer fonts (except Courier) have proportional spacing, which means that the width of the characters and the spacing surrounding them are in proportion to each other. Proportional spacing results in a more even, balanced appearance. Because of this, a single space is enough to create the necessary visual separation between sentences.

Shortened words

Always use words in full in sentences, headings, captions, etc.

Exceptions include for tables, graphs and charts (eg, Mon, Tue, Nov, Dec).

Correct	Incorrect
For more information, contact...	For more info, contact...

Spelling

Set you spellcheck in Word to New Zealand English.

Anti-money laundering
Apostille (uppercase)
Bicultural/Multicultural
Cashflow
Cooperate, coordinate
Crown (uppercase)

e-Apostille
ePassport
Email
Helpdesk
Mailout
Nationwide

Online
Subheading
Videoconference
Webpage
Website
Workplace

Writing for web

People do not read content on the web the same way they read print; they scan and skim read. On average, our customers read only a quarter of the words on a web page – if they stop to read it at all.

The first 7 words of a heading, a link or a navigation label should include the information the customer needs to decide if they want to use that content.

Structure content on 3 levels

This makes it easy for our customers to use it.

1. “Just enough” content at the surface for customers to act.
2. The “full story” below that, for customers who need it.
3. Include “fine print” below that. Fine print can be content we need to publish or links to policy or other documents.

Page name

Make page names, unique – the meaning of the page name must be clear to people with no knowledge of the subject.

Make page names 4 to 10 words

Don't use short words in names and titles

Use plain English in page names – don't use jargon, initials, acronyms, or abbreviations.

Page summaries

Summaries immediately tell readers who the content is for and what they can do with it.

Write a page summary that can double up as the metadescription (see below).

Metadescription

Search engines (eg, Google) sometimes use the metadescription to provide information snippets about a site that they can match with search queries. Only the first 100 characters including spaces will be displayed in the search result, so your description or summary needs to be concise and understandable.

Use subheadings

Subheadings structure content for customers, helping them find what they need.

Make subheadings specific and unique

Each subheading occurs only once on a page.

Make subheadings meaningful to customers

Writing paragraphs and sentences

Give each topic its own paragraph.

Aim for 7 paragraphs on a page.

Make sentences about 12 to 15 words.

Writing numbers

Write Zero and One as words.

Write from number 2 onwards as numerals.

If a sentence starts with a number then it needs to be written as a word.

Lists – numbered and bulleted

Bulleted lists can make content easier to understand.

Bulleted lists summarise points that don't have a necessary order.

Numbered lists order points in a sequence, like steps in a process.

Use an opening statements before a list (as above).

Tables

Tables display information in 2 or more columns and rows.

Make tables no more than 7 rows

If a table has more than 7 rows, chunk the information in to separate tables.

Give each column a heading and use correct table heading styles.

Anchor links

Anchor, or “jump” links act like a table of contents at the top of a webpage. They link to the subheadings on the page and help our audience work out if the content they want is on the page.

Images, infographics or diagrams

Use meaningful images

Images should include useful information and enhance understanding of the surrounding text, rather than be used simply for decoration.

Provide “alt text” (a short text description) for each image to enable accessibility. The text should stand alone as a description of the image.

Get permission to use every photo

We must have permission to publish a photo on the web.

Links

Link only to content that is directly relevant to the page's content.

Using too many links is distracting and weakens the page's message.

Don't use "click here" or "find out more".

Use meaningful and instructive links at the start of the sentence.

Example:

- [Download the application form](#) and contact us with any questions

When linking to another page or document use "webpage name" or the "name of a document"

Example:

- For privacy legislation, go to Privacy Act 1993 (New Zealand Legislation website).

Use email addresses as link text for email links

- Example: help@dia.govt.nz

Useful resources

Jargone

Jargone is a web tool that highlights jargon in text content on a web page. It's based on a list of words identified by the UK's Government Digital Service.

To find out how to install the tool, open Google Chrome and go to the Jargone tool at

<https://github.com/rooreynolds/jargone>.