Submission from Ragg & Co

Associate Professor Megan Williams and I have provided a submission (through our company Yulang Indigenous Evaluation) that examines the content of the draft strategy. This submission contains comments on the wording and design of the draft strategy. I make this submission because of concerns about the uptake of the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy, when complete.

By way of background, although my recent work is largely in research, for many years I worked as a communications consultant with governments and agencies to shape policies and strategies.

In summary, I feel the potential of the draft strategy will not be fulfilled unless significant changes are made to the presentation of the content. In draft form, the text is often unclear, and the design and layout compound the lack of clarity. The strategy offers a tremendous opportunity to make structural change that will advance the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and every effort should be made to ensure its implementation.

I would be very happy to work with the Commission to rectify these issues and to present the strategy in a manner such that it can be easily read and implemented by its target audience. If you would like to discuss this further, please let me know.

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Best practice

The best publications follow the following principles:
- words are clear and have only one meaning in the context
- words are chosen with an awareness of other meanings and associations
- there is a logical flow to the text that leads to understanding
- the hierarchy of headings is used to help readers navigate and understand the text
- individual design elements signify something unique, and the combination of design elements help guide the reader towards fuller understanding.

But there are a number of issues with the draft strategy, as currently written and designed, that don't follow best practice.

Headings are unclear
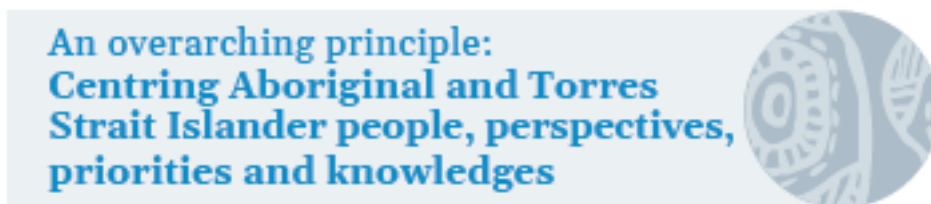
This combined heading/graphic looks good in isolation. But as an element of a document, it is confusing. Even as an experienced reader, it took me multiple readings to see that it operated as a level 2 heading, rather than simply an illustration.

It would be easier to read if the principle was simply treated as level 2 heading, with the icon used as an illustration, rather than as part of the heading.

The heading hierarchy is unclear

In the document, this is a level 1 heading

.

Introduction

And this is a level 2 heading.

What is evaluation and why evaluate?

The two are too similar. The reader needs to look closely to understand the importance of the heading.

Subheads contain a mix of fonts weights

The text below starts at a regular weight then moves to bold.

Action 1: Agencies should systematically identify evaluation priorities and publish evaluation forward work plans

It is rare for subheads to use a mix of weights. The few times I have seen it done, the bold comes before regular, not after. This has no purpose, impairs easy understanding and looks unprofessional.

The design diminishes the power of submissions

The design offers prominence to pull-quotes, as they are known. This can be done simply to improve readability by creating white space, or it can be used to highlight that an agency hear those who have made submissions.

In this case, using pull-quotes to showcase submissions would serve and dual purpose, and should be effective.

The first example is from a submission, and reflects a conscious effort from a member of the public to engage with the Commission, and showcases the Commission's willingness to listen.

> We need to know what is working and if policy and programs which apply to Indigenous individuals, families and communities are having an impact. We also want greater insight into why policy or program implementation is not effective, and we need early opportunities for correction or reinvestment of funds and effort to ensure that funding is directed to where it is needed most.
>
> Empowered Communities (2019, p. 5)

However the next quote from the Minister, but it was not made in response to or about evaluation.

> It's time that all governments took better steps to empower individuals and communities, and work in partnership to develop practical and long lasting programmes and policies that both address the needs of Indigenous Australians and ensure that Indigenous voices are heard as equally as any other Australian voice.
>
> Ken Wyatt, Minister for Indigenous Australians (2019)

The two are conceptually different – one is directly about evaluation in a submission to the Commission, and the other is not about evaluation, and not directed to the Commission.

In treating the two quotes the same, the design diminishes the importance to the Commission of submissions. Submissions become just another form of words to be drawn on, rather than something to be given primacy.

I suggest that pull-quotes be reserved for submissions only. Any other quotes should be absorbed into the body of the text.

Similar text is treated differently

The Strategy has been developed at a time when relationships between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are changing.

The historic Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap sees Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives sitting at the table with ministers from all Australian governments. The Agreement 'embodies the belief of all its signatories that shared decision making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled representatives in the design, implementation and monitoring of the Closing the Gap framework is essential to achieve their shared goal to close the gap in life outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians' (JCOCTG 2019, p. 2).

The paragraph in blue, like other paragraphs in blue, reads as ordinary text that flows naturally into the next paragraph, which is in a smaller font and in black. It has no different purpose to that of the black paragraphs.

If the blue paragraphs are meant to operate as subheadings, they are far too long. And sub-headings don't have full stops.

The paragraphs in blue should be treated as normal text – smaller font and black, like the other body text.

There are too many random elements

For example, look to the top of page 6.

There are four reasons for an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy:

And at the top of page 7.

Figure 1. The objective of the Strategy is to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

The words 'There are four reasons for an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy' appears in the light ochre colour. It is not a heading – it is simply body text. That same light ochre is used as the heading for figures and tables. That is confusing.

Heading case is inconsistent

Most heading and sub-heads use sentence case (initial capital only), which is best practice. Yet table 6 capitalises each word – 'Priority Policy Areas' etc.

Colours don't work

The light ochre works well in the artwork, but does not work as a heading or in text. It is too light. A darker shade will make it more noticeable.

Illustrations don't work

Figure 2 lacks logic – the first word you see in the diagram is 'Centring', but it is placed at the top of the diagram, not the centre. Having something discussing centring at the periphery of a diagram causes confusion.

Linking the principles and the objective would make more sense if the actions were included. Without them, it is better to have principles on their own.

Language is loose at times

There is a lack of clarity around some of the concepts. For example, the overarching principle is said to be at the core of the strategy (see p. 10). It is confusing to say something is both overarching and central.

The implementation timeline (p. 30) contains both priorities and actions. It should contain only actions that can be implemented.

The section starting on page 23 is headed 'Actions to support an evaluation culture'. It is not clear why the actions support an evaluation culture, rather than being actions that are part of the strategy.

Table 6 concerns 'Proposed interim government-wide evaluation priority areas'. This is difficult to understand, partly due to its presentation. For example, the text 'Based on draft priorities …' should be under the table, or as a footnote. The chapter heading uses 'evaluation priorities', but the table that comprises most of the chapter uses 'evaluation priority areas'. The three main headings use 'priority policy areas', 'cross system priority (singular)' and 'priority reform areas'. There is too much overlap and not enough clarity around these headings. And it is not clear why the entry on data is not to be 'proposed' – the entire table is 'proposed'.

Surprises

At times, the document springs surprises. For example, tables 1–5 are based around four phrases – what to evaluate, evaluation planning and design, reporting evaluation findings, and building capability and a culture of evaluation – those four phrases don't appear consistently anywhere else in the strategy.

They are not explained. Are they stages in a process? It is not clear why such a grouping has been used.

The language across the four elements should have a similar structure. Changing 'what to evaluate' to 'deciding what to evaluate' would achieve this.

Summary

All these issues detract from the authority of the text. They could all be fixed readily by having an editor who works with the Commission to refine the text, then when the text is approved, becomes the liaison between the designer and the author. This approach is recommended by the Australian Government's Style Manual.

Figure 1: Publishing process relationships

This is standard practice in many organisations. I have carried out such work with many federal and state departments and agencies over the past 20 years.

Following is a high-level description of the workflow.

Table 1: Publishing workflow

Stage	Task	Notes
Finalise text	Editor works with Commission staff, preferably one contact, to ensure that the text is clear to non-experts, and that it reflects the wishes of the Commissioner	This is an iterative process involving multiple drafts
	Commissioner (or other executive member with delegated authority) recommends changes until satisfied, then approves text	
Develop illustrations and tables	Editor works with Commission staff and designer to ensure the illustrations and tables are clear to non-experts, and that they reflect the wishes of the Commissioner	This is an iterative process involving multiple drafts
Lay out report	Editor manages the layout of the text and illustrations, keeping Commission staff informed of progress	This is an iterative process involving multiple drafts
	Commissioner (or other executive member with delegated authority) recommends changes until satisfied, then approves report	