A quick guide to writing at the Productivity Commission

Productivity Commission papers and reports should make compelling arguments based on sound evidence in clear, direct language. Our work should be rigorous, objective and withstand the scrutiny of professional economists and other experts. But it should also be accessible to a broader audience, including policy officials in government departments, Ministers and their advisers, journalists, academics and members of the public.

Well-written papers and reports are more likely to be read and implemented. They are more likely to influence governments and contribute to academic and public debate. They may even be a pleasure to read.

This document is a quick guide to writing at the Commission. If you have a specific question, start by consulting this quick guide, the Australian Government Style Manual or the Macquarie Dictionary.

You can also consult your team's 'style czar' or email the style guide working group (styleguide@pc.gov.au).

Australian Government Style Manual

The Productivity Commission uses the Australian Government Style Manual (the style manual). The style manual is updated regularly by a group of experts and is designed to help writers to create content that is clear and accessible to the community.

It has detailed guidance not only on grammar and punctuation, but also structure, how to write in plain language, and how to use inclusive language.

The rest of this quick guide provides an overview of the style manual and some Commission-specific rules and guidance. Add the style manual to your browser as a favourite and consult it regularly.

Departures from the style manual

The Commission has a few minor departures from the style manual:

- Capitals: When referring to the Productivity Commission in a shortened form, write 'the Commission' with a capital C, rather than 'the commission'.
- Numerals: Use words for whole numbers between one and nine. For example, 'there were nine cows, 10 goats and 17 sheep'.
- Block quotes: If the lead-in sentence is a fragment, use a colon. If the lead-in sentence is a full sentence, use a full stop.
- When a general reference is appropriate, write 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people', not 'peoples'.

We aim to keep this list as short as possible to avoid confusion and inconsistencies between reports.

Changes to the Commission's style

- Use en dashes, both for ranges and for punctuation, not em dashes.
- Use a comma for numbers over 1,000, not non-breaking spaces.
- Use % symbol, not 'per cent'.
- Use 'data' in the singular – 'the data **is** clear' not 'the data **are** clear'.
- Only capitalise the names of Australian or state and territory governments when used as a formal name (the 'Australian Government' and the 'Victorian Government'). Do not use capitals in other cases.

Tone

Government and academic writing is often criticised for being dense, dull and difficult to read. Productivity Commission reports should generally be written in a formal tone – they should not be chatty, breezy, jokey or glib – but they should be clear, accessible and as easy to read as the subject matter allows.

Not all Commission papers need to have the same tone. Early papers – such as issues papers and calls for submissions – can be less formal than the final report. Tone can also be adjusted to meet the needs of a particular audience.

Tone can also be subtly adjusted for different parts of the same paper or report. Overviews, introductions and summary points, for example, might be a little less formal and more plain and direct than other more detailed or technical parts of the document.

See the end of this guide for some tips for writing lively prose and the section about voice and tone in the style manual.

Length

Getting the length of our reports right is one of the most important challenges to writing at the Commission. There are many advantages to keeping a report short and focused. Other things being equal, short reports are more likely to be read than long ones. They are also easier to review and discuss in teams and by Commissioners, and therefore easier to improve and refine. Mistakes are also more likely to be found and corrected in a short report.

Our reports should not, however, be written like newspaper articles. Supporting evidence and arguments and the views of participants all need to be presented, and counter-arguments will often need to be addressed. The Commission's processes and reasoning should be transparent. Furthermore, many topics given to the Commission are inherently complex and technical, and our expertise is not sought merely to produce high-level overviews of a topic.

Given these competing considerations, getting the length of a report right can be difficult. But take pride in editing and refining your work so that it is not only thorough, clear and compelling, but also no longer than it needs to be. If mountains of research and notes can be neatly encapsulated in a few clear sentences, readers will be grateful.

Structure

Reports should usually start with an overview and chapters should start with a list of key points. The overview and key points should each stand alone and provide a clear exposition of the findings and recommendations, rather than merely signal what will be discussed later. Remember, many readers might only read these parts of the report.

It is sometimes useful to start individual sections within a chapter with a paragraph about the conclusion reached in that section – that is, tell your readers what you've concluded, and the strongest arguments for that conclusion, before you set out the supporting arguments in detail.

In other words, get to the point. Don't bury the good stuff at the back of your chapter or repeatedly signal what you plan to say before you actually say it.

For guidance about structuring your work, read about developing message-based structures and the section about structure in the style manual. A message-based structure can be thought of as an inverted pyramid, with an overview, key points or other important information coming first, and progressively more detail further below. This structure makes it easier for readers to choose the level of detail they want.

The Commission's inquiries manual also has guidance on what Commission reports and papers should generally look like, and some alternative options to consider.

Headings

Headings should be short, clear and use keywords. They should usually be about the substance of the subject matter, rather than generic labels such as 'background'.

Try to use only three levels of heading: Level 1 for the chapter title and levels 2 and 3 for headings within a chapter. Readers can get lost when there are too few or too many heading levels.

Remember:

- Use the sentence case and minimal punctuation (no full stop at the end).
- Same-level headings should have the same grammatical form.
- Headings should usually stand alone, although occasionally two heading can be part of the one sentence, separated by an ellipsis (if the headings are not too far apart). Do not overuse ellipses.
- Do not skip heading levels.

When drafting, you may like to use more headings than you will need in the final product. These workings headings can help you structure your work, refine your overall argument, and improve the flow.

Inclusive language

See the style manual for guidance on how to use inclusive language, including how to write respectfully about people with disability and how to use language that is respectful of cultural, sexual and gender diversity.

Also see the Commission's Indigenous capability hub for guidance, based on the style manual, about how to write about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Remember:

- Consultation is key. If unsure, ask.
- Use empowering, strengths-based language and do not be use patronising or paternalistic language.
- Try to be specific. If writing about a particular group, use their nation, island or community name.
- When a more general reference is needed, use 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people' (not 'peoples').

How to refer to the Commission and participants

- Write the 'Productivity Commission' in full the first time it is used in each chapter, and thereafter simply 'the Commission' (unless repeating the full version is more clear). There is no need to set-up the short version – that is, no need to write, 'The Productivity Commission (the Commission) …'
- Where required, sources for figures and tables should be 'Productivity Commission estimates', not 'Commission estimates', to prevent confusion for readers.
- Take care when you refer to two different commissions in a short space – for example, the Productivity Commission soon after a Royal Commission.

- In some papers, where a less formal tone is needed or there are lots of references to the Commission, 'we' or 'our' can sometimes be used. 'We welcome submissions from …'
- Phrases such as 'in the Commission's view' and 'the Commission considers' should be avoided as much as possible. They are long-winded and sound a little pompous.
- The people and organisations who write submissions and contribute to the work of the Productivity Commission should be referred to as 'participants', not 'stakeholders'. And they are participants 'in' an inquiry, not 'to' an inquiry.

Use tables, figures and charts

Use tables, figures and charts to present information that might be easier to understand in a visual format.

Use boxes for case studies and other background information that can stand alone and might otherwise interrupt or slow the main argument in the text.

Contact the Media, Publications and Web team for suggestions.

Referencing and footnotes

- Use the Harvard in-text referencing style and the software program Zotero.
- References should appear in text, not in a footnote, and usually at the end of a sentence or block quote. Footnotes for other text should be used sparingly.
- Try not to repeat in the text information that appears in a citation or the bibliography (such as the author and title of a paper), unless this information needs particular emphasis.

Avoid this	Consider this
In their paper, *On the Adequacy of Consultation in the Basin*, Smith et al argues that consultation has been inadequate (Smith 2020, p. 7).	Communities in the Basin have expressed concerns about the adequacy of consultation (Smith et al. 2020, p. 7).
In its 2021 report, *Murray–Darling Basin Water Markets Inquiry Final Report,* the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission noted that some market participants have said water ownership should be tied to land ownership (ACCC 2021, p. 8).	Some market participants have said water ownership should be tied to land ownership (ACCC 2021, p. 8).

For more guidance, see the referencing section of the Writing hub.

Punctuation

- Only one space after full stops and other punctuation.
- Use a comma after introductory words and phrases at the start of a sentence ('However**,** the evidence was overwhelming'; 'On that day, the member countries announced an embargo').
- Avoid the Oxford comma (the comma before 'and' in a list of words or phrases), unless using the comma will clear up an ambiguity.
- Use a colon to introduce a list of words, phrases or clauses (including a fragment list of bullet points) and place a full stop at the end of a sentence that leads into a sentence list. (See the section about lists below.)

- Use either a colon or a full stop before a block quote, depending on whether the first part of the quote is a full sentence.
- Use ‘smart quotes’ (the curly ones, not the straight ones).
- Not sure whether a word of phrase needs a hyphen? Check the dictionary, and if there are two options, choose the first – for example, co-locate, tax-free, policymakers, socio-economic.
- Use a non-breaking hyphens (ctrl+shift+keypad-) for financial years, to prevent ranges being split across lines.

For more guidance, see the section on punctuation in the style manual.

Lists

Fragment lists	Sentence lists
Fragment lists have a: • lead-in phrase or sentence followed by a colon • list of fragments, each marked by a bullet point.	There are different rules for sentence lists. • The lead-in sentence should be a full sentence that ends in a full stop. • Each list item should also start with a capital letter and end with a full stop.

Notice how each item in the fragment list does not make sense without the lead-in? For fragment lists, there is no capital letter in the first word of each item in the list. The fragments should also be short – usually just a few words. If you find each dot point is quite long, try to turn your fragment list into a sentence list.

For sentence lists, each item in the list is a complete sentence. So capital letter for the first word and a full stop at the end.

For more guidance, see the section about lists in the style manual.

Capitalisation

- Less is more. Too many capital letters can make text difficult to read.
- The Commission conducts ‘inquiries’ and writes ‘reports’, not ‘Inquiries’ and ‘Reports’.
- Use initial capitals for the Australian Government and the formal name of a state and territory governments (‘Australian Capital Territory’, ‘Victorian Government’), but lower case for generic or plural references (‘in the state’, ‘state and territory governments’, ‘the government recently announced’).
- In a sentence list, the first word of each item in the list should have a capital letter.
- In a fragment list, the first word of each item in the list should be in lower case.

For more guidance, see the style manual, including the section on government terms, with one exception: the Commission, when short for the Productivity Commission, should have a capital C.

Abbreviations and acronyms

- Avoid uncommon abbreviations and acronyms, particularly if you only need them a few times in a chapter – use the full term instead. But freely use widely known acronyms and abbreviations, such as the ABS.
- Spell out most acronyms the first time you use them in a chapter, but repeat the full term if you think it will help the reader (for example, if the acronym hasn’t been used for a few pages).

- Spell out the names of Australian states and territories in full ('New South Wales'), but use the shortened form when the name is used as an adjective (the WA Government) or space is limited (such as in figures or tables).
- Follow the same rule for countries: abbreviate when used as adjectives (UK production), but not as nouns (the United Kingdom).
- The following acronyms do not need to be spelled out, but they should be in the abbreviations list of each report in which the terms appear: ABS, CPI, CSIRO, GDP, IT, MP.
- Avoid Latin shortened forms, including i.e. and e.g. – write 'that is' and 'for example' instead.

For more guidance, see the acronyms section of the style manual.

Currency and numbers

- Where content is clearly only referencing Australian dollars, use '$', not 'A$'.
- Where it is unclear, and for other currencies, use the relevant currency symbol – for example, US$7, not the IBAN symbol.
- For less well-known currencies, use the full name of the currency before you use the symbol for the first time – for example, 'the minimum wage in Japan in 2023 is Japanese yen (¥) 901 per hour'.
- Round numbers to no more than one decimal place (7.6%).

See the numbers sections of the style manual, with one exception: use words for whole numbers from one to nine.

Commonly confused words and phrases

Affect and effect; alternate and alternative; advice and advise; that and which. The style manual discusses these and other commonly confused words and phrases. If in doubt, check the manual and the dictionary.

Myths

There are many myths about correct English, such as:

- Never split an infinitive.
- Never start a sentence with 'and' or 'but'.
- Never use the passive voice.
- Never end a sentence with a preposition.
- Never use verbs that have been repurposed from nouns.

When correcting the work of your colleagues, check the dictionary, a book about English usage, or the style manual to ensure you're not repeating a myth, and remember that how words are used changes over time.

Refine your work and welcome feedback

Review your writing with a critical eye and think about your audience. Revise your work often, delete unnecessary words and simplify your expression, so that your work is clear and informative. And regularly review and refine your structure and think about how your work fits into the rest of the report.

You may like to read your work aloud or ask a colleague or the computer to read it to you. If you suspect your work is too long, ask someone to help you cut it back.

It is also important to ask for comments and suggestions from your supervisor and colleagues – early and often. If you don't understand the feedback, ask for clarification.

Tips for writing clear and lively prose

Vary sentence length and structure

Avoid very long sentences – that is, sentences with more than 25 words – and vary the length and structure of your sentences.

Choose words carefully

Use short, concrete, familiar words. Prefer simple English expressions – for example, write 'among other things' rather than 'inter alia' and 'other things being equal' rather than ceteris paribus.

Avoid jargon, clichés and vogue terms. Full disclosure, corporate jargon might leverage your career going forward, but it doesn't make for best-in-class writing.

It will often be necessary to use at least some technical terms, but explain their meaning the first time you use them. If the term will be familiar to most readers and an explanation will be distracting, define the term in the glossary instead.

Avoid repetition and cut clutter

Delete anything that does not add value. Look out for tautologies (e.g. 'top of the summit', 'adequate enough'), empty modifiers ('*clearly*, this is *totally* and *utterly* unnecessary', '*very*', '*indeed*'), and wordy expressions that can be replaced with something short, clear and direct.

Also avoid excessive repetition and unnecessary detail and avoid repeating in text information that appears in tables, figures or the bibliography (see the referencing section above).

But don't go overboard in your editing zeal. Do not cut anything that might help your readers understand your argument, such as a helpful example. Remember, after spending months on an inquiry, you're likely to know more about the subject than many of your readers, so help them understand the topic as well as you do.

Avoid long strings of nouns and adjectives

Would you prefer to read about 'draft laboratory animal rights protection regulations' or 'draft regulations **to** protect **the** rights **of** laboratory animals'? What about 'long-term economic growth potential' or 'the potential **for** long-term economic growth'?

Noun trains or noun strings are common in academic and technical writing, but they are hard to understand, tiring for the reader, and usually not too much trouble to fix. In the examples above, the key words were rearranged and a few short words were added.

Turn dull abstract nouns into verbs

There's no need to rid your work of all abstract words, but replace dull abstract nouns with more lively verbs. Look out for nouns ending in -ion, -ition, -isation, -ibility, -ance, -ment.

Dull abstract nouns	Lively verbs
The *facilitation* of strategic implementation through the *utilization* of innovative methodologies promotes the *achievement* of organizational objectives.	Using new methods to implement strategies helps organisations reach their goals more effectively.
The reorganisation of the commission was effected as quickly as possible.	The commission *was reorganised* as quickly as possible.
A realisation among producers that *the provision of* services by existing organisations is inadequate is growing.	Producers *are realising* that existing organisations *do not provide* adequate services.

Prefer the active voice

Whether to use the active or passive voice is often a question of emphasis – whether to emphasise, in the first example below, the clown or the children. Sometimes it will be obvious or unimportant who, for example, made the mistakes or will table the report – in which case, use the passive voice.

But in most cases, the active voice will be more clear, direct and a little shorter. Sometimes it may even be crucial to use the active voice: recommendations in the passive voice, for example, can leave no one accountable for implementation.

Passive	Active
The children were terrified by the clown	The clown terrified the children
Mistakes were made	The agency made mistakes
The report will be tabled in Parliament in June.	The Minister will table the report in Parliament in June.
A recommendation was made by the inspectors that further consideration be given by the company to safety.	The inspectors recommended that the company further consider safety.

Resources

Key resources

- PC referencing guide – About how to reference and use Zotero.
- PC editing checklist – Use this to assist with editing your chapter before the report is finalised.
- Research, analysis and report drafting in the Commission's Inquiries Manual. Includes information about the different approaches to various Commission papers and reports, advice about research and drafting, and some more writing tips.
- Australian Government Style Manual – Follow this manual, except for the handful of exceptions set out at the beginning of this quick guide.
- Macquarie Dictionary – Use the online version for current spelling and word usage.

Other books and resources

- The Economist, *Style Guide, 2018*
- McCloskey, D.N. 1987, *The Writing of Economics*
- Dreyer, B, 2019, *Dreyer's English: An Utterly Correct Guide to Clarity and Style*
- Pinker, S, 2014, *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*
- James, N, 2007, *Writing at Work: How to write clearly, effectively and professionally*
- Butterfield, J. (ed.), 2015. Fowler's Dictionary of Modern English Usage, 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- American Heritage Dictionary

Hardcopies of some of these books are available in the library.

Software

There are many tools that can be used to improve your writing, but do not accept their suggestions uncritically. A good place to start is the editor function in Word, but the Commission is also exploring other tools.

Appendix – Formal, informal and academic tone

Formal – what we are aiming for	Informal – avoid	Academic – avoid
The integrated nature of the world economy has implications for how risk and uncertainty are spread. Disruption to production in one country affects others in the global supply chain and breakdowns in trade between two countries can have various implications for trading partners. Trade itself can spread some forms of disruption, particularly where it relates to biohazards or disease.	When countries are all connected in the global economy, it means that risks and surprises can spread around easily. If something goes wrong in one country, it can mess up the supply chain for everyone else. Even just two countries having problems with trade can cause issues for others. Plus, sometimes trade can spread bad stuff like biohazards or diseases.	The intricate interdependence of the global economic system entails significant consequences pertaining to the dissemination of risk and uncertainty. Disruptions in the production process within a given nation can reverberate throughout the international supply chain. Bilateral trade disruptions may engender multifaceted ramifications for associated trading entities. Furthermore, the act of trade can facilitate the propagation of certain forms of disturbance, most notably in cases involving biohazardous materials or the transmission of disease.
Tax concessions for philanthropic giving facilitate choice — a person or organisation, rather than the government, can direct their donation to their preferred cause. However, the government relinquishes some control over where public funds are directed when it provides tax support for philanthropic giving.	Tax breaks help people and groups have more choice when giving to charity. Basically, they can pick where their money goes, and the government isn't as much in control of where the cash ends up when they offer tax perks for donating.	Tax concessions additionally engender the diversification of decision-making authority, empowering individuals and organizations to allocate their financial contributions toward their preferred philanthropic objectives. The corollary of this is that this paradigm necessitates the government's partial abdication of control over the appropriation of public resources, as tax incentives are employed to bolster philanthropic endeavours.
Consumers are not always aware of the concerns around the authenticity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts and crafts. The information available in the market can make it difficult for them to make informed decisions. Although various measures, such as labelling, have sought to provide better information to consumers, these measures have had limited success.	When people buy Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and souvenirs, they might not always know about authenticity issues. With so much info out there, it's pretty hard for them to make well-informed choices. They've tried using labels to help people figure it out, but it hasn't been super successful.	The procurement of souvenirs and merchandise containing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts and crafts often occurs without full cognizance of the potential issues surrounding authenticity. The plethora of information present in the market can obfuscate the decision-making process for consumers, rendering it challenging to ascertain the veracity of such products. Despite the implementation of various measures, such as labelling systems, to ameliorate consumer awareness, the

Formal – what we are aiming for	Informal – avoid	Academic – avoid
		efficacy of these interventions remains limited.
A well-functioning consumer redress system is essential for the effective operation of consumer guarantees. It underpins consumer confidence and sends a signal to businesses about the need to comply with consumer laws. But in practice, consumers often find it difficult to exercise their rights under guarantees, particularly for higher-value products such as cars, electronics and white goods.	A good system for fixing customer complaints is really important for making sure customer guarantees actually work. It helps build trust between customers and businesses and reminds companies that they have to follow the rules. But, in real life, customers often have a tough time getting their rights under these guarantees, especially when it comes to more expensive things like cars, electronics, and fridges.	An optimally functioning consumer restitution framework is integral to the successful implementation of consumer warranty provisions. This structure bolsters consumer reliance and conveys a message to commercial entities regarding their imperative to comply with consumer protection legislation. However, in real-world situations, consumers regularly experience difficulties in exercising their entitlements under such warranties, particularly in relation to high-value items such as motor vehicles, electronic equipment, and major household appliances.