#

# Plain language writing guide

## Helping make our content easy to read and understand for everyone

### November 2021

# Acknowledgement of Country

This guide was written on the land of the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung people 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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# About the plain language guide

## Purpose

This plain language guide has been developed to make sure that all material produced by our organisation is consistent. It should be used by all staff.

If you need more information on a particular topic, please refer to the [Australian Government Style Manual](https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/). You will find specific references to the relevant page numbers in some sections of this guide.

We use Australian English (not American or UK English) and follow spelling, style and punctuation conventions listed in the online version of the [Macquarie dictionary](https://www.macquariedictionary.com.au/).

## Contact

If you need help with any writing or style issues email the Style Guide Committee. Also email the group if you would like to contribute to the guide, or to suggest a topic that is not covered.​​

# Plain language

Understand what writing in plain language is and why Victoria Legal Aid is committed to providing information that is easy to understand.

## Our commitment to plain language

* We want to effectively communicate our services and information about the law. It is important that our clients clearly understand what they are reading. Also, Rule 39 of the current lawyers' Professional Conduct and Practice Rules 2005 require that lawyers 'must communicate effectively' with their clients.
* Effective communication has to be clearly understood. This is why Victoria Legal Aid (Victoria Legal Aid) is committed to providing information in plain language. This is also sometimes called plain English.

## 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
* active voice
* short sentences
* using ‘you’ and ‘we’.
* These and more writing techniques are explained in [Plain language writing tips](#_Plain_language_writing).

## 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.

Key questions to ask yourself when planning a piece of content include:

* What level of education does your audience have?
* What level of English comprehension does your audience have?
* How much does your audience know about the subject?
* What do they need to know?
* What's the best way to organise ideas so that they make sense to the reader?

While Victoria Legal Aid 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. In addition, about a fifth of people who get a Victoria Legal Aid grant are not born in Australia and over a third are under 25 years old. There are clear links between these multiple levels of disadvantage and low literacy. Therefore if you are writing for this audience, it is important that you use plain language that is easy to understand.

# Plain language writing tips

Here are some plain language tips to help you write clearly:

* use short, simple, common words
* explain legal or difficult terms
* remove unnecessary words and be precise
* use short sentences
* use short paragraphs
* use an active voice
* use verbs instead of nouns derived from verbs
* use ‘you’ and ‘we’
* write positively
* keep tenses consistent
* use inclusive language
* use sex-neutral references
* those with diverse sexualities and gender identities​
* use Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
* references to other community groups.

## 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.

For some simple alternatives to complex words see [Simple words](#_Simple_words).

## 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'.

When writing for clients, it is better to assume that they have no prior knowledge of the law. Even though your clients may have heard the legal term before, this does not mean that they understand it. 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](http://www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/find-legal-answers/courts-and-legal-system/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.

or

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. For example:

* Avoid: ... until such time as the probation period ends.
* The same meaning can be conveyed much more simply as: ... until the probation period ends.

Other words to avoid are ‘said’ and ‘aforesaid’ and ‘being’, as in:

* Avoid: The defendant aforesaid ...
* Write: The defendant ...
* Avoid: A person who is 70 and over, being a person who has a driver’s licence
* Write: A person who is 70 and over and has a driver’s licence

The word ‘shall’ is also often used in legal writing. The word is appealing because it is flexible, but it can affect the clarity of what you are trying to say. You can be more precise by using:

* 'must’ when expressing obligation
* 'may’ for permission or discretion
* 'will’ for the future.

For example:

* Avoid: The parties shall forthwith take all necessary action to resolve the dispute.
* Write: The parties must immediately take all necessary action to resolve the dispute.

For more examples of plain language see [Simple words](#_Simple_words).

## 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**.

Consider this example from a list of definitions sent to our clients:

If you do not complete the community-based order or follow the lawful directions or requirements as provided by the court as it asks you to, or commit any offence then you will be in breach of your community-based order and be brought back to court to face the charges again as well as the charge of breaching the community-based order. (64 words)

All the information is here, but for many readers this would be extremely difficult to follow, especially those with low literacy. The sentence is too long. At 64 words, it is three times the recommended length.

The sentence is communicating four main points. They are:

1. If you fail to comply with a community-based order you may have to return to court.
2. If you commit another offence before you complete your community-based order you may have to return to court.
3. The court may re-sentence you on the original charge.
4. The court may sentence you for the breach of the community-based order.

Why not express the definition in three shorter sentences?

If you do not comply with the community-based order you will have to return to court. (17 words)

and

This also applies if you commit a crime before you complete the order. (13 words)

and

At court you may be re-sentenced on the original charge as well as the new charge of breaching the community-based order. (22 words)

Breaking it down to three sentences makes it easier to understand. The total of these three sentences is 49 words – 14 words less than the original sentence.

Another way to break up ideas is to use bulleted lists. These can draw the attention of the reader to the important points. For example:

You will be in breach of your community-based order if you:

* do not comply with the conditions of the order
* commit a crime before you complete the order.
* You may then have to go back to court. The court may re-sentence you on the original charges, as well as the new charge of breaching the community-based order.

For more information see **Bullet lists**in [Formatting and layout](#_Formatting_and_layout).

## Use short paragraphs

Like a good sentence, a good paragraph is short. Short paragraphs are less overwhelming for the reader. They help break up the text into easily understood chunks of information.

Particularly for online writing, or material for clients or low literacy readers, aim to make your paragraphs two to three sentences long. Have one idea per paragraph. Then you can introduce the idea in the first sentence, develop it in the second, and conclude it in the third.

It can help, where possible, to try to make your paragraphs even in length. Too much information is confusing and gives the impression that your writing is disorganised.

## 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 the example below, 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 above sentence would look like this:

The client was represented by the lawyer.

Sometimes the use of passive voice can create awkward sentences. A passive voice also can hide the subject, which reduces clarity and make it harder to understand. For example:

Passive: It has been decided that you should get a grant of legal assistance.

Active: We have decided to give you a grant of legal assistance.

Further information:*Commonwealth of Australia's Style manual for authors, editors and printers* (John Wiley & Sons 2002), pp. 54–55

## Use verbs instead of nouns derived from verbs

Verbs are the most important part of a sentence. They convey meaning with great efficiency. This is why ‘nominalisations’ – converting verbs into nouns – should be avoided. Examples of nominalisations are:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Nomina​lisation** | **Verb** |
| deci​sion​​ | decide |
| ruling | rule |
| in agreement | agree |
| finding | find |
| enter into correspondence | correspond |
| accomplish the completion of | complete |
| make an application | apply |

Watch out for them. They can often creep into legal writing. For example:

* avoid: The decision of the tribunal …
* write: The tribunal decided …​
* avoid: You need to make an application …
* write: You must apply …

## Use ‘you’, ‘we', 'our'

Write as if you are talking directly to someone by using personal pronouns like ‘you’ instead of ‘they’. Using a friendly, conversational tone helps to engage with your audience and is aligned with our plain-language and government accessibility requirements. It also imparts accountability in business writing and avoids an unnecessarily academic tone.

* avoid: Victoria Legal Aid was deeply concerned...
* write: We are deeply concerned....

Note when there is ambiguity due to multiple organisations mentioned in the same piece of writing, sometimes it is best to refer to our organisation as Victoria Legal Aid.

## 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. This is a matter of logic, but also follows how people respond to what they are told on an emotional level. 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.

If you need to include a negative statement, exception or limitation, do not put it at the beginning of a sentence. For example:

* Avoid: If a person who has no criminal record can make an application, pays the scheduled fee, and waits the statutory period, the commissioner may issue a licence.
* Write: The commissioner may issue a licence to people without a criminal record who have paid the scheduled fee and completed the statutory waiting period.

A better option would be to use:

The commissioner can issue a licence to a person who has no criminal record and:

* makes an application
* pays the scheduled fee
* waits the statutory period.

Reading and understanding text is easier with bullet lists. For more information see **Bullet lists**in [Formatting and layout](#_Formatting_and_layout).

## Keep tenses consistent

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.

If you are writing about something that has happened, you will obviously need to use past tense. However, the idea is to limit the shifts between present and past. Usually it is better to have one tense per sentence, or paragraph.

Past: In September 2004 the Minister for Community Services released the Technical Options Paper, Protecting Children: 10 priorities for children’s wellbeing and safety in Victoria.

and

Present: The paper proposes radical changes to Victoria’s child protection system.

## 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.

## Use gender-neutral references

We do not refer to male and female forms separately, unless referring to a specific person. This can be avoided by:

* rewriting the sentence in the plural
* removing the possessive pronoun ‘their’
* using the gender-free pronoun ‘you’
* using the gender-free plural pronoun ‘they’
* rewriting the sentence to avoid the pronoun.

For example:

Avoid: Defendants must arrive early for their hearings.
Use: Defendants must arrive early for hearings.

Avoid: You must come early for your hearing.
Use: They must come early for their hearing.

Use: It is important to arrive early for the hearing.

You can also use gender-neutral words instead of using ‘he or she’. For example, use chairperson instead of chairman, or police officer instead of policeman.

You can also repeat the noun. For example:

Avoid: In less serious criminal cases, the magistrate decides whether the defendant is guilty. If he is found guilty, the magistrate also fixes the penalty.

Use: In less serious criminal cases, the magistrate must decide whether the defendant is guilty. If the defendant is found guilty, the magistrate also fixes the penalty.

## ​Those with diverse sexualities and gender identities

* LGBTIQ stands for 'lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, intersex and queer/questioning' people. Many organisations are moving away from the acronym (much like 'ATSI') and towards the more inclusive terminology of 'sexuality and gender-diverse people', or 'those with diverse sexualities and gender identities'.
* More information available at the Victorian Government's LGBTIQ Inclusive Language Guide – <https://www.vic.gov.au/inclusive-language-guide>​

Further information: *Commonwealth of Australia's Style manual for authors, editors and printers*(John Wiley & Sons 2002), p. 58–60

## Use Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people​s

When referring to Aboriginal people the most inclusive collective term is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Do not use Aborigine or Aboriginal as nouns. ‘Aboriginal’ can be used as an adjective. Do not use acronyms such as ‘ATSI’ and ‘TSI’.

If you are referring to Aboriginal people in Victoria, use ‘Koori’ or ‘Koorie’. ‘Koori’ is not a synonym for ‘Aboriginal’ and should not be used to refer to groups in other parts of Australia.

If possible, the best option is to ask the particular community how they would like to be referenced.

Further information: *Commonwealth of Australia's Style manual for authors, editors and printers* (John Wiley & Sons 2002), p. 57

## References to other community groups

Some examples of other non-discriminatory language include:

| **Use** | **Do not use** |
| --- | --- |
| culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities​​ | language other than English (LOTE)non-English speaking (NES and NESB) |
| person with a disability | disabled/crippled person |
| person with a hearing loss | deaf person |
| person with a vision impairment | blind person |
| the elderly/senior citizens | old/older people |
| young people | youths |

References to religious affiliation and ethnic identity are acceptable if pertinent to discussion. However, be careful not to equate country of origin with particular religious beliefs. For example, not all Iraqi-Australians are Muslims. All references should be capitalised.

Further information:*Commonwealth of Aus​tralia's Style manual for authors, editors and printers* (John Wiley & Sons 2002), p. 58

## Examples of plain language writing

Using extracts from letters to clients, these examples show how to apply plain language principles.

### Example 1: Paragraph in letter to client about closing their file

#### Before

**Storage and destruction of your case records**

Now that Victoria Legal Aid’s involvement in your matter as your legal representative has come to an end, your file will be closed. Victoria Legal Aid’s normal practice is to archive completed files for seven years as required by the *Legal Profession Uniform Law Australian Solicitors' Conduct Rules 2015*. At the end of seven years, files are destroyed unless they are required for permanent storage with the Public Records Office (only unusual or exceptional files are stored at the Public Records Office).

If you wish to retain your file, or parts of your file, or wish to retrieve any personal items from your file (such as character references, pay slips, letters etc.), you should contact this office prior to the end of the seven-year period.

Unless this office receives written notification from you to the contrary, we will store your completed file for seven years.

#### After

**What happens to the documents in your file?**

Your Victoria Legal Aid file will now be closed. If there is anything in your file that you want me to send back to you, please let me know by [14 days from date of letter].

Victoria Legal Aid will store your file until at least [seven years from date of letter]. After that, your file might be destroyed.

### Example 2: Sentence in letter to client about meeting lawyer at court

#### Before

In order to ensure that there is sufficient time to obtain your instructions prior to the commencement of the next hearing we ask that you arrive at court by 9.30 am on [date].

#### After

Please be at court by 9.30 am on [date]. This will give us time to talk before court begins.

### Example 3: Freedom of information request

#### Before

I act for [name].

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act 1982 (Vic) and the authority contained in the enclosed completed form titled ‘Freedom of Information Request’ form, I request all documents on all files held by you that relate to my client, including but not limited to any medical reports, transfer reports, progress reports and breach reports.

An Authority signed by my client is enclosed, authorising me to receive these reports on my client’s behalf.

As my client is in receipt of a Centrelink income support payment, I ask that the fee that applies to requests of this kind be waived. A certified copy of my client’s Centrelink card is enclosed, as evidence of my client’s eligibility under the fee waiver provisions of the Freedom of Information Act.

#### After

I act for [name]. The following documents are provided with this letter:

* an Authority signed by my client
* a certified copy of my client’s Centrelink card
* a completed Freedom of Information Request form

As allowed by the Freedom of Information Act 1982 (Vic), I request copies of [list documents required].

My client receives a Centrelink income support payment so please waive the fee that generally applies to a freedom of information request.​

# Simple words

A list of plain language alternatives to complex words.

For more plain language alternatives, see the Plain English Campaign's (UK) [A–Z of alternative words (PDF)](http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/alternative.pdf).

#### A

| **Compl​​ex words** | **Simple words** |
| --- | --- |
| a large number | many, lots of |
| absence of​ | lack of, without |
| according to the document | the document shows |
| accordingly | so |
| acknowledge receipt of | thank you for |
| acquaint yourself with | find out about |
| additional | more, extra |
| address issue | handle issue, deal with problem |
| administer | give, manage |
| advantageous | good, useful, helpful |
| affect | to influence, to move |
| affected | changed |
| alternatively | or |
| amongst | in, among |
| amounted to | was |
| as a consequence of | because |
| as a means of/to | to |
| ascertain | find out, discover |
| assist in the development of | help set up |
| at the present time | now |
| at this point in time | now |
| at this stage | now |

#### B

| **Complex words** | **Simple words** |
| --- | --- |
| because of the fa​ct that | because |
| be deficient in | want, need |
| be responsible for | take care of |
| by means of | by, with |
| both | do not write ‘both Tom and John are here’ of course they are both there by reference to the two names |
| by virtue of | by, under, because of |

#### C

| **Complex words** | **Simple words** |
| --- | --- |
| capability | ability, can |
| category | class, group |
| caveat | warning |
| cease | end, finish, stop |
| close proximity​ | close, near |
| cognisant | aware, know |
| commence | begin, start |
| compared with | like, than |
| comply with | follow |
| comprise | make up |
| comprising | is |
| concerning | about |
| conclude | end, finish |
| concur | agree |
| consecutive | next |
| consecutive days | days in a row |
| consensus of opinion | agreement |
| consequently | so |
| consider | think |
| consolidate | join, merge |
| contains | has, includes |
| contend | argue, say |
| correspondence | email, letter, phone call |
| cumulative | add up |
| customary | usual |

#### D

| **Complex words** | **Simple words** |
| --- | --- |
| decrease | reduce |
| deem | consider, think |
| demonstrate | prov​e, show |
| designate | appoint, choose |
| deteriorate | worsen |
| determine | decide, find out |
| dialogue | talk |
| disclose | tell |
| disinterested | not interested |
| dispatch | send |
| disseminate | issue, send out, give |
| donate | give |
| due to the fact that | due to, because |
| during the course of | while, when |

#### E

| **Complex words** | **Simple words** |
| --- | --- |
| echelons | levels |
| effect | result or consequence of an action |
| emoluments | fees |
| employ | use​ |
| encounter difficulty in | find it hard to |
| endeavour | try |
| ensure | make sure |
| ensuring the successful implementation of | guarantee, make it happen |
| entitled to | can |
| equitable | fair, equal |
| equivalent | the same |
| erroneous | wrong |
| establish | set up, prove |
| establish the location of | find |
| evaluate | check, test |
| examine | look at, check |
| exclusively | only |
| exempt from | free from |
| expedite | hurry |
| expeditiously | as soon as possible |

#### F

| **Complex words** | **Simple words** |
| --- | --- |
| facilitate | help, make happen |
| factor | reason, cause |
| feasible | possibl​e |
| for a period | for, when, during |
| for the duration of | during, while |
| for the purpose of | to, for |
| forfeit | give up, lose |
| forthwith | now, immediately |
| formulate | work out |
| future planning | planning |

#### G

| **Complex words** | **Simple words** |
| --- | --- |
| geographical location | place |
| give a clear indication of | ​show clearly |
| gratuity | tip |

#### H

| **Complex words** | **Simple words** |
| --- | --- |
| has discretion to | can/ is able to |
| has the authority to | can/ is able to |
| has the capability to | can |
| have a liability to | should |
| have a requirement for | need |
| have a responsibility to​ | must/ have to/ need to |
| have an obligation to | must |
| have exemption from | free from |
| hence/henceforth | from now |
| herewith | with this |
| home | house |

#### I

| **Complex words** | **Simple words** |
| --- | --- |
| implement | carry out, do |
| in a timely manner | on time |
| in accordance with | as​, under, by |
| in addition to | also, too, as well as |
| in advance of | before |
| in an effort to | to |
| in case of | if |
| in circumstances where | if |
| in conjunction with | and, with |
| in connection with | about, for |
| in consequence | because |
| in consideration of the fact that | because |
| in excess of | more than |
| in lieu of | instead of |
| in order that | to |
| in receipt of | have/get |
| in regard to | about, on |
| in relation to | about |
| in respect of | about, for |
| in spite of | despite |
| in the absence of | without |
| in the case of | with |
| in the course of | while |
| in the event that | if |
| in the near future | soon |
| in view of | because, since |
| inasmuch as | because, since |
| incorporate | join, include |
| incumbent upon | must |
| inequitable | unfair |
| interface with | meet |
| is authorised to | may/can |
| is/is not entitled to | may/may not |
| is not able to | cannot |
| is of the view that | believes |
| is reflective of | shows |
| it is essential | must |
| it is probable that | probably, likely |
| it is recommended | we recommend |
| it is requested | please, we ask |
| it will be necessary to advise this section | please tell us |
| it would be appreciated if | please |
| it would appear that | apparently |

#### J

| **Complex words** | **Simple words** |
| --- | --- |
| job on a full-time basis | full-time job |

#### L

| **Complex words** | **Simple words** |
| --- | --- |
| liable | must pay |
| liaise with | c​​o-ordinate, talk with |
| limited number | few |

#### M

| **Complex words** | **Sim​ple words** |
| --- | --- |
| magnitude | size |
| major | big, large, great |
| methodology | method, way of doing it |
| minimise | reduce, make smaller |
| monies | money |

#### N

| **Complex words** | **Simple words** |
| --- | --- |
| naive | innocent, unaffected |
| noiseless | silen​t |
| notwithstanding | despite, even if |

#### O

| **Complex words** | **Simple words** |
| --- | --- |
| objective | aim |
| obligate | must |
| occupation | job |
| on behalf of | for |
| on the basis that | if |
| on the part of​ | by |
| operate | run, use, work |
| optimum | best |
| otherwise | or |
| owing to the fact that | because |

#### P

| **Complex words** | **Simple words** |
| --- | --- |
| per annum | a/each year |
| performed | did |
| period in time | time |
| permissible | you can​ |
| personnel | people, staff |
| persons | people |
| pertaining to | about |
| point in time | point, time |
| preclude | keep out |
| prescribed | set |
| primarily due to an increase in X | because X increased |
| prior to | before |
| prior to the commencement of | before X starts |
| pro forma | standard form |
| procedures | rules |
| provide | give, deliver, supply |
| provided that | as long as |
| provisional | for the moment |
| presently | now |
| press release | media release |
| pro-active | active |
| pursuant to | under, according to |

#### Q

| **Complex words** | **S​imple words** |
| --- | --- |
| quote | say |

#### R

| **Complex words** | **Simple words** |
| --- | --- |
| re | about |
| reason for | why |
| refute | do not agree |
| regarding | about |
| relating to | about |
| relocate | shift, move |
| remuneration | ​pay, payment |
| render | make |
| rental | rent |
| report | tell |
| requirement | need |
| reside | live |
| rescind | withdraw |
| review | check, go over |

#### S

| **Complex words** | **Simple words** |
| --- | --- |
| save | except |
| shall (future) | will |
| shall (imperative) | must |
| shortly | soon |
| significant | im​portant |
| so as to | to |
| solely | only |
| state-of-the-art | latest |
| subject to | as long as |
| submit | send, say (in court) |
| subsequently | later |
| suggest | say |
| summary offence | minor offence |
| supplementary | extra |

#### T

| **Complex words** | **Simple words** |
| --- | --- |
| target | g​o for, direct, aim for |
| ​telephone | phone​​ |
| the most appropriate combination of | the best mix |
| ​thereafter | then |
| therefore | so |
| therein | there |
| thereof | its/their |
| to date | so far |
| to enable us | so that we can |
| together with the associated | with |
| transpire | happen |

#### U

| **Complex words** | **Simple words** |
| --- | --- |
| ultimately​ | in the end |
| undertake | say you will |
| under the provisions of | under |
| until such time | until |
| unto | to |
| upon | on |
| utilisation | use |
| utilise | use |

#### V

| **Complex words** | **Simple words** |
| --- | --- |
| validate | confirm |
| verbatim | word for word |
| viable | can be done, possible |

#### W

| **Complex words** | **Simple words** |
| --- | --- |
| warranted | needed |
| whenever | when |
| whensoever | when |
| whereas | since |
| whilst | while |
| whom | who |
| with a view to | to |
| with reference to | about |
| with the exception of | except for |

#### X

| **Complex words** | **Simple words** |
| --- | --- |
| Xmas | Christmas |

#### Z

| **Complex words** | **Si​mple words** |
| --- | --- |
| zone | region |

# Standard word use and punctuation

Victoria Legal Aid style follows spelling, hyphenation and capitalisation 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 sixth edition of the *Commonwealth of Australia’s Style manual for authors, editors and ​printers* (John Wiley & Sons, 2002).

## Spelling

Always proofread your work carefully, or ask someone else to check it. Words people often get wrong are listed in the [spelling list](https://viclegalaid.sharepoint.com/sites/intranet/policiesandprocedures/communications/plain-language-writing-guide/Pages/spelling-list.aspx).

If a word is not listed here, refer to the *Macquarie dictionary*(Macquarie, 2009). If *The Macquarie dictionary* lists alternative spellings of the word, use the first listed spelling.

Always use Australian English and choose English words and phrases. If you use a non-English word, make sure it has the appropriate accents; for example, cliché. Avoid American spelling. For example:

| **Use** | **Do not use** |
| --- | --- |
| -ise, capitalise  | -ize, capitalize(except for official names, such as World Health Organization) |
| -re, centre, metre​​ | -er, center, meter |
| -our, colour | -or, color(except for ‘Labor’ in Australian Labor Party) |

The Microsoft Word dictionary has been set to the English (Australia) setting. Microsoft Word’s spellchecker is accurate, but it will not pick up words that are spelt correctly but incorrectly used. For example, 'their' and 'there'. If you are unsure, check the*Macquarie dictionary*(Macquarie, 2009).

## Plurals

An ‘s’ without an apostrophe should be added when using the plural of a shortened or abbreviated word, for example, FAQs, JPs, PCs, DMs, CLCs. For the plural of the words ‘pages’ and ‘sections’, use double letters and include a full stop; for example, pp. (pages) or ss. (sections).

The singular and plural use of English words derived from other languages is an area in which recommended style is changing. For example, many English words derived from Latin, such as media, are most common in their plural form. When in doubt check the*Macquarie dictionary. ​*

| **Singular** | **Plural** |
| --- | --- |
| appendix | appendices |
| Attorney-General | Attorneys General |
| body corporate | bodies corporate |
| bureau | bureaus |
| conference | conferences |
| criterion​ | criteria |
| data | data |
| formula | formulae |
| matrix | matrices |
| medium/media | media |
| phenomenon | phenomena |
| referendum | referendums |
| summons | summonses |

## Apostrophes

The apostrophe is used to show:

* an omitted a letter or letters (contractions)
* singular possession
* plural possession.

The apostrophe is the most misused punctuation mark. A common mistake is when to use an apostrophe with its or it’s. If it is a possessive pronoun (like my, her/his, their), use 'its'. If it is a contraction of 'it is', use 'it's'.

It is important to understand the proper use of the apostrophe because misuse can lead to ambiguity and misleading information.

In [contractions](https://viclegalaid.sharepoint.com/sites/intranet/policiesandprocedures/communications/plain-language-writing-guide/Pages/standard-word-use-and-punctuation.aspx#contractions), the apostrophe sits in place of the missing letter or letters. For example, 'do not' becomes 'don’t' and 'it is' becomes 'it’s'.

When showing singular possession – something belonging to one person or thing – insert the apostrophe before the ‘s’ at the end of the word. Nouns that end in s are treated in the same way. For example:

* today’s email = the email of today
* James’s case = the case of James.

When showing plural possession – something belonging to more than one person or thing – insert the apostrophe after the ‘s’ at the end of the word. For example:

* the lawyers’ briefs = the briefs of the lawyers
* the managers’ decision = the decision of the managers.

When showing possessive forms of plural words that do not end in ‘s’, such as people and children, insert the apostrophe before the ‘s’ to the end of the word. For example:

* the people’s choice = the choice of the people
* the children’s parent = the parent of the children.

Some organisations and associations often leave out the possessive apostrophe, but some retain it. Always use the punctuation that the organisation and association uses. For example:

* Federal Magistrates Court
but
* Magistrates’ Court of Victoria.

Possessive pronouns do not use an apostrophe. For example:

* my/mine
* your/yours
* his/his
* her/hers
* its/its
* our/ours
* their/theirs.

Further information**:** *Commonwealth of Australia's Style manual for authors, editors and printers* (John Wiley & Sons, 2002), pp. 85–8

## Hyphens

Use a hyphen when:

* using some compound words (if you are not sure, check the*Macquarie dictionary*)
* a word has a different meaning without the hyphen, for example, re-sign [sign again] rather than resign [quit]
* using a prefix such as co-, ex- or e- (co-worker, ex-husband, e-business).

It is also important to use a hyphen when the last letter of a prefix is a vowel that is repeated in the first letter of the next word, for example, de-emphasise not deemphasise.

We use this rule even when removing the hyphen has become common usage, as is the case with co-ordinator. The*Macquarie dictionary*says to use coordinate. However, this is difficult for low literacy readers to understand, especially if English is not their first language, so always use a hyphen.

### Electronic publications

* Use a hyphen when referring to electronic publications, for example: e-books and e-newsletter. Do not use eBook, e-Book or ebook.
* Further information: *Commonwealth of Australia's Style manual for authors, editors and printers* (John Wiley & Sons, 2002), pp. 88–93

## 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:

* Victoria Legal Aid
* GDP
* DHS.

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. Also they are often confusing for low literacy readers.

Do not start a sentence with an initialism and do not repeat a word that has been reduced to an initialism. For example, 'ABN number' is incorrect because the 'N' represents 'number' in this initialism.

Take care if you are using acronyms online as they can be difficult for screen readers to pronounce, and thus decrease 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. Do not put the acronym or initialism before the full name. For example:

* Roundtable Dispute Management (RDM)
* Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT).

The exception to this rule is when the acronym or initialism is in common use, for example ‘CAYPINS’. In this case, it may be appropriate to use the acronym or initialism in public documents, as this is how the public would know the service, rather than Children and Young Persons Infringement Notice System.

The use of a specific indefinite article (a/an) with acronyms and initialisms depends on how the first letter of the acronym or initialism sounds. If the first letter of the acronym or initialism sounds like a vowel, use ‘an’:

* an ASIO employee
* an ATLAS document.

If the first letter of the acronym or initialism sounds like a consonant, use ‘a’:

* a CAYPINS matter
* a PLE lecture.

See the list of [acronyms and initialisms](https://viclegalaid.sharepoint.com/sites/intranet/policiesandprocedures/communications/plain-language-writing-guide/Pages/acronyms-and-initialisms.aspx) that are commonly used at Victoria Legal Aid.

Further information:*Commonwealth of Australia's Style manual for authors, editors and printers* (John Wiley & Sons, 2002), pp. 150–61

## 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 fine for internal documents, avoid using them in writing for an external audience. Readers may not be familiar with them, especially low literacy readers.

## 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).

Especially avoid using the abbreviations etc, ie and eg in external documents, as they are informal English. Use ‘and so on’, ‘that is’ and ‘for example’, which are easier for readers to understand.

Note: Although it is more formal to use full stops to show that these words have been abbreviated, we have removed them as punctuation marks make text more difficult to understand, particularly for low literacy readers.

## Days of the week

Abbreviate days of the week as:

* Mon
* Tues
* Wed
* Thurs
* Fri
* Sat
* Sun

## Months of the year

Spell out May, June and July. Abbreviate other months of the year as:

* Jan
* Feb
* Mar
* Apr
* Aug
* Sept
* Oct
* Nov
* Dec

## States and territories of Australia

Abbreviate Australian states and territories as:

* ACT
* NSW
* NT
* SA
* WA
* Qld.
* Tas.
* Vic

## 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.

Examples include:

| **Use** | **Do not use** |
| --- | --- |
| you are | you’re |
| it is | it’s |
| cannot | can’t |
| d​o not | don’t |
| need not | needn’t |
| will not | won’t |

Contractions help create a friendly or collaborative tone in internal documents, but should not be overused.

## Commonly misused words and terms

These words and terms are commonly misused:

**affect** – a verb that means to influence

**effect** – a noun that means the result

**alternately** – taking turns between one thing and another

**alternatively** – the choice between one of two possibilities

**between** – used when talking about only two things, for example, between you and me

**among** – used when referring to more than two things

**compare** **to** – liken one thing to another

**compare** **with** – set things side by side and examine to what extent they are similar or different

**emigrant** – a person who leaves the country

**immigrant** – a person who enters the country

**fewer** – used with plural nouns that can be counted

**less** – used with singular nouns that cannot be counted

**further** – the further she read, the less she understood (used for figurative, not literal, expressions)

**farther** – the Bairnsdale office is about six metres farther along the road (physical distance)

**impact** – a noun meaning effect, for example, the impact of the new policy is unpredictable

**impacted** **upon** – the policy impacted upon our division's finances (not 'impacted' our finances)

**lead** – a verb meaning showing the way or guiding. For example, Victoria Legal Aid leads the world in the development of plain language resources

**led** – the past tense of the verb 'to lead', for example, Kerrie led an investigation into client access and disability

**may** – permission to do something

**can** – ability to do something

**affect** – a verb that means to influence

**effect** – a noun that means the result

**practice** – a noun that means the business of a professional person, for example, ‘I have a law practice’

**practise** – a verb that means to carry out or perform, for example, ‘I practise law’

**that** – use before a restrictive clause (one you need)

**which** – use before non-restrictive clauses (one that just adds information, usually enclosed by commas)

**who** – when you are talking about a person

**that** – when you are talking about an object or plural collective noun, for example, ‘the group that’

# Spelling list

Victoria Legal Aid follows the spelling, hyphenation and capitalisation rules listed in online version of the [Macquarie dictionary](http://www.macquariedictionary.com.au/203.41.246.6%40929FFC53990430/-/p/thes/logged_in.html) and the sixth edition of the *Commonwealth of Australia’s Style manual for authors, editors and printers* (John Wiley & Sons 2002).

Commonly used words are included in this spelling list. If a word is not listed here, refer to the [Macquarie dictionary](http://www.macquariedictionary.com.au/203.41.246.6%40929FFC53990430/-/p/thes/logged_in.html). Use the first listed spelling from the dictionary if there are alternative spellings of the word.

### A

accept (to receive)

accessory (spare part)

accommodate

Act(s) (always capitalised when referring to legislation)

adviser (not advisor)

affect (verb, to influence or move)

ageing (not aging)

aggravate (to make worse not annoy)

all ready (everyone is ready)

all right (everything is right)

all together (in unison)

all ways (every direction)

altogether (completely)

already (beforehand)

alright (fairly well)

always (constantly)

among (more than two things)

analyse/analyses

analysis/analyses

and (not &)

any more

appalling

appendix/appendices

Attorneys-General (not Attorney-Generals)

audience (people who are viewing, can include readers)

Australian Labor Party

### B

backup

bail (security court appearance)

basically

base/bases

basis/bases

benefited

biased

Bill(s) (always capitalised when referring to legislation)

bona fide

budgeted

bureau/bureaus

between (between two things)

### C

cafe (no accent)

calibre

cannot

car park

casework (not case work)

categorise

cash flow

central business district

centre/centred/centring/centric

charge-out

clean-up

cliché

co-accused

co-dependent

colour

complement (add to)

compliment (flatter)

Commonwealth

community-based order

consensus

continual (frequently, recurring)

continuous (going on without a break)

conveyer (legal)

conveyor (mechanical)

co-operate

co-ordinate

corroborate

cost-benefit analysis

cost-efficient

council (committee/board)

counsel (advice)

counsellor

country-wide

courtroom

criterion/criteria

cross-examined

cross-reference

Crown land

### D

data

database

day-to-day

decision-maker

defence

dependant (noun – someone who looks on another for support)

dependent (adjective – depending on someone/something for support; contingent)

deterrent

development

device (noun – method or appliance)

devise (verb – work out or invent)

dilemma (faced with only two choices)

discharge (discharge an accused person)

discreet (tactful or careful)

discrete (separate or detached)

dismiss (dismiss a charge)

dispatch (not despatch)

download

downsize

dyeing (changing colour of)

dying (ceasing to be)

### E

eccentric

effect (noun—outcome, verb—achieve)

e-lodgement

email (not e-mail or E-mail)

enforceable

enrol/enrolled/enrolment

envelop (verb – enclose)

envelope (noun – thing you send a letter in)

except (to omit or exclude)

### F

face-to-face

fast-track

favour

feasible

Federal Magistrates Court

finalise

flier (not flyer)

focused

foreword (not forward)

framework

fulfil/fulfilled/fulfilment

full-scale

full-time

### G

gauge

gram

grant of legal assistance (not legal aid)

guarantee (person who says they will pay)

guaranteed

guarantor (person who will fulfil obligation if other person fails)

### H

harbour

harassment

headquarters

home in on (proceed towards)

hone (sharpen)

honour/honourable

### I

illegible

illicit

inadmissible

index/indexes (table of contents)

indices (maths)

Indigenous Australian

infra-red

in-house

inquire (not enquire)

install/instalment

instil/instilled

interest-free

internet

interstate

intestate

into

intranet

intrastate

invaluable (priceless)

investor

### J

jail (not gaol)

judgment (verdict)

### K

kilogram

kilometre

### L

label/labelled

labour (except for political party = Labor)

La Trobe Street

La Trobe University

layby

liaise/liaison

licence (noun)

license (verb)

licensed

licensee (noun)

lifecycle

literally (exactly to the letter, in actual fact)

lodgement

long-term

longstanding

low-income

### M

managing

manoeuvre

matrix/matrices

meagre

medium/media

memorandum/memoranda

meter (measuring device)

metre (length)

mid-year

mileage

minimise

moral (right, virtuous)

morale (mental state)

multimedia

Magistrates’ Court of Victoria

### N

National Legal Aid

national legal aid commissions

nationwide

net (not nett)

next of kin

nominee (the candidate)

nominator (person who nominates)

non-English speaking

no-one

not-for-profit

### O

occasion

occurrence

of (belonging to or relating to not a verb)

off-set

offshore (do not confuse with overseas)

ombudsman

ongoing

online

onto (not into)

Ordinance(s) (always capitalised when referring to legislation)

overall (clothing)

over all (in general)

overrun

overseas

### P

parallel

parliament

Parliament of Victoria

part-time

per cent

percentage

phenomenon/phenomena

placename

practice (noun)

practise (verb)

principal (leader or most important)

principle (code or moral)

prioritise

pro-active

procedure

proceed

pro-forma (adj.)

program

proviso

publicly funded

### Q

qualitative

quantitative

### R

rateable

reader (not audience)

realise

re-bound (tie again)

rebound (bounce back)

reconcilable

re-enforce

referendum/referendums

regionalise

Regulation(s) (always capitalised when referring to legislation)

relevant

reopen

reported (reportedly, which tends to be used mostly in the media for ‘alleged’)

résumé

rigorous

risk-based

rollout

### S

saleable

scenario

second-hand

seize

separate

seven day notice (no hyphen)

sheriff

Sheriff’s Office

shortlist

short-term

sizeable

skilful

so-and-so

so-called

specialise

spellcheck/er

stand-alone

state (the state of Victoria)

statewide

stationary (motionless)

stationery (paper)

storey/storeys (building levels)

subpoena/ subpoenas

succinct

Supreme Court

### T

targeted

timeframe

timeline

tonne

totalling

transferable

turnaround

### U

unique (one of its kind)

upfront

up-to-date

usable (not useable)

usage

useful

user-friendly

### V

value-add

Victoria Legal Aid (not Legal Aid or Victoria Legal Aid)

### W

website (not web site)

web (World Wide Web)

wellbeing

well known

western/er

the west

Will (capitalise when referring to the legal document)

World Health Organization

WorkCover

workers’ compensation

workplace

worthwhile

write-off

### X

x-ray

### Y

year-round

year-end

Your Honour

### Z

# Acronyms and initialisms

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

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. **Do not** put the acronym or initialism before the full name.

Common acronyms and initialisms

**AAT**Administrative Appeals Tribunal

**AFP**Australian Federal Police

**ADR**Appropriate Dispute Resolution

**AG**Attorney-General

**AHRC**Australian Human Rights Commission

**ATLAS**Australian Total Legal Aid Solution

**​AWA**Australian workplace agreement

**BAC**blood alcohol concentration (percentage of alcohol in a sample of breath or blood)

**CALD**culturally and linguistically diverse

**CAV**Consumer Affairs Victoria

**CAYPINS**Children and Young Persons Infringement Notice System

**CCO**community corrections order

**CGT**capital gains tax

**CJAE** Civil Justice, Access and Equity (internal​)

**CLC**community legal centre

**CLM**Criminal Law Melbourne (internal)

**CLE**community legal education

**CLS**Criminal Law Services (internal)

**CPMS**Case and Practice Management System (internal)

**CSA**Child Support Agency

**DHS**Department of Human Services

**DIABP**Department of Immigration and Border Protection

**DOJ**Department of Justice

**DVRCV**Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria

**FAB**Finance, Assignments and Business (internal)

**FDR**family dispute resolution

**FDRP**family dispute resolution practitioner

**FYCLS**Family, Youth and Children's Law Services (internal)

**ICAT**Improved Client Access and Triage (internal)

**ICL**independent children's lawyer

**ICT** Information and Communications Technology (internal)

**ISD**Information Systems Division (internal)

**LIV**Law Institute Victoria

**NJC**Neighbourhood Justice Centre

**OPA**Office of the Public Advocate

**OPP**Office of Public Prosecutions

**PILCH**Public Interest Law Clearing House (now called Justice Connect)

**PLE**Professional Legal Education (internal)

**POA**power of attorney

**PSL**professional support lawyer (internal)

**R&C** Research and Communications (internal)

**RDM**Roundtable Dispute Management (internal)

**SSAT**Social Security Appeals Tribunal

**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

**Victoria Legal Aid**Victoria Legal Aid

**Victoria Legal AidF** Victorian Legal Assistance Forum

**VOCAT**Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal

# 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 num​ber ​of capitals, especially in the body of your text. Too many capitals looks like you are SHOUTING at your reader.

Further information:*Commonwealth of Australia's Style manual for authors, editors and printers* (John Wiley & Sons 2002), pp. 118–35

## When to use capitals

| **When to use capitals** | **When not to use capitals** |
| --- | --- |
| * people’s names, for example, John Smith
* business names, for example, Origin Energy (as per regist​ered 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, Australia Day
 | * 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…
but
* Her Honour Justice Brown
* a court hearing...
but
* the Magistrates’ Court in Broadmeadows

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.

Further information:*Commonwealth of Australia's Style manual for authors, editors and printers* (John Wiley & Sons 2002), pp 124–5 for full coverage of using capitals for terms associated with government.

## Naming service areas, programs, projects, job titles and policies at Victoria Legal Aid

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. At present they are named as follows.

​For example:

* Corporate Affairs
	+ Strategic Communications
		- ​Digital Communications.

For up-to-date information about our divisions, services, units and teams, see our [Organisation chart](https://viclegalaid.sharepoint.com/sites/intranet/aboutus/Pages/organisation-chart.aspx).

​​​Victoria Legal Aid's style is to use 'and' rather than an ampersand (&) in program, team and section names. This aligns with the online writing style guide, which advises against using ampersands in page headings.

### ​​​Committees and wor​​king groups

Committees and working groups are capitalised, for example, the Action Research Reference Group.

### Special projects

Special projects are capitalised. They may often be commonly referred to as an initialism. For example, Improved Client Access and Triage project is known as iCAT. If you are writing for an internal audience, using the initialism may be appropriate, especially if it is common usage. However, the initialism should be avoided in external communications, especially when the audience is not familiar with the project.

See [Acronyms and initialisms](https://viclegalaid.sharepoint.com/sites/intranet/policiesandprocedures/communications/plain-language-writing-guide/Pages/acronyms-and-initialisms.aspx)

### Job titles

Job positions are always lower case if they are 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.

However, if you are referring to a specific person and their specific job title you use capitals:

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

You also use capitals when writing out someone's full title:

* **Write –** The Administrative Services Manager, Wimmera Regional Office, Horsham.
* **Don't write –** The director of corporate services has just been appointed.

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

* **Write –** John Smith is the manager of Strategic Communications at Victoria Legal Aid.
* **Don't write –** John Smith is a Lawyer in Victoria Legal Aid’s 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 Scott Morrison met with former prime minister John Howard to discuss sportswear.

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

Mehreen Faruqi is a Senator for New South Wales.
The senators will each have a turn to speak at the conference.

### Names of reports, policies and strategies

The names of reports, policies, strategies and other unpublished documents are capitalised. Do not use quotation marks or italics for names of these documents. For example:

* Document Control Policy
* Victoria Legal Aid Interpreter and Translator Policy
* Respectful Workplace Behaviour Policy.

# Sentence punctuation

Sentence punctuation assists clarity by showing readers the relationship between various components of your writing. 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.

## 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.

Further information: *Commonwealth of Australia's Style manual for authors, editors and printers* (John Wiley & Sons 2002), p. 97

## 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 phras​​e | 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 CEO said, 'Here is...' |
| before 'which' but not after 'that' | The book, which belongs to...The court that she visited... |

|  |
| --- |
|  |

Further information: *Commonwealth of Australia's Style manual for authors, editors and printers* (John Wiley & Sons 2002), pp. 101–5

## Question mark ?

A question mark indicates a query. For example:

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

## Exclamation mark !

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

## 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/plain-language-writing-guide/Pages/formatting-and-layout.aspx))
* 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 & Equity Services and Family, Youth & Children's Law Services.
* in subtitles and subheadings (no capital is necessary after the colon)
* before a blocked quote, that is, a long quote that is indented from the rest of the text.

Further information:*Commonwealth of Australia's Style manual for authors, editors and printers* (John Wiley & Sons 2002), pp. 99–101

## 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 the example above it would be better to make this a new sentence. You will find that this will help you to keep your sentences shorter too.

Further information: *Commonwealth of Australia's Style manual for authors, editors and printers* (John Wiley & Sons 2002), p. 101

## 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.

See Chapter 6, ‘Spelling and word punctuation’, in the *Style manual for authors, editors and printers*.

For direct speech or quoted material, punctuation usually appears outside the quotation marks. For example:

The CEO 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 CEO.
* The CEO 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’.

Further information:*Commonwealth of Australia's Style manual for authors, editors and printers* (John Wiley & Sons 2002), pp. 112–116

## Dashes and hyphens

At Victoria Legal Aid we only use 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
*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.

Further information: *Commonwealth of Australia's Style manual for authors, editors and printers* (John Wiley & Sons 2002), pp. 106–9

## 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.

Further information:*Commonwealth of Australia's Style manual for authors, editors and printers* (John Wiley & Sons 2002), pp. 110–2

### Brackets in case law citation

Round brackets ( ) are used when the volume numbers are sequential, unique and the year is not essential for find the case. For example:

Maroney v The Queen (2003) 216 CLR 31

Square brackets [ ] are used to enclose the year of publication when the volume numbers are not sequential and unique and cannot direct you to the right volume. For example:

Hoeper v Neldner [1932] SASR 173

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

Use { } for mathematical equations only.

## Ellipsis …

Ellipsis points are primarily used to show omission of a word or words. 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)
or
* '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 (...?).

Further information: *Commonwealth of Australia's Style manual for authors, editors and printers* (John Wiley & Sons 2002), p. 110

## Forward slash /

The forward slash (also known as a ‘solidus’ or ‘oblique’) should be used for:

* showing alternatives, for example:
and/or
* internet addresses, for example:
www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/fines.htm
* 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.

Further information:*Commonwealth of Australia's Style manual for authors, editors and printers*(John Wiley & Sons 2002), p. 109

# Numbers

## General rules for using numbers

In general, you should:

* Spell out numbers from one to nine in words, and use numerals for 10 and above.
* If a number starts a sentence, write the number out in full unless it is large or rearrange the sentence so it does not start with a number.
* Millions, billions and trillions are written out; for example, 63 million.
* Numerals are always used in tables, temperatures, measurements, percenta​​ges (3%) and equations.
* Page numbers have as few digits as possible: pp. 176–9.
* Use 1000 without a comma, but use commas for 10,000 and above (100,000; 1,000,000).

## Dates

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 2021
* Friday 1 October
* 1 October 2021
* 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 a span of financial years, spell out the first half-year in full, abbreviate the second half-year and include an en rule (dash) between the years. For example: 2008–09

When referring to a span of calendar years, spell out all years in full and use ‘from’ and ‘to’ in between the years. For example:

He served on the committee from 2001 to 2008.

When referring to decades, use numbers and spell out the decade in full. An apostrophe is not required. For example:

Requests for assistance rose markedly in the 1990s.

When referring to centuries, you can use words or a mixture of words and numbers. For example:

* …the twentieth century
* …the 20th century

## 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. You can also include the extension number for internal numbers, but this must be followed by 'in Melbourne' as regional offices cannot use the extension number. For example, phone (03) 9269 0609 (ext. 609 in Melbourne).

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.

## Time

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

Victoria Legal Aid’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).

Hint: Use ‘Ctrl shift space’ between the number and am or pm. This will make sure that they are kept together on one line.

## Percentages, fractions and decimals

### Percentages

The % 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.

### Fractions

The symbols list in Microsoft word has a list of fractions. If there is no fraction symbol for the fraction you are looking for, express it as a decimal instead.​

### Decimals

Add a zero ‘0’ before the decimal point if you are writing a number less than 1. For example ‘0.37’ not ‘.37’.

# Formatting and layout

​Victoria Legal Aid has a number of corporate stationery templates. They are set up with the standard formatting styles. The following outlines the styles that should be applied to all written material.

## Fonts (typeface) and type size

Keeping the typefaces consistent across Victoria Legal Aid creates a strong organisational image. Fonts and type size have been chosen to make a document reader-friendly.

Victoria Legal Aid style is:

* Arial 11 pt for body text in all Victoria Legal Aid document templates
* 15 pt exact line spacing
* Arial 10 pt for electronic content, including email, website and the intranet
* one space after full stop
* all text in black.

## Alignment

Align text to the left with a ragged right-hand side. This is easier to read. (The text on this page is left-aligned.)

Victoria Legal Aid style is:

* left justified and ragged right
* no indents for the start of a paragraph.

Do not justify text (aligned equally on left and right sides). To do this effectively you need to have a considerable amount of design skill. It is not easily achieved in a Word document. It also makes it harder to read.

## Emphasising text

### Italics

Use italics for emphasising text, except in an online environment, where bold is used for emphasis (see ‘Online writing style guide’).
Italics can emphasise a few words, but should not be used for large pieces of text. Do not use italics for quotes, use single quotation marks.

Use italics for:

* the full titles of legislation and legal cases (see Style manual, p. 147 and pp. 224–6 )
* individual words that must stand out
* words that are not part of the English lexicon, such as guestimate
* titles of publications.

Further information: Commonwealth of Australia's *Style manual for authors, editors and printers* (John Wiley and Sons 2002), pp. 145–9

## Bold

Bold should be used for headings and subheadings. Bold text stands out on the page, but do not overuse it. Never use bold for large sections of text.

## Underlining

Never use underlining for emphasis.

## 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.

Victoria Legal Aid style for standard documents is:

* use round black dots (click on the formatting tool bar or go to ‘Format’, ‘Bullets and Numbering’, ‘Bulleted’ and select the first option)
* 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
* always include a full stop after the last dot point (or list item) only.

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 Victoria Legal Aid’s 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.

Further information:Commonwealth of Australia's *Style manual for authors, editors and printers* (John Wiley and Sons 2002), pp. 142–4

## 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.

Our style for tables, graphs, charts and diagrams is:

* Arial 10 pt
* numbers are right-aligned
* headings are bold, but captions are not
* text is legible – check this for charts and graphs created in Excel.

Example table showing salary packaging expenses:

| **Date** | **Description** | **Amount** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 1 May 2021 | Coffee at the Common | $3.70 |
| 13 June 2021 | L​​unch at Crisp salad bar | $18.45 |

# Correspondence

## Format for writing letters

All letters must be presented in a consistent format.

* See [Formatting and layout](https://viclegalaid.sharepoint.com/sites/intranet/policiesandprocedures/communications/plain-language-writing-guide/Pages/formatting-and-layout.aspx) for more information.

## 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 Family Court are addressed:

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

Letters to the Justice of the Federal Court or the 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 Australian Industrial Relations 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

### Further information

The Victoria Law Foundation's brochure 'What do I call the judge? has a table that sets out the correct way to address judges, magistrates and tribunal members including changes after they retire.

See [What do I call the judge?](http://www.victorialawfoundation.org.au/publications/productdetail/productdetail/what-do-i-call-the-judge/53)

## 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 XXXX 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

Further information: *Commonwealth of Australia's Style manual for authors, editors and printers*(John Wiley & Sons 2002), p. 514

## Addressing envelopes

Victoria Legal Aid 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 and finally 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:

Joe Bloggs
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 ba​​sed on the author-date system.

## Acts or 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*.

### Schedules of Acts

The numbered paragraphs in the Schedules of Acts are called items.

## 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.

Further information:*Commonwealth of Australia's Style manual for authors, editors and printers* (John Wiley & Sons 2002), pp. 224–226

## 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

Further information:*Commonwealth of Australia's Style manual for authors, editors and printers* (John Wiley & Sons 2002), pp. 226–227

## 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*.
but
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 Australia website at [www.fwa.gov.au](http://www.fwa.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 <http://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>.

Further information:*Commonwealth of Australia's Style manual for authors, editors and printers* (John Wiley & Sons 2002), pp. 226–227

# Writer’s checklist

This checklist assists with preparing content that adheres to *Victoria Legal Aid’s Plain language writing guide*and is in line with best practice written communication principles.

## 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.

Further information

* [Plain language](https://viclegalaid.sharepoint.com/sites/intranet/policiesandprocedures/communications/plain-language-writing-guide/Pages/plain-language.aspx)

## Writing

When writing always keep in mind *Victoria Legal Aid's Plain language writing 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.

Further information

* [Plain language writing tips](#_Plain_language_writing" \o "Plain language writing tips)
* [Standard word use and punctuation](#_Standard_word_use)​
* [Sentence punctuation](#_Sentence_punctuation" \o "Sentence punctuation)

## 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

Further information

* [Formatting and layout](#_Formatting_and_layout)

## Editing

Once you have finished writing it is a good idea to get someone else to edit and proofread your work. They can:

* make sure it is clear and consistent
* check that plain language rules have been applied
* check that it meets all *Victoria Legal Aid Plain language writing guide*standards.