

Writing style guide

s 22 s 22 (MDBA)
Assistant Director

On this page

- [A–Z acronyms and style guide quick reference](#)
- [Australian Government conventions](#)
- [Legislation](#)
- [Plain language](#)
- [Our brand tone of voice](#)
- [Our channels – tone of voice dimensions](#)
- [Capital letters](#)
- [Numbers](#)
- [Dates and times](#)
- [Percentages](#)
- [Em and en dashes](#)
- [Shortened forms, abbreviations and contractions](#)
- [Scientific names](#)
- [Quotations](#)
- [Text formatting – bold and italics](#)
- [Table formatting](#)
- [Footnotes and endnotes](#)

The MDBA's technical reports, publications, website and other products all conform to the Australian Government Style Manual.

This MDBA Editorial style guide is intended as a companion to the [Australian Government Style Manual](#), and outlines where our style may differ. We've also included information about some of the commonly used styles in the Australian Government Style Manual for easy reference.

The MDBA uses Australian over American spellings (for example, use 'ise' for words such as utilise, not 'ize'), and follows the Macquarie Dictionary. Where the Macquarie provides more than one option, use the option listed first.

For advice on using the MDBA logo and brand, refer to the MDBA Brand guide on Billabong at [Communications > Logo and branding](#).

The MDBA templates ensure you meet mandatory style and content standards. Always start a document by opening a new template (rather than working from previous files) to benefit from regular updates. The templates were last updated in July 2023. To use the templates:

- open Microsoft Word (or PowerPoint), click File > New > Shared > MDBA
- save the template as a new document using 'Save as'
- make sure you can see (and therefore use) the styles listed in the styles palette

- [Referencing](#)
 - when transferring text into your document through the clipboard, use the 'Paste as unformatted text' option – this will ensure that no unnecessary (and possibly corrupting) styles appear in your document.

For help with templates or style advice, contact the Communications team at communications@mdba.gov.au.

The [MDBA First Nations cultural protocols and style guide](#) provides specific advice to achieve a consistent approach when working with or referring to First Nations people in facilitation, publications, products and on the web.

Ministerial correspondence is not covered here. Its style is prescribed and is overseen by the MDBA Parliamentary Team. See the [Parliamentary section on Billabong](#).

Last updated: 3 January 2024.

A to Z acronyms and quick style guide

The A to Z quick reference guide provides a comprehensive list of definitions, acronyms, water management terms, punctuation, commonly misspelled words and place names.

Access the A to Z acronyms and quick reference guide

The guide is a Microsoft List that allows you to filter and search. To suggest an addition to the guide, email communications@mdba.gov.au.

Australian Government conventions

All references to Commonwealth Government or Federal Government should be to 'Australian Government' in all cases and on all products.

When referring to the Australian Government and state and territory governments, use the following convention:

The Australian Government and the governments of New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory...

Departmental names should be written as 'the Australian Government Department of XYZ'.

With states, spell out in full (except in tables, or when used as an adjective). Always spell out the name of state governments in full, for example 'New South Wales Government'.

Read more in the [Australian Government Style Manual section on government terms](#).

Legislation

It's important to cite legal sources in a consistent and accurate way across government.

The style for the titles of Acts of parliament is to use title case. Use italics in the first mention of the titles with the year, and include the jurisdiction (not in italics). Include the shorter informal title at the first mention. For subsequent mentions, use the shorter informal title, no italics. There is no need to include the year and jurisdiction each time.

Always use an upper case A for Act. For example: Staff must read the Act to understand their compliance responsibilities.

Examples

The *Water Act 2007* (Cth) (the Water Act) – use the full citation (that is, include the year and in italics, and the jurisdiction) the first time in each chapter or on each web page. For subsequent uses write as ‘the Water Act’ without the year and not in italics.

The Basin Plan is legislation, so the first reference needs to be written as The Basin Plan (2012) (the Basin Plan). Subsequent mentions are written as the Basin Plan.

Make sure to differentiate between the Water Act and state legislation of the same name when both appear in a document or web page, and include the state jurisdiction: *Water Act 1912* (NSW), *Water Management Act 2000* (NSW), *Water Act 2000* (Qld), *Natural Resources Management Act 2004* (SA), *Water Act 1989* (Vic), *Water Resources Act 2007* (ACT)

Freedom of Information Act 1982 (Cth) (FOI Act). For subsequent uses, ‘the FOI Act’.

Read more in the [Australian Government Style Manual section on legal material](#).

Plain language

Always use words appropriate for your readers. When you are writing your document, keep your reader in mind. Say exactly what you mean, using the simplest words that fit and words the reader will understand.

Use personal pronouns when it suits the context, voice and tone.

A direct, active voice and tone helps to engage users. Active voice and tone make it clear who must do what. Active voice is preferred. In a sentence written in active voice, the subject of the sentence *performs* the action. In the passive voice the subject *receives* the action.

Reading levels

The [Australian Government Style Manual recommends](#) writing to a reading level of **Year 7** (or age range **12 to 14 years**), after removing any proper names and titles. Using [literacy statistics](#) this means around 83% of the Australian population is likely to understand your content.

You can check the reading level of your document or content by either:

- using the readability scores in Microsoft Word (on the Home tab, choose Editor, then go to Document stats)

- copying and pasting your text into the free online [Hemingway](#) tool.

Active voice

A formula to use for writing in **active voice** is: subject – verb – object

Write this
The dog bit the postman.

Avoid **passive voice**: object – verb – subject.

Not this
The postman was bitten by the dog.

Read more about active voice in the [Voice and tone section of the Australian Government Style Manual](#).

Our brand tone of voice

The MDBA tone of voice aligns with our values. Through this, we aim to achieve consistent and quality content in our external communication products, including the MDBA website. These principles apply to all MDBA Portfolios.

Because we value	Our voice is	This means our communication is	We use this voice when	Writing principles to apply or avoid	Written examples
Being courageous	Informative	Open Factual Explanatory Purposeful Formal	We need to provide factual and clear information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use plain language. Keep it simple. • Search out easier to understand words for scientific terms. • Avoid jargon, uncommon abbreviations and acronyms that 	The Murray–Darling Basin is the largest and most complex river system in Australia. It covers 1 million square kilometres of south-eastern Australia, across New South Wales,

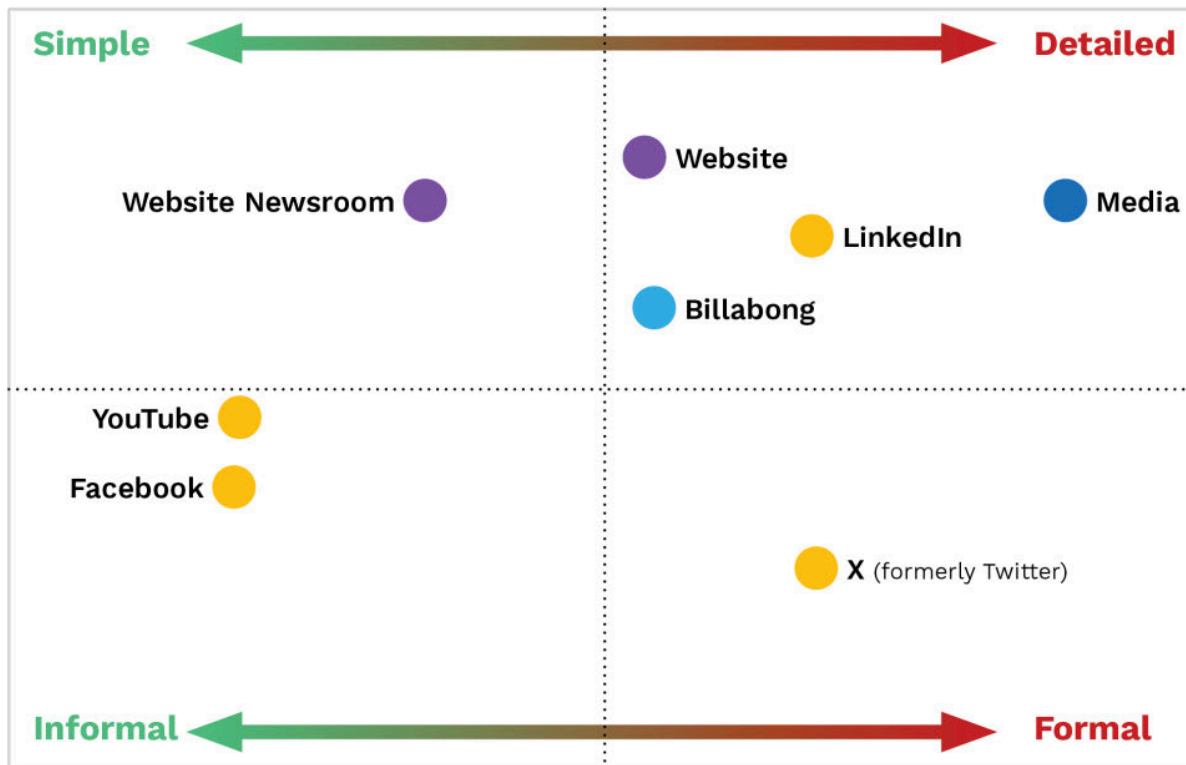
		Authoritative Realistic		are not well known.	Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory.
Being in community	Supportive	Engaging Open Factual Informative Friendly	We want to motivate our audience or build their trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't try too hard; make sure it sounds credible. • Make sure it sounds empathetic. 	At its heart, the Basin Plan sets the amount of water that can be taken from the Basin each year, while leaving enough for our rivers, lakes and wetlands and the plants and animals that depend on them. We know the Basin encompasses a complex network of people, industries and organisations with competing interests and this is why water needs to be managed carefully for future generations.
Being in community	Collaborative	Explanatory Friendly Purposeful Informal Realistic	Ongoing collaboration is needed to succeed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use respectful language that starts a dialogue and creates mutual understanding. • Suggest what people can do, rather than what they shouldn't. 	We work with Basin governments to agree on the scientific approach to assessment and monitoring of the health of the Basin. We share our science and modelling with Basin governments and seek input from their own government experts to validate the analysis and results.
Bringing energy	Inspiring	Factual Open Engaging Optimistic	We share our knowledge and science outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure it doesn't sound patronising. • Make sure it sounds authentic. For language to portray authenticity try saying it out loud, or ask 'does it sound real?' 	The people running the rivers use 'models' to simulate a range of possible future scenarios and consider how different rainfall, evaporation and climate conditions could impact on river flows.

Read more about [Voice and tone in the Australian Government Style Manual](#).

Our channels – tone of voice dimensions

The below diagram provides an overview of the tone of voice you should aim for when writing content for MDBA's main external and internal channels. The tone of voice applies to scales of:

- complexity (simple to detailed)
- formality (informal to formal).



Capital letters

Use capital letters sparingly, most commonly at the start of a sentence and for proper nouns and proper names.

For titles of people, full titles should be capitalised, but generic titles should not. Certain official titles, such as Prime Minister and Governor-General, are always capitalised.

The terms **federal** and **parliament** only require capitals when they form part of an official title (the Federal Court of Australia). The **House** (meaning either parliamentary chamber) and the **Senate** are always capitalised.

For states and territories, use initial capitals when referring to one specifically (for example, the State of Victoria). For generic or plural references, use lower cases (for example, state government, state and territory regulatory agencies or state and territory legislation, Basin state governments).

Programs and projects do not generally need capitals, except where it is well-recognised, for example, The Living Murray (TLM).

Read more about using [capital letters in the Australian Government Style Manual](#).

Numbers

Write the numbers 'zero' and 'one' in words. Use numerals for '2' and above.

Always use a hard space (ctrl + shift + spacebar) between numbers and whatever they are modifying (for example, 4 pm) – this stops the number being separated from what it is describing.

Don't use en dashes between ranges of numbers, use the word 'to' (for example, 10 to 28).

Use phrases instead of en dashes for most spans and ranges of numbers (for example, 2017 and 2019).

Use 4 digits for both dates, joined by an unspaced en dash. Right-justify numbers in a table and use a space between abbreviations for page/s, section/s (for example, p 42, ss 14B).

Use spaces consistently with landline, mobile, national and international phone number formats:

- 03 1234 4321 (landline number)
 - 0400 000 000 (mobile number)
 - 1300 975 707 (Australia-wide local-rate number)
 - 13 00 00 (alternative Australia-wide local-rate number)
 - +61 2 1234 4321 (Australian landline number in international format)
 - +61 412 345 678 (Australian mobile number in international format)
-

Dates and times

When the day is followed by the date, do not separate with a comma. For example:

Thursday 21 June 2022 – not Thursday, 21 June 2022

When writing decades numerically do not use an apostrophe:

the 60s or the 1930s – not the 60's or the 1930's

When writing times in am and pm, use a colon between the hours and minutes, and a space before am or pm. No zeros are needed to show the full hour. For example:

8:30 am to 5 pm

9 am to 6:30 pm

Use noon, midday or midnight instead of 12 am or 12 pm to make it easier for people to be certain of the time:

The webinar starts at midday.

Read more in the [Australian Government Style Manual section on numbers](#) and [conventions for dates](#).

Percentages

MDBA uses the % symbol. The general rule is to use numerals not words: 1%, 15%. There is no space between the numeral and symbol. If starting a sentence with a percentage, use words.

Examples

Fifty per cent of all native fish in that reach died.

It took 50% less time than the first attempt.

Em and en dashes

The Murray–Darling Basin has an **en dash (not a hyphen)** between Murray and Darling. Other place names that are joined also use an en dash (for example, Barmah–Millewa, Barwon–Darling).

Keyboard shortcuts to create an en dash are:

- CTRL + hyphen on the **numeric keypad** on the right side of your keyboard (not the numbers above QWERTY keys)
or
- While holding down the Alt key + press 0150 on the numeric keypad

En dashes are also used in document or web page titles.

Examples

Mitta Mitta Flow Advice – 4 December 2023

Basin Plan annual report 2022–23

Register of measures – sustainable diversion limit adjustment mechanism

En dashes are twice the width of a hyphen. Em dashes are twice the width of an en dash. Em dashes are generally no longer used in government communications.

Hyphen -

En dash –

Em dash —

Read more in the [Australian Government Style Manual section on dashes](#).

Shortened forms, abbreviations and contractions

Minimise use of all shortened forms, including abbreviations, acronyms, initialisms and contractions. As per the [Australian Government Style Manual](#), use the following for states, territories and the Commonwealth:

- abbreviations: NSW, Vic, Qld, WA, SA, Tas, ACT, NT
- initialisms: NSW, SA, WA, ACT, NT
- contractions: Cth when in brackets after legislation

Scientific names

The MDBA convention is to use common names followed by the scientific name in brackets the first time a species is referred to in a chapter or web page.

Example

Red river gums (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) declined dramatically during the drought.

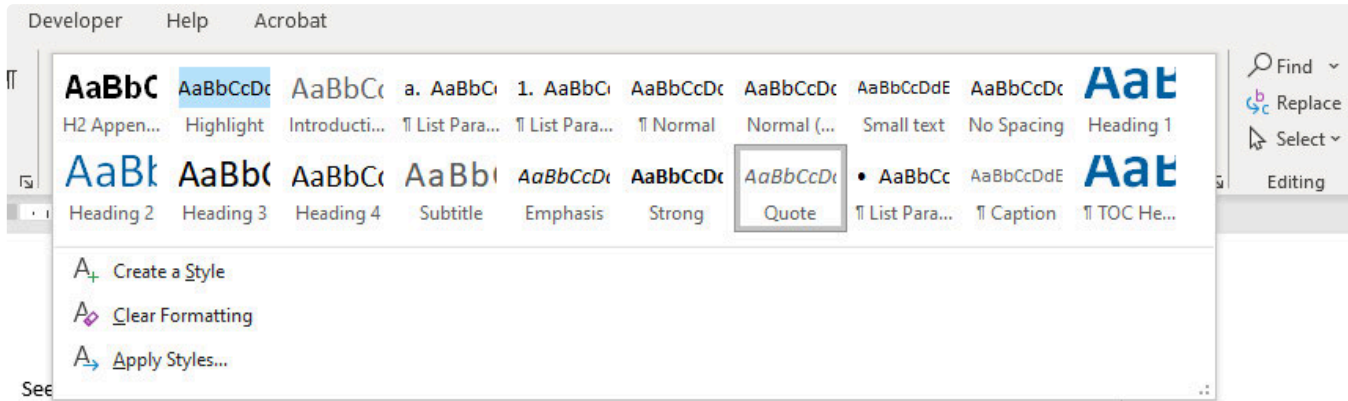
Read more in the [Australian Government Style Manual](#).

Quotations

Follow the [Australian Government Style Manual's section on quotations](#). When the quotation is longer than 2 lines, use the 'Quote' style in the MDBA report template (that is, left-indented and right-indented.)

Example

This block of text is using the 'quote style' provided in Microsoft Word style palette, available in the ribbon menu bar. Select your text, and then apply the style from the style palette.



Text formatting – bold and italics

Bold and italics can distract the reader so use them sparingly. If you need to highlight words, use the 'Strong' (bold) style from styles palette in the MDBA template. To italicise text, use the 'Emphasis' (italics) style from styles palette in the MDBA template.

MDBA style is to also use italics for Latin terms, except where the term has been thoroughly anglicised (for example, *prima facie*, *ad hoc* and *per se*). The full names of Acts also use italics, refer to the [Legislation section](#) of this guide.

See the [Australian Government Style Manual section on italics](#) for all instances where they should be used.

Table formatting

With tables and figures in Microsoft Word, follow these MDBA rules:

- apply the style 'MDBA simple table1' from the style palette

- apply 'Repeat Header Rows' to all tables
 - don't leave cells empty. Use 'zero' or 'nil' or 'n/a' if it is numeric data, use the numeric zero (0) but only use if zero is the true value
 - don't use footnotes
 - when putting notes into a table, use lower case letters, not numbers
 - always number the tables by chapter (if applicable), for example: table 3.1 is the first table in chapter 3
 - do not use colons or full stops in captions (for example, Figure 8 example caption)
-

Footnotes and endnotes

Footnote markers should be placed at the end of a clause or sentence. Footnote markers should be placed after punctuation marks.

Example

Under the *Water Act 2007* (Cth) a potential issue relating to international traders is the definition of the phrase in 'trade or commerce'.¹

MDBA preference is for footnotes rather than endnotes.

Referencing

Use the author-date referencing system. Add hyperlinks to titles where available. For material in preparation, no italics are used:

Baker, AK, Taylor, P, Mason, K & Fogg, M (2010) 'Acid sulfate soil assessment of sediments in the banks of the River Murray between Blanchetown (Lock 1) and Wellington' (in prep.).

For media releases:

Black F and Jacobsen N (4 February 2022) ACT has highest student participation and employment [media release], ACT Government, accessed 5 February 2024.

For reports:

Murray–Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) (2009), Socio-economic context for the Murray–Darling Basin, MDBA Technical Report Series: Basin Plan: BP02, report prepared for MDBA by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics, and the Bureau of Rural Sciences, MDBA, Canberra.

For standards:

Australian Standard, AS 3550.3–1992 Waters – Determination of alkalinity – Acidimetric titration method

After first appearance, use the abbreviated descriptor (for example, AS 3550.3–1992).