

Bureaucrats get duelling style guides

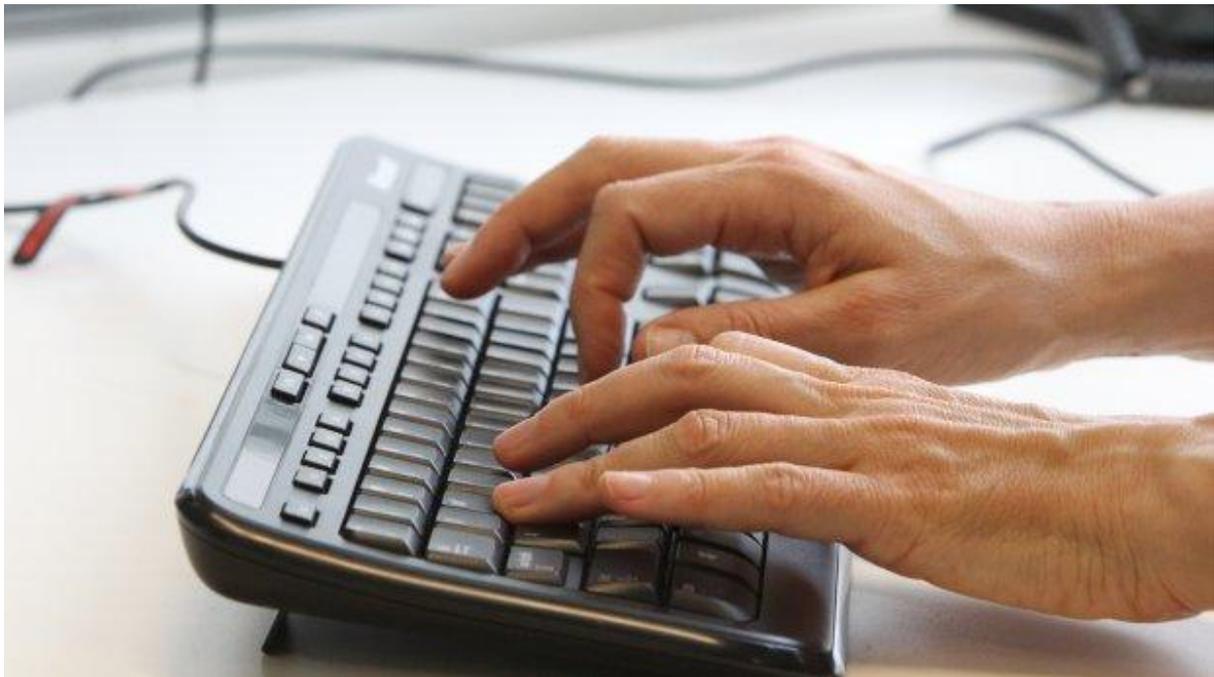


Tom Burton
Government editor

Dec 10, 2020 – 7.30pm

Two competing style guides for corporate, academic, media and government writers are being launched after a revamped editorial bible for writers and editors – the government's *Style Manual* – was criticised for being too digital.

Detractors say the *Style Manual*, which has long been the gold standard for writers and editors, was hijacked by digital content designers when its 550-page sixth edition was overhauled and converted to a website in September.



The government *Style Manual* had long been the gold standard for public and private sector publishing. **Peter Rae**

In response, the new [Australian Style Guide](#) has been developed by editors at the Plain English Foundation training and editing group, led by its director and co-founder, Neil James.

The new guide covers contemporary Australian writing practice for print and digital environments and is targeted at a broad audience of public and private sector communicators.

The government *Style Manual* had long been [the gold standard for public and private sector publishing](#) but had not been updated for 20 years.

After much lobbying by professional editors for a new edition for government and non-government writers, it was merged with the Digital Transformation Agency's digital content guide to create an unashamedly digital-centric [online style guide](#) for federal government writers, editors and approvers of official content.

The result is purposely more an instructional manual than the definitive guide to clear expression. Brevity is applauded, with research suggesting attention spans have [fallen by about a quarter in 15 years](#) to about eight seconds.

While this has been welcomed for web content to support government services, professional editors say the digital guide does not work for analysis and longer form writing, either in government and more broadly.

Not what was hoped for

"It definitely is disappointing," said Kerry Davies, the chair of the Style Manual Steering Group of the Institute of Professional Editors, which helped advise the DTA on the revamp and provided an external review before its public release.

"This is not the seventh edition editors were hoping for. It does not have the nuance and context that editors need for their work across different written forms and genres."

Ms Davies said the DTA guide reflected its audience's desire for rules rather than discussion about style, and confirmed the institute was looking at the suitability of other style manuals that could also be used in its accreditation program.

She pointed to another style manual being developed by Biotext and Macquarie University, to be called the [Australian Manual of Style](#).

Dr James said policy writers would see "plain language" as dumbing down their text and would largely ignore the new digital style guide, resorting to complex "narrative" style that buried the key messages.

In the push to emphasise usability and what digital content designers refer to as "[content as the interface](#)", critics said the new government style guide lacked the editorial gravitas and rigour of the previous print-only versions of the official *Style Manual*.

Workplace writing is too often marred by poor design, unclear structure and complex language that does not always consider its audience.

— Neil James, Plain English Foundation

Rather than focus on "plain English", the digital guide [explicitly dumped](#) the term and defined plain language narrowly as involving shorter sentences and simpler words.

In contrast, Dr James' new style manual has plain English principles as the centre piece of its approach.

Clear and consistent

Dr James, who sat on the advisory group for the DTA's revamp, said his organisation's new guide "sets out how to make content clear and consistent for online use, without losing the editorial rigour of the traditional print environment".

"The ASG is firmly grounded in plain English principles and in the rigorous set of style rules that Australian editors have built up over the decades," Dr James said.

"Plain English isn't just about using short words. It's also about how you highlight key messages, structure information and lay it out on the page.

"While getting the words right is certainly key to the writing process, so too is the way we structure information and deploy visual elements to make it easy to use.

"Equally important is evaluating how easily your audience will find understand and use the information they need.

"Workplace writing, and public language more broadly, is too often marred by poor design, unclear structure and complex language that does not always consider its audience carefully enough."

The split over approaches to clear expression is not simply about language and design.

Online services save governments an estimated \$16 per transaction compared with face-to-face engagements.

Dr James cited a Swedish example where the Higher Education Authority saved nearly 20 per cent of its call-centre costs by rewriting application forms in simple, easy-to-read formats.

[US Navy research](#) found that well-written memos took up to a quarter less time to read and approve, saving the navy about \$US73 million (\$99 million) in officer time (not including the time for rewrites) and \$US350 million for the whole service.

Dr James estimates a third of public servants' time involved writing. Applying similar ratios, that is a productivity saving close to \$8 billion a year for the annual \$100 billion wage bill for all federal and state public servants.