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**Te Kāwanatanga
o Aotearoa**
New Zealand Government

Writing for Ministers and Cabinet

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Purpose of this document

Whether you're writing a Cabinet paper, a policy paper, an aide memoire, or an A3, you'll find high-level descriptions in this product of what's involved, links to resources, and tips for success. We encourage you to also seek out your own organisation's guidance on language style, process, and templates.

This guide can be used as a training tool for new or developing public servants. It can be a reminder of good practice for more experienced advisors and analysts who want to refine their writing skills in a policy context.

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The Policy Project
c/o The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
Parliament Buildings
Wellington 6160
New Zealand

Email: policy.project@dpmc.govt.nz

Web: dpmc.govt.nz/policy-project

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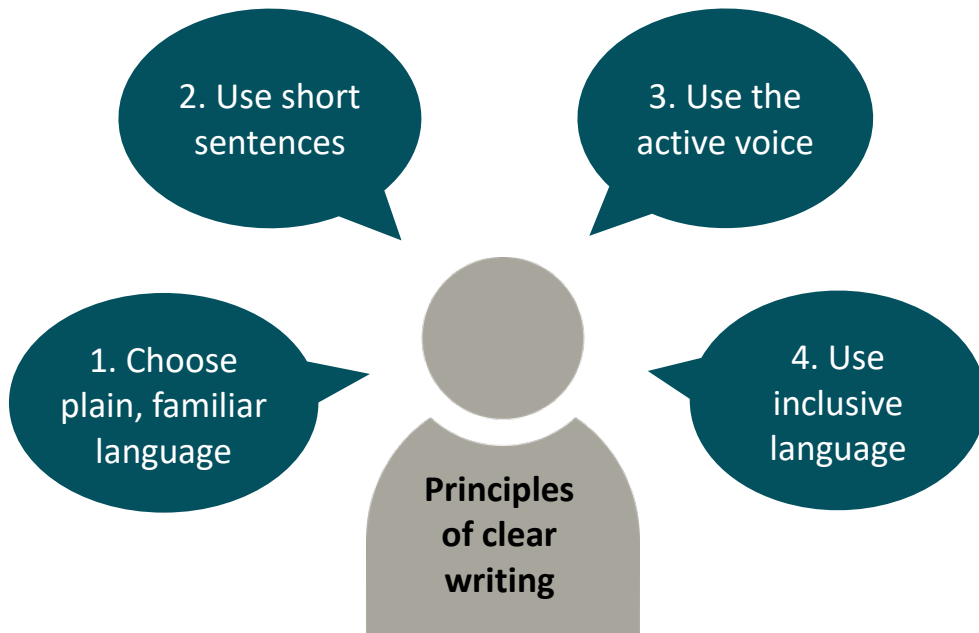
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Writing clearly

Whether your readers are individual ministers or Cabinet, your senior leadership team or the public, writing clearly will help you get your message across. This guidance should be applied to all the written products for ministers and Cabinet described in this document.

Thinking also about the presentation of the document will make your writing easier to read. The layout and formatting should help the reader absorb the messages quickly and easily. Use headings to tell a clear story, and charts and diagrams to support understanding.

The following principles of clear writing below are described in more detail over the next two pages.



1. Choose plain, familiar language

- **Choose common words** – use the smallest word with the most obvious meaning that does the job. Readers will absorb your message better if your words are familiar and easily understandable.
- **Avoid abstract terms** – figurative language and metaphors require more effort to understand than plain, simple language. Abstract concepts can make your reader lose interest. Resist the urge to be creative and metaphorical. Be literal and direct.
- **Use verbs, not nouns** – verb phrases are direct and active, while noun phrases are longer and lack momentum. Compare 'We discussed the issue' with 'We had a discussion on the issue'. Using verbs will carry your reader through the text.
- **Avoid jargon and buzzwords** – sometimes technical language is necessary, but keep jargon to a minimum and avoid using buzzwords. Ask, 'Would a member of the public know this term?' If not, try rephrasing. Limit the use of acronyms where possible.

2. Use short sentences and paragraphs

- **Keep sentences around 15 to 20 words** – this length is ideal for ease of reading. Try to not go over 30 words per sentence.
- **Avoid redundancies** – remove any words that aren't needed for your reader's understanding. Are there phrases or descriptions that repeat often? Get other people to review your work with a fresh pair of eyes and keep an open mind to their suggestions.
- **Lead with action** – start your sentence with the main point. Don't bury the action at the end, or your audience may have to reread.

3. Use the active voice

- **80 to 90% of your verbs should be active** – active sentences are stronger and clearer. Consider the difference between ‘Jack climbed the hill’ and ‘The hill was climbed by Jack’. Sometimes the passive voice is appropriate, but keep it to a minimum.
- **Use ‘you’ and ‘we’** – personal pronouns are clear and short. They create a more appealing and engaging tone. No matter how educated or formal your audience is, using ‘you’ and ‘we’ will keep their interest and help their understanding.
- **Express action, not intention** – consider the difference between ‘I apologise’ and ‘I want to apologise’: in the latter, no apology has been made. Be clear and confident about the action you’ll take. Unless you need to be vague, avoid weakening it with words like ‘hope’, ‘try’, ‘aim’, ‘seek’ or ‘intend’.

4. Use inclusive, inviting language

- **Use gender neutral language** – avoid terms such as chairman and fireman, but also think about less common words such as ‘manpower’ or ‘man-made’. Collective pronouns like ‘they’ and ‘them’ can replace ‘he’ and ‘she’.
- **Use people’s terms for themselves** – whether the group is based around ethnicity, sexuality, or disability, use the terms that people use for themselves (where possible). In regard to disability, the New Zealand Disability Strategy provides further guidance.
- **Use a positive, helpful tone** – your reader will respond more favourably if you sound like you want to help them. Try to sound less formal and more human.

The Read Test

Always read your text aloud

The only way to know how your writing sounds is to read it out loud. This is always a good idea when writing, for two main reasons:



1. **You’ll find out how easy it is to read.**
If the sentences are too long or punctuation marks are in the wrong place, you’ll notice. Use this insight to edit and re-draft to improve your reader’s experience.
2. **You’ll hear how it sounds.**
Our ears can be more reliable than our eyes at noticing repetitive words or sounds. If it doesn’t sound good, fix it.

Resources for writing clearly

- **Free guides**
Resources on plain language topics.
- **Free tools**
A range of tools to help you write clearly and meet your communication goals.

Briefing papers

Most briefings to the minister will be requested by their office. Many agencies use the term ‘briefing’ to describe a wide range of papers produced for ministers. In the context of this guidance, we use the word ‘briefing’ to mean relatively short papers setting out some initial information and advice. Sometimes briefings are used by an agency to advise a minister on something it wants them to know. There are two kinds of briefing papers you’re most likely to write.

1. **Requests for information** – when a minister asks to be informed or needs to be briefed on an event, issue or operational matter. This form of initial briefing provides necessary background information and in some cases can seek approval for more detailed work. Ministers are very busy and sometimes need briefings completed at short notice.
2. **Advice on consultation** – when you inform your minister about another agency’s policy advice to their minister following an inter-agency consultation round. A short briefing is usually required because another agency’s advice has implications for your minister’s portfolio. Your briefing would usually include your ministry’s view, and may recommend action to your minister, such as discussing the issue with their colleagues.

Aide memoires

An aide memoire provides your minister with information for an event, such as a speaking engagement, panel discussion or meeting.

The aide memoire can provide talking points, background information, and any facts and figures that will equip your minister to speak confidently and competently. Try to predict what potential questions they might be asked in that context, and then provide the necessary information. A good aide memoire will help the minister communicate in a well-spoken, aware, and informed manner.

An aide memoire must be very easy to read

If your minister needs to translate the talking points into actual speech, it’s less helpful. More than ever, you need to use plain language and short sentences. Keep your paragraphs simple and bite-sized. Make the information accurate and easily digestible.



Before you finish the aide memoire, read it out loud. How does it sound? Are the sentences short enough to read easily? Do they flow like natural speech? Keep editing until the talking points sound pleasing to your ear.

For both short initial briefings and aide memoires some advice is the same:

- **Less is more** – ministers would expect a short briefing to be covered in two pages. Time’s a precious resource in a minister’s office, so trim your information down and then trim it again.
- **Identify your primary question where appropriate using the CTQ** (Context, Trigger, Question) method on page 7. Anything that doesn’t answer this focal question can be left out.
- **Write clearly using plain language** – refer to the plain language principles on pages 3 and 4.

Policy advice papers

Policy advice requests

A request for more substantive policy advice can stem from an initial briefing to your minister that recommends more work be done. It can also come from a decision taken by a ministerial Group or Cabinet.

This work could be part of an ongoing project on the Government's work programme or a new initiative. It may involve a sequence of papers that need further direction and approval from Cabinet along the way, or could result in streams of work being referred elsewhere and dovetailed with sector-led projects.

Advice can be prepared jointly with other agencies or as part of a ministerial review or working group process.

It's important to note your minister will have the power to make some policy decisions independently of their Cabinet colleagues, while other decisions will require Cabinet authorisation. For a list of issues that need to be taken to Cabinet, refer to the [Cabinet papers](#) section on page 9 and the CabGuide links on page 10.

Good processes and quality assurance

Seek out your own agency's guidance on developing policy advice for ministers. Make sure you're familiar with the timings for internal sign-off processes for policy papers.

Policy papers brief the minister on your agency's analysis of the issues. They should define the problem or opportunity, outline the evidence and any consultation undertaken, and set out the agency's free and frank advice.

Advice can present a range of options from maintaining the status quo, to making operational changes and amending policy and legislative settings. The recommendations you make to your minister will form the basis for their decision making. They should help your minister formulate next steps and the scope of any consultation with Cabinet.

Good policy decisions are informed by free and frank advice, so it's important to be familiar with what that means in principle and in practice. See the link to further guidance on page 8.

“Advice to Ministers must be free and frank. It should be based on officials' professional opinions and best judgement. Free and frank advice is honest and fearless but should also be responsive to the priorities determined by the government of the day, and be offered with an understanding of the government's political context.”

[Paragraph 3.78, Cabinet Manual](#)

Analysis and advice on regulatory impacts

Certain types of policy issues may have to meet more specific requirements about form and process.

Regulatory proposals

Unless an exemption applies, a Regulatory Impact Statement must accompany all policy proposals considered by Cabinet that may involve legislation. The content of this statement is your agency's responsibility. It should present your agency's best analysis and advice, which might differ from what your minister is proposing. It needs to be independently reviewed. See [Impact Analysis Requirements for Regulatory Proposals](#).

The underlying analysis for the statement should begin as early as possible so it can be used to advise your minister on the policy issues and options. It can be tested through meaningful engagement before the analysis is finalised.

Spending proposals

Proposals with financial implications that involve investment decisions may need to be accompanied by a business case. See the links to [Better Business Cases](#) and the Cabinet Office circular [Investment Management and Asset Performance in Departments and Other Entities](#).

Ideally all policy proposals with financial implications that require Cabinet approval should be submitted through the Budget initiative process. Consult early with Treasury officials about preparing advice that feeds into the government's investment cycle – see [PCO \(18\) 2: Proposals with Financial Implications and Financial Authorities \(CO\(18\)2\)](#).

Communicating advice – Storylining

Storylining is another tool to ensure your written policy advice or 'story' is clearly communicated. Start by identifying the primary question that the paper will answer. To identify the primary question, use the 'CTQ' (Context, Trigger, Question) method.

1. **Context** – start by describing the topic
(e.g. a health outbreak is causing harm in the community).
2. **Trigger** – explain why you're talking about the topic
(e.g. people are ill as a result of a lack of services to manage the outbreak, and a review has recommended changes).
3. **Question** – the question answered by the document
(e.g. how can the government best enable the service to reach more people? – the answer to which is an operational response and increased funding).

When asking the minister to make a decision, the analysis and options should support the recommendations – and offer an answer to the question.

Resources for quality policy advice

- **[Start Right](#)**
This guide sets out a commissioning approach to making the best start in policy projects, including tools for designing and planning a policy project.
- **[Policy Methods Toolbox](#)**
list of new methods that can be used for gathering evidence, insights and analysis to feed into policy projects.
- **[Free and frank advice and policy stewardship](#)**
Guidance on how to provide free and frank advice, and a reference for good practice.

Policy Quality Framework overview



Quality standards for written policy and other advice

These standards will help you assess and improve the quality of your agency's written policy and other advice, and whether it's fit for purpose. The advice may be for a minister, Cabinet, or other decision makers. It may be jointly provided with other agencies. Depending on the issue and the nature of the advice the paper provides, sometime not all the standards will be applicable. Oral advice should also meet the spirit of these standards but not necessarily their detail.

All agencies are required to use the Policy Quality Framework to assess the quality of their policy advice each year and include the results in their annual reports.

Supporting resources

- **Policy Quality Framework**
sets out the standards for high-quality, fit-for-purpose advice.
- **Developing papers with the Policy Quality Framework: Checklist for reviewing papers in development**
Provides questions to ask and actions to take so the paper you're developing will reflect the detailed characteristics that sit under the four standards of the Policy Quality Framework.
- **Peer-review worksheet for policy papers**
When you're peer reviewing someone else's paper, this electronically editable worksheet can help you test how well the paper meets the four standards of quality policy advice.

Cabinet papers

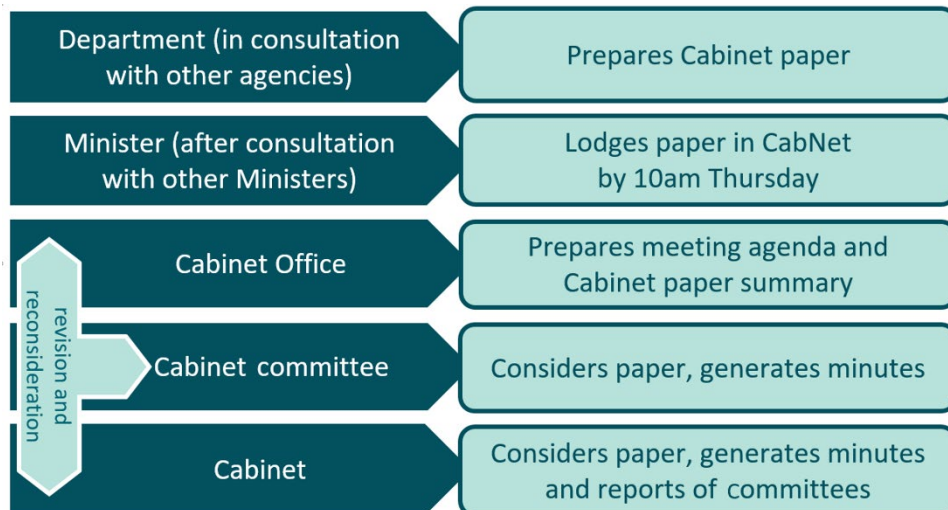
Policy advice for Cabinet consideration

Cabinet provides a forum for ministers in government to collectively make decisions and keep one another informed. Cabinet usually meets on Mondays at 1pm.

Cabinet considers significant issues or policy changes, regulation changes, decisions involving major funding, ratification of international treaties, and appointments to boards or prominent public service positions. Ministers' offices can provide guidance on whether or not an issue needs to go to Cabinet. As a general rule, ministers should let their colleagues know which issues they want to be consulted on.

See [Principles of Cabinet decision-making](#) for more information on decision-making arrangements, and requirements and processes for coalition and support party ministers.

The Cabinet decision-making process



Cabinet committees

Before a paper goes to Cabinet, it's considered and discussed in detail by Cabinet committees. Ministers outside Cabinet can sit on Cabinet Committees and take papers to Cabinet. Cabinet committee decisions on a paper's recommendations are recorded in a Report of Committee minute that seeks confirmation from Cabinet the following week. The final decision lies with Cabinet.

Nine subject-related Cabinet committees (as at April 2024)

- [100\) Cabinet 100-Day Plan Committee](#)
- [\(APH\) Cabinet Appointments and Honours Committee](#)
- [\(CBC\) Cabinet Business Committee](#)
- [\(ECO\) Cabinet Economic Policy Committee](#)
- [\(EXP\) Cabinet Expenditure and Regulatory Review Committee](#)
- [\(FPS\) Cabinet Foreign Policy and National Security Committee](#)
- [\(LEG\) Cabinet Legislation Committee](#)
- [\(SOU\) Cabinet Social Outcomes Committee](#)
- [\(STR\) Cabinet Strategy Committee](#)

Make sure you're familiar with the timetable, membership, and terms of reference for the committees that are relevant to you. As this list is subject to change, check the page [Cabinet committees](#) to ensure you have the most up-to-date information.

The timetable for Cabinet and Cabinet committee meetings is available on CabNet. For those without access to CabNet, more information can be found at [CabGuide – Lodging a paper](#).

Preparing Cabinet papers

A Cabinet paper is effectively the voice of your minister communicating with their Cabinet colleagues. It's the minister's paper, so find out your minister's preferred style. Use their language if that's their preference.

Cabinet papers should:

- Be concise, coherent and logical, and structured so the key issues stand out, using headings and sub-headings
- be under ten pages (the recommended maximum length)
- use plain language, short paragraphs, uncomplicated sentences, and bullet points where appropriate
- contain consistent and accurate information (including figures and dates – fact check everything)
- have clear, logical recommendations that show the pathway of decision-making – write them so they can stand alone, because they will need to do so in the minutes
- use appendices or attachments to include further supporting information where necessary
- use the latest template if regulatory impact analysis is required – see the section [Analysis and advice on regulatory impacts](#) and the Treasury's guidance on [regulatory impact statements](#)
- use charts, diagrams and other graphics to help understanding
- avoid acronyms where possible – ministers comment regularly on the overuse of acronyms in Cabinet papers; even if your minister knows an acronym, other ministers may not.

CabNet



CabNet is a secure electronic system that supports Cabinet and Cabinet committee

processes. It's the central

repository and workflow system for meetings, papers, and minutes of decisions. CabNet is administered by the Cabinet Office, and access to CabNet material is limited to authorised users in ministers' offices and departments. Cabinet papers are submitted into CabNet by 10am on the Thursday of the week before the Cabinet committee's consideration.

Resources for Cabinet papers

- **CabGuide**
Information for public servants and ministers' offices on the procedures and operation of the New Zealand Cabinet, Cabinet committees, and the Executive Council.
- **CabGuide – Lodging a paper**
A section of the CabGuide, providing guidance on all steps in the process of lodging a Cabinet paper.
- **Regulatory Impact Statements**
Information on regulatory impact statements, which must accompany any Cabinet paper with regulatory proposals.
- **Cabinet committees**
Current list and further details of Cabinet committees.

A3 presentations

A3s provide a visual overview that can simplify complex ideas and issues for a minister or Cabinet. They can be used as a discussion tool to support quality thinking early on in policy development. They can paint a picture of the policy issues and provide a breakdown of options. Good A3s are attractive and easy to read.

Think of the A3 as the ‘Little Golden Book’ version – the story has been reduced to its essence, with less text and more pictures. Developing an A3 will test how well you understand your message, as you’ll need to be more selective and clear about what you say.

If you don’t know how to start...

- Group your information into boxes and ask: ‘If I could only keep one of these boxes, which would it be?’ The box you choose is your main message. Let that message shape your presentation.
- Is there a natural structure in your information? For example, a sequence might suggest a timeline, a cycle could suit a circular shape, and a layered approach might work well as a pyramid. The natural flow of the content will suggest the best layout.

Clarify your purpose and hook your reader

- Use your title to hook your reader. Use the text beneath it to explain why they should care about your message.
- Find out how much your reader already knows. This will help you identify the main question your reader will have. Knowing these questions will help you choose which information to include and which to leave out.

Influencing with visual elements

People remember information better when it’s combined with images. Facts and information tire the brain, but attractive colours and shapes will please your reader on a subconscious level. Don’t underestimate the importance of this reaction. Readers will respond well to your message if the presentation makes them feel good. If it doesn’t, they may lose interest.



Influence your reader’s reaction by considering:

- **the emotional temperature of the colours** – think about the mood generated by reds and oranges as opposed to blues and greens
- **alignment of lines and boxes** – PowerPoint is helpful for showing you when the objects are aligned, but if this has been done poorly, your audience can feel subconsciously that something isn’t right
- **a layout that seems familiar** and meets your reader’s expectations
- **the connections between the parts of your A3** – the sequence of information should be obvious. This is why it can be helpful to base it on a single structure that suits the information.

PowerPoint tip

- If your slides are intended for printing, make sure you don’t use the widescreen layout. Select A4 or A3 as your slide size.
- If you’ll be giving a presentation or projecting your slides, use minimal text and extra-large font sizes. It’s better to have many slides with over-sized text than a compact slideshow that’s dense and hard to read.



Best practice layout and formatting

- **Contrast** – make sure your A3 contains white space. Don't fill the background with an image or block colours. Our eyes like to see white space.
- **Headings** – especially if you have plenty of text, use headings and sub-headings. You can use them to summarise the main points of information, so that your audience quickly understands the main message at a glance.
- **Margins** – always use left-aligned text with a ragged right margin. Justified text is more tiring to read, as our eyes have to make micro-adjustments for the subtle changes in word spacing.
- **Bullet lists** – research shows that if a bullet list has more than seven points, people don't read many of them. Keep lists short.
- **Text effects**
 - CAPITALS CONVEY A SENSE OF SHOUTING AND ARE USUALLY NOT A GOOD IDEA.
 - *Italics are slower for the brain to process and are harder to read for everyone, especially those with visual impairments. It's unnecessary to italicise quotes (quotation marks are enough). Use italics very sparingly.*
 - Underlining is an old-fashioned style of emphasis used by typewriters that could do little else. Save it for hyperlinks.
 - **Bold is effective for occasional emphasis, but be careful not to overuse it, and don't use it for paragraphs or blocks of text.**
 - Avoid using coloured or white fonts on a coloured background. If the contrast between the text and the background isn't high enough, it's harder to read and doesn't meet accessibility requirements.

Use a friendly and clear tone

A3s suit an informal communication style. Talk to people directly. Use plain language and personal pronouns. Make clear connections for your reader.

Sometimes stories and metaphors can be effective at keeping your reader's interest. Case studies work well in A3s because they hook your reader's attention with stories about people.

Finishing

People generally read A3s from top-left to bottom-right, and don't look closely at the top-right quadrant. This makes the top-right quadrant ideal for visuals, graphs, or other eye-catching content. The conclusion in your bottom-right corner should leave the reader clear on next steps, proposals, or follow-up. Don't leave them wondering 'So what?'

And remember to:

- **edit your material** – cut, cut, and cut down again
- **proofread carefully** – use the style manual of your agency and get someone else to double check there are no errors.

Resources for your A3

- **Icons and Photos For Everything**
The Noun Project provides a wide range of icons and images for you to use.
- **Colour and contrast**
Learn about the New Zealand Government Web Accessibility Standard and how to make sure the contrast ratios of your colours meet these requirements.