Writing for Ministers and Cabinet
Using this document

This document contains guidance on different types of communication with Ministers and Cabinet. Whether you are writing a Cabinet paper, an aide memoire or an A3, you will find high-level descriptions of what it involves, links to resources, and tips for success.

Each government agency or department has its own processes for communicating with Ministers and Cabinet. We encourage you to seek out your own organisation’s guidance on language style, process and templates. The information in this document should enhance the approach you take and help you communicate more effectively.

This guide can be used as a training tool for new or developing public servants. It can be a reminder of good practice for advisors and analysts who are looking to refine their writing skills. Although it has been written with the New Zealand public sector in mind, most of the information could be applied elsewhere.

We welcome your suggestions on how this document could be improved. Please send any feedback to policyproject@dpmc.govt.nz.
The Cabinet decision-making process

Cabinet is central to the system of government and is established by convention, not law. It provides a forum for Ministers to decide on government issues and keep other Ministers informed. Cabinet Ministers and secretariat staff attend on Mondays at 11.30am.

Ministers’ offices can provide guidance on whether or not an issue needs to go to Cabinet. All decisions made by Cabinet Committees are confirmed by Cabinet as part of the Report of Committee. Generally, 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.

Cabinet delegates some decision-making authority on specific matters to ten Cabinet committees:

- Cabinet Appointments and Honours Committee (APH)
- Cabinet Economic Growth and Infrastructure Committee (EGI)
- Cabinet External Relations and Defence Committee (ERD)
- Cabinet Legislation Committee (LEG)
- Cabinet National Security Committee (NSC)
- Cabinet Committee on State Sector Reform and Expenditure Control (SEC)
- Cabinet Social Policy Committee (SOC)
- Cabinet Strategy Committee (STR)
- Cabinet Committee on Treaty of Waitangi Negotiations (TOW)
- Cabinet Business Committee (CBC) stands in for all the other committees in the weeks when the House isn’t sitting

Refer to Cabinet manual 5.11 and 5.12.
The New Zealand Cabinet Office says that Cabinet Papers ‘should use plain language, short paragraphs, uncomplicated sentences’. Whether you are writing for Ministers or the public, for colleagues or busy members of the workforce, using plain language will help you get your message across. This guidance should be applied to all products 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.

There are four main principles that can help you write more clearly:

1. **Use 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 obvious to them.
   - **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 the following: ‘We discussed the issue’ and ‘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.

2. **Use short sentences and paragraphs**
   - **Keep sentences around 15–20 words** – this length is best for reader comprehension. Try to not go over 30 words per sentence.
   - **Avoid redundancies** – remove any words that are not 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 hide the action at the end, or your audience may have to reread.
3. Use the active voice

- **80–90% 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 will take. Unless you need to be vague, avoid weakening it with words like ‘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’.

- **Put people first** – it may be shorter to say ‘deaf people’ but this can be dehumanising. Say rather ‘people with hearing impairments’, ‘people with learning disabilities’ etc.

- **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).

- **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.

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**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 will find out how easy it is to read.**
   If the sentences are too long or the pauses are in the wrong place, you will notice. Use this insight to improve your reader’s experience.

2. **You will 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.

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**Resources for plain writing**

- **The Write Group**
  [www.write.co.nz](http://www.write.co.nz)

- **Plain language materials and resources**
  [www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/developmaterials/plainlanguage.html](http://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/developmaterials/plainlanguage.html)

- **Plain English Campaign**
  [www.plainenglish.co.uk](http://www.plainenglish.co.uk)
Cabinet papers

A Cabinet paper is from a Minister to other Ministers. The paper is submitted to Cabinet committees and Cabinet so that Ministers can make informed decisions. Most Cabinet papers seek decisions on policy, funding or legislation.

Cabinet papers should:

- be concise, coherent and logical, and structured so that the key issues stand out, using headings and subheadings
- use plain language, short paragraphs, uncomplicated sentences, and bullet points where appropriate
- use charts, diagrams and other graphics to help understanding
- ensure that the information contained in the paper, including figures and dates, is consistent and accurate
- have clear, logical recommendations that show the decisions required
- have recommendations that can stand alone as a separate minute
- use appendices or attachments to include further supporting information where necessary.

CabNet is a secure electronic system that supports Cabinet and Cabinet committee processes. It is the central repository and workflow system for Cabinet and Cabinet committee 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.

Storylining

Effective Cabinet papers focus on answering a primary question. It could be the problem or opportunity that you need to research before you can write your paper. If you need help identifying the primary question, use the ‘CTQ’ method:

1: Context – start by describing the topic (e.g. a health service is no longer effective).
2: Trigger – explain why you are talking about the thing (e.g. people are suffering ill health as a result of the service not reaching them, and a review has recommended changes).
3: Question – the question answered by the document (e.g. increased funding will enable the service to reach more people). Even if you are asking the Minister to make a decision, the options you provide are the answer to the question.

Make sure that you have fully explained the problem or opportunity, consequences, evidence and international comparisons, options and next steps.

The CabGuide online provides detailed information about Cabinet papers and the Cabinet decision-making process. It is laid out in four main sections:

1. Writing a paper (consultation, secure handling and templates)
2. Lodging a paper (submission deadlines and CabNet guidance)
3. Consideration of papers (Cabinet, Cabinet committees, and the Executive Council)
4. Proactive release and Official Information Act requests
Tips to remember:

- Remember that this is the Minister’s paper, so use the language they would want to use. Your Minister will have a preferred style and your government services team will know what it is.

- Avoid acronyms. Ministers comment regularly on the overuse of acronyms in Cabinet papers. Your Minister may be familiar with the acronyms used in your agency, but other Ministers might not.

- At the beginning, ask, ‘What decision am I recommending Ministers make?’ If you write the recommendations first, the story of your Cabinet paper will become clear. Any information that does not support the recommendations can be removed.

- Write your recommendations so that they can stand alone, because they will need to do so in the minutes.

- Ministers are busy, so keep it short. Except for papers on major proposals or reviews, ten pages is the recommended maximum length.

- Use headings to structure your document. They should summarise the main points and issues so that they provide an overview of the story at a glance.

- For best readability, use 12 point font.

- Include graphs and charts as single image files.

Resources for Cabinet paper writing

- CabNet
  cabnet.dpmc.govt.nz/share/page/

- Uploading papers into CabNet
  www.dpmc.govt.nz/publications/cabnet-how-upload-cabinet-papers

- CabGuide
  dpmc.govt.nz/publications/cabguide

- Writing a Paper
  dpmc.govt.nz/node/1716/#collection-group-heading-1

- Guidance for length and format options
  dpmc.govt.nz/publications/guidance-length-standard-cabinet-papers-and-format-options-longer-papers

- Current list of Cabinet Office Contacts
Impact Analysis Requirements  (former Regulatory Impact Statements)

Cabinet papers must be accompanied by a Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) if its policy options involve creating, changing or removing primary or secondary legislation (exemptions to this requirement can be found in the Cabinet Office circular). An RIA summarises the agency’s best advice and analysis of the impacts likely to result from the paper’s regulatory proposals. It provides Cabinet with a summary of that impact analysis; that is, the problem definition, policy objectives, the options and their associated costs, benefits and risks, the consultation undertaken, and the proposed arrangements for implementation, monitoring and review. The RIA should be prepared before the Cabinet paper.

To increase the transparency of the regulatory process, each RIA is published on the websites of the responsible agency and the Treasury.

Developing a regulatory proposal

1. Get feedback early on problem definition and options from Treasury and your agency’s quality assurance panel or expert.
2. If an exemption may apply, confirm this in writing with Treasury. Their confirmation that a RIA is not required needs to be included in the relevant Cabinet paper.
3. Do your policy analysis, using the policy quality frameworks.
4. Complete a process confirmation form and send to Treasury. They will confirm both the appropriate RIA template and who is responsible for arranging independent quality assurance of an RIA.
5. Summarise your impact analysis using the appropriate RIA template.
6. The manager responsible for the Cabinet paper signs off the RIA.
7. Get independent quality assurance and include this statement in the Cabinet paper.
8. Prepare the Cabinet paper.
9. If a regulatory proposal has inadequate impact analysis, the Chair of the Cabinet committee decides whether the paper is considered.
10. If the paper is considered and substantive decisions are made, you’ll need to do a Supplementary Analysis Report.
11. Publish the RIA (and Supplementary Analysis Report, if any) on the responsible agency and Treasury websites.

Resources for Impact Analysis

- Treasury forms and RIA templates are available at www.treasury.govt.nz/regulation/impact-analysis
- Impact Analysis Requirements – Cabinet Office Circular www.dpmc.govt.nz/publications/co-17-3-impact-analysis-requirements
Briefings

Most briefings to the Minister will be requested by their office. Sometimes briefings are used by the agency to advise a Minister on something it wants them to know. Generally speaking, there are three kinds of briefings you are most likely to write.

1. **Requests for information** – when a Minister asks to be informed or needs to be briefed, this one-off briefing provides the necessary information. Ministers are very busy and sometimes need briefings at short notice.

2. **Second opinion advice** – when you are informing the Minister on another agency’s policy advice to their Minister, because it has implications for their portfolio. This would usually include a Ministry view, and may recommend action to the Minister, such as discussing the issue with their colleagues.

3. **Developing a Cabinet paper** – during the development of a Cabinet paper, it is normal for the Minister to receive a series of briefings. This gives the Minister opportunities to make decisions on the direction and content of the paper. These briefings can usually be planned in advance.

**Aide Memoires**

Aide memoires differ from briefings because they do more than provide information – they prepare your ministerial audience with information for a specific purpose, such as a speaking engagement, panel discussion, or meeting.

The aide memoire provides talking points, background information, and any facts and figures that will equip the 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.

The aide memoire must be very easy to read

If the Minister needs to translate the talking points into actual speech, then it is 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 briefings and aide memories, some advice is the same:

- **Less is more** – Ministers do not like a 14 page briefing when they asked for two pages. Time is a precious resource in a Minister’s office so trim your information down and then trim it again.

- **Identify your primary question** using the CTQ method on page 6. Anything that does not answer this question can be left out.

- **Use plain language** – refer to the plain language instructions on pages 4 and 5.

**Resources for briefings and aide memoires**

- How to write effective briefing notes in plain language
  www.publicsectorwriting.com/?page_id=6
A3 presentations

A3s provide a visual overview that can simplify complex ideas and issues in a briefing or Cabinet paper. They can be used to support decision making. They can also be used as a discussion tool to support quality thinking early on in policy development. 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 will 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.

• Identify 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 is combined with images. Facts and information tire the brain, but attractive colours and shapes will please your reader on a subconscious level. Do not underestimate the importance of this reaction. Readers will respond well to your message if the presentation makes them feel good. If it does not, they may lose interest.

Influence your reader’s reaction by considering:

• the emotional temperature of the colours – think about the mood of reds and oranges versus blues and greens. Soothe your audience.

• alignment of lines and boxes – PowerPoint is helpful for showing you when the objects are aligned. 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:

The A3 option in PowerPoint is not a true match for an A3 sized paper. Before you start work on your A3, get the dimensions right:

1: change the slide size: Click Design > Slide Size > Custom Slide Size

2: set your dimensions to: W 42cm x H 29.7cm (for portrait, swap the numbers around)
Tips for layout

• **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 anyone 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 from the days when typewriters couldn’t do anything else. Don’t use it.**
  - **Bold is effective for occasional emphasis, but be careful not to overuse it, and don’t use it for blocks of text.**
  - Try not to use coloured fonts or white fonts on a coloured background. They are not good for contrast, and can be difficult for a wide range of visual impairments.

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.

Stories and metaphors are very 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, so use the bottom-right corner for your conclusion. The conclusion 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.
• **Proofread carefully** – use the style manual of your agency and ensure there are no errors.

Resources for designing A3s

• Free icons for diagrams [www.thenounproject.com](http://www.thenounproject.com)
• ‘Psychology of Color in Logo Design’ contains a helpful guide on how to best use colour [www.thelogocompany.net/blog/infographics/psychology-color-logo-design](http://www.thelogocompany.net/blog/infographics/psychology-color-logo-design)
• Colour scheme inspiration [au.pinterest.com/aeyr/colour-scheme-inspiration](http://au.pinterest.com/aeyr/colour-scheme-inspiration)