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, a policy paper, an aide memoire or an A3, you will find high-level descriptions of what is involved, links to resources, and tips for success.

Each government agency 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 more experienced advisors and analysts who want to refine their writing skills, in a policy context.

We welcome your suggestions on how this document could be improved. Please send any feedback to policyproject@dpmc.govt.nz.

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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.

Below are four main principles that can help you write clearly. They 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 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. Limit the use of acronyms where possible.

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 ‘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 will find out how easy it is to read.**
   - If the sentences are too long or punctuation marks are in the wrong place, you will notice. Use this insight to edit and re-draft 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.

## Resources for writing clearly

- **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)
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 are 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.

Aides Memoire

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.

**The aide memoire must be very easy to read**

If your Minister needs to translate the talking points into actual speech, 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.

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For both short initial briefings and aides memoire some advice is the same:

- **Less is more** – Ministers would expect a short briefing to be covered in 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** where appropriate using the CTQ (Context, Trigger, Question) method on page 6. Anything that does not answer this focal question can be left out.

- **Write clearly using plain language** – refer to the plain language instructions on pages 2 and 3.
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 is 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 which need to be taken to Cabinet, refer to the Cabinet papers section on page 10 and the Cabinet Office links on page 11.

Good processes and quality assurance

Seek out your own agency’s guidance on developing policy advice for Ministers. Make sure you are 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 set out a range of options from maintaining the status quo, to making operational changes and amending legislation or other policy 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 is important to be familiar with what that means in principle and in practice. See the link to further guidance on page 7.

“Advice given to Ministers must be honest, impartial, and include all relevant information. It must also be responsive to the priorities determined by the government of the day. Advice should be free and frank, and acknowledge any key information gaps, assumptions, risks or connections to other matters. This will allow Ministers to take decisions based on the best available evidence and appreciation of all the options and issues.”

Paragraph 3.59, Cabinet Manual
Developing quality policy advice

Additional support for producing quality policy advice can be found in the Start Right Guidance, Policy Quality Framework and Methods Toolbox which were developed by The Policy Project.

The ‘Start Right’ approach

Experience shows that certain behaviours are critical to high quality, timely and clear policy advice. This is especially true when they are applied early on in the policy process. The Start Right Guide sets out a best practice approach to starting a policy project or fulfilling policy advice requests.

Policy Quality Framework

The Policy Quality Framework (PQF) was developed by policy experts to support the development of good quality advice. The framework sets out the characteristics and enablers of high quality and influential advice. It provides a set of acid tests to help make sure that advice is robust. You can find an overview of the Policy Quality Framework on pages 8 and 9, and a link to the full version on page 7.

Methods Toolbox

The Policy Methods Toolbox is a growing list of new methods that can be used for gathering evidence, insights and analysis to feed into policy projects. The toolbox list is iterative and will be expanded over time – see the link on page 7.

Communicating advice – Storylining

Story lining 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. If you need help identifying 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 are 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? – to which the answer is an operational response and increased funding).

If you are asking the Minister to make a decision, check that the analysis and options support the recommendations – and ultimately offer an answer to the question.
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, all policy proposals considered by Cabinet that may affect legislation must be accompanied by a Regulatory Impact Assessment. The content of this Assessment is the responsibility of your agency. 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.

The underlying analysis for the Assessment should be started 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 consultation before the analysis is finalised. For further information, see the link to the Impact Analysis requirement on the Treasury website.

**Spending proposals**

Where the financial implications of a proposal will involve investment decisions, Cabinet may also require you to complete a business case. For further information on these requirements, see the links to Better Business Case Guidance and the Cabinet Office circular on Investment and Asset.

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 the last link on the right.

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Resources for quality policy advice

Policy Quality Framework overview

Quality enablers
- We are agile and responsive while we are doing the work
- Our conversation with decision makers is ongoing, and aims for increased certainty
- We generate and draw on relationship capital
- Quality assurance is habitual and supported by culture, systems and processes

Engages the decision maker and tells the full story
- Balances what is desirable, can be delivered and is cost effective

We seek out diverse perspectives to add rigour to our analysis and advice
- We understand our story and what works
- Work programming and resourcing is deliberately managed

Is informed by evidence and insights and is analytically sound
- Is put in context, links to the desired future state and exposes risks, opportunities and implications

Acid tests
- Does this equip the decision maker to make fully informed decisions?
- Is the real problem (or opportunity) exposed?
- Does this advice take account of the broader context?
- Does advice make sense of the evidence & insights?
- Can these options really be delivered and deliver results?
Characteristics of quality policy analysis and advice

In sum, quality policy advice:

- reveals the problem or opportunity, as well as its size, scope and immediacy
- is clear about what is intended and describes the vision for success: links outcomes, immediate objectives and recommended actions to that intent
- is clear about why the government/agency should intervene
- is well staged and sequenced
- is error free, and meets legal and process requirements (e.g. of Cabinet Office, Treasury).

Each piece of advice:

- starts with a clear purpose
- is timely
- is in a format that fits the purpose and the decision maker's preferred style
- makes action-oriented recommendations and sets out next steps.

Problem/opportunity diagnosis and solutions are well informed (i.e. by data, evidence, insights, research and/or relevant experts).

Insights come from diverse perspectives along the ‘outcomes value chain’ (e.g. from customers, operations, frontline staff, regulators, investors, service providers).

Takes account of stakeholder's views, preferences and stake.

Is clear about assumptions, uncertainties and gaps in information or evidence and what these mean for the decisions being made.

Uses analytical frameworks to elevate analysis and make sense of information.

Considers the context that is shaping the current state (e.g. infrastructure, norms and attitudes, issues of the day, current policies and strategy).

Reveals relevant prior advice and decisions.

Describes opportunities that can be leveraged.

Assesses risks and how they could be managed or mitigated.

Is forward looking and considers stewardship responsibilities.

Focuses on the decision maker’s intent and is frank, honest and apolitical about the best way to achieve that.

Scopes a range of options (including doing nothing).

Articulates how options can be delivered and confronts what is required for successful implementation.

Assesses options:

- focusing on results and impact on outcomes, implementability, and costs & benefits
- making the choice criteria transparent
- matching the level of analysis to the scale of the decisions being made.

Identifies timely indicators that will show “Is this working?”

Identifies if uncertainty should/can be reduced (and how) before moving ahead, or if an interim or adaptable decision is needed.
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.

Refer to Cabinet manual 5.11 and 5.12 for more information on decision-making arrangements, requirements and processes for coalition and support party Ministers.

The Cabinet decision-making process

Cabinet Committees

Before a paper goes to Cabinet, it is 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.

Ten subject-related Cabinet committees:

- Cabinet Priorities Committee (CPC)
- Cabinet Crown/Māori Relations Committee (CMR)
- Cabinet Appointments and Honours Committee (APH)
- Cabinet Economic Development Committee (DEV)
- Cabinet Environment, Energy and Climate Committee (ENV)
- Cabinet Government Administration and Expenditure Review Committee (GOV)
- Cabinet External Relations and Security Committee (ERS)
- Cabinet Social Wellbeing Committee (SWC)
- Cabinet Legislation Committee (LEG)
- Cabinet Business Committee (CBC), which stands in for all the other committees in the weeks when the House is not sitting.

Make sure you are familiar with the timetable, membership and terms of reference of the committees that are relevant to you.

The timetable for Cabinet and Cabinet committee meetings is available on CabNet. For those who do not have access to CabNet, a schedule of next week’s meetings is issued by the Cabinet Office every Friday on the Public Sector Intranet – links to CabNet and the Public Sector Intranet are on the following page.
Preparing Cabinet papers

A Cabinet paper is effectively the voice of your Minister communicating with their Cabinet colleagues. It is 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 that the key issues stand out, using headings and subheadings
• 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 – and 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 assessment is required – see material on page 7 and link on the right
• 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 is a secure electronic system that supports Cabinet and Cabinet committee processes. It is 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 paper writing

• CabGuide
  www.dpmc.govt.nz/publications/cabguide
• Uploading papers into CabNet
  www.dpmc.govt.nz/publications/cabnet-how-upload-cabinet-papers
• Treasury forms and RIA templates are available at
  www.treasury.govt.nz/regulation/impact-analysis
• Current list of Cabinet committees and the Cabinet committee timetable is updated on the Public Service Intranet (accessible from public service IP addresses only)
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 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.
- 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 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 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:

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 A3 presentation 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.

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, 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

- ‘Psychology of Color in Logo Design’ contains a helpful guide on how to best use colour
  www.thelogocompany.net/blog/infographics/color-logo-design

- Colour scheme inspiration
  au.pinterest.com/aeyr/colour-scheme-inspiration