AEC Hub

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AEC writing style

> ℹ **Current use of the word 'voice'**
>
> To help maintain the AEC's neutrality in the context of the upcoming referendum, AEC staff are asked to avoid using the word 'voice'. For example, avoid using 'Your vote, your voice', 'Make your voice heard', 'giving Australians a voice' and instead use 'Your vote, your say', 'Have your say', 'helping Australians have their say'.
>
> Acceptable uses of 'voice' are limited to the subject matter of the 2023 referendum (e.g. "The draft question that will be put to voters is whether to alter the Constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice"), and to formally refer to associated legislation (e.g. Constitution Alteration (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice) 2023 Bill).

The AEC writing style is used for communicating with internal and external audiences, and promotes greater consistency, professionalism and clarity in communication. As a result, it encourages trust in the content.

The same principles apply for all writing, from reports, letters, emails or for the web.

Writing style follows best practice as set out in the sixth edition of the Commonwealth *Style manual*. Refer to the *Style manual* for detailed information and recommendations about government language conventions and grammatical standards.

Quick tips for writing clearly

- Grab the reader's attention from the start.
- Use short paragraphs, grouping ideas with one theme in each paragraph.
- One sentence should cover one idea.
- Write in 'active voice'.
- Use simple but accurate punctuation.
- Where there's a comma, check if a full stop is better.
- Don't use a long word when a short one will do – use 'help' instead of 'assist'.
- Limit clichés, jargon and technical terms.
- Spell acronyms out the first time followed by the acronym in brackets.

Style reference

Audience

Your audience determines the best approach to your writing. Is it for an internal or external audience? Is it formal or informal? Then decide if certain abbreviations, acronyms and jargon are appropriate.

Common, everyday words

The majority of AEC correspondence encourages the audience to get involved or take action. Choose words that are familiar in everyday use.

Personal language

Avoid the use of personal pronouns (I, we, us etc.) when making any references to the AEC in external communication. The reference is to the organisation, rather than a collection of individuals.

Use 'the AEC will deliver on its priorities' instead of 'we will deliver on our priorities'.

A more personal approach is acceptable for internal audiences. The use of 'I, we, us' is encouraged in informal internal communication when it refers to the organisation as a whole. Avoid using 'we' if referring to a specific team or area of the organisation.

Short words, phrases and sentences

Be precise and to the point. People switch off if they see line upon line of long words, long sentences or both.

Keep sentences to 25 words or less and use contractions where possible ('won't' instead of 'will not', 'they're' instead of 'they are' and 'don't' instead of 'do not').

Inclusive language

Consider the diversity of your audience and ensure references to, and about, particular people or social groups are written in inclusive terms.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Using respectful and inclusive language and terminology is an essential component of reconciliation and strengthening relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the wider Australian community.

It is preferable to use 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' (with capitalisations and plural) when referring generally to the diversity of Indigenous communities throughout Australia, as 'Aboriginal' as a term is not inclusive of Torres Strait Islander peoples. 'Indigenous Australians' ('Indigenous' is always capitalised) is an acceptable alternative.

Capitalisation demonstrates respect, and should also be extended to Elders, Traditional Owners, and Country.

If you are working with, or writing about or for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in a specific local community, you should seek advice from those people regarding preferences and protocols around terminology use.

Instead of	Use
Aboriginal people	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, or Indigenous Australians
indigenous (e.g indigenous culture, indigenous history)	Indigenous (e.g. Indigenous culture, Indigenous history)
acknowledgement of country	Acknowledgement of Country
elders	Elders

Pluralisation

Use 'peoples' (plural) when referring to the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups across Australia. For example, 'Australians voted overwhelmingly in favour of amending the constitution to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the census'.

Use 'people' (singular) when referring to a single Indigenous community, for example 'the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation', or when referring to individual people, for example, 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working for the AEC'.

Cultural and linguistic diversity

For internal audiences, use the term 'culturally and linguistically diverse' (CALD) when referring to people from non-English speaking or diverse cultural or religious backgrounds. In external communication, be more specific wherever possible, and provide links or details in the language relevant to your audience.

Generally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are not considered part of CALD communities. In cases where you need to refer to both communities, you should use 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and culturally and linguistically diverse people'.

Instead of	Use
Christian name	First name
Minorities (e.g. ethnic minorities)	Culturally and linguistically diverse people

Gender and sexual orientation

Use gender-inclusive language in your writing. Avoid referring to someone's gender or sex unless you need to. Use gender-free pronouns such as 'you', 'they' and 'their', and gender-free terms such as 'chairperson' instead of 'chairman/woman'.

When required, use a person's preferred pronoun, but if this is not clear or you cannot ask them, always use gender neutral terms. Follow the rule that people have the right to identify their sexual orientation and gender identity as they choose.

As you review your writing, ask yourself the following questions:

- Have you used 'man/men', 'he/him/his' or 'guys' to refer to people who may not be men?
- Do you use any occupational or other stereotypes?
- Do you refer to a person or a group of people using their sex or gender when you don't need to?
- If a diverse group of people read your writing, would each reader feel respected?

Instead of	Use
Ladies and gentlemen	Welcome everyone, honoured guests
Guys (e.g. 'hi guys')	Everyone, all, folks, team
Woman / man	Person
She / he	They
Mankind	People, humankind
Chairwoman / Chairman	Chairperson
Manpower	Workforce
Manning (e.g. manning the phones)	Staffing (e.g. staffing the reception desk)

LGBTI communities

Recently the term LGBT has evolved. Use the terms LGBTI or LGBTIQ+. LGBTI is to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual transgender, intersex people and queer people. The + is for other sexual identities.

People with disability

Person-first language is the most widely accepted terminology in Australia. Always put the person first, and refer to the impairment (if necessary) second. For example, use 'people with disability' instead of 'disabled people', or 'person who is blind or has low vision' instead of 'blind person'.

When referring to the diversity of people with disability in the community, use 'people with disability' instead of 'people with a disability'. This ensures your language includes people with multiple different disabilities.

Avoid euphemisms and made-up words such as 'differently abled' or 'special needs'. These are euphemistic and can be considered patronising, despite the good intention. Emotive language such as 'suffering from...' or 'afflicted with...' should also not be used.

When referring to a person who uses a wheelchair, do not use terms such as 'wheelchair-bound' or 'confined to a wheelchair'. People who use wheelchairs are not bound by the chair, but rather enabled by it. Always use 'person who uses a wheelchair'.

Lastly, it is appropriate to use 'people without disability' instead of 'able-bodied', as 'able-bodied' implies that people with disability are unable to use, or incapable of using, their bodies well.

Instead of	Use
Person with a disability / people with a disability	Person with disability / people with disability
Disabled person / disabled people	Person with disability / people with disability
Blind person	Person who is blind or has low vision
Deaf person	Person who is deaf or hard of hearing
Differently abled, special needs	Person with disability / people with disability
Wheelchair-bound person	Person who uses a wheelchair
Able-bodied person	Person without disability

Accessibility

Consider your audience when developing materials to ensure they are in the most accessible formats. Include metadata in your document and assistive information to graphics and images. Refer to the Microsoft Office support page for information on how to make your document accessible. For more information see Accessible and Inclusive Content - Australian Government style manual.

Jargon

Jargon only works between people who share certain information or knowledge. If you need to use a technical or legal term, explain it in plain English first.

Refer to online sources

Use descriptive links to refer to information already available on the AEC website or intranet rather than repeating the content in your writing. This helps maintain consistency in messaging and increases trust.

Use a link to the AEC home page (www.aec.gov.au) if you are referring to the AEC website. Use the short links (below) to direct your audience to specific content on the AEC website.

Check with the external campaign team ✉ within the Communication, Education and Engagement Branch before sending any material containing URLs to print.

Make web links useful and descriptive

Descriptive linking text makes explanations and instructions redundant.

Counting the votes or 'scrutiny' begins in polling places after the polls have closed at 6pm.

Don't use 'click here'. It is an accessibility barrier to those who use assistive technologies to access the web (i.e. screen readers) and provides no information about where the link will take them. Search engines like Google and Bing use link text as part of their ranking algorithms, and content linked by 'click here' won't rank highly.

Short links for the AEC website

URL	Focus	Description
www.aec.gov.au/enrol	Enrolment	Enrolling for the first time
www.aec.gov.au/check	Enrolment	Check your enrolment
www.aec.gov.au/change-address	Enrolment	Update your address on the electoral roll
www.aec.gov.au/return	General	Returning signed forms to the AEC
www.aec.gov.au/contact	General	Contacting the AEC
www.aec.gov.au/translated	Enrolment and voting	Translated information on enrolment and voting, using the AEC telephone interpreter service
www.aec.gov.au/media	Media	AEC media centre
www.aec.gov.au/employment	General	Information on employment at the AEC
www.aec.gov.au/Indigenous	Enrolment, voting and Indigenous programs and resources	Enrolment and voting information for Indigenous Australians
education.aec.gov.au	Education	Education services and resources
education.aec.gov.au/getvoting	Get Voting	Get Voting resources

Abbreviations and acronyms

Abbreviations are shortened forms of words (e.g. 'dev' for development). Acronyms are abbreviations formed from initial components in a phrase or a word (usually initial letters, such as DRO for 'Divisional Returning Officer'). Unless a word is universally known in its abbreviated form, such as 'DVD', don't use it. Spell acronyms out the first time you use it and include the acronym in brackets e.g. divisional returning officer (DRO).

Refer to the abbreviations and acronyms list on the intranet for examples commonly used in the AEC.

Acts, bills and case law

The correct way to include references to Acts and bills in your writing will depend on how many times you need to reference the Act or bill.

Acts

Number of references	What to include	For example
A single reference	The full title including the year, written in italics	*Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*

Number of references	What to include	For example
First of multiple references	The full title including the year, written in italics, followed by a shortened version without the year, in brackets, without italics	*Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* (Electoral Act)
Subsequent references	A shortened version of your choosing without the year, without italics	Electoral Act or the Act
References to multiple different acts	Following the initial references which spell out the acts in full followed by a shortened version in brackets, subsequent references to multiple different acts should refer to neither as 'the Act' so as to avoid confusion	Electoral Act and Privacy Act

Bills

A single reference	The full title including the year, without italics	Electoral Legislation Amendment (Modernisation and Other Measures) Bill 2018
First of multiple references	The full title including the year, without italics, followed by a shortened version without the year, in brackets, without italics	Electoral Legislation Amendment (Modernisation and Other Measures) Bill 2018 (Technical Amendments Bill)
Subsequent references	A shortened version of your choosing without the year, without italics	Technical Amendments Bill

Sections, sub-sections, paragraphs and sub-paragraphs are written: s 129(1)(b).

Multiple sections are written: ss 69–71.

Case law

Reference	The case/party names italicised, the year in round brackets, volume number, abbreviation of the law report, starting page number – in that order.	*Roach v Electoral Commissioner* (2007) 233 CLR 162

Addresses

Don't use punctuation in an address block.

Ms Mary Holt

56 Langdon Avenue

REGATTA POINT QLD 4723

Ampersand

Don't use ampersands (&), spell out 'and'.

Apostrophes

The apostrophe is used to indicate ownership. It shows that an object or an activity belongs to someone or something. It is also used to show the omission of a letter. For example, 'it's' for 'it is'.

Use an apostrophe	Don't use an apostrophe		
DRO's	That DRO's team has performed well	DROs	Most DROs attended the seminar
who's	That man, who's my father	whose	Whose hat is that?
you're	You're the best at smiling	your	Your car is blocking mine
they're	They're the worst drivers	Their	Their shoes match
buses'	The buses' doors closed	buses	The buses were parked at the depot
it's	It's a hot day	its	Put it in its bag

When to use an apostrophe

Dates and times

Write day, date, month and year. Regardless of whether the day is named or not, don't use any punctuation.

Friday 19 August 2016

19 August 2016

Write financial years with an en rule (–) not a hyphen (-) without spaces on either side.

2015–16, not 2015-2016

Write the names of centuries in words or a mixture of words and numerals.

The nineteenth century

The 19th century

Don't use an apostrophe for decades.

1990s

2100s

Unless specific systems require it, don't use 24-hour clock references, gaps, colons, unnecessary zeros or words.

Incorrect	Correct
8.30 am, 11 AM	8.30am, 11am
09:00am	9am
12 noon, 12pm	12 midday

Incorrect	Correct
11am-12 midday, 12 midday-1pm	11am-12pm, 12-1pm
1515, 5PM	3.15pm, 5pm
06:00pm	6pm
8:00pm	8pm
6pm-8pm, 6:00-8:00pm	6–8pm
8:00am-6:00pm	8am–6pm
6pm (AEST)	6pm AEST
Tuesday the 3rd of January	Tuesday 3 January
2nd of February	2 February
16th December	16 December

Dates and times

Exclamation marks

Refrain from using exclamation marks. These are typically used for dramatic effect in fictional and non-official writing.

Money, numbers and percentages

Don't specify 'Australian' when writing currency (not A$15,000) but specify other denominations by using the short form of the country, currency symbol and amount.

Never start a sentence with a figure. In body text, numbers one to nine should be spelt out. Use figures for 10 and over.

Three hundred early votes have already been cast in the federal election.

There have already been 300 votes cast in the federal election.

three, six, nine, 15, 160.

When numbers are greater than 1,000, you should always use a separating comma. Don't use a space (i.e. 1 000). When numbers are less than 1,000, you shouldn't use a comma or a space (i.e. 987).

Spell out 'million' in body text, but use the short form 'm' in tables and headings.

Use figures in tables and charts; for larger numbers, use commas.

When writing about percentages in body text, use the word per cent (not percent). Don't use the per cent symbol (%). The symbol (%) can be used in tables or figures.

When numbers are less than one, a zero should always be placed before the decimal point. Always use the same number of decimal places throughout your document. Unless specifically needed, don't use more than one decimal place.

Numbers should be rounded downwards if they are 0.4 or less and rounded upwards if they are 0.5 or more.

Take care if the data you're using has already been rounded. If it has, don't round it further. Always check the data at its original source and always state if figures have been rounded.

Incorrect	Correct
$60 000	$60,000
$200mill, $200million	$200 million (body text)
A$15,000	$15,000
USD15,000	US$15,000
50mill, 50million	50m (charts, tables and headings)

Incorrect	Correct
8 000 or 8000	8,000
5 000 000 or 5000000	5,000,000
.75	0.75
0.251137	0.25
percent	per cent
%	per cent (% for charts, headings and tables only)

Money, numbers and percentages

Phone numbers

Write 'phone' or 'call' instead of 'ring'. Formats need to be consistent.

National number: 02 6271 4411

International number: +61 2 6271 4411

Mobile number: 0401 234 567

AEC number: 13 23 26

States and territories

The names of Australian states and territories are best spelt out in official publications, except when space is limited or when lengthy repetition would otherwise result.

When listing states and territories in AEC publications, they should be referred to in order from largest to smallest population:

NSW Vic Qld WA SA Tas ACT NT

Postal standards

To suit Australia Post's mail-sorting equipment, all states and territories on outgoing mail should be written in the shortened form, in full capitals, without any punctuation:

NSW VIC QLD WA SA TAS ACT NT

Titles

Use capital letters in titles, but avoid using capital letters for general position references. For example, 'the Divisional Returning Officer for Mallee is attending a meeting for all Victorian divisional returning officers'.

Structuring your content

As well as considering the AEC writing style and government best practice, think about the structure of your writing.

Headings

Break up and organise content with relevant headings. Make them meaningful rather than cute or catchy – 'Writing for the web' rather than 'WWW talk'.

Headings should accurately describe the content and include relevant keywords. Audiences tend to read the first few words of headings, titles and links when they scan a page.

Answer questions in your heading instead of asking them. Question-style headings push the keywords away from the start of the heading. Instead of saying, 'Who are your candidates?' say, 'AEC declares candidates for 2016 federal election'. This promotes the role of the AEC and gives more information and context about the candidates and the election.

Write headlines and headings in lower case after the initial capital letter unless there is a name within the heading.

Determination of membership entitlement to the House of Representatives

Tasmanian redistribution: suggestions and comments on suggestions

Use sub-headings to break up information when necessary.

Paragraphs

Break your information into paragraphs. Focus on one topic for each paragraph. Don't write long paragraphs – this makes the reader feel like they are staring at a wall of text. Order your sentences within each paragraph so the most important information comes first.

Lists, bullet lists, bullet points and ordered lists

Lists are an easy way to break complicated passages into accessible parts and to group similar elements or items.

You can make your key points stand out by using bullet point lists.

The three basic types of lists are illustrated below.

1. Lists of short items

Lists of short items should be introduced by a full sentence with the following elements:

- introductory colon
- no initial capitals
- no punctuation or comma after each item
- a full stop at the end.

2. Using fragmented sentences

Where each list item completes the introductory sentence:

- begin with the introductory colon
- label each item with the appropriate bullet, number or letter
- list items do not need to end with a comma
- close with a full stop.

3. Using complete sentences

If any one list item consists of several complete sentences, announce the list with a complete sentence and continue as indicated below:

- Introduce the list with a colon.
- Label each item with the appropriate bullet, number or letter.
- Begin each item with a capital letter.
- End each statement with a full stop.

This allows several sentences to be included under a single item without confusing punctuation.

Images

Photos, charts and graphs can be used to add meaning and context to your writing but shouldn't be used for decoration. Keep information in tables and figures as short as possible, without repetitive contextual content.

Writing for the minister

Parliamentary documents have specific style requirements. See Ministerial and Parliamentary Services.

For more information contact the MPS Mailbox. ✉

Writing style quick reference lists

Use these quick reference lists to check your content:

- unnecessary words – replacing common jargon and over-used words with simple alternatives
- common style and spelling errors
- common AEC words and phrases
- AEC glossary of common terms

Unnecessary words

We often use extra words to emphasise a point, but often these words are unnecessary. Keep sentences brief and to the point.

Avoid	Use
address	look at/resolve/amend
ballpark	estimate
court in the legal system	court
dwelling	your home/where you live
each and every	all
easily accessible	accessible
end result	result
first and foremost	first
full and complete	complete
going forward	in the future
impact	affect
implement	do
in order to	to
in terms of	regarding
in the event that	if/when
in this space	here
is located at	at
large in size	large
merge together	join
methodology	method
necessitates	needs
new invention	invention
parameters	limits
promulgate	issue
return back	return
touch base	contact
true fact	fact
utilise	use
very unique	unique

Common style and spelling errors

Incorrect	Correct
Aborigine/aborigine	Aboriginal person
Aborigines/aborigines/Aboriginals/aboriginals	Aboriginal people
accomodate	accommodate

Incorrect	Correct
advisor	adviser
appendix	Appendix
benefitted	benefited
blind person, blind people	person/people who is/are blind or have low vision
co-operate, co-ordinate	cooperate, coordinate
customize	customise
data base, data-base	database
disabled person, disabled people	person/people with disability
E-mail, e-mail	email
focussed, focussing	focused, focusing
fulfill, fullfill, fulfillment	fulfil, fulfilment, fulfilled
homeless person, homeless people	person/people experiencing homelessness
indigenous	Indigenous
Intranet	intranet
Internet	internet
lead (past tense of 'to lead')	led
occassion	occasion
on-line	online
organization	organisation
percent	per cent
pro-active	proactive
targetted, targetting	targeted, targeting
trialed, trialing	trialled, trialling
web site, Website, web-site	website
Wi-fi, WiFi	wifi

Common AEC words and phrases

Some expressions and jargon are acceptable (and even expected) when writing for internal audiences. However, the following words and phrases should be used when writing for an external audience.

Note: there may be a legal requirement in some specific cases to use the terminology as per the Electoral Act.

Avoid	Use
2016 Election	2016 federal election
2016 Federal Election	2016 federal election
2016FE, FE2016	2016 federal election
Above the Line	above the line

Avoid	Use
Above-the-line	above the line (*Only use hyphens when describing an action, for example, 'Joe Happyblogs used the above-the-line voting method on the Senate ballot paper'.*)
advisory referendums	plebiscite
Ballot Paper	ballot paper
Below-the-line, Below the Line*	below the line
byelection, by election	by-election
Certified List	certified list
Certified List of Electors	certified list of electors
Close of Rolls	close of rolls
Commonwealth electoral roll	Commonwealth Electoral Roll
Commonwealth parliament	Australian Parliament
Declaration Vote	declaration vote
Declaration Vote Issuing Officer	declaration vote issuing officer
Declaration Vote Issuing Point	declaration vote issuing point
despatch	dispatch
Division	electoral division
Divisional Office	divisional office
divisional office of Maranoa	Divisional Office of Maranoa
Election Call Centre	election contact centre or call centre
Election Day	election day
elector	voter
electoral event	election
Electoral Roll	electoral roll
enroled	enrolled
enroling	enrolling
enroll	enrol
enrollment	enrolment
factsheet	fact sheet
Federal Election	federal election
Federal Government	federal government
Government	government
Half-Senate election	Senate election
Local Government	local government
Local Government Election	local government election
Member	member or Member for Hume
Members of Parliament	members of parliament or MPs
Minister	minister or Special Minister of State
National office	National Office

Avoid	Use
NSW state office	NSW State Office
parliament house	Parliament House
Parliamentary	parliamentary
party worker	campaign worker
plebiscite day	voting day
polling day	election day
pre-poll vote	early vote
pre-poll voting centre	early voting centre
premise	premises
prime minister	Prime Minister
programme	program
re-count	recount
Redistribution	redistribution
referenda	referendums
referendum day	voting day
relected	re-elected
scrutiny	counting the votes
Senator	Capitalise when referring to a person, e.g. 'Senator Blogs said...'
senator	Lower case when used generically, e.g. 'A senator said...'
State Election	state election
State Government	state government
State Office	state office
State/Territory	state/territory
Territory Office	territory office
Virtual Tally Room	tally room
writ-ready -100, Writ Ready -100, Writ-Ready -100	writ ready minus 100 days (*you can use writ ready -100 in tables and headings*)
writ-ready minus 100, Writ Ready minus 100, Writ-Ready minus 100	writ ready minus 100 days (*you can use writ ready -100 in tables and headings*)
writ-ready, Writ Ready, Writ-Ready	writ ready

Contact

Internal communication team ✉

Comments

Acknowledgement of Country

The AEC acknowledges the Traditional Owners of country throughout Australia and recognises their continuing connection to land, waters, culture and community.

We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

My Links

Organisational structure

Corporate directory

Coronavirus info

Dates to remember

AEC Teams sites

Our people profiles

My Apps

AEC Service Centre

Aurion ESS

ObjectiveIM

Media monitoring