

No, Minister: intention and reality in government rhetoric

By Neil James

When we think of government writing, the language of Sir Humphrey Appleby is often not far behind. But is this still a realistic portrait of government communication? Is there still a gap between how agencies communicate and the services they aspire to provide?

We can start to answer this question by looking at the values that agencies say guide their activities. A recent survey identified some common principles in the headline documents of a sample of Australian agencies. You can find these in almost any government annual report: respect, fairness, openness, accountability, integrity, honesty, transparency, accessibility, and clarity.

When we turn the torchlight of these values on textual examples, we find that the gap between intention and reality can be wide indeed. While agencies have modernised many of their business processes in recent decades, they are only just starting to understand the vital step of modernising their communication.

Government agencies generally use an officialese expression. It has a formal tone and poor readability. Its hallmarks are hardly surprising:

- a high proportion of Latinate diction
- a high average word length
- a long average sentence length
- a high proportion of passive voice
- a great deal of redundancy.

We can measure some of these elements empirically. The Plain English Foundation has applied four simple measures to more than 600 government samples taken from the documents of ten agencies in the finance, human services, justice and business sectors. The results are very consistent:

Indicator	Government average
Readability	Grade 17 Fry Graph
Sentence length	26 words
Passive voice	40 per cent
Fitness	44% keywords

The Fry Graph estimates the number of years of education that somebody would need to read a passage once and comprehend most of it without re-reading. At 17, government agencies are almost off the scale. This means that even educated readers must invest more concentration in comprehending government texts than is warranted by their content.

Sentence length is one of the factors that feed into readability. It is easy to underestimate the impact of sentence length on comprehension. UK research has shown that only four per cent of readers can understand a 27-word sentence after reading it just once. The government average comes in close to this, and some agencies far exceed it.

The overuse of passive voice is another weaknesses. Typically, nobody actually recommends anything in government texts. Instead ‘it is recommended that’ actions emerge, as if by magic out of thin air. A simple and clear sentence such as ‘I think you can fund this program from your existing budget’ becomes ‘it is suggested that consideration be given to the implementation of the program from existing budgetary resources’.

Finally, government style is typically inefficient, using less than a 50 per cent ratio of key words. You can typically trim it by between one third and 40 per cent without losing any content.

To these more measurable elements you could add an almost obsessive aversion to adverbs and personal pronouns; little or misplaced punctuation; almost no modals; and complex verb phrases combining nominalisation, infinitive verbs and gerunds. You can read hundreds of pages without encountering a single metaphor or simile. The result is a dry, dead, dreadful style.

We can illustrate these elements in a short sample I received from my local council. This is a standard letter that explains why the Council decided to approve a development despite resident objections:

In terms of reaching its decision Council took into consideration the matters in your submission and as the proposal complied with the objectives of Council's policies and conformed to the relevant statutory requirements, Council was of the opinion that the application should be approved. (44 words)

All this means, in half the words, is:

Council considered your submission carefully. However, we had to approve the application because it complies with Council policy and meets legal requirements. (22 words)

Officialese expression is deeply embedded in government culture. Staff commonly believe that it is necessary for technical reasons, or that they must use it to convey sufficient 'gravitas'. One participant even remarked recently: 'you mean I spent four years at university learning all these big words, and now I have to stop using them just so the client can read our reports easily?'

Of course, there's nothing grammatically wrong with officialese, but it does fail to achieve the transparency, accessibility and clarity that agencies say they aim for. Council does not approve applications. It is 'of the opinion that the application should be approved'. It does not respect its readers by considering their submissions. Instead 'In terms of reaching its decision Council took into consideration the matters in your submission'.

The second feature of government writing is the narrative structure that dominates its documents. Out of the myriad compositions and arrangements available, agencies tend to order their content chronologically.

The standard structure of a briefing note, for example, proceeds in a carefully scripted series of headings. This is the document used internally to brief a Minister or senior manager and recommend a course of action. Its full headings are: Issue, defining the problem; Background, going into its history at length; Current Position, bringing the story into the present; Advice, outlining anyone the author has consulted; Comment, where we might finally get some analysis, and Recommendation, where the reader is asked to approve a particular course of action.

This is a perfectly logical structure which mirrors the research process itself. As an information gathering structure it makes perfect sense. It makes a poor rhetorical structure, however, if the purpose of the composition is to persuade. Its effect is to spread the key information throughout the narrative before concentrating the most important stuff at the end. It assumes that readers will work their way systematically through the text and consider each and every point before coming to the conclusion. Yet these are documents with many readers, some of who will need to assess the detail, some who are recording it for posterity, and some such as the Minister who will want to glean the essence very quickly. Ironically, the Minister's needs often come last, even though he or she is the one who has to authorise the action.

One Minister uses the arrangement in this way. He first turns to the very back of the document to read the recommendation. He then turns to the front again to read what the issue is, and may read the start of the background. He will then flip over again to read the analysis in the comment section. He does so because he has learnt that this is where the information he needs is placed. By the time he has sifted it out in a kind of briefing-note ballet, the chances of its persuading him are remarkably diminished.

The same principle commonly applies in a government letter. It begins with a reference to the correspondent's original letter. It then describes, often in two or more paragraphs what the correspondent has raised (as if they didn't know). It then outlines the research processes the department has been through to answer the query, and how these apply in this particular circumstance. Only well into the second half of the letter does the text begin to answer the question, by which time, particularly if the answer was not what the correspondent wanted, the chances of persuading him or her to the department's point of view are negligible.

Yet when we raise the prospects of restructuring letters to place the main answer in the first or second paragraph, followed by the detail, public sector staff are often horrified. As one described it: 'we simply can't answer the question until we've explained all of the reasons we have for our decision.' This assumes, of course, that the reader will patiently work their way through the text, when in reality they will start to skim almost straight away. It leads to frustration, error and further correspondence.

But there is one other problem with the narrative arrangement. We can divide the sections of the narrative structure into two broad components. By focusing on the processes of information gathering, narrative inevitably privileges descriptive information over analysis. Look at hundreds of government samples, and the average will come in at

80 per cent description and only 20 per cent analysis. Readers wade through a mass of background while wondering if the facts of the case are ever going to get to a point.

Instead of sharpening their analysis to win over a reader, government authors rely on sheer volume. Many of them feel that this reflects the weightiness of their content. One senior manager described it this way: ‘when I finish a report and send it off, I like to feel some solid weight in my hands before I can be satisfied.’ He was complaining that since this plain English caper had taken on, their reports were (literally) not heavy enough.

These poor writing practices are not merely a case of government failing to match principle with action. They matter because changing government writing will also improve the very services that agencies deliver. That may seem a large call, but the evidence has been gathering steadily in the last 10-15 years.

Let’s look one case study document, a form letter used by the US Department of Veteran’s Affairs. Each year this Department receives several hundred new requests for veteran’s benefits. It replies with a standard letter, then has counselors available to help applicants by telephone. A study by Daniel and Schuetz estimated that in one year, for 750 letters sent out, the Department received 1,128 calls. That’s approaching two calls for every letter. Applicants only have 60 days before their claim is denied, and many of them found the letter so hard to read that they missed the deadline. Inevitably, eligible veterans did not receive their due benefit. When the department changed its writing, it sent out its new letter 710 times, and received only 192 calls. The audience now found the document clear and effective. The chances of the department delivering its services increased as a result.

The second implication of this shift is the one that most convinces departments to change: the savings. This one Veteran’s Affairs letter saved about \$40,000 in staff time. It sends out thousands of letters a year. In Britain, the Royal Mail changed a redirection of mail form that was experiencing an 87 per cent error rate. Improving the form dramatically reduced the error rate and saved 500,000 pounds in the next nine months alone. The obvious benefit is that dollars saved on administration can be redirected to services.

It can also save time. The Victorian Law Reform Commission redrafted the Australian Takeovers Code into plain English, then tested the results with some lawyers and law students. They understood the plain language version in one half to one third of the time

needed to comprehend the original. A US Navy study calculated that plain language memos could save up to \$350 million a year in staff time.

The experience of the Plain English Foundation in Australia mirrors these results, although we more commonly work with internal documents such as briefing notes and reports. We find these reduce on average by between one third and 40 per cent using plain English expression and structures. Staff report that they often take half the time to write a standard brief. It can also reduce the number of drafts that go back and forth between authors and managers. It's no wonder the director of finance in one department welcomed declared: 'think of all the toner we are saving!'

More importantly than the costs, however, are the improvements that can then flow to decision making. Senior managers often comment that, after introducing plain English, they 'now read more of our people's work'. It means they can scrutinise the content closely instead of putting in long hours correcting the commas. As one put it in a qualitative survey 'clearer writing has also helped us to think much more clearly'. A manager in another department said that after changing their writing approach, they realised they really couldn't justify some of the actions they were recommending. Changing the writing altered the decisions and improved the results.

There is a shift in the writing of government, and it is happening in our generation. But the success stories are still far too piecemeal. Adopting plainer expression and more effective structures will help agencies bridge the gap between intention and reality in their communications, but it will also improve civic outcomes for real people.

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