



Advertisement

[Politics](#) [Federal](#) [Digital transformation](#)

Bureaucrats get duelling style guides

Tom Burton | *Government editor*

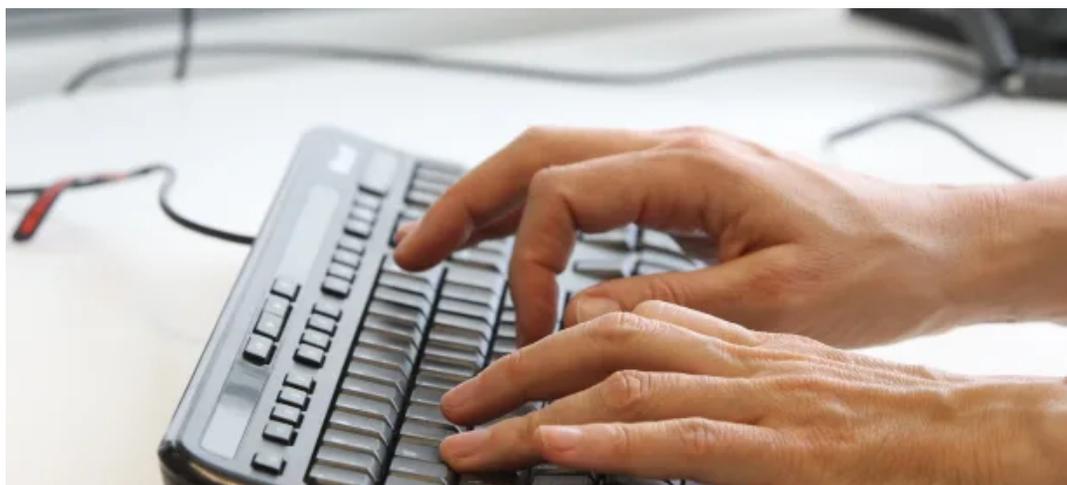


Dec 10, 2020 - 7.30pm



Two competing style guides for corporate, academic, media and government writers are being launched after a revamped editorial bible for writers and editors – the government's *Style Manual* – was criticised for being too digital.

Detractors say the *Style Manual*, which has long been the gold standard for writers and editors, was hijacked by digital content designers when its 550-page sixth edition was overhauled and converted to a website in September.



FINANCIAL REVIEW

The government Style Manual had long been the gold standard for public and private sector publishing. **Peter Rae**

In response, the new [Australian Style Guide](#) has been developed by editors at the Plain English Foundation training and editing group, led by its director and co-founder, Neil James.

The new guide covers contemporary Australian writing practice for print and digital environments and is targeted at a broad audience of public and private sector communicators.

The government *Style Manual* had long been [the gold standard for public and private sector publishing](#) but had not been updated for 20 years.

Advertisement

After much lobbying by professional editors for a new edition for government and non-government writers, it was merged with the Digital Transformation Agency's digital content guide to create an unashamedly digital-centric [online style guide](#) for federal government writers, editors and approvers of official content.

The result is purposely more an instructional manual than the definitive guide to

Save 50% for your first 3 months.

SAVE 50% NOW

Already a subscriber? [Log in](#)

FINANCIAL REVIEW

"It definitely is disappointing," said Kerry Davies, the chairman of the Style Manual Steering Group of the Institute of Professional Editors, which helped advise the DTA on the revamp and provided an external review before its public release.

"This is not the seventh edition editors were hoping for. It does not have the nuance and context that editors need for their work across different written forms and genres."

Ms Davies said the DTA guide reflected its audience's desire for rules rather than discussion about style, and confirmed the institute was looking at the suitability of other style manuals that could also be used in its accreditation program.

She pointed to another style manual being developed by Biotext and Macquarie University, to be called the [Australian Manual of Style](#).

Dr James said policy writers would see "plain language" as dumbing down their text and would largely ignore the new digital style guide, resorting to complex "narrative" style that buried the key messages.

In the push to emphasise usability and what digital content designers refer to as "[content as the interface](#)", critics said the new government style guide lacked the editorial gravitas and rigour of the previous print-only versions of the official *Style Manual*.

Workplace writing is too often marred by poor design, unclear structure and complex language that does not always consider its audience.

— Neil James, Plain English Foundation

Save 50% for your first 3 months.

SAVE 50% NOW

Already a subscriber? [Log in](#)

FINANCIAL REVIEW

Dr James, who sat on the advisory group for the DTA's revamp, said his organisation's new guide "sets out how to make content clear and consistent for online use, without losing the editorial rigour of the traditional print environment".

"The ASG is firmly grounded in plain English principles and in the rigorous set of style rules that Australian editors have built up over the decades," Dr James said.

"Plain English isn't just about using short words. It's also about how you highlight key messages, structure information and lay it out on the page.

"While getting the words right is certainly key to the writing process, so too is the way we structure information and deploy visual elements to make it easy to use.

"Equally important is evaluating how easily your audience will find understand and use the information they need.

"Workplace writing, and public language more broadly, is too often marred by poor design, unclear structure and complex language that does not always consider its audience carefully enough."

The split over approaches to clear expression is not simply about language and design.



RELATED

Style manual gets a digital rewrite

Online services save governments an estimated \$16 per transaction compared with face-to-face engagements.

Save 50% for your first 3 months.

SAVE 50% NOW

Already a subscriber? [Log in](#)

FINANCIAL REVIEW

(not including the time for rewrites) and \$US350 million for the whole service.

Dr James estimates a third of public servants' time involved writing. Applying similar ratios, that is a productivity saving close to \$8 billion a year for the annual \$100 billion wage bill for all federal and state public servants.

Tom Burton has held senior editorial and publishing roles with The Mandarin, The Sydney Morning Herald and as Canberra bureau chief for The Australian Financial Review. He has worked in government, specialising in the communications sector. He has won three Walkley awards. *Connect with Tom on [Twitter](#). Email Tom at tom.burton@ufr.com*



Save



Share

License article

READ MORE

[Digital transformation](#)

[Public service](#)


LATEST STORIES

Live [Markets Live](#)

ASX to fall: \$A breaks above US75¢; Iron ore hits \$US156

9 mins ago

Live [Need to Know](#)

'Difficult decision': CSL, UQ dump vaccine trial

11 mins ago

[AFR Magazine](#)

What's ahead for watches in 2021?

[Before the Bell](#)

ASX to open lower as markets hit a lull but iron ore still hot

Save 50% for your first 3 months.

SAVE 50% NOW

Already a subscriber? [Log in](#)