

# Case study: school registration manuals transformed using a plain language approach

This case study describes how we helped the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) use plain language to transform their school registration and accreditation manuals. Schools found the existing manuals hard to use. And the language was legalistic and confusing. We created new streamlined documents that are 25% shorter, simple to navigate, and written in clear, precise terms that are easy to read.

## The client

NESA is an independent statutory authority that is responsible for setting and monitoring educational standards in NSW. All schools must follow NESA standards for:

- curriculum and assessment
- teaching
- school regulation.



## The problem

First published in 2005, NESA's school registration and accreditation manuals had been updated many times due to legislative changes. It was now time for a major overhaul to improve some of the main issues:

- Lots of information was repeated, which confused the readers.
- Legal details were mixed up with the content that schools needed to focus on.
- The layout was cluttered, with large areas of dense text.



## The process

We applied a 6-step process that aligns with the ISO standard for plain language. Over 10 months of collaborating closely with NESA, we:

- assessed the original document
- did a full structural review
- streamlined the number of sections
- cut the word count
- added design elements
- finalised the end product.



## The solution

Our editors worked with NESA to deliver:

- 2 new manuals that were 25% shorter than the originals
- a new template to use for future manuals
- a guide to explain the changes to users
- a self-assurance tool for schools to assess how well they meet the requirements.



## The outcome

- **Better structure:** A simple 5-part structure that makes navigating easy.
- **Improved wording:** Simplified language that makes it easier for schools to understand the requirements.
- **Enhanced design:** A clean new look that helps schools find what they need at a glance.
- **A new perspective:** NESA is reviewing how it uses plain language in public documents.



## The feedback

"The [Foundation's] full structural review was critical to the success [of the project]."

"It was... a great learning experience on document editing, formatting and plain English!"

"[You were] always accessible and easy to work with."

"We have enjoyed working with your team and truly value what you do."



# Six-step guide to a plain language transformation

1

## Identify the problem



NESA's registration and accreditation manuals were written in **2005**. Having been revised more than **20 times**, they were long, hard to read, and full of dense legal text that was difficult for schools to understand.

2

## Restructure the content



Our next step was to map out the material and work out a new structure. We identified the parts that were most important and the parts that should be grouped together, and we moved the information that was used less often towards the back.

3

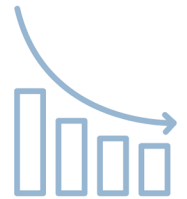
## Streamline the sections



The largest NESA manual had **13 sections**, **41 subsections** and **4 heading levels**. We reduced this to just **5 sections**, **23 subsections** and **2 heading levels**. This simple framework is much easier for schools to digest, and they can easily find the information they need.

4

## Drop the word count



The original NESA manuals were **52,591 words**. We took a good, hard look at every word and cut out anything that wasn't needed. The end result:

- a **25% drop** in the overall word count
- simpler, shorter sentences that separate ideas and boost readability
- active verbs that make it easier for schools to understand their obligations.

5

## Revamp the design



The old manuals were text-heavy with very few design features. We used more **lists** and **tables** to present information clearly and efficiently. We also added more **white space**, new **icons** and a splash of **colour**: small changes that make a huge difference to usability and make the documents much easier to work with.

6

## Launch it!



After 10 months reviewing, reorganising, editing, designing and refining, we handed the manuals back to NESA. The team at NESA did all the legal checks, consulted stakeholders and got the final tick of approval. The new manuals are live from **1 January 2024**. A new era for NESA!