

## Plain English

Why use plain English?

People engage more easily with familiar language. The average reading level in Australia is level 2, which is equivalent to Australian year 7.

Simple words make sentences easier to scan and the content more accessible to a wider range of people, including people whose first language is not English.

Here are some plain English guidelines:

- Use familiar, everyday words that readers will understand.
- Find the simplest, clearest option when choosing words. Please see the attached appendix 'Words to avoid'.
- Avoid long sentences. Keep to an average of 15 words and no more than 25 words. Prefer simple sentences: less is better.
- Use 'we', 'you' and 'us' if you can. A direct, active voice helps to engage users and makes it clear who must do what. It is ok to refer to the Shire as 'we' or 'us' when it suits the tone of the communication.
- Avoid jargon, clichés and overused 'on trend' words or phrases.

## Active voice

Active voice helps users understand who is doing what. It also helps people know exactly what their responsibility is.

For example:

PASSIVE: Applications are assessed within 30 days. (Passive voice makes who is doing what less clear. There are no pronouns in this sentence.)

ACTIVE: We will assess your application within 30 days. (Active voice makes who is doing what clear. Personal pronouns 'we' and 'your' support a direct tone.)

## Use of Council and/or Shire

The Council and the Shire are referred to as 'it'. Therefore, always write:

Council is. Council has.

The Shire is. The Shire has.

NOT:

The Shire are

Council have

Mornington Peninsula Shire Council refers to the council of elected representatives, i.e. the councillors.  
Mornington Peninsula Shire refers to the organisation as a whole or the geographic location.

For example:

Mornington Peninsula Shire Council met last night and voted unanimously to adopt the...

Council would like to thank everyone who contributed to ...

Council does not have any decision-making powers with respect to this project.

# Shire written style guide



Mornington Peninsula Shire has launched a campaign to ...  
The Shire is conducting a heritage review of ...  
As part of the Shire's efforts to improve road safety ...

If you are talking about the organisation, it is always Mornington Peninsula Shire. If you are talking about the Council i.e. the councillors as a group, or decisions that have been made by councillors at Council, then it is Mornington Peninsula Shire Council, or just Council.

There is a little bit of a grey area here where both Shire or Council would be fine, but try to use the rules above.

After writing Mornington Peninsula Shire first, you can then use 'the Shire'.  
You can use Council rather than Mornington Peninsula Shire Council, especially if you have already referred to the Shire first.

Never abbreviate to MPS or MPSC in external documents.

## The Peninsula

The Shire changed its style many ago from lower case to upper case.  
Please use a capital P when referring to the Peninsula.  
For example: Burning off restrictions are now in place on the Peninsula.

## Councillors/Mayor

'Councillor' is always to be used before the name of the Councillor.  
After the first instance, it is appropriate for Cr to be used, or Crs if plural.  
For example:  
Councillor Kate Roper or Cr Kate Roper. No full stop after the contraction.  
Crs Gill and Celi were at the event.

Shire style is to use a capital C for Councillors even when used in a general sense.  
For example: All the Councillors were invited to the meeting.

Mayor's title:  
Mornington Peninsula Shire Mayor, Councillor Steve Holland.

## Wards

Shire style is when referring to a specific ward, use a capital 'W'. When referring generically to wards, use lower case.  
For example:  
The Nepean Ward covers the townships of Portsea and Sorrento.  
The letter was sent to residents of both wards.

## Shire office locations

# Shire written style guide



You should always clearly state these are offices of Mornington Peninsula Shire, so it is not confused with Mornington Shire, Hastings Shire or Rosebud Shire (which used to exist but don't anymore).

For example:

Mornington Peninsula Shire's Mornington Office

Mornington Peninsula Shire's Rosebud Office

Mornington Peninsula Shire's Hastings Office

Mornington Peninsula Shire Council Chambers, Mornington Office.

NOT:

Mornington Shire office

## Referring to governments

Victorian Government – always both capitals

For example:

We are adhering to the Victorian Government guidelines.

Australian Government – always both capitals

For example:

The Australian Government has issued a travel warning.

The Commonwealth of Australia is the name of Australia in our constitution, not the name of the government, so please do not use the Commonwealth Government.

Local government – usually lower case both

For example:

Rates notices are issued by local government.

While it is not grammatically correct, most people love using capitals for State Government and Federal Government: it gives it a sense of authority.

Shire style is to use capitals for both.

For example:

The project has received funding from the State Government.

This is a Federal Government initiative.

## Local Members of Parliament

Informal use: e.g. internal documents. This makes it clear if they are State or Federal level.

Federal Health Minister Greg Hunt

Federal member for Flinders Greg Hunt

State member for Nepean Chris Brayne

State member for Mornington David Morris

State member for Hastings Neale Burgess

State member for Eastern Victoria Jane Garrett

Formal use e.g. letters and direct correspondence

# Shire written style guide



The Hon Greg Hunt MP  
Minister for Health  
Federal member for Flinders

Mr Chris Brayne MP  
Member for Nepean

Mr Neale Burgess MP  
Member for Hastings

Mr David Morris MP  
Member for Mornington

The Hon Jane Garrett MLA  
Parliamentary Secretary for Jobs  
Member for Eastern Victoria Region

## Capital letters

- **Capitals in headings**

No capitals in the heading except for proper nouns (and first letter).

For example: Construction starting on Hastings boat ramp

NOT: Construction starting on Hastings Boat Ramp

Don't capitalise all the 'important-sounding' words in headings.

- **Capitals in names of strategies, plans, policies**

Policy and strategy are upper case when you are naming the document.

For example: Climate Emergency Plan

While it is not strictly grammatically correct, Shire style is to continue with a capital letter when subsequently referring to it as 'the Plan' or 'the Strategy'.

For example: The Climate Emergency Plan has been adopted by Council. The Plan sets out clear targets and actions...

Note: 'draft' is always lower case.

If you are just writing about any old generic plan then please use lower case.

- **Other common Shire usages**

The Briars

The Briars always capital for The. This is because 'The' is part of the proper name.

For example: The event was held at The Briars.

Master Plan

Master Plan (two words), then the Plan

Rates and ratepayers

These do not need caps unless they are the first word of a sentence.

# Shire written style guide



The Budget

The annual Shire Budget cap B, all others lower case b.

For example: The budget for the capital works is \$4 million.

For example: Council has adopted the 2020–21 Budget.

- **Place names**

There are many place names on the Mornington Peninsula. The general rule is if it is a specific name, then capitalise, if not don't.

When referring to structures like piers, plazas, pavilions, playgrounds, beaches etc in the common form; they do not need a capital letter.

For example:

Napier Street plaza

Hastings boat ramp

Rye pier

Dromana foreshore

Portsea beach

Bayview Road footpath

Always spell out the Mount in Mount Martha and Mount Eliza, and Point Nepean if it is for public distribution.

If it is the specific name of a place, i.e. a proper noun, then use capitals.

For example:

Tanti Creek

Balcombe Estuary

Devilbend Reservoir

- **Seasons**

Seasons do not have a capital letter.

For example:

The Yawa Aquatic Centre will be open in winter.

## Dot points

Dot points are extremely useful when you have a lot of information to list.

Always lead into the list of dots point with a colon.

For example:

Priority projects include:

- a strategic plan for libraries
- \$1.1 million for The Briars Master Plan
- social housing projects.

In this case they are 'fragments' and not complete sentences, so no capitals as first letter and a full stop at the very end.

Each point must make sense if you say it straight after the intro, so they must follow the same structure.

Full stop after the last dot point.

If they are full sentences and stand alone, then you can use a capital and a full stop in each.

For example:

The Sport and Recreation Advisory Committee resolved at its last meeting:

- Leisure Services officers need to urgently investigate guidelines to construct a new skate park in Somerville.
- Funding for this skate park needs to be sourced.

Never use 'and', 'or' or a semi colon in the list.

## Apostrophes

Hang on for the ride.

### They show possession

Ask who or what is doing the owning and the apostrophe goes straight after the answer.

For example:

The government's policy (the policy of the government)

The community's feedback (the feedback of the community)

The students' answers (the answers of the students)

The countries' responses (the responses of the countries)

The children's memories (the memories of the children)

### Proper names that already end in 's'

Shire style is to just add an apostrophe at the end.

For example:

Burns' report

Mr James' application

Different organisations and levels of government have different style for this. Australian Government style is to add apostrophe s at the end e.g. Mr James's application.

### Place names

Australian placenames involving possessives are all written without apostrophes. This dates back to a 1966 decision by the Geographical Names Board.

For example:

Arthurs Seat, Kings Cross, the Devils Marbles

### Decades

There is no apostrophe in 1990s, 80s etc.

For example:

The 1980s were a great decade for fashion.

It is very common to see an apostrophe inserted as 1980's. This is not correct.

### Do not use apostrophes with plural nouns

For example:

NOT: There are many pro's and con's of the proposal.

NOT: Please add the Shire's logo's to the document.

### Do not use apostrophes with plural acronyms or initialisms

RDOs not RDO's

MPs not MP's

POs not PO's

## Its and it's

It's in a contraction of 'it is'  
Its is the possessive form of 'it'

For example:  
It's a beautiful day.  
The dog is at the pound. We found its owners today.  
It's time to give the committee its terms of reference.

## Expressions of time

Shire style is to use an apostrophe in expressions of time in both a singular and plural reference.

For example:  
Last year's budget  
A day's work  
Three months' wages  
Six weeks' time

## Dates and time

Shire style for the date is:  
Tuesday 14 February 2020. No punctuation.

Time: spell out 'to' and 'from' in a span of dates  
For example:  
Curfew is from 8pm to 5am  
The data range is from 2016 to 2020.

Am and pm. No space beforehand  
For example:  
We are open from 8.30am to 5pm.

Note: Shire style is to use a dot in the time, not a colon.  
For example:  
9.45am NOT 9:45am

When space is limited you can use:  
6-10am  
11am-3pm

Financial years please use an unspaced en dash.  
For example: The 2020–21 financial year

(Microsoft Word does the en dash for you automatically when you type 'year space hyphen space year space'. You need to go back and remove the spaces though.)

## Numbers/measurement/money

# Shire written style guide



Here's a biggie for those who care. The new Australian Government style is to write numerals one and above.

Shire style is to continue to spell out numbers one to nine in documents, then numerals from 10 up. (Website can use 1, 2, 3, 4 etc. Except must write 'zero' not '0' as this can be confused with the letter 'O'.)

For example:

The Shire has received four complaints regarding a vicious dog.

More than 10 people have commented on the Facebook post.

In general text, use a comma to separate a group of three digits. This applies to four-digit numbers as well. For example: 3,000

Don't start a sentence with a number, find another way to write it.

Use an unspaced en rule, not a hyphen, to link spans of numerals. Microsoft Word does this for you automatically when you type 'number space hyphen space number space'.

For example: 11–12

Money \$1 million or \$1m (no space or fullstop). Only use the \$1m in a list, not in a sentence.

Write out per cent, not %

Fewer or less. The rule is if you can count it, it is fewer. If you can't count it, use less.

More than 50 people, more than 10 per cent. Not over 10 per cent.

Measurement

km/h

50cm (Note: no space)

80km (Note: no space)

## Ampersand

Don't use it! Unless it is part of a trademarked name or the style of the specific name.

Please write arts and culture, not arts & culture. Infrastructure and planning. Sport and recreation.

## Roll out/roll-out and drop in/drop-in

Both are correct but cover different parts of speech. Roll out is a verb and roll-out is a noun.

For example:

Council decided to roll out a new waste management system.

The new waste management system roll-out was scheduled for July.

Residents are encouraged to drop in to the new community centre.

Maternal and Child Health is running a drop-in session for new mothers.

## That and which



A common mistake is to insert 'that' in a sentence when it is not required. Always read the sentence again without 'that' in it. If it still means the same thing and makes sense, leave it out.

For example:

Nobody knew that the book existed. This should be shortened to:

Nobody knew the book existed.

The community feedback stated that they were opposed to the idea. This should be shortened to:

The community feedback stated they were opposed to the idea.

Now the complicated bit. How to know whether to use 'which' or 'that'.

'That' is used in defining clauses.

A defining clause (also called an essential clause or restrictive clause) gives information essential to the meaning of the sentence.

For example: My bike that has a broken seat is in the garage.

'Which' introduces non-defining clauses.

Defining clauses don't limit the meaning of the sentence. You might lose some interesting details if you remove them, but the meaning of the sentence wouldn't change.

For example: My bike, which has a broken seat, is in the garage.

The reason for distinguishing between the use of that and which is to avoid confusion.

Where no ambiguity could result, either that or which could be used, but 'that' is more simple.

Note: a comma is required before 'which'.

For example: Council has removed the Rural Living Rate, which affected some properties in the Green Wedge.

One way to remember is: which is as disposable as a sandwich bag. If you can remove the clause without destroying the meaning of the sentence, the clause is non-essential and you can use 'which'.

## A or an

The choice is made on the basis of the first sound of the following word. If it is a vowel *sound* (whether the first letter is a vowel or not), then use 'an'.

For example:

An hour

An honour

If the following word starts with a consonant sound, use 'a'.

A union

A hotel

A unique

## Whilst and amongst

Don't use! This is not the 1800s.

Please use while and among.

## Enquiry or inquiry

Enquiry is a formal word for ask; whereas inquiry relates to an investigation (inquiry = investigation).

For example:

For further enquiries please contact:

The government inquiry uncovered serious flaws in...

## Other punctuation

If you're a word nerd like us, all your burning punctuation and grammar questions can be answered in the [Australian Government Style Manual](#) under [Grammar, Punctuation and Conventions](#)

## Words to avoid

### Words to avoid and plain English alternatives

#### Don't write this

acquire

additional

adequate number of

address the issue

advising in relation to

amongst

a number of

approximately

as a consequence of

ascertain

assist

at a later date

at this point in time

attempt (verb)

cease

cognisant of

collaborate with

commence

concerning

consequently

create a dialogue

deliver,

drive

#### Try this instead

buy, get

more

enough

solve the problem

answer the question

advising on, advising about

among

some, many, few  
(or tell people how many there were)

about

because

find out

help, support, guide

later, soon

(or tell people a specific or rough timeframe)

now

try

stop, end

aware of, know

work with

start, begin

about

so

speak, discuss, talk

say what you are doing – for example, 'increasing' ...

# Shire written style guide

## Words to avoid and plain English alternatives

### Don't write this

### Try this instead

desire	want
despite the fact that	although (or break up the sentence to avoid this phrase)
disburse	pay
discontinue	stop, end
dispatch	send
due to the fact that	because
exit (something)	leave
give consideration to	consider
impact, impact on (verb)	affect
implement	apply, install, do, start
in order to	to
in receipt of	get, have, receive
in relation to	about, on, it
in regards to	
in respect of	
in the event that	if, when
inquire	ask
is unable to	can't
it is requested that you declare	declare
leverage	use, build on
make an application	apply
make a complaint	complain
manner	way
methodology	method
notwithstanding	even though, though, even if, despite
obtain	get, have
presently	now
prior to	before
primary	main
provide a response to	respond to
Provide an explanation	explain
provide assistance with	help, support
pursuant to	under
reach or make a decision	decide
require	need, must
subsequently	after
table (verb) – unless tabling a document in parliament	address, discuss, release
thereafter	then, afterwards
until such time as	until
upon	on
utilise	use

# Shire written style guide



## Words to avoid and plain English alternatives

### Don't write this

with reference to  
with regard to  
with respect to

### Try this instead

about