Accessible and inclusive content

Accessible and inclusive content

Design content for equal access.

- Make content accessiblePeople can experience ongoing, temporary or situational barriers to access information they need. Help them by designing accessible and inclusive content.
- Agency responsibilities and commitmentsAccessibility is a mandatory standard for government agencies. Test your content against the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) success criteria. Agencies should commit to improving their performance against the standard.
- Apply accessibility principlesUser needs are at the heart of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). When you take user needs into account, applying accessibility principles becomes simpler, though not necessarily easier.
- Design for accessibility and inclusionHow we design has a direct influence on what we design. Inclusive design means that the products and services we create work for everyone.
- Literacy and accessLiteracy can be a barrier to access for Australian users. Writing to an Australian year 7 level makes content usable for most people.
- How people readWrite and design content that matches how users read. Use short sentences and simple structure.
- Inclusive languageUse language that is culturally appropriate and respectful of the diversity of Australia’s peoples.Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoplesAge diversityCultural and linguistic diversityGender and sexual diversityPeople with disability
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- Age diversity
- Cultural and linguistic diversity
- Gender and sexual diversity
- People with disability

Make content accessible

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How we design has a direct influence on what we design. Inclusive design means that the products and services we create work for everyone.

Literacy and access

Literacy can be a barrier to access for Australian users. Writing to an Australian year 7 level makes content usable for most people.

How people read

Write and design content that matches how users read. Use short sentences and simple structure.

Inclusive language

Use language that is culturally appropriate and respectful of the diversity of Australia’s peoples.

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- Age diversity
- Cultural and linguistic diversity
- Gender and sexual diversity
- People with disability

Make content accessible

People can experience ongoing, temporary or situational barriers to access information they need. Help them by designing accessible and inclusive content.

Make content accessible

Accessibility is about inclusion.

Government services and products need to be available to everyone. This means creating inclusive content.

Inclusive content recognises:

- Australia’s diversity
- the diversity of technology Australians use to engage online.

For example, inclusive content accommodates:

- cultural and linguistic diversity among users
- diversity of abilities among users
- how users interact with technology in different contexts.

The Australian Government's aim is that all government services are digital first. This aim is described in theGovernment Digital Strategy.

Australian Government digital services must be usable and accessible–a requirement under theDigital Service Standard.

Follow accessibility guidance in context

Style Manual topics give you the guidance you need to follow to create accessible content. Where there are specific accessibility requirements or guidance, the Style Manual provides callouts to make it clear what you need to do.

Example

This is an example of an accessibility callout.

Style Manual guidance

In addition to this contextual guidance, the Style Manual also provides information on:

- designing for accessibility and inclusion
- applying the principles of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)
- the responsibilities of government agencies.

This guidance supports agencies in meeting accessibility requirements. The Style Manual does not provide technical guidance or support for developers and site owners on meeting specific accessibility requirements.

The digital edition recognises accessibility as an integral aspect of government content.

The sixth edition mentioned the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) but did not go into detail about how to implement accessibility in relation to writing and editing.

Content Guide had an overview on accessibility that referred to specific success criteria in WCAG.

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This page was updated Friday 7 July 2023.

Agency responsibilities and commitments

Accessibility is a mandatory standard for government agencies. Test your content against the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) success criteria. Agencies should commit to improving their performance against the standard.

Use WCAG to guide your agency about accessibility

‘WCAG’ stands forWeb Content Accessibility Guidelines. WCAG 2.2 is the current version. The Worldwide Web Consortium (W3C) released version 2.2 in October 2023.

WCAG is a stable standard to meet specific needs of people with disability. The standard acknowledges its limitations in meeting needs for people with cognitive and learning disabilities.

The standard is integrated with Style Manual guidance to help you create inclusive content.

Meet WCAG level AA, but aim higher

Accessibility is a mandatory government standard. WCAG is a baseline accessibility standard for Australian Government content.

Test your content against the WCAG success criteria. You need to meet the level A criteria to meet level AA.

Your agency will need to make its own assessment about whether content achieves a WCAG level AA standard. You'll find the WCAG success criteria that relate to any given Style Manual topic on the relevant page.

Not all level AA success criteria are covered in the Style Manual. You will need to refer to WCAG to check if there are more criteria to consider for a specific piece of content.

Aiming higher than the level AA standard will improve usability.

The Style Manual relates the level AAA standard to some topics. This promotes the aim that government content meets the highest WCAG standard whenever possible.

Include an accessibility statement

An accessibility statement gives users:

- information about how you've addressed WCAG
- information about the technical specifications you've tested
- evidence of a commitment to accessibility.

For example, your statement might mention how your agency is working on its implementation of the standard.

Include a page on your site that explains the extent your service or product complies with WCAG.

You can check how the Style Manual measures up to level AA in itsaccessibility statement.

Other accessibility guidance and standards

W3C has a working draft of recommendations that will expand on WCAG:Making content usable for people with cognitive and learning disabilities.

You may also need to refer toother relevant W3C standards.

For procurements, checkAccessibility requirements suitable for public procurement of ICT products and services(AS EN 301 549:2016). Refer to the digital sourcingConsider First policy, which applies to non-corporate Commonwealth entities.

Legal and policy frameworks

Accessibility is integral to Australian Government policy for digital transformation, and written into theDigital Service Standard.

Failure to provide equal access to government services (including information) can be a failure of obligation under theDisability Discrimination Act 1992.

Australia has obligations under international frameworks, including:

- the United NationsConvention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- the World Intellectual Property OrganizationMarrakesh Treaty to Facilitate Access to Published Works for Persons Who Are Blind, Visually Impaired, or Otherwise Print Disabled(Marrakesh Treaty).

These international frameworks are relevant to Australia's domestic policy settings through theNational Disability Strategy.

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This page was updated Friday 15 December 2023.

Apply accessibility principles

User needs are at the heart of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). When you take user needs into account, applying accessibility principles becomes simpler, though not necessarily easier.

Use WCAG principles to meet user needs

The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.2guidelines can be expressed as user needs. These needs feature throughout the Style Manual. The following lists group user needs (guidelines) under WCAG principles.

Principle: content is perceivable

Any user can perceive the content.

User needs:

- I can understand any information contained in an image. (Guideline: text alternatives)
- I can access equivalent information to anything contained in a video or audio file. (Guideline: time-based media)
- I can change the content’s presentation without losing information or structure. (Guideline: adaptable)
- I can easily control how I see and hear distinctions if colour or sound convey meaning. (Guideline: distinguishable)

Principle: content is operable

Any user can operate the navigation and interface.

User needs:

- I can operate the content using only a keyboard. (Guideline: keyboard accessible)
- I can control any features that involve timing so I have enough time to read and use the content. (Guideline: enough time)
- I can use the content without experiencing a seizure or physical reaction. (Guideline: seizures and physical reactions)
- I can find and navigate the content and determine where I am on the webpage. (Guideline: navigable)
- I can operate the webpage with something other than a keyboard, like a pointer. (Guideline: input modalities)

Principle: content is understandable

Any user can understand the information and the interface.

User needs:

- I can read and understand text, even if the content includes unusual words and shortened forms,or features languages other than English. (Guideline: readable)
- I can predict the webpage's appearance and how I will operate the content. (Guideline: predictable)
- I can avoid making any mistakes with my inputs, and correct any that I might make. (Guideline: input assistance)

Principle: content is robust

Assistive technologies can interpret the content.

User need:I have confidence the markup language supports my use of software and assistive technology to access the content. (Guideline: compatible)

Follow Style Manual guidance on accessibility requirements

Look for accessibility requirements as you check guidance for different topics.

Callout boxes in the Style Manual relate user needs to fundamental actions you can take to ensure content is accessible by design.

Callouts also include references to WCAG criteria that link to technical details (level A, level AA and level AAA success criteria).

The Style Manual also includes links to other external resources about accessibility.

The digital edition recognises accessibility as an integral aspect of government content.

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Design for accessibility and inclusion

How we design has a direct influence on what we design. Inclusive design means that the products and services we create work for everyone.

Design for all

The idea of ‘design for all’ has its roots in human-computer interaction studies. This body of knowledge offers practical methods to improve people’s experience of digital content.

The Style Manual promotes some of these methods, in line with theDigital Service Standard, such as:

- understanding needs through user research
- embedding accessibility as a foundation
- using consistent and responsive design.

The goal is inclusive design that meets a diverse range of needs. Inclusive design considers user experience in a range of situations – for example, on different devices and for time-poor users.

Do user research

Find out more aboutuser research for content. This aspect of inclusive design is core to Style Manual guidance.

As part of your user research, test content to gain:

- input from the users you’re designing for
- views and feedback from a diverse and representative users.

You can make content accessible for one user, but it will benefit others in different situations.

For example, user research can help you understand:

- a person who uses their mobile and needs simple menu options
- a time-poor executive who needs content that’s easy to scan
- a person who needs to fill in a form, but English is not their first language.

Accessibility is a common thread in each of these situations.

Combine your user research with accessibility techniques to design usable content.

Ask what makes content usable

Usability and accessibility are closely linked. People will use content that accommodates their needs (usable content). They turn away from content that is alienating or frustrating to use.

Accessible content is a foundation to address broader user needs. For example, page structure feeds into assistive technology. But good page structure also improves readability.

You can think of accessibility as a necessary step to create usable content.

Consider a user who cannot perceive images and the content provides no description, such asalt text. In this situation, visual content is not usable because it is not accessible.

Create content for people with diverse abilities

People can experience difficulties with access because of ongoing, temporary and situational barriers. Government content needs to be designed so it does not create barriers to access.

Example

Using sight to read:

- A senior executive has an inflamed optic nerve that limits their field of vision. They may experience a temporary barrier to access.
- A commuter on public transport cannot read on their phone because the screen reflects their surroundings. They may experience a situational barrier to access.

Poor design causes people to experience ongoing, temporary or situational difficulties. This can limit the extent and duration of access to online content in many ways.

Accessibility is how you can avoid setting up barriers for people with diverse abilities.

When you design content, it needs to serve people with:

- age-related conditions
- changing abilities
- disability
- health issues
- cognitive, neurological and learning disabilities.

Usable content accommodates this range of human experience.

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Literacy and access

Literacy can be a barrier to access for Australian users. Writing to an Australian year 7 level makes content usable for most people.

Literacy affects access to government services and information

Literacy is a person’s ability to read and write. It is also how well they can access written text in digital and print formats.

The effect of literacy on people’s lives is profound. It influences how they interact with each other and how they approach education, work and government.

Low literacy can make it hard to access government services and information.

Factors that affect literacy in English include:

- where people live
- theirlinguistic background
- their education
- how old they are
- theirabilities and limitations

- how they access information.

Accessibility requirements

User need:

I can read and understand text, even if the content includes unusual words, shortened forms, or features languages other than English.

Fundamentals:

- Write in plain language. This helps all users and is essential for some.
- Level AAA requires a lower secondary education reading level, after removal of proper names and titles (year 7 or between 12 and 14 years old).
- Avoid (or explain) unusual words, phrases, idioms and so on.
- Expand all acronyms on their first use.
- Avoid using double negatives.

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines success criteria:

- 3.1.5 Reading level – level AAA
- 3.1.3 Unusual words – level AAA
- 3.1.4 Abbreviations – level AAA

Reading levels in Australia

‘Reading level’ is the level of education someone needs to be able to read text. It is one way to measure literacy.

In Australia:

- about 44% of adults read at literacy level 1 to 2 (a low level)
- 38% of adults read at level 3
- about 15% read at level 4 to 5 (the highest level).

People at a reading level 1 read at a primary school equivalent level. They can understand short sentences.

Note: Percentages do not add to 100.

Sources: Reading level statistics are from ABS (2013). Australian school-level equivalents for each OECD classification level are from ABS et al. (2017).

Education and literacy

People with higher literacy – as measured by reading level – generally have had access to a better education.

Many factors influence people's access to education, including where they live.

Post-school education is easier to access if you live in a major city. For example, people in cities are more likely to have a bachelor degree than people in regional areas. But there are also areas of disadvantage in the major cities.

An education doesn't guarantee a reading level that matches the qualification. For example, about 30% of Australians have a diploma or higher, but only 1.2% of Australians can read at that level.

Many people maintain their high-school reading level even if they go on to tertiary studies.

Clear content helps all users

Regardless of literacy levels, all users want to be able to interact with government easily. Respect their time by writing inplain language. Check that your content is a reading level 2 (Australian year 7 equivalent). This level also helps users with higher literacy.

Users with higher education also prefer content that's easy to read. People with the highest literacy levels tend to be time-poor and have the most to read. The preference for plain English increases with:

- a person's level of education
- the complexity of the topic.

Content for general consumption needs to be accessible by everyone, regardless of literacy. Specialist content is more accessible for technical users when written in plain language.

Understanding users

Before you start writing, douser research. Don't assume that everyone can access, read and understand what you write.

Always make it simple for people to get what they need to do with government done. People might need an alternative to the digital service.

You must understand the needs of all users of your service and create content they can access to meet the Digital Service Standard:

- Criterion 1. Understand user needs
- Criterion 9. Make it accessible.

Ensure that people who use the digital service can also use the other available channels, if needed, without repetition or confusion.

Do user research to understand how people interact with government services or information. Ensure users with low literacy have equal access.

Criterion 12. Don't forget the non-digital experience

The digital edition has more detail and updates statistics, compared to both the sixth edition and Content Guide information on this topic.

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How people read

Write and design content that matches how users read. Use short sentences and simple structure.

Simple language, structure and design helps all users

To create usable content, take into account how people read and what makes content easy to read.

You can increase usability with:

- legible page design
- readable language
- comprehensible structure.

People read text in different ways. How they read depends on:

- how well they already understand the subject
- how familiar the vocabulary is.

Digital Service Standard requirements

You must understand the needs of all users of your service and create content they can access to meet the Digital Service Standard:

- Criterion 1. Understand user needs
- Criterion 9. Make it accessible.

People skim headings and page structure

To help people understand the type of content, use a clearstructure.

People want to find the information they need. They skim over the headings to find ‘signposts’ that confirm the content is relevant. Before reading the text, they look at other elements such as:

- headings
- links
- images
- tables
- lists.

Layout and typography are also important. A clear visual structure with an easy-to-read font is quicker to scan and read.

The way people read content on a screen is different to how they read in print.

On a smaller screen, such as a phone, people are likely to scan the entire screen before focusing on text or other elements. On other devices, people usually start at the centre of the screen and scan to the left and to the right. Structure the page to make the most useful content stand out.

If people are looking for specific information, they are likely to scan the text as a whole to find what they need. They will look for links, a specific term, a number or an address. For this reason, present information in an accepted pattern such as:

- an address block
- underlined hyperlinks.

Accessibility requirements

User needs:

- I can find and navigate the content and determine where I am on the webpage.
- I can change the content's presentation without losing information or structure.

Fundamentals:

- Write clear page titles. This is the first thing a screen reader user will hear and should align with the first heading on the page.
- Organise content with a clear structure using section headings. Describe the topics or the following section in the heading.
- Make sure users can navigate through all content in the intended order, regardless of the technology they're using. Use the same navigation elements across the service.
- Don’t rely on colour alone to structure pages.

- Don’t rely on sensory characteristics such as shape, size, visual location, orientation or sound to explain things.

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines success criteria:

- 2.4.2 Page titled – level A
- 2.4.6 Headings and labels – Level AA
- 2.4.10 Section headings – level AAA
- 1.3.1 Info and relationships – level A
- 1.3.2 Meaningful sequence – level A
- 1.3.3 Sensory characteristics – level A

Print considerations

People read print content more thoroughly. On a double page of print without any headings or images, people usually read from top left to bottom right.

When they’re reading non-fiction, people need headings to help them find information. They also scan illustrations, tables, headings and other elements before reading the text. Often they do this in a sweeping curve counterclockwise from the top right before they decide what, if anything, to read.

Content with too many unfamiliar words slows readers down

Some readers can scan text and quickly find what they need. They don’t focus on every word. Instead, they take in all the meaning at once. As a result, they don’t need to read individual words such as ‘the’ to understand a sentence (but they see all the words).

Other readers have to work harder to understand individual words. They will find reading easier if you use more familiar words.

Familiar words that are spelled as they sound are easier to read than unfamiliar words that are not spelled as they sound.

People read more slowly if they find:

- too many unfamiliar words
- too many long words
- unfamiliar or complex sentence structures.

If the content is difficult, people slow down and focus on unfamiliar words. They might backtrack to try to understand the meaning. This can cause difficulty with comprehension.

Complex sentences are hard to read

Complex sentences are harder to read than simple ones.

People pay attention to content only for as long as they need to. They are not likely to read everything.

People will take seconds to decide from the page title and first few headings if the content is relevant.

Once people are on a page, they might scan only a fifth of the content before deciding whether to read in detail.

Accessibility requirements

User needs:

I can read and understand text, even if the content includes unusual words, shortened forms, or features languages other than English.

Fundamentals:

- Write in plain language. This helps all users and is essential for some.
- Level AAA requires a lower secondary education reading level, after removal of proper names and titles (year 7 or between 12 and 14 years old).
- Avoid (or explain) unusual words, phrases, idioms and so on. Expand all acronyms on their first use.
- Avoid using double negatives

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines success criteria:

- 3.1.5 Reading level – level AAA
- 3.1.3 Unusual words – level AAA
- 3.1.4 Abbreviations – level AAA

Rhythm changes can help or hinder reading

People need to be able to read as smoothly and quickly as possible. They build a rhythm as they read a line of text. They automatically go to the beginning of the next line and begin reading.

Help people build reading rhythm with:

- short sentences
- newparagraphs
- line breaks.

Varying rhythm can help or hinder comprehension.

Sentence length

Short sentences are easier to read because they limit the scope of an idea. But most readers like the variety and rhythm of a mixture of sentence lengths. For most readers, aim for an average sentence length of 15 words per sentence. Long sentences should have no more than 25 words.

Short sentences are great. But not always. Vary sentence length. It helps people stay engaged.

Paragraphs and line breaks

Paragraphs give people a rest before launching into a new idea. They also help people quickly find an idea in the writing.

Line breaks also package information. Used well, they are an effective way to keep people focused and interested.

Line breaks are used to:

- help people focus on one idea at a time
- draw attention to a point – this is why a paragraph of one short sentence can be so effective.

Line breaks disrupt the eye as it moves along a line. Poorly used line breaks either:

- break ideas in the wrong place – for example, by creating too many short lines
- let ideas run together – for example, by creating long lines.

Variations in rhythm

Variations need to support comprehension. For example, you can use a change of rhythm for emphasis: to make a point or draw the reader's attention to a certain word.

You can vary rhythm using:

- headings, lists and other elements that givestructure
- punctuation marks
- parenthetical information – set off usingbrackets,commasordashes.

Each of these variations can interrupt a reading rhythm.

Reading rhythm is also interrupted by:

- unfamiliar words
- capital letters
- changes in font or typeface, such asitalics
- images.

Any variation or interruption in rhythm can affect comprehension.

BLOCKS OF CAPITAL LETTERS ARE HARD TO READ.

Use capital letters appropriately to help people understand written English.

The digital edition has an online focus for how people find information and how people read. It does not directly address how people find information in printed material. It has similar information on scanning and reading print and digital content.

The sixth edition had information on how people find information online and in print. It included information on indexing that is not part of the digital edition's Live release.

The digital edition omits some information from the sixth edition on eye movement.

The sixth edition explained how readers absorb information. It included information about context and patterning, attention spans, style and layout, and images (called 'illustrations'). It referred to the use of moving images to get users' attention. This information sits on other pages in the digital edition, which are linked to types of structure.

The Content Guide did not address this topic, but had related information on writing for search engines and navigation labels.

About this page

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This page was updated Monday 24 June 2024.

Inclusive language

Inclusive language

Use language that is culturally appropriate and respectful of the diversity of Australia’s peoples.

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoplesUse culturally appropriate and respectful language when writing with, for or about First Nations people.
- Age diversityRefer to age only if it is necessary. Use respectful language and consistent style if age is relevant.
- Cultural and linguistic diversityAustralians have different cultural backgrounds and speak many languages. Use inclusive language that respects this diversity.
- Gender and sexual diversityInclusive language conveys gender equality and is gender neutral. Respect people’s gender and sexual identity with pronoun choice, job titles and personal titles.
- People with disabilityDisability does not define people. Use inclusive language that respects diversity.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Use culturally appropriate and respectful language when writing with, for or about First Nations people.

Age diversity

Refer to age only if it is necessary. Use respectful language and consistent style if age is relevant.

Cultural and linguistic diversity

Australians have different cultural backgrounds and speak many languages. Use inclusive language that respects this diversity.

Gender and sexual diversity

Inclusive language conveys gender equality and is gender neutral. Respect people’s gender and sexual identity with pronoun choice, job titles and personal titles.

People with disability

Disability does not define people. Use inclusive language that respects diversity.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Use culturally appropriate and respectful language when writing with, for or about First Nations people.

There is no single Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander identity

First Nations people are often called Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. But there is significant diversity within these 2 groups.

There is a wide range of nations, cultures and languages across mainland Australia and throughout the Torres Strait. Given this diversity, respectful language use depends on what different communities find appropriate.

‘Aboriginal’ is a broad term that groups nations and custodians of mainland Australia and most of the islands, including Tasmania, K’gari, Palm Island, Mornington Island, Groote Eylandt, Bathurst and Melville Islands.

‘Torres Strait Islander’ is a broad term grouping the peoples of at least 274 small islands between the northern tip of Cape York in Queensland and the south-west coast of Papua New Guinea. Many Torres Strait Islander peoples live on the Australian mainland. There are also 2 Torres Strait Islander communities at Bamaga and Seisia, within the Northern Peninsula Area of Queensland.

Authoritative guidance lives with the relevant community or individual

There is a legacy of writing about First Nations people without seeking their guidance about references and terminology. Educational texts and official websites can be inaccurate when written without consultation.

It’s important to consult with traditional owners, local elders, community and content experts. Consultation is essential when writing about sensitive matters like cultures and history.

Consultation protocols and respectful language use depend on the preferences of the peoples involved. As a result, there are very few hard rules. Respectful content and language use will always depend upon proper consultation.

Respectful language use starts with the basics

Basic respectful language means using:

- specific terms, like the name of a community, before using broader terms
- plurals when speaking about collectives (peoples, nations, cultures, languages)

- present tense, unless speaking about a past event
- empowering, strengths-based language.

Language that can be discriminatory or offensive includes:

- shorthand terms like ‘Aborigines', ‘Islanders’ or acronyms like ‘ATSI’
- using terms like ‘myth’, ‘legend’ or ‘folklore’ when referring to the beliefs of First Nations people
- blood quantums (for example, ‘half-caste’ or percentage measures)
- ‘us versus them’ or deficit language
- possessive terms such as ‘our’, as in ‘our Aboriginal peoples’
- ‘Australian Indigenous peoples’, as it also implies ownership, much like ‘our’.

Many texts have referred to First Nations people in the past tense, for example:

- ‘The Aboriginal language existed for hundreds of years.’
- ‘Torres Strait Islanders once congregated at this place.’

This use of past tense continues the historical erasure of First Australians.

The 2 statements also show a lack of understanding about diversity within either group.

Statements to redress the historical erasure and inaccuracy would read:

- ‘There is no such thing as “the Aboriginal language”, it would be like saying “the European language”. There are literally hundreds of First Nations languages that exist today, and have been spoken for millennia.’
- ‘The people of Iama (Yam Island) in the Torres Strait have been living there for thousands of years.’

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have always been here. They are still undertaking cultural activities. Be conscious of this and work to change the habit.

A Welcome to Country is not the same as an Acknowledgement of Country

Welcome to Country is an important ceremony for many First Australians. An Acknowledgement of Country is a way of showing respect. Both are distinct practices with different requirements and meanings. Always capitalise both.

A Welcome to Country is a ceremony to welcome people onto the land of the custodians. A local traditional owner performs a Welcome to Country. The welcome can take many forms. It might offer safe passage to visitors or outline any responsibilities while on country. Providing a Welcome to Country is a paid service. A traditional owner can assign a proxy if they are unable to attend unexpectedly, though this is rare.

An Acknowledgement of Country is something anyone can do. It is a way a person of any descent can pay respect to the local community and nation(s). It acknowledges the custodians of the land on which a meeting is being held. And it recognises the local community’s ongoing connection to, and care for, country. Some organisations also include acknowledgements in email signatures, websites and other materials.

Both are simple but important ways of paying respect. They redress the erasure of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on their own lands.

First Nations diversity is reflected throughout Australia

Most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples live in urban places. Historical stereotypes of ‘traditional’ peoples are inaccurate and can be offensive.

A common misconception is if people have fair skin or live in a city they can’t be a First Nations person. This could not be more wrong. For a long time, policies dictated to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who they could marry, and where they could live. Terms like ‘half-caste’ or ‘part Aboriginal’ reflect these policies. These terms are deeply offensive and hurtful.

Peoples were also forcibly removed to other locations. In every location in Australia, remote, regional or urban, there are traditional custodians. There may also be many different peoples currently living there. When writing about any particular place, make sure to be inclusive of all First Nations people living on country.

Naming protocols are complicated, specificity is often more respectful

Always ask for people’s preferences about what they want to be called or how they want to identify. It is usually more respectful to be specific.

Use the following hierarchy based on what you are writing.

If writing about:

- a specific group, use their nation, island or community name
- many Aboriginal nations, there may be a regional term that is better, such as ‘Murris’ or ‘Kooris’
- many Torres Strait Islander peoples or islands, there may be a regional term that is more appropriate, such as Kulkalgal (encompassing the central islands of Masig, Poruma, Warraber and Iama)
- both AboriginalandTorres Strait Islander peoples, use terms such as ‘First Nations people’, ‘First Australians’ or ‘Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples’.

The issue with general terms and when to use them

‘Indigenous’ and ‘Aboriginal’ are broad terms imposed on First Australians without consultation. These are not words they chose for themselves.

While the term ‘Indigenous Australians’ is in common use, many First Australians may not be comfortable with it.

Using ‘Indigenous Australians’ to refer to First Australians is relatively recent. Its use became popular through international discussions, where the term ‘indigenous’ is appropriate (with a lower case ‘i’). But it is a blanket term that homogenises a wide array of peoples and cultures. This can cause offence.

Due to the common use of ‘Indigenous Australians’ in our society, there may be times when you can’t avoid the term. It can come up in discussions with government organisations, in the names of some organisations or in grant applications.

If you must use it, remember to only do so when writing generally about AboriginalandTorres Strait Islander peoples. The term should always appear as ‘Indigenous Australians’ in the first instance, always with a capital ‘I’. Afterward you can use ‘Indigenous’, capitalised, so long as the context is correct and clear. Using ‘Indigenous’ alone is inaccurate.

Example

‘Indigenous Australians’ is a broad term and covers a large array of peoples. Often Indigenous peoples themselves do not identify using this term, they will use their local community, island or language group.

Indigenous peoples also have regional terms that they use for specific geographical locations, such as ‘palawa’ or ‘Noongar’ to name a couple.

Some people use Aboriginal ‘and/or’ Torres Strait Islander. This is a good idea when the audience isn’t clear or specific. It’s also important to realise that some individuals identify with both groups.

Style for First Australian languages needs to recognise continuing cultures

Hundreds of distinct First Nations languages and dialects are alive and spoken today. Never refer to them as ‘extinct’. Many communities are working to revive their languages. The preferred term to describe these languages is ‘sleeping’.

Spelling

Written sources are often viewed as ‘better’ or more ‘reliable’ in Australia. But spellings for words from First Australian languages are inconsistent across many sources.

Many colonial attempts to document First Nations languages and cultures introduced inaccuracy and misrepresentation. This includes inaccurate spellings for names, nations and locations.

First Nations cultures are oral-based traditions. Oral sources must have precedence. Follow the spellings that local traditional owners, elders or community members use for words from their languages.

Consultation is essential. You can use a style sheet to record terms you have checked with the relevant community.

Italics

Do not italicise names or words from First Nations languages. They are Australian languages, not foreign languages.

Capitalisation and meaning

There are few firm rules for capitalisation, as different peoples have their own preferences. Always ask the relevant community's preferences and usages, and follow their advice.

Many First Nations people have developed their own dialects of English as well as creole/Kriol languages. This means common nouns used in Standard Australian English can shift into proper nouns at times.

The information on this page follows the convention of minimal capitalisation. But there are many First Australians who have their own preferences, and these should always take precedence.

Examples of words that are sometimes capitalised include Elders, Country or Traditional Custodians. Important cultural practices are also capitalised. For example, Acknowledgement of Country and Welcome to Country.

Some words in Standard Australian English sound the same in Aboriginal English dialects and in Torres Strait dialects, such as Yumpla Tok. But the meaning can be very different. Words like deadly, country, elder and law are good examples.

Listen carefully to the context these words are being placed in and ask for clarity if you need it.

Example

For Standard Australian English, 'dreaming' has a very particular meaning. For some Aboriginal peoples, there is also another meaning.

Within some communities, the Dreaming means something very different. It refers to a range of systems of spiritual beliefs. This term is complex. It should always be capitalised when used in this way.

Some peoples still use 'the Dreamtime'. But, it has fallen out of use with many, as it implies a timeframe or 'past', which is not accurate.

Some peoples use terms that don't have an English equivalent.

First Nations spirituality is easily misused or misrepresented

Some First Australians' beliefs are being used in disrespectful ways. For example, the use of ancestral beings such as the Rainbow Serpent, or Wandjinas as a characters in 'fictional' stories, art or other forms of media. Most often they are used without permission, and portrayed in deeply hurtful ways.

Sometimes wider Australian society has denigrated these beliefs. For example, climbing Uluru in direct contradiction to requests from the traditional custodians not to do so.

Both instances show a lack of understanding or respect for others' beliefs. And unfortunately, there's a legacy of willful ignorance in this country that is only now being addressed. As with any religion or spiritual belief, words like 'myth' or 'legend' are minimising and hurtful.

Example

A bunyip is a being that many Aboriginal peoples believe is real. Yet many Australians speak of it using terms such as ‘myth’ or ‘legend’. They also use it without permission, and appropriate it for their own purposes. Appropriating others’ beliefs and treating them in this way is disrespectful.

It is not necessary to believe in or understand someone else’s beliefs to be respectful of them.

Strengths-based language respects continuous cultures and connections

Content about First Nations people has often focused on ‘problems’. This has 2 outcomes: making First Australians ‘the problem’ or continuing a deficit discourse. Neither is acceptable.

It’s important to acknowledge the many wrongs and ongoing injustices that stem from our shared history. And it's not about ignoring issues. But it is just as important to acknowledge the strength of those First Australians whose cultures survive and thrive today.

Make sure to:

- Use empowering, strengths-based language.
- Tell positive stories.
- Emphasise ongoing connections to community, culture and country.

Write this

The program supports First Nations people to achieve their goals.

Not this

The program seeks to address the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander problems within the community.

The difference between 2 outcome statements above:

- The first has a strengths-based emphasis.
- The latter perpetuates a deficit discourse.

Be careful not to perpetuate patronising or paternalistic language use. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures are millennia old. They are not ‘in need’ of being ‘rescued’ or ‘saved’.

It is about working together, not doing things ‘for them’ or ‘to them’. Also, setting up a dichotomy of ‘us' and ‘them’ perpetuates division and exclusion. This language use is not acceptable.

Consultation is a must

Consultation starts with elders of any given community. They might not be living on their traditional lands, or there might be multiple groups to consult.

If it’s not clear who you need to talk to, there are many community organisations that exist today and can help. These include land councils, housing, medical, legal or social organisations.

These groups will likely have a direct link to traditional owners and/or elders they can help you contact.

There is clear information about communities within the region on theTorres Strait Regional Authority's website. They are able to do this because it is a geographically small area.

Mainland Australia is much larger, and there is no single body that can offer guidance for all communities.

Cross-cultural communication is not easy. Some basic starting points include:

- Communicate clearly without jargon or acronyms.
- Understand that community concerns will take precedence over your request.
- Make sure to build in plenty of time around the request to support this. When receiving a response, listen. Body language is also important, so pay attention to what is not said.
- Understand that silence is an important part of First Australians communication.
- Do your research.

It is normal to want to avoid offending or upsetting people. In any process mistakes will happen. If this occurs, you might have to ask for clarity. Do not rush to fill any silence. Listen closely, apologise and try to learn from it.

When working in this manner, always give the group final control. Make sure to return whatever is taken from the community, or ensure a returned benefit. This includes knowledge and stories.

For full guidance around consultation visitAIATSIS Ethical Research Guidelines.

Forming a working relationship with a specific group is wonderful. But understand that this does not translate into knowledge about any other groups.

Working with content experts, such as a First Nations editor or liaison officer, is invaluable. People in these roles can play an important role as a cultural translator.

Sorry business

Sorry business is an important grieving process when someone passes. It involves not only immediate family, but the entire community.

If a person has passed, approval must be sought from the family around the use of their name and image. There might be some avoidance protocols you need to adhere to.

Some communities are okay these days with the use of a name, an image, or both. Others still request the use of neither. The community will have a way to refer to someone in this case and can give guidance.

Always adhere to these requirements for all community members. If in doubt, ask.

Australian audiences are familiar with standard warnings about use of names, images or voices of deceased people in many publications and media. This is a respectful acknowledgement of sorry business practices and beliefs, and is meant to warn others. Using a standard warningdoes notreplace respectful consultation with the community.

Permissions

The permissions process is vital and differs from standard copyright procedures. As well as consulting with elders and/or traditional owners, there are other steps to take. When seeking permissions for the use of any item, individuals sometimes need to provide approvals too.

Example

You have images of a group of people you wish to print. You are already in consultation with the elders or relevant family groups in the community and they are happy with what you have. You then learn that you also have to ask the individuals within any image for approval.

This is not a firm rule, but one example of how things can change. Always follow the guidance of the appropriate elders or community members.

Use of images

Many historical images lack any contextual information. It can be impossible to trace the names of peoples or locations that feature in the images. As a result, it can be inappropriate and offensive to publish them. Avoid using photographs where people are unnamed.

Illustrations and photographs should include diverse, dynamic and contemporary representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Visual representations will depend on context. Just like use of terms in text, images should be specific to the particular nation, region or community that relates to the content.

The digital edition significantly revises and updates guidance on content that relates to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It provides more comprehensive guidance than both the sixth edition and the Content Guide.

For example, the sixth edition described the term ‘Indigenous’ as ‘widely acceptable’ as a subset of the broader term ‘Australian’. The digital edition cautions that use of the term ‘Indigenous’ can be inaccurate without proper context.

The digital edition offers more options for general terms than the sixth edition around ‘precise and inclusive language for collective references’ to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The sixth edition based recommendations about preferred terms on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission advice. The digital edition recommends consulting directly with relevant communities and individuals. It states, ‘Respectful content and language use will always depend upon proper consultation.’

The digital edition recommends against use of italics for names or words from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. This departs from stylistic convention: ‘borrowed’ words (not absorbed into Australian English) are otherwise italicised.

This page was updated in June 2023 when the term ‘First Nations Australians’ was replaced by ‘First Nations people’. This reflects a change in language usage.

About this page

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This page was updated Wednesday 5 July 2023.

Age diversity

Refer to age only if it is necessary. Use respectful language and consistent style if age is relevant.

If age is relevant, follow style conventions

Question whether age is relevant. Avoid referring to a person’s age or an age group if it’s not relevant.

If you need to mention age, follow style conventions:

- When the reference to age comes before a noun, punctuate it withhyphens.

- Unless the age reference begins a sentence, usenumerals.

Example

A39-year-oldman faces court today on several charges.

You can withdraw your super once you’re65, even if you’re still working.

Fourteen-year-oldJasmine Greenwood is the youngest Australian on the Paralympic Games squad.

Use respectful terms when you write about age

Avoid characterising age references when it’s not strictly relevant.

Standalone words in everyday use, like ‘old’ and ‘young’, can carry bias or unintended subtext. Words that carry stereotypes, for example ‘elderly’, are not acceptable.

When an age or age range is relevant to a fact, you can use the term ‘people’ with the age reference.

Example

Survey data showedpeople aged 15 to 17 yearswere the highest proportion of internet users.

Inclusivity requirements

Use respectful and inclusive language that talks to the person, not their difference. It’s the law.

Commonwealth laws include:

- Age Discrimination Act 2004
- Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986
- Public Service Act 1999.

Older people

The term ‘older people’ is acceptable. Don’t use the term ‘old people’. It is disrespectful.

- older people
- retired people or retirees
- older Australians
- senior Australians or seniors
- old people

Choose the term that best fits the context.

Moreolder Australiansare using smartphones to do their business.

Young people

The most neutral term is ‘young people’. ‘Youth’ is a gender-neutral term and is also acceptable.

Be careful using the plural ‘youths’. This is often used to refer to male youths only and may carry other connotations.

- young people
- youth
- junior or juniors

Depending on the context, you can use the words ‘adolescents’, ‘children’ and ‘babies’. ‘Kids’ can be suitable, depending on thecontent’s voice and tone.

The eSafety Commissioner resources forkidsandyoung peopleare tailored to different reading ages.

Childrenin Defence families can need support through a move.

Refer to level of study instead of age

Refer to students by the level of study they are doing, not by their age, unless the age is relevant.

Example

- preschoolstudents
- high-schoolstudents
- postgraduatestudents

Tertiary students can be many ages. Refer to them simply as ‘students’ or, in the case of PhD students, as ‘PhD candidates’.

Avoid using ‘mature-age student’ unless it is relevant to what you are writing.

The digital edition includes a section on age diversity. It has more examples of appropriate terms to refer to age than either the sixth edition or the Content Guide.

Like the sixth edition, the digital edition recommends using ‘youth’ as a neutral term.

The Content Guide recommended against using the term ‘youth’.

About this page

Australian Human Rights Commission (n.d.)The power of oldness, AHRC, accessed 22 May 2020.

This page was updated Monday 6 September 2021.

Cultural and linguistic diversity

Australians have different cultural backgrounds and speak many languages. Use inclusive language that respects this diversity.

Speak to the person, not their difference

Use inclusive language. You can use the general term ‘multicultural communities’ to write about people from different cultural backgrounds.

People writing for government sometimes use the term ‘culturally and linguistically diverse’ (CALD) communities. Avoid using the acronym unless you’re speaking to a specialist audience.

Inclusivity requirements

Use respectful and inclusive language that talks to the person, not their difference. In Australia, it’s the law.

Commonwealth laws include:

- Racial Discrimination Act 1975
- Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986
- Public Service Act 1999.

Mention people’s cultural affinity or identity only when you need to.

Australians speak many different languages and have different cultural and religious beliefs. Each culture has its own values and beliefs. You can be sensitive to these differences when you write, through doinguser research.

Avoid using words such as ‘ethnic Australians’ or ‘ethnic groups’. This can imply that migrant heritage or migrant status is unusual.

Refer to people living in Australia as ‘Australians’

The meaning of the word ‘Australian’ can vary in different contexts. It could mean anyone who lives in Australia. Legally, it could mean only people who are Australian citizens.

Depending on the type of content, you might need to explain what you mean by the term. For example, ‘Australian students’ could refer to all students in Australia including international students.

Mention heritage, cultural or other national identity only if it’s necessary. Consult guidance on how to refer tonationalities, peoples and places outside of Australia.

When you specify a dual identity or other heritage as an adjective, connect the reference and the term ‘Australian’ with anen dash.

Write this

The Japanese–Australian community takes part in the Summer Festival in Melbourne. [Dual identity expressed as anadjective]

Japanese Australians take part in the Summer Festival in Melbourne. [Dual identity expressed as anoun phrase]

Not this

Many Japanese take part in the Summer Festival in Melbourne. [Does not convey dual identity of community or individuals]

To refer to people who have recently arrived in Australia, use the words:

- ‘migrants’
- ‘immigrants’
- ‘new arrivals’.

These words don’t say anything about a person’s culture or language: they are neutral. Don’t use these words once people have settled and become Australian citizens. They suggest a temporary or marginal status.

Use the terms ‘given name’ and ‘family name’

Many naming systems around the world differ from those used in English-speaking countries.

Given names come before family names in English-speaking countries. In some Asian cultures, people write the family name first.

Example

- Wong Hei
- Takeshi Noboyuki

This is not always obvious when the names are unfamiliar. Sometimes, the owners of names foresee the possible confusion for English speakers. They reverse the order in an English-speaking context.

Example

- Hei Wong
- Noboyuki Takeshi

When you ask people their name, don’t ask for ‘Christian name’, ‘first name’, ‘forename’ or ‘surname’. These terms all take for granted the European conventions and order of names.

Instead, ask for their:

- given name
- family name.

Some people state a preferred name instead of their given name. This could be different from their legal name, so be clear about which you need.

Other countries have variations of name order. For example:

- In Indonesia, some people have only one name. They might use this in Australia for both their given name and family name to conform with Western conventions.
- In Myanmar, names are not divided into given and family names. These names keep their full form instead.

For more on this rule, refer to guidance onpersonal names.

The digital edition updates inclusive language guidance around cultural and linguistic diversity. It recommends against using the term ‘ethnic’, as it is now out of favour. The Content Guide had brief information on the 'Accessibility and inclusivity' page.

About this page

This page was updated Monday 6 September 2021.

Gender and sexual diversity

Inclusive language conveys gender equality and is gender neutral. Respect people’s gender and sexual identity with pronoun choice, job titles and personal titles.

Use gender-neutral language

Use terms that recognise gender equality. Avoid terms that discriminate on the basis of a person’s gender or sexual identity.

Our use of language reflects changes in society. There is wide agreement about using language to support equality between all genders.

Inclusivity requirements

It is unlawful to discriminate against a person under theSex Discrimination Act 1984. This discrimination relates to their:

- sex
- marital or relationship status

- actual or potential pregnancy
- sexual orientation
- gender identity
- intersex status.

It is also unlawful to discriminate against a person because they are breastfeeding.

Pronoun choice

Learn the user'spronoun. If it's not clear and you can't ask them, choose gender-neutral pronouns.

The singular 'they' is gender-neutral. It avoids specifying a person's gender.

You can use 'they' or 'them' when you would otherwise use a singular personal pronoun such as:

- 'he'
- 'she'
- 'him'
- 'her'.

You can also use 'themselves' or 'themself' instead of 'himself' or 'herself'. 'Themself' is an extension of using 'they' for a single person.

The use of gender-neutral pronouns to refer to a person of unknown gender has a long history. Usage now covers people who either:

- don't wish to identify as a particular gender
- identify as non-binary or gender-fluid.

There are many ways to avoid using gender-specific pronouns.

Youmust provide copies of the application toyourreferees. [Use the second-person pronouns ('you' and 'your') with direct tone and active voice.]

Candidates must provide copies of the application totheirreferees. [Use a plural pronoun. The pronoun 'their' relates to a plural subject 'candidates'.]

Every candidate must provide copies of the application to referees. [Leave the pronoun out altogether.]

Avoid gender-specific job titles

Avoid using job titles that end in '-man' or '-woman'.

Avoid using the traditional terms for jobs that end in '-man'.

- police officer
- minister of religion
- firefighter

- supervisor
- policeman
- clergyman
- fireman
- foreman

You should also avoid job terms that specify women.

- actor
- host
- waiter
- flight attendant
- actress
- hostess
- waitress
- stewardess

Gender is not relevant to a person's profession or title in general. Use gender-specific adjectives only when gender is relevant. For example, an economic analysis might discuss 'female-dominated' or 'male-dominated' industries.

Titles 'Ms' and 'Mx'

'Ms' is now widely used instead of 'Mrs' or 'Miss'. It does not disclose marital status.

'Mx' refers to non-binary people and those who do not wish to be referred to by their gender. Use 'Mx' when a person indicates this is what they prefer, but not otherwise.

Forms and surveys can ask for people to specify gender. Don't ask for a title or gender identityunless the form is designed to collect this information. For example, a form can ask fora person's given and family name. It does not need to ask for their preferred title.

Check for changes in language use

Take care in areas where language is changing. Follow the rule that people have the right to identify their sexual orientation and gender identity as they choose.

The discussion is still evolving about words for other aspects of gender and sexual diversity.

Gender and sexual diversity terms

It can help to know the meanings of words people use about gender and sexual diversity. This includes sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics.

- 'Gender' is about social and cultural differences and identity. 'Gender' and 'sex' both mean 'the state of being male or female' but are often used in different ways.

- ‘Gender expression’ is the way a person expresses their gender.
- ‘Gender identity’ is about who a person feels themself to be. It refers to the way a person identifies or expresses their masculine or feminine traits.
- ‘Gender-queer’ and ‘non-binary’ refer to people who don’t identify as either male or female. They may identify as both or neither. ‘Gender-fluid’ refers to people who do not identify with a fixed gender.
- ‘Intersex’ refers to people with innate genetic, hormonal or physical sex characteristics that do not conform to medical norms for female or male bodies.
- ‘Sex’ refers to the legal status that was initially determined by sex characteristics observed at birth.
- ‘Sex characteristics’ are a person’s physical sex features, such as their chromosomes, hormones and reproductive organs.
- ‘Sexual orientation’ is a person’s romantic or sexual attraction to another person, such as heterosexual, gay, lesbian or bisexual.
- ‘Sexuality’ includes biological sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, pregnancy and reproduction.
- ‘Transgender’ means people whose gender identity is different from that given to them at birth.

These are not the only ways to use these words. The definitions highlight some of the main points and distinctions. For more advice on these terms, go to:

- theHuman Rights Commission
- theAustralian Institute of Family Studies
- Intersex Human Rights Australia.

LGBTI and LGBTIQ+ communities

The term LGBT arose in the 1990s to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. The term has since expanded to LGBTI, to include intersex people. LGBTI is now widely accepted and used.

Recently, the term has expanded again to LGBTIQ, LGBTIQ+ or LGBTIQA+. The ‘Q’ refers to the queer community or to people questioning their gender identity. The ‘A’ refers to asexual people. The newer terms are used less frequently. The use of ‘+’ represents other sexual identities.

Australian Government agencies use both LGBTI and LGBTIQ+.

‘SOGIESC’ is a term writers use when discussing law and policy. It refers to ‘sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics’. This term replaces the earlier term ‘SOGII’. It referred to ‘sexual orientation, gender identity and intersex’ issues.

The digital edition contains new guidance on inclusive language around gender and sexual diversity. It adds advice on the distinctions between gender, sex and sexuality, on LGBTIQ+ communities and on the use of the title ‘Mx’.

The sixth edition focused on inclusive treatment of the sexes. It gave options for avoiding gender-specific pronouns, and noted the singular ‘they’ had acquired a ‘special value’ in the context of inclusive language.

The digital edition goes further: it suggests using the singular ‘they’ as a gender-neutral pronoun when avoiding gender-specific pronouns. This is consistent with advice that was in the Content Guide.

The Content Guide had advice on avoiding gendered pronouns, on transgender and intersex issues and on gender and sexuality.

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People with disability

Disability does not define people. Use inclusive language that respects diversity.

Focus on the person, not the disability

Mention disability only when it’s relevant to the content.

When you are writing about people with disability, focus on the person. Engage with people throughuser research.

User research can uncover whether an individual or community preference is:

- person-first language
- identity-first language.

Use person-first language for Australian Government content, unless user research says otherwise.

Example

- people with disability [Person-first language]
- disabled person [Identity-first language]

Be responsive if you get feedback on the language you've used. It can guide user research around language that respects individual or community preferences.

Accessibility and inclusivity requirements

You must design accessible content to meet the Digital Service Standard:

- Criterion 1. Understand user needs
- Criterion 9. Make it accessible

You must make all government content accessible to people with disability.

Use respectful and inclusive language that talks to the person – not their difference.

Commonwealth laws include:

- Disability Discrimination Act 1992
- Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986

Use respectful language

Respectful language acknowledges peoples' preferences to identify with a particular community or characteristic.

Terms should not identify people without an understanding of personal preference. For example, many people who are deaf or hard of hearing may identify as 'Deaf' – a cultural group with a different first language.

Avoid using the disability as an adjective that defines the person, unless that is their preference. Use the word 'disability' as anuncountable noun.

Use person-first language when you don't understand individual or community preferences. Describe the person and then the characteristic.

Write this

- person with disability
- person who is deaf or hard of hearing
- person who is blind or has low vision
- person living with disability

- person with mental illness, person with psychosocial disability, person with a psychiatric condition
- person with intellectual disability, person with developmental disability
- person with learning disability
- person with cognitive disability
- person who uses a wheelchair or mobility device
- person with reduced mobility
- person with physical disability
- accessible parking

Not this

- person with a disability
- handicapped person
- handicapped parking
- crippled
- invalid
- incapacitated
- mad
- mute
- deaf and dumb
- deaf person
- blind person
- person without sight

You can cause offence when you do not use respectful language, even if it is well intentioned.

- Don’t say a person is inspirational only because of their disability.
- Don’t write about people as if they are heroes or victims.
- Avoid euphemisms and made-up terms, such as ‘differently abled’ and ‘handicapable’.

People with disability could consider these types of terms condescending.

When you are making comparisons, write:

- ‘person without disability’ – rather than ‘able-bodied’
- ‘sighted person’ for someone who is not blind
- ‘hearing person’ for someone who is not deaf
- ‘neurotypical’ for someone who is not autistic.

The social model of disability

The traditional view of disability has been a medical model. In this approach, disability is a health condition for health professionals to treat, fix or cure.

Many people with disability prefer another approach: the social model of disability. This is a way to understand how people with disability interact with their environment and others in society.

The social model is about shifting the problem from individual impairments to the social environment that people operate in.

From this viewpoint, disability arises from the way people with disability interact with the world. They encounter physical barriers, digital barriers and barriers of attitudes and communication. These block their participation in society.

The social model recognises the reality of a disability and its effects. By contrast, the medical model looks at impairments that create a medical condition.

The Australian Federation of Disability Organisations hasmore information on the social model of disability.

Advocates of the social model of disability focus on the barriers to participating in society faced by people living with disability.

People who are blind or have low vision

‘Legal blindness’ and being ‘legally blind’ have specific definitions. In government use, these terms relate a person's sight loss to eligibility criteria. Many people who are legally blind do have some vision.

The terms ‘blind’ and ‘low vision’ include people with no sight and people who have some sight.

A person who is totally blind does not perceive light and has no usable vision. A person who has low vision has some ability to see. Wearing regular glasses will not improve their vision.

A person who is blind or who has low vision might use screen reading software, Braille displays, or screen magnification technology to access content. People who are blind might use other ways to communicate using hearing or touch.

Acceptable terms include ‘person who is blind’ and ‘person who has low vision’. Don’t write ‘the blind’ or ‘person without sight’.

People who are deaf or hard of hearing

The terms ‘deaf’ and ‘hard of hearing’ include people with no hearing or limited hearing. They might have difficulty using audio content. If you are providing audio content, make the information available in other ways – such as captions and a transcript.

The World Federation of the Deaf disapproves of the term ‘hearing impaired’ as it describes people as if they have a deficiency.

Refer to someone with hearing loss as a ‘person who is deaf or hard of hearing’.

Some people who are deaf or hard of hearing use the Australian sign language, Auslan. Some people who are deaf or hard of hearing view themselves as members of a community and language

group. This community calls itself the Deaf community, and encourages others to do the same. The Deaf community uses the term with a capital letter ‘D’ as a mark of its identity.

Members of the Deaf community might still use deaf with a lowercase ‘d’ to refer to their hearing.

People with cognitive disability

People with cognitive disability include people with intellectual disability, acquired brain injury or dementia.

‘Cognitive disability’ is a broad term that covers a range of conditions. Genes, illnesses, injury, physical factors or environmental factors may cause cognitive disability.

Creating content in more than one format, such as making an Easy Read version, can help some people with cognitive disability access information. Follow W3C updates onmaking content usable for people with cognitive and learning disabilities.

People with learning disability

People with ‘learning disability’ might have difficulty planning and difficulty processing new information. The causes are neurological. They are difficult to address and can be lifelong.

Some Australian support groups and educators use ‘learning difficulty’ and ‘learning disability’ for all people who have difficulty learning a basic academic skill.

Learning disability is not the same as a learning difficulty, which can be overcome with intensive teaching or training. Learning difficulties are not generally considered to be disability.

Examples of learning disabilities are dyslexia (reading), dyscalculia (mathematics) and various auditory processing disorders (sound and verbal instructions). Having a learning disability is not related to intelligence.

People with mental illness

‘Mental illness’ is a broad term that covers many different conditions that influence the way people act, think, feel or see the world.

The term ‘psychosocial disability’ is specific to some people with severe mental health conditions. It covers both psychological and social factors. It focuses on restrictions on participating in society. Not every mental illness involves a psychosocial disability.

Some ways of talking about mental illness can cause offence.

Use people-first language when you refer to a person with mental illness.

- people with mental illness
- people with mental ill-health
- the mentally ill

Describe the person as ‘having’ mental illness, just as you would for any other illness or injury. Don’t describe the person as ‘being’ a disease.

- Rupert has schizophrenia.
- Alice has depression.
- Lu has bipolar disorder.
- Rupert is a schizophrenic.
- Alice is a depressive.
- Lu is bipolar.

Mental illness sometimes attracts social stigma. This stigma may prevent people from acknowledging their mental health conditions and talking about them with others.

There is advice about the best language to use for mental illness in guides from theAustralian Human Rights CommissionandEverymind.

Neurodiversity

The term ‘neurodiversity’ refers to the idea that neurological differences, such as autism and ADHD, sit within the normal spectrum of human variation. Neurological differences are not always a disability. Advocates refer to the diverse range of differences in the brain and behaviour. They say societal barriers are the main factors disabling people.

Neurodiversity was first used for people on the autism spectrum. It is now also applied to other conditions, such as dyslexia.

The digital edition revises and expands inclusive terminology on the topic of people with disability. It includes a new section on the ‘social model of disability’.

The sixth edition related inclusive language around disability to the legal requirements for accessibility, and briefly mentioned the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). Contextual references to those guidelines appear throughout the digital edition.

The Content Guide had summary information about complying with WCAG and on inclusive language.

The digital edition will continue to update terms on inclusive language to reflect contemporary usage.

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