

Your guide to our Plain English Standard



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Preface

Kia ora tātou,

When I'm out and about, people are starting to tell me that our information is getting much easier to understand. I think we can give credit to the work we've done so far on getting underway with plain English.

It's hard work but it's paying off. Being as concise with our words as we are precise with our numbers is like learning a new language.

As we continue to develop our storytelling abilities, this guide will help you shape those stories for our readers.

I expect to hear more praise as our plain English voice gets stronger.

I encourage you to use the guide in all your writing – emails, internal discussion documents, information releases, reports, articles, signs, notices, presentations, and conference papers.



Geoff Bascand
Government Statistician

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Our Plain English Standard and Checklist

Our Plain English Standard has four main sections:

- **Big picture elements** help you make the purpose, content, and structure of your document clear and logical.
- **Language elements** ensure your paragraphs and sentences are short and focused, and your words and tone are appropriate for the reader.
- **Presentation elements** help you produce a document with good layout and no errors and that adheres to our *Style Manual*.
- The **checklist** is a tick-box list of all the elements to help you ensure your document is in plain English.

These sections work together to help you produce a clear, concise, and well-presented document tailored to the needs of your audience.

This guide gives you information about how to apply the standard and shows you examples of plain English in practice.

Big picture elements

1. The purpose of the document is clear at the start

Informative title or subject line

An informative title or subject line tells your readers what your document is about. It gives the first impression of your document.

A good question to ask yourself is: 'What do I want people to do or understand after reading my document?'. If you want your readers to take an action, make it obvious in the title. If the document is for information only, make the title as descriptive as possible.

Online, titles are like signposts; they lead users and search engines to your document.

You can make it easier for search engines and readers to find your document by placing key topic words first – people who read online tend to skim-read and focus on the beginning of lines.

Aim for a title or subject line that is:

- descriptive
- concise
- accurate.

Points to note in these examples

1. Our media release headlines are descriptive, concise, and accurate. A good headline summarises the story in one line.

[Statistics NZ Home](#) > [Browse for statistics](#) > [Industry sectors](#) > [Accommodation](#) > [Accommodation Survey, June 2011](#)

 [Earthquakes and ash clouds affect South Island guest nights](#)

2. Key topic words first are placed first, helping search engines and online readers.

[Statistics NZ Home](#) > [Browse for statistics](#) > [Population](#) > [Births](#) > [Birth and population trends: how predictable are they?](#)

 [Birth and population trends: how predictable are they?](#)

A clear purpose statement at the start

A purpose statement expands on the title of your document and tells the reader what information they can expect to find. The purpose statement needs to be at the beginning of your document (eg in the preface or introduction, or on an online publication's introductory page) to help your reader decide whether they want to read further.

Write your purpose statement with your intended audience in mind. Consider these questions.

- Who will read my document (who is my intended audience)?
- What are the main messages or topics I want readers to understand?
- Why do I need to give readers this information?
- Where will people find my document (will it be online, in an email, printed, in Doc One)?
- What do I want people to do after reading my document?

2. The content supports the purpose of the document

Content clearly supports the main messages

Your document's content includes features that support your words, such as:

- structure
- order
- language level
- headings and subheadings
- graphics and tables.

Once you've decided what your main messages are, include these features as you write your content. This content should be relevant, sufficient, and accurate.

As you write, ask yourself the following questions.

Is my content relevant?

- What information does my reader need?
- Why does my reader need it?
- What will they do with it?
- Have I used familiar words?

Is my content sufficient?

- How much information does my reader need?
- How much detail?
- Could I use graphics instead of some of my words?
- How can I explain technical terms without jargon?
- Do the headings and subheadings signal the main messages?
- Can my reader understand my messages without further help?

Is my content accurate?

- Have I checked all data?
- Do my words and data match up?
- Is my content unambiguous?
- Do all the content features support the main messages?

Points to note in this example (overleaf)

1. The purpose is clearly stated in the page title – the webpage content describes what would have happened to census forms.
2. The section headings in the list of links describe the steps census forms go through as they are processed – they support the main message.

What happens to your census forms?

- ⊙ [2011 Census](#)
- ⊙ [Returning your forms](#)
- ⊙ [Confidentiality of your forms](#)
- ⊙ [Transporting and storing your paper forms](#)
- ⊙ [Processing your forms](#)
- ⊙ [Archiving your forms](#)
- ⊙ [Published information from the census](#)

2011 Census

The 2011 Census was not held on 8 March 2011. See [here](#) for the latest news about the 2011 Census.

The information below was prepared before the Government Statistician announced on 25 February 2011 that the 2011 Census would not be held, following the earthquake in Christchurch.

It describes what would have happened to your census forms if the census had been held.

Returning your forms

Census day is Tuesday, 8 March 2011.

An official census collector will deliver census forms, and information about completing your forms online, to your home. This will happen in the 17 days before census day.

Each household will receive an Internet Access Code so you can complete your census forms online. Your code is unique to your household and protects the privacy of people in your home.

Once you submit a form online, it is sent direct to Statistics New Zealand using secure technology known as secure socket layer (SSL). This method is as secure as that used for electronic transfer of money between banks.

In the 12 days after census day, your collector will call back to collect any forms not completed online.



Paper forms will be delivered by an official census collector.

3. The structure of the content is clear and logical to the reader

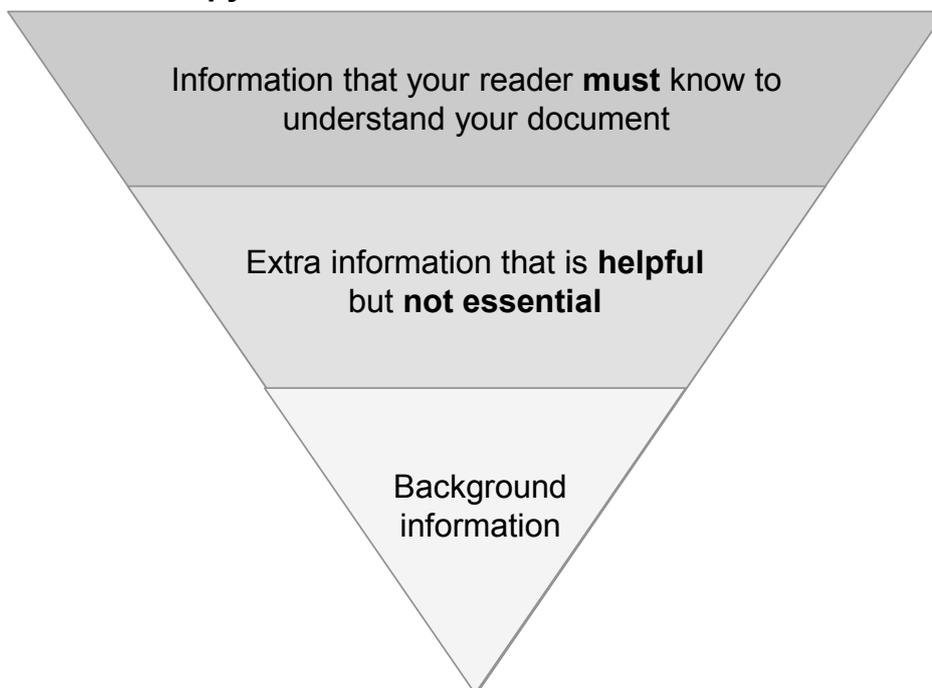
The way you structure your content provides a framework to guide the reader through your information. A clear and logical structure helps your reader understand and use the document.

Main messages are placed first

Once you have identified your main messages, plan how to order them so they make most sense to your reader.

Keep each main message as a separate section in your document, and create paragraphs for single topics that reinforce this main message. Order your sections so the information progresses logically from the most important information to the least – the ‘inverted pyramid’ structure.

The inverted pyramid



Give each section a meaningful heading and use subheadings for each topic you write about. Like your document title, these headings are signposts to help the reader find and understand your information.

Details supporting main messages are in logical order

The inverted pyramid works at all structural levels in your document. Use this structure to order the single-topic paragraphs within each section as well as the section itself. This leads your reader from the most important information to the least.

Aim to also use the inverted pyramid structure within each paragraph and sentence. Start your paragraph with a sentence that summarises that topic’s main point and then provide more detail.

Headings are frequent and informative

Readers scan headings to get an overview of your content, particularly on web pages, so use them often. Headings become an expanded table of contents by describing what’s in each small part of the content. They also provide visual clues to the start of a new segment.

A software-generated table of contents uses the headings you write to assemble its listings, so ensure they work in a hierarchical structure (pyramid again!).

Use concise, informative headings often, so readers can skim-read your document and quickly get the gist of your information. Consider using a question as a heading when you're writing instructions or processes you want readers to follow.

Check that your headings:

- act as headlines
- are clear, succinct, and unambiguous
- explain or reinforce the content they cover
- summarise the main point in the segment
- lead your reader through your information.

Use headings to develop your document's structure

It's often useful to think of headings for your information before you start writing. As you decide what your readers need to know, make a list of headings for the main points. Use the list to work out the best way to organise the information. You may find headings that group together in your list. This can identify the sections of information for your document's structure.

Point to note in this example

1. The text boxes highlight the points to note.



Date

EN reference number

Name
Business name
Address 1
Address 2

Written with the readers' needs in mind. Clearly states what we would like them to do.

Dear Name or business owner

Please complete our business information survey

Main message is placed first.

When a new business starts up in New Zealand, or changes ownership or legal status, we need to gather some information about it. With this letter, we've included a quick Business Exploratory Survey questionnaire for you to complete, along with some other information that you'll find useful.

Each supporting detail is a separate paragraph.

Please complete the questionnaire and return it to us by date on the questionnaire in the prepaid envelope provided.

**Headings are frequent and informative.
A skim-read of the headings gives an accurate summary of the letter's content.**

Questions about the survey

You'll find some questions and answers about the survey on the back of this letter. Please take a moment to read them.

Free information to help you in your business

Did you know that the information we collect from our surveys can help your business?

You can find out about your market and your industry by using tools such as Business Toolbox and other helpful resources on our website. You can get advice from the friendly team in our Information Centre and view testimonials on YouTube.

Thank you for completing this questionnaire

We appreciate your time and hope you'll use our free services to help your business grow.

If you want to talk to us about this survey, please call our Contact Centre using the details on the back of this letter or email surveys@stats.govt.nz.

Yours sincerely

Kat Keelan
Contact Centre Manager, Auckland



Language elements

4. The paragraphs are short and focus on one topic

Short paragraphs make it easier for readers to understand your information, especially on web pages. Aim for no more than six lines in a paragraph, and focus them on a single topic.

Organising information in small, focused chunks creates a clear, logical structure and helps you write clearly. It also allows you to use more 'white space' in your document – to make it easier to read.

Paragraphs begin with a topic sentence

Put your main idea in the first sentence of your paragraph so your reader can find it straight away. Make that main idea the subject of the sentence too.

Every sentence in the paragraph relates to the topic

Check that each sentence in your paragraph explains or expands your topic. If a sentence doesn't do this obviously, you can probably cut it out.

Points to note in this example

1. The topic sentence (in bold) alerts the reader to what the paragraph's about.
2. Each following sentence provides more detail.

Fewer visitors arrived from Australia (down 11,400), the United Kingdom, Korea (each down 1,400), Japan, and the United States (each down 1,100).

The drop in visitor arrivals from Australia is largely due to the ash cloud disrupting flights. Visitor arrivals from the United Kingdom have declined in most months since April 2007, while sharp decreases in visitors from Japan and Korea began after the Christchurch earthquake on 22 February 2011. Japan was hit by its own devastating earthquake and tsunami a few weeks later. This event would also have affected the number of visitor arrivals from Japan.

5. Sentences are mainly short and straightforward

Short sentences are easier to understand than long ones. Your reader is less likely to need to re-read a sentence if you keep it short and stick to one idea. But use a variety of sentence lengths to keep your reader interested.

Long sentences are much harder to read online than in print – and online readers are impatient!

Write about one idea. Aim for an average length of 15–20 words in a sentence. If you have a long sentence with more than one conjunction (eg and, because, although), try breaking it into two.

Try the breath test on your sentences – if you run out of breath before you finish reading a sentence, it's too long.

No unnecessary words

Sentences are clearer if they only have essential words. Focus on writing concisely and directly to the reader to keep your writing 'tight'.

Avoid false subjects in a sentence (eg there is, there was) – they often introduce unnecessary words.

Use verbs effectively to tighten your writing. Replace noun phrases with precise, meaningful verbs. For example, use 'provide' instead of 'make provision for', 'apply' instead of 'make an application to'.

Verbs such as 'provide' and 'apply' work strongly on their own. They carry the meaning in a sentence, without the 'glue' words the noun phrases need.

Mostly written in the active voice

Use the active voice in your writing – it's more concise, direct, personal, and trustworthy. It's how we usually speak.

The passive voice refers to a subject **receiving** a verb's action (the house was bought by the woman), rather than **performing** the action (the woman bought the house).

To spot a sentence in the passive voice, ask these questions.

- Does the 'doer' (subject) come after the verb, or is it missing?
- Does it contain 'be', 'being', 'am', 'are', 'is', 'was', 'were', or 'will be'?
- Does it use 'by' to show who or what is doing something?

Clear instructions

If you are giving instructions, use the imperative (commanding) form of the verb. This is a very clear, direct way of telling your reader what they need to do. For example, 'apply for this job', 'consider this offer', 'use the imperative!'.

Points to note in these examples

Example 1

1. Precise, meaningful verbs replace noun phrases, and the passive voice becomes active. The sentence is shorter and clearer.

A meeting was held by the Executive Committee for the purpose of reconciling opposing views regarding the matter (18 words).

Becomes ...The Executive Committee met to reconcile opposing views on the matter (11 words).

Example 2

1. The active version is shorter, more direct, and easier to read.

When internal and external users were consulted on the 2011 Census deferral, there was considerable support for a census to be held as soon as possible, with 2012 being the preferred year for the vast majority (passive version).

Becomes ...When we consulted internal and external users about the 2011 Census deferral, we found considerable support for a census to be held as soon as possible, preferably in 2012 (active version).

6. Words are clear, precise, and appropriate for the reader

Choose your words with your reader in mind. Use clear, precise words that are familiar to your reader, to show you have written for them. Be courteous: explain technical terms, acronyms, and abbreviations so the reader doesn't have to work to understand you.

If your writing is tailored to your reader's needs, they will be more likely to believe and trust you and Statistics NZ.

Precise, familiar words

Use words that are precise and familiar – readers will get your message quickly and clearly. If they have to stop and think about what you are saying, or what an unfamiliar word or abbreviation might mean, you slow their understanding.

Familiar words help you explain complex concepts to your readers, and you don't have to compromise on accuracy.

Example

To the mythical seasonal entity it may concern
c/- Geodetic Latitude 90°North

It has come to our attention that the much anticipated, though somewhat unsurprising, and some may say repetitive annual season of frivolity and beneficence is almost at hand, hence the communication herewith of this party with the stated intention of drawing to the recipient's attention a number of pertinent concerns related to the issue described above, and requiring urgent attention, taking into account the abbreviated nature of the remaining timeframe before said seasonal event reaches an inevitable conclusion within the remaining calendar month.

With due consideration of the constrained and challenging economic and financial global circumstances in which we find ourselves located as this fiscal period progresses to its conclusion, one cannot help but opine that extravagant ostentation and lavish displays of consumerism might in some circumstances be considered less than appropriate. It is, however, necessary to bestow some appropriately modest tokens of appreciation and esteem upon those with whom one has developed a stakeholder relationship, including those who are members of one's own familial group.

Therefore it is necessary to request that the Elven Manufacturing Collective embark on production forthwith of a non-motorised ambulatory tri-wheeled device, subject to human propulsion, and suitable for utilisation by a non-mature, non-compliant and diminutive human male who is not always in complete control of his faculties and of limited judgement and coordination ability. It would be appreciated if the recipient could see his way clear to the delivery of said ambulatory device via rangifer tarandus as is traditionally expected on the evening before the day in question.

Thanking you in anticipation of your urgent attention to this correspondence and efficient dispatching of the aforementioned item.

Yours sincerely

B Bletherington

Becomes ...

Santa
North Pole
The Arctic

Dear Santa,

Christmas is almost here again. I know it's late notice but I'm writing to you in the hope that you can help me with something.

Money has been tight this year and we're having to scale back the presents, but I really want to get something for my nearest and dearest.

Can you please get the elves to whip up a tricycle for my boy? He's only small and still a bit accident-prone. It would be great if you could deliver this (by reindeer of course) on Christmas Eve.

Many thanks,
BB

(Gobbledegook translator: Paul Pascoe, Statistics New Zealand.)

Free of jargon and vogue words

Avoid jargon and fashionable words – you create barriers for your reader if the meaning you intend differs from the everyday meaning. Where jargon is necessary or efficient, define it the first time you use it.

Example

Do you know what the sentence below means?

The deliverables we are going to cover off going forward in the statistical space are a more timely dissemination of outputs and efficiency gains within a shorter timeframe.

Write what you mean. For instance, the sentence above can become:

By doing this project we will publish statistics in less time and they will cost less to produce.

Avoid noun strings

Try not to 'string' a series of nouns together one after another. Change the structure and replace one of the nouns with a verb, to make the meaning clear.

Example

This report explains our investment growth stimulation projects.

Becomes ...This report explains our projects to stimulate growth in investments.

Use verbs rather than abstract nouns to express actions

Abstract nouns formed from verbs (eg expectation, completion) often hide verbs that can better express an action. Change the noun to a verb (eg expect, complete) to make your writing clearer.

Example

We have the expectation that completion of the analysis will be accomplished by the end of the financial year (19 words).

Becomes ...We expect to complete the analysis by the end of the financial year (13 words).

Explain technical terms

Use technical terms sparingly. Can you explain your information in plain, common words instead? What does your reader already know? What do you need to explain?

Imagine you are presenting the information verbally. What words would you use as you speak? What questions would your listeners ask? How would you answer?

If technical terms are necessary, define or explain them the first time you use them so your reader doesn't have to find their meaning elsewhere.

Examples

You can include a short definition in brackets.

New Zealand's **net debtor position** (liabilities exceeding assets) was \$163.7 billion (86.5 percent of GDP) at 30 June 2010, compared with \$161.0 billion (85.9 percent of GDP) at 31 March 2010. Financial account transactions accounted for \$1.3 billion of the increase in the net debtor position, while changes in the valuation of foreign assets and liabilities accounted for the remaining \$1.4 billion.

Or you can explain the concept at the start of your paragraph.

Multifactor productivity (MFP) is measured as a ratio of output to total inputs. It reflects growth that cannot be attributed to capital or labour, such as technological change or improvements in knowledge, methods, and processes. ... Factors contributing to negative MFP could include low utilisation of capital (meaning input growth is being overstated), new staff taking time to learn their job, or a drop in efficiency.

Acronyms and abbreviations

Readers unfamiliar with your acronyms and abbreviations find them hard to understand – these words are like jargon. Spell out the term the first time you use it then place the abbreviation in brackets. This saves your reader the effort of working out the meaning.

Example

Think back to your first day at Statistics NZ. Did you know what these abbreviations meant? And do you know now?

- SMA
- SDDM
- SHG01
- CS&L
- MEES

To reduce your use of abbreviations, spell out the full name at first mention and then use a simplified name for it afterwards. Instead of becoming JARC, the Jargon and Abbreviation Reduction Committee can be referred to as 'the committee'.

Always spell out your abbreviations in a filename. This makes your document easier to find, both online and in our internal filing systems. If you come across an abbreviation you don't know, ask the writer to explain it to you!

7. Tone is reader-friendly and professional

The tone of your writing should reflect your relationship with your reader. Direct, plain language tells your reader you want to make it easy for them to understand your information.

Don't distance your reader

Use language and expression that treats your reader as a partner you want to share information with. Don't condescend or oversimplify, and avoid distancing your reader with formality or over-complex writing.

Use words like 'we' and 'I'

Use personal pronouns to address your reader and talk directly to them. It's a way you can be less formal in an official message or instruction and show the human side of our organisation. Using personal pronouns also shows our organisation 'owns' the work and it can be a good way to avoid long-winded sentences. Aim to be personal and engaging.

Points to note in this example

1. This information brochure uses 'you' often, to speak directly to the reader.
2. The headings are questions the reader might ask. They label the information in a clear, helpful way.

What is the census?

The census is the official count of how many people and dwellings there are in New Zealand. It takes a snapshot of the people in New Zealand and the places where we live.

The census is held every five years, and everyone who is in New Zealand on census day must fill in a census form.

The information you provide is protected by the Statistics Act 1975 and must be kept confidential by Statistics New Zealand. Census information can only be used for statistical purposes and must be reported in a way that cannot identify you.

The next census will be held on Tuesday, 8 March 2011.

Why is it important?

Information from the census helps determine how billions of dollars of government funding is spent in the community.

It is used to help make decisions about which services are needed and where they should be, such as hospitals, kōhanga reo, schools, roads, public transport, and recreational facilities.

Information from the census is also used by councils, community groups, iwi, and businesses to plan for the future.

What do you have to do?

The census is on **Tuesday, 8 March 2011**. You can do your forms online or use the paper forms delivered to your house.

Everyone in your home, including children, babies, and visitors, must fill in a blue Individual Form or have one filled in for them. One person must fill in the brown Dwelling (household) Form.

Filling in census forms is required by law.



Councils, community groups, iwi, and businesses use information from the census to plan for the future.



Tone fits your document's purpose

What tone or 'voice' will engage your reader? Go back and read your document's purpose. You need a tone in your writing that speaks appropriately to your reader, and suits the purpose – just as you use a tone of voice to suit your message when you speak.

Tone is a subtle aspect of writing that affects how your reader feels. As you combine words, sentence structure, grammar, and images, you create a voice for your message. Imagining your reader is listening to you talk helps you create a tone that will encourage them to read on.

Aim for a friendly, professional tone.

- Think of your reader as a partner for sharing information with.
- Use a tone that reflects how you want your reader to respond to your writing.
- Address your user as 'you' to speak directly to them.
- Refer to your organisation as 'we'.
- Express negative ideas as positives.
- Be professional, polite, and considerate.
- Match your tone to your purpose, for example soften your tone to be less aggressive or direct in an email.

For example, to persuade your reader to take action, you need to encourage rather than direct or threaten them. Use verbs that command, but choose firm and friendly verbs rather than sharp and bossy ones. If you need to instruct your reader, use an unambiguous, clear, and direct tone, rather than a flowery and emotive one.

Points to note in these examples

1. The tone in the promotional web page talks directly to the reader as 'you'.
2. The lists in example 1 show the breadth of information that's available and the range of uses for Infoshare.

Example 1

Infoshare: Your connection to a rich source of data

[Use Infoshare](#)

[Infoshare](#) is a free-of-charge online tool that gives you access to a range of time-series data such as:

- economic information (eg price indexes and production figures)
- demographic measures (eg births and deaths)
- arrival and departure data
- wholesale and retail trade information
- exports and imports data
- building consents data.

You can:

- find tables by searching or browsing through a list
- download customised tables in Excel or comma separated variable (CSV) format
- print tables
- find and download detailed exports and imports data (by HS code and country)
- save queries for re-use
- use 'time series identifiers' to find specific data.

Videos on YouTube

A series of video clips demonstrating how to use Infoshare are available at [Statistics NZ's YouTube channel](#):

1. Infoshare: Module 1 of 5 – Overview and find the table you want using browse or search tabs

Example 2

1. The tone for these definitions is plain but precise and informative – the writing is not trying to persuade.

More definitions

ANZSIC: Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification.

Average transaction value: the total value of transactions divided by the total number of transactions.

Average value of transactions per person: the total value of transactions divided by the sum of the average resident population and the average number of overseas visitors to New Zealand for the reference year.

Average number of transactions per person: the total number of transactions divided by the sum of the average resident population and the average number of overseas visitors to New Zealand for the reference year.

Card-not-present transactions: purchases made using a credit card, via telephone, mail order, Internet, or credit card direct debit where the card is not present for the transaction.

Cash out: cash taken out at a point-of-sale terminal, with or without a purchase.

Debit card: card used for debiting money directly from a bank account. Also commonly referred to as eftpos, cash, or ATM card.

Debit transactions: where the purchaser uses the cheque or savings buttons on the point-of-sale terminal.

Eftpos: electronic funds transfer at point of sale.

Share of spending by electronic card transactions: proportion of total spending that debit and credit card spending makes up. This figure can be approximated by dividing the value of retail electronic card transactions (excluding GST) by total retail sales, as estimated from the Retail Trade Survey.

Presentation elements

8. Layout helps understanding

Lay out your document so your messages are clear and easy for your reader to absorb. Uncluttered, well-organised information is much easier to read, particularly on web pages. Use plenty of white space, headings, appropriate fonts, text tables, and graphics to make your information look both appealing and easy to follow.

Readers of web pages are impatient. They scan vertically down the left-hand side of the page looking for visual clues about content. Our Sitecore templates ensure your web page is not too wide and positions important information consistently (eg the page title and navigation breadcrumb). It also left-aligns headings and text automatically.

Use Statistics NZ's corporate templates to help with your layout. Select a template appropriate to your document and use the built-in styles to format the content. They are designed to make formatting easy.

Graphics support content

Some content is best displayed as a graphic or other visual component, such as a table. Ensure a graphic supports and illustrates your content – it shouldn't need extra text to explain it.

Points to note in this example (overleaf)

1. The graphics in this Business Toolbox flyer illustrate what users will see when they look at the toolbox online.
2. The labels on the lower graphic highlight instructions and information about the map feature.
3. The headings are questions a user might ask, which highlights information about the toolbox.



What is Business Toolbox?

Business Toolbox contains free tools for small businesses, providing quick and easy access to information to help with business planning. The toolbox has two components:

- Market Mapper – a visual mapping tool that allows you to map types of individuals, households, or families down to the level of suburbs.
- Industry Profiler – provides easy access to information about your industry.

How do I access it?

Business Toolbox is available free at www.stats.govt.nz/businesstoolbox.

How do I get a map of my residential market?

Use Market Mapper. Describe your market of interest using the options available. Press **Go** to create a map. You can also get overviews about each area by holding your mouse over the red pins on the map and clicking on the QuickStats link in the information box.

The screenshot shows the Market Mapper interface with the following callout boxes:

- Choose individuals, families, or households:** Points to the 'Individuals', 'Families', and 'Households' tabs.
- Use the drop-down lists to describe your target market:** Points to the 'Age', 'Ethnic group', and 'Income' filters.
- Push Go to create your map:** Points to the 'Go' button.
- Colour keys tell you how dense your market is in an area:** Points to the legend for 'Number of target market per km² per density'.
- Zoom in to see suburb level:** Points to the map's zoom controls.
- Hover over pins to see more information:** Points to a red pin on the map.
- Click, drag, and hold down mouse button to move map:** Points to the map's navigation controls.

Plenty of white space

White space is the blank space between different elements of a document's design – the area between text and images, the space between letters, words, sentences, headings, and paragraphs.

White space provides a visual clue that:

- leads readers through your information
- reinforces the structure you use
- provides visual pauses for the reader
- works with other design elements to make your document readable.

Use white space in layout to pull related items into groups, or bring elements together. For example, a little white space between a heading and its paragraph 'ties' the two elements together.

White space also differentiates separate groups of information from each other. For example, more white space between paragraphs than between sentences is a visual clue that the two pieces are separate. Similarly, starting a chapter on a new page rather than directly below the previous chapter shows you have moved to a new topic.

On a web page, white space plays a big part in making a page readable. Readers focus on the left-hand side of a web page and read down that edge, so use white space to reinforce that pathway.

Point to note in this example

1. A diagram helps get the message across by summarising the information and using white space to organise it into chunks.

Statistics New Zealand's strategic framework

The strategic framework diagram shows how our department's operations (including our values and strategic priorities) contribute to achieving our impact, the Official Statistics System's outcome, and the Government's goal.

What we aim to achieve



What we do



9. The document is free of errors

Imagine if we distributed this guide with one reference to it as *Your guide to our Pain English Standard*. Spell-check software would not have picked it up, because the word 'pain' is spelled correctly.

What would you think if you read this?

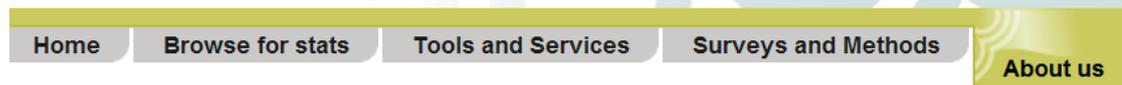
Citation

Statistics New Zealand (2011). *Your guide to our Pain English Standard*. Wellington: Statistics New Zealand

Send	Send and File...	Save as Draft	Delivery Options...	▶	🔗	Display▼	More▼	Doc ONE▼
	To:	All Staff,						
	Cc:							
	Bcc:							
	Subject:	Your guide to our Pain English Standard						



Welcome to Statistics New Zealand
Nau mai, haere mai ki Tatauranga Aotearoa



[Statistics NZ Home](#) > [About us](#) > [Our publications](#) > [Your guide to our Pain English Standard](#)

Your guide to our Plain English Standard

Errors affect credibility

You'd think we were a bunch of idiots who couldn't even meet their own publishing standards. You might doubt the value and trustworthiness of the rest of the information.

Don't undermine your carefully crafted document with errors. Make a final check of every part of your document so it's polished, clean, and free of errors. Ask someone else to proofread it – Product Development and Publishing editors can advise you.

Check and check

Check your text, headings, graphics, title, headers, and footers for correct:

- spelling, punctuation, and grammar
- dates and numbers
- referencing and page numbers
- Statistics NZ style.

Check everything about your document, and all references to it, especially on web pages where information appears in many places that will show when published.

Point to note in this example

1. Web pages have many places to check for errors. You need to check all the words you enter in the content fields, such as the breadcrumb, page and table file titles, and alternative (alt) text for images.

Statistics NZ Home > Browse for statistics > Industry sectors > Information technology and communications > **Internet Service Provider Survey: 2011** — **Breadcrumb**

Internet Service Provider Survey: 2011 — **Page title**

Embargoed until 10:45am – 14 October 2011

Sections

- Key facts
- Commentary
- Definitions
- Related links
- Data quality
- Revisions
- Contacts
- Tables

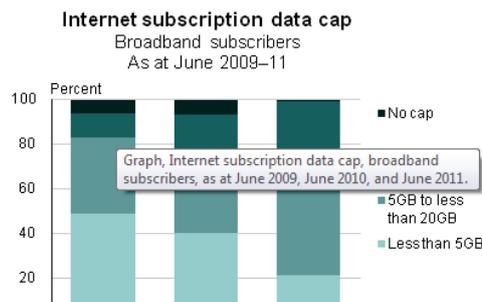
Downloads

- Internet Service Providers Survey: 2011 (PDF, 16 pages, 328kb)
- Internet Service Provider Survey: 2011 - tables (Excel, 14 sheets, 94kb)

Media release – [Kiwis adopting faster broadband](#) — **Table file title**

Key facts

- The total number of broadband subscribers increased by 14 percent, to almost 1.5 million between June 2010 and June 2011.
- The largest growth rate of all broadband connections was in cellular, cable, and satellite connections. When combined, these increased almost 50 percent since June 2010.
- Almost 80 percent of broadband subscribers at June 2011 had a data cap of 5 gigabytes (GB) or more, with the most common cap between 5 and 20GB.
- The number of subscribers with an upload speed of 1.5Mbps or more increased by almost three quarters since 2010.
- The average subscriber consumed 9GB of data per month between June 2010 and June 2011.
- In the three months prior to 30 June 2011, 1.9 million New Zealanders had active Internet subscriptions via a mobile phone.



Make life easy for yourself. Write a list of text items that you use often, such as titles for graphs in an information release. Check your list for spelling, grammar, and style. It will now be perfect to copy into alt text fields in Sitecore.

Proofread

Try the following ideas to proofread written information:

- read it out loud
- cover the text then read it slowly, uncovering one line at a time
- read it backwards one word at a time to focus on the spelling
- use a spelling and grammar checker as a first screening, but don't depend on it
- have others read it – the more eyes the better.

Don't proofread for every type of mistake at once – do one read-through for spelling, others for missing/additional spaces, consistency of word usage, or headings.

10. Consistency with Statistics NZ style

The style we use at Statistics NZ is described in our *Style Manual*. We also have guidelines for graphs and tables, writing for the web, and the Plain English Standard checklist. Our style gives authors guidance about all the elements we use in written communications.

Style includes:

- spelling and punctuation
- fonts
- capitalisation
- alignment of text and spacing
- how we reference other authors
- page layout.

Use plain English

Use our Plain English Standard to help you write to suit your readers. The checklist at the end of this guide sets out the important elements that support plain English writing. Use it to plan, review, and check your writing.

Our style

Our style conventions are based on decisions we've made about which writing styles are best for our purposes. The decisions reflect best practice and our readers' needs.

Our *Style Manual* records the decisions, so we can all use spelling, punctuation, expressions, layout, and document structure consistently.

You can find our preference when a word has optional spellings. The *Style Manual* describes when to use capitals or lower case, and en-dashes or hyphens. Applying our style helps us achieve consistent presentation and appearance in everything we publish.

Templates

We have Word and Sitecore templates with our formatting styles embedded in them. Using a template helps you format consistently, and apply the correct fonts, spacing, and page numbering. Excel templates for graphs and tables also make consistent formatting easy.

Professional presentation

Combine our style conventions with plain English writing to present your information professionally and clearly. It will make our information easy for readers and website users to understand.

Plain English tools, resources, and help

Free tools to help you test your work

You can use many free plain English testing tools. On their own, they won't tell you if you have communicated clearly to your audience in way that is appropriate for them, but they can support that goal. Here are some examples.

- [Drivel Defence](#) is a free software package that helps you check your use of plain English.
- The [Wasteline Test](#) counts words in five categories commonly associated with stodgy sentences: weak verbs, abstract nouns, prepositions, adjectives/adverbs, and 'waste words'.
- [WordStyler](#) gives you plain language alternatives and suggestions.
- The [Redundant Word and Jargon Buster](#) finds words you can often remove from your writing (scroll down to the bottom of the page).
- Microsoft Word's grammar checker can be set to pick up passive sentences, false subjects, long sentences, wordiness, unclear sentences, and reading level.
- Google has a search filter within its advanced search function called [Reading Level](#). It tells you whether web content is at a basic, intermediate, or advanced level.

Plain English resources

The Plain English homepage has many plain English resources to help you understand and apply plain English principles. See the Bulletin Board under 'Work information/ Homepages/ Plain English homepage'. Look under 'Resources for writers' and 'Your toolkit'.

How can I get more help?

For help with plain English, contact:

- editorial@stats.govt.nz
- a plain English champion (see the Plain English homepage for contact details).

Appendix: Our Plain English Standard and Checklist

Plain English Standard for Statistics New Zealand

'Big picture' elements

1. The purpose of the document is clear at the start.
2. The content supports the purpose of the document.
3. The structure of the content is clear and logical to the reader.

Language elements

4. The paragraphs are short and focus on one topic.
5. The sentences are mostly short and straightforward.
6. The words are precise, familiar, and appropriate for the reader.
7. The tone is reader-friendly and professional.

Presentation elements

8. The layout helps the reader absorb the messages quickly and easily.
9. The document is error-free.
10. The document complies with Statistics New Zealand's *Style Manual*.

Check your writing against the standard by using the checklist on the next three pages.

Checklist		✓	Needs work
'Big picture' elements			
1	The purpose of the document is clear at the start.		
<p>Check that the document has:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an informative title or subject line • a clear purpose statement at the start. <p>Comment</p>			
2	The content supports the purpose of the document.		
<p>Check that the content:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • clearly supports the main messages • is relevant, sufficient, and accurate. <p>Comment</p>			
3	The structure of the content is clear and logical to the reader.		
<p>Check that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • main messages are placed first wherever possible • details supporting the main message are in a logical order for the reader • headings are frequent and informative. <p>Comment</p>			

Checklist	✓	Needs work
Language elements		
4 The paragraphs are short and focus on one topic.		
<p>Check that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • paragraphs are generally no more than six lines • paragraphs begin with the topic sentence • every sentence in the paragraph relates to the topic. <p>Comment</p>		
5 The sentences are mostly short and straightforward.		
<p>Check that sentences are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an average length of 15–20 words • free of unnecessary words • mostly written in the active voice. <p>Comment</p>		
6 The words are clear, precise, and appropriate for the reader.		
<p>Check that the document:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • uses precise, familiar words • is free of jargon and vogue words • avoids noun strings • uses verbs rather than abstract nouns to express actions • keeps technical terms to a minimum and explains them when necessary • spells out acronyms and abbreviations. <p>Comment</p>		

Checklist		✓	Needs work
7	The tone is reader-friendly and professional.		
<p>Check that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the language does not distance the reader words like 'we' and 'I' are used where appropriate the tone fits the purpose of the document. <p>Comment</p>			
Presentation elements			
8	The layout helps the reader absorb the messages easily.		
<p>Check that the document includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> useful graphics to support the content plenty of white space. <p>Comment</p>			
9	The document is error-free.		
<p>Check that the document uses correct:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> grammar, punctuation, and spelling dates and figures referencing. <p>Comment</p>			
10	The document is consistent with Statistics New Zealand's <i>Style Manual</i>.		
<p>Check that the document follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> our guidelines on using plain English our specific style conventions. <p>Comment</p>			