

Clatter Chatter

The Crisis in Public Sector Writing

For an organisation to operate successfully, communication is important.

In 'knowledge' organisations, communication is the essential element: the form within which knowledge resides.

In government organisations, knowledge is called 'policy'. It is developed, implemented and explained, principally, in writing.

So, good writing provides the framework for effective government.

But, what happens when writing is distorted to the point of fracture? How good can government get when documents are loose and muddle-headed?

Many documents create more noise than sense: they wheeze with errors; they mumble dullness. And, this is achieved with enormous effort and cost.

How did we get to this point? How do we get out?

The problem is not simply the result of poor thinking, although that is an important concern. It is not caused by ignorance of grammar, style and punctuation, although that exaggerates the aggravation. Nor does the trouble arise from faulty processes alone, although that baffles reason.

The problem is systemic. It needs rapid remedying. It is urgent.

The best public sector organisations have taken up the challenge to change. The worst ignore it or say that nothing is wrong. They declare that it happens everywhere. They work with words that are barely more than government chatter. They shrug off the emptiness. 'Why bother?'

The Pedantic Solution

To the pedantic public servant, the symptoms are the cause: no-one knows the rules of grammar, spelling, punctuation and style. The pedant argues that we should follow the rules (they mean the rules they know and love). Then, the problematic clatter will be hushed.

They are right, but not wholly.

In the Department of Pedantry, the Punctuation Section dozes in a quiet corner of an office, abandoned in Barton. The comma is awaiting a redundancy package, and the semi-colon has already retired to the south coast. Of course, we speak softly about the colon: terminal, apparently. No hope.

Only the full stop sees a career ahead, although it constantly complains about doing work for which it is unqualified.

The Punctuation Section often hears that ministers sometimes must proofread documents they receive. These are pieces that have passed by five or more professional public servants. What were they doing? Nothing coherent, it seems. This impulse to anarchy makes meaningless chatter: government chatter.

Of course, every supervisor takes a varying view on style. Every middle manager diverges from those above and below on grammar. Every executive remembers what their teacher told them about commas in Year 5. Every minister develops differing rules, guidelines and formats.

If you hear calls for clarity and precision, listen carefully and follow. They are two, lost graduate recruits. Their voices echoing along an empty corridor.

So, the pedantic public servant's impulse is towards authoritarianism. They declare, 'Any order is better than none'.

I tend to agree.

In fact, the pedant's position meets little opposition. The problems are real. But, they are symptoms of a wider problem.

The Confused Purpose

The purposeful public servant works against confusion. You can hear them querying their boss.

'A report has an introduction, a body and a conclusion. A submission has a recommendation. So, do you want a report or submission?'

Their boss's answer is silence.

'Why does the Information Brief end with a redundant recommendation? It's just information.'

The manager has no comeback.

'Why do we use these hollow headings and nutty structures?'

The busy supervisor sneers, 'Get over it'.

I ask those questions, too.

How can we write ministerial briefings that include delirious headings? We see 'Issues', under which are found recommendations. We find 'Background', where the key problem is defined. We read 'Comments', below which the text

offers options. These teetering structures are quite common. This is the architecture of anarchy.

In the end, the purpose-driven public servant understands that the worry is wider. There is much more to the problem.

The Public Relations Perspective

For those with a public-relations inclination, the issue is the reader. Does the document reach the reader in a form that they can and will read? The PR public servant fights for Plain English. They detest documents that require PhD-level reading skills (particularly, those sent to citizens who quit school at Year 10).

They craft modern, eye-catching formats; they dish up dashes and fancy fonts. The style is the message. The tone is the content. They reckon the rest is scarcely read. It's just government clutter and clatter.

In monochrome offices, they are told their writing is one of the two, known tones: 'too flowery' or 'too blunt'. This clanking criticism is not common to all public service organisations, but the tone-deaf tend to target 'professional neutrality' as their failsafe. Here is the impulse towards authoritarianism.

Of course, 'professional neutrality' may sometimes succeed, but there are times when text loses any subtlety or charity. It clatters like a tin can hit with a stick.

The public-relations public servant becomes outcome obsessed. But, their perspective has narrowed too much to accommodate the twin desires of clarity and precision. In the end, they too become part of the problem.

The Peculiar Processes

To the process-driven public servant, the problem is the pathway. It's the way the document is produced.

Few find it hard to understand the rationale of the process. Many staff produce many draft documents. As the documents pass up the managerial tree, they are refined from each perspective: more effort below, more power and precision above. This is the authoritarian dream.

What actually happens is different. The staff member drafts as best they can, based on their knowledge of the subject and of the 'department's view'. Both can be famously foggy.

I have seen as many as 14 redrafts at this stage. They bounce back and forth between one staff member and one supervisor: a clattering public service pinball machine.

The writer sees their document systematically destroyed. Their morale sinks. Their competence falters. Careless cynicism will draft the next.

The procedure is duplicated between the supervisor and the manager. Every aspect of the document may be changed before it rises to the next level, the SES officer (sometimes referred to as the Senior Editing Service).

The SES officer, sometimes liaising with the executive group, may rewrite the document or suggest changes. These can be determined by a carefully considered ministerial change or, sometimes, by chaotic convulsions in the minister's office that are calmed and covered by the discreet, senior bureaucrat.

Then, the document may go to the minister's office for approval. Or, it may drop all the way down to the original staff member for redrafting. It is now common for the first, (long-forgotten) draft to be offered once more. It whooshes through the approval process like a demented skyrocket: anarchy in flight.

But, that is just one symptom of a wider problem that is pervasive and pernicious.

Clarity and Precision

What can we do to correct this sclerotic system?

The public sector document should be clear and precise, but what part does clarity play and what part precision?

Clarity should set the context. Each player in the process must be clear about the document's purpose. They must agree on the appropriate form and style of writing. They must concur on the characteristics of the reader and the policy context.

Precision should guide the writing. The text must be aimed precisely at the abilities of the reader. It must be written in a language that is exact, following clear-cut grammatical, punctuation and stylistic rules. It should fit within standard structures and sit perfectly within the policy context. Everyone dealing with a document should hold precisely to their roles.

Let's harness the impulses towards anarchy and authoritarianism. They can drive the improvements so desperately needed.

The Solution Call

Let there be a standard style of writing that the leaders of the political and public service spheres endorse.

It may be that the next edition of the *Style Manual* wins that role. The debate about what is good style and what is bad grammar must end. Let's simply agree on a set of rules in the Australian Public Service and leave it at that.

Clarity is served by approving a service-wide style. Precision is served by writers following its formulas.

What a pleasure it would be to hear the Prime Minister and the Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet settle the empty arguments about grammar, punctuation and style. They could do so much to stop the fragmentation and foolishness.

Let there be standardised names and structures for APS documents.

A report should be called just that. A submission named a submission. An information brief should bear that title. A minute is sent within an establishment. A memo's sent outside.

Let's ensure the clarity of a document's purpose and the precision of its structure. We have nothing to lose but our confusion.

Let there be writing that fits every reader. Messages to the minister and to the masses should be clear and precise.

Citizens, customers and clients should be surveyed to ensure that writing's complexity and tone is precisely right for them. Every writer should be clear about the appropriate form and style for every type of reader.

Let there be information flowing freely to all those who draft. Let there be less work for supervisors, managers and executives who have opened these gates. Let the territorial disputes about knowledge and power dissipate as a culture grows that knows. Remember, an unknowing staff silently subverts an organisation's aim.

Let everyone understand and stick with their task. The writer with clarity and precision can confidently draft. The supervisor and manager can effectively check and direct. The executive can swiftly oversee. The minister (and their staff) can rapidly reach decisions, assured rather than flustered by sloppy processing.

What a wonderful day it will be when leaders of politics and public sector agreed to bring order to our document names and structures. When they set strict guidelines on how to reach out to readers. When they require realignment of the writing rules.

What a glorious day it will be when they call for clarity in responsibility and precision in performance.

We must stop this pervasive problem before government and nation are damaged.

Some say that public sector writing cannot be saved. It is nothing more than government chatter: the clatter of a pebble in an empty, metal kettle. If that is so, we will face a difficult fate.

I say, let's make a start. Let's begin the work.

Let's speak out against the loss of meaning and purpose in public sector writing: the inevitable outcome of the anarchy of government clatter chatter.

Francis Walsh