

Cost-saving on written materials across the APS

This submission is a response to the discussion points under ‘Efficiency in all aspects of government operations’.

Proposal

Use Hansard’s expertise and apply their style guide across the APS to ensure consistency and best practice in style, usage and editing

Background

The amount of text generated across the service is massive – and probably growing. In this era of text fatigue and overload, it is particularly important to apply the best possible standards to style and expression in any document, so that it is read and understood.

It is useful when staff can prepare documents that don’t require senior managers to spend time proofreading and editing. When authors apply consistent style from the beginning of a writing task there is quite a saving later on, whether that’s for ministerial liaison staff finalising briefs, or managers finalising reports, or public affairs officers preparing communication materials for the public.

There is currently massive duplication and a waste of resources across the APS, with individual departments developing idiosyncratic style guides.

Hansard’s core business is maintaining best practice in editing. Hansard editors apply their standards to the point that their editing is seamless (e.g. the reader cannot tell the editors changed mid-sentence). The Hansard style guide is exhaustive.

In the agencies, the best alternative to having trained editors finalise text would be to have public service writers follow a comprehensive guide that outlines the reasons behind style decisions.

Maintaining editing and proofreading skills is practically impossible when editing tasks occupy little of an officer’s time. Most public servants should probably defer to the advice of editors who are constantly applying their skills.

Case study: an agency’s (no) style guide

When I arrived in a particular agency in early 2008 I contributed my Hansard-trained expertise to a draft style guide being developed by the department’s web team. Shortly afterwards, another section of the department started work on another style and usage guide for the whole department. Even though both teams working on style guides are in same division, and there is 80 per cent crossover in the content, for months neither team knew that the other’s work was happening.

Nearly two years on, the department still has no style guide, and there is an ongoing argument about elements of style – all of which are clearly set out in the Hansard style guide.

Fellow editors and public affairs officers in other agencies tell me this duplication of effort is happening across the service.

The need for an up-to-date, single style resource

Having individual style guides in development across the public service is a waste of time and effort. There is a further problem when departmental style guides are developed by officers who aren't trained editors. This leads to confusing and often incorrect instructions.

The Commonwealth *Style manual* is a useful book up to a point, but doesn't go down to the detail needed – and, clearly, many agencies have felt that it needed to be supplemented or even ignored. The *Style manual* has not been updated since I believe 2005.

Project team

I propose that a small project team be put together to investigate:

- establishing use of Hansard's expertise and the Hansard style guide across the public service, in place of the Commonwealth *Style manual* and overriding individual agency style guides;
- possibilities like resourcing Hansard to run a 'style hotline' online for APS staff and offer solutions to new style issues (such a resource would of course provide information for updates to the Hansard guide); and
- whether an online 'desktop' style guide with automatic updates could be developed.

If warranted, the team would go on to implement the project and communicate the benefits across the service.