

1 Principles of good writing

Responsible writing

1.1 This chapter deals with some of the principles of good functional writing. Whether you are writing something for publication, such as a book or an article, or something for internal use, such as a memorandum, a report, a 'ministerial' or a letter, the principles remain the same.

1.2 The purpose of writing is to convey to another person what is in the writer's mind. 'Good writing', therefore, is writing which does this effectively. Every organisation needs to encourage good writing for at least three reasons. Firstly, it is efficient: if what is in the writer's mind is conveyed effectively, time will not be wasted in sorting out misunderstandings. Secondly, it is economical: efficient communication saves both time and money. Thirdly, good writing gives a favourable impression of the organisation.

1.3 Conversely, bad writing leads to confusion, mistakes and misunderstandings. These can cost time and money; and they convey a bad impression of the organisation's efficiency.

1.4 In organisations, writers may be called upon to express their personal opinions, but what they write is nevertheless intended to serve not their own interests but those of the organisation that employs them. It follows that to write well is to write responsibly: it is an important aspect of your duty towards your colleagues and the organisation as a whole.

1.5 In most organisations, writers do not normally decide what the organisation writes or prints for the public. There is a corporate responsibility, and many people may take part in the drafting of a document. Nowadays, many if not most documents are drafted on personal computers. Drafts of documents may be passed from one person to another electronically, whereas formerly it was usual to send a hand-written text to a typist and then circulate it. If each person involved writes responsibly, everybody's job will be made easier.

1.6 Good writing is based on a number of principles, all of which are important. Three, however, are fundamental—clarity, conciseness and style.

Clarity

1.7 It is obvious that the most effective way of conveying one's meaning to someone else is to write clearly; but that is often easier said than done. If you are writing under pressure, for instance to meet a tight deadline, you may feel tempted to write hurriedly with little attention to the way in which you express your thoughts. Clear writing, however, requires both time and care. If what you write is not clear, you will not in the end save time or effort at all. On the contrary, lack of clarity can waste a great deal of your time, as well as that of other people, in redrafting, discussing and clearing up the misunderstandings that have been caused.

FIRST STEPS

1.8 Before you start writing, you should spend some time considering what precisely you want to say. If you are not clear about this in your own mind, you will certainly not be able to write clearly. You may need to discuss the matter with someone else, or to jot down notes to help you think it through.

1.9 It is also important to be quite clear about what sort of document you are preparing. The reply to someone's letter on a particular topic will obviously need to be different from a press release or a pamphlet intended for the general public. Unfortunately, many people have written to seek specific information, only to receive a reply which showed that its writer had not taken the trouble to think about its purpose or the expectations of the original correspondent. For example, if a member of the public writes to a government department asking about eligibility for funding under a particular scheme, he or she expects a clear and direct answer, not a general description of the government's policies and guidelines.

1.10 Similarly, it is important to be sure who your readers are, or are likely to be. The author of the following example presumably had in mind the younger generation of bus passengers; but people of all ages use buses and perhaps the very elderly may also need to be reminded about giving a clear signal to the driver. They are not, however, very likely to want to imitate John Cleese:

Bus drivers, like auctioneers, need good clear signals. When your bus is approaching stand about a metre away from the kerb and signal the driver that you wish to board the bus by raising one arm. This may seem a bit boring but it is the most effective method of catching a bus, even more so than John Cleese impersonations!

1.11 Be clear, too, about who you are and what your role is. Responsibility towards an organisation includes caring about the impression you give to other people. If you talk down to them, attempt to bully them, or try to deceive them with evasions or deliberate ambiguity, that impression will be a bad one. A newly qualified lawyer once started work with a municipal council, so it is said, and was immediately given the unpopular task of trying to recover overdue rates. He had little knowledge of the powers of the council and forgot that he was merely an employee, so he wrote to delinquent ratepayers as follows:

I understand that you owe the Council \$xyz in overdue rates. If you do not pay immediately, I shall take measures that will astound you.

The letter was remarkably successful in recovering outstanding rates, but the young man had to be told very firmly by the Town Clerk exactly what his role was in the organisation.

ORGANISING YOUR MATERIAL

1.12 Once you are clear about what you are required to produce, you may find it useful to jot down, perhaps in a random form, the gist of what you want to say. Reducing your thoughts to a few words will help you to clarify them and avoid irrelevancies or diversions.

1.13 If the document is to be relatively lengthy or complex, it is usually a good idea to outline a logical structure which sets out in headings the main points you wish to make and the

subsidiary material. Start from what you are sure (or can safely presume) that your readers already know, and summarise the steps that lead to what you want them to know. Many modern software packages have a facility known as 'outlining' or something similar, which makes it very easy to set out your argument with major headings, subheadings and so on. This is often a very helpful way of seeing at a glance whether you are thinking logically, and the computer automatically labels your various levels of heading. The following example comes from one of the most popular current software packages:

I. POLICY AND PRACTICES

- A. Introduction
- B. Policy development
- C. Training
- D. Consultation

II. PROGRAM ANALYSIS

- A. Audit methodology
- B. Country programs
 - 1. Introduction
 - 2. Environmental programs
 - 3. Education and training programs
- C. Global programs
 - 1. Multilateral activities
 - 2. Non-government organisations

1.14 You can of course create a similar structure even if you do not have the use of a personal computer. When you are satisfied that you have a logical structure it may help to summarise what you want to say at each stage of the discussion, under the headings in that outline.

CHOOSING THE BEST WORDS

1.15 Clear writing has a lot to do with choosing the 'right' words and expressions. The 'right' words convey your meaning directly and unambiguously; the 'wrong' ones leave the reader uncertain or confused.

1.16 Because the English language has such a large vocabulary, it is often possible to choose between alternative words which mean the same, or almost the same, thing. For example:

deep	profound
harmful	deleterious
children	progeny
stop	discontinue
send	transmit

Which word you choose should depend on which is clearer. Generally speaking, the shorter words are clearer, stronger and more concrete; the longer ones vaguer and more abstract. Clearly, there can be contexts, such as in a legal document, in which any of the words listed in the second column above might be the right word; but good writers will avoid the temptation to use the longer word because they think it is more 'dignified' or 'impressive'. There are some such

words, indeed, which might better be removed from the vocabulary altogether. The word 'commence' is one of them. It is hard to imagine any context in which that word would be preferable to 'start' or 'begin'; yet it is very often used because people seem to feel that it is somehow more genteel than the alternatives.

PASSIVE VOICE

1.17 Some books on good writing urge writers to avoid the passive voice and use the active voice whenever possible. It is not hard to show why that is desirable. Consider the following sentence:

You can get a shock from your telephone during a thunderstorm.

It is obviously clearer and more direct than

Persons using telephones during thunderstorms are advised that electrical shocks may be experienced.

Similarly,

The Minister believes that the subsidy should not be restricted to rural areas.

is clearer than the vague statement

It is believed that the subsidy should not be restricted to rural areas.

1.18 On the other hand, there may be times when you cannot avoid the passive. The chapter on non-discriminatory language gives examples of sentences in which use of the passive may be the only way of avoiding tedious repetitions of 'he or she' and the like. Similarly, there may be occasions when, as in the example quoted above, such constructions as 'it is believed that' are appropriate. One such occasion could be when you may not be confident of the Minister's view, or even the department's view, and you simply want to draw attention to a widely held belief without attributing it to any particular individual or body.

1.19 Nevertheless, a good writer will always think carefully about whether it is better to use the passive rather than the active. As we have seen, it is often possible to avoid the passive by using the second person ('you') instead of an impersonal passive. In this respect, there have been great improvements in official notices and information in recent years, thanks in particular to the growing emphasis on plain English. Expressions such as 'Persons desirous of doing A are advised to complete form B' are now much more likely to read 'If you wish to do A, you should fill in form B'. This is all to the good, but it takes care and attention to make sure that you are always so clear and direct.

CHOOSING THE CORRECT WORDS

1.20 Using the right words does not only mean using the clearest ones; it also means using words in their correct sense and form. Recently, for example, many writers and speakers seem to have forgotten the difference between the verbs 'convince' and 'persuade'. Certainly they overlap and occasionally are interchangeable, but basically you convince people that what you

say is true, or that your argument is correct; you persuade them to do something. It makes perfectly good sense to say:

You have convinced me [that you are right], but you have not persuaded me [to do what you want].

If you use 'convince' all the time in preference to 'persuade', you deprive yourself of a useful distinction and so make it more difficult to express your meaning clearly.

1.21 'Imply' and 'infer' are also often confused. To imply something is to suggest it without actually stating it; to infer something is to come to a conclusion from evidence or from what someone else has stated. For example:

His comments implied that they would be dismissed.
They inferred from his comments that they would be dismissed.

1.22 The words 'may' and 'might' are closely related; but they often serve quite different purposes and should be used correctly. If you are talking about the past, then what may have happened is a possibility, but you do not know whether it was so or not. What might have happened did not happen—but under other circumstances it could have. At the time of the turmoil in Fiji, a news reader announced:

The Prime Minister of Fiji said this morning that Australia and New Zealand may have saved democracy in his country by invading.

This clearly said to startled listeners that Australia and New Zealand had in fact invaded Fiji, but the outcome was still uncertain. It turned out, however, that what the Prime Minister meant (or perhaps said, but was wrongly reported) was that those countries might have saved democracy had they invaded—but they did not. Obviously, this is an important difference and one that writers should be careful to maintain.

1.23 A less common error, but one which occurs quite often with certain pairs of words, is to use the wrong word altogether: that is, to use it with the wrong meaning. Usually this happens because there are words which look alike but have different meanings. For example:

full	fulsome
averse	adverse
militate	mitigate
affect	effect
alternately	alternatively
disinterested	uninterested
continual	continuous
forceful	forcible
compliment	complement
licence	license

1.24 There are words in English which change their form (or spelling), or combine with other words in such a way that they can easily be confused with each other. Writers need to be quite sure that they use the right one; for example:

it's [it is] its [belonging to it]

who's [who is]	whose [belonging to whom]
you're [you are]	your [belonging to you]
they're [they are]	their [belonging to them]

POSITIVE VERSUS NEGATIVE

1.25 In general, writers should choose positive expressions rather than negative ones, if there is a choice. This is because negative expressions such as 'The Minister is not unaware that . . .' sound both pompous and defensive in comparison with positive statements such as 'The Minister realises that . . .' Moreover, positive statements are more likely to get results than negative ones. The following statement, for example, reads like a complaint about a sad state of affairs rather than the urging of a desirable course of action:

Without a major information initiative directed to specific target groups, misunderstanding of XYZ's intention can occur and impair the effectiveness of the Australian program.

There are other aspects of that sentence that are open to criticism, but if its object is to make sure that money is spent on information, it would have more effect if written positively:

The Australian program will have a much better chance of being effective if major efforts are made to inform those groups which might otherwise misunderstand XYZ's intention.

STRINGS OF NOUNS

1.26 One useful characteristic of English is that you can string nouns together to make new phrases: *salt water*, *cloud formations*, *government spending*, *traffic laws* and so on. However, if this is overdone, the effect can be very clumsy and tedious. Long strings of nouns may be useful as titles for programs and policies (Third World Development Co-operation Program, Defence Force Retirement Benefits Fund), but they should not be used for other purposes. Consider the following sentences, in which the strings of nouns are italicised:

Commonwealth spending in 1990–91 targeted on language and literacy totalled over \$240 million, through 23 specific purpose programs and *policy support*. *State and Territory systems'* expenditure on *language and literacy programs*, particularly at *school level*, is far greater and they have recently strengthened their *language and literacy policy statements*.

Writing of that sort, particularly when it occurs throughout a long document, is deadening. The same information could have been given in a less tedious way:

In 1990–91, the Commonwealth spent more than \$240 million in supporting policies for language and literacy and on 23 programs for specific purposes. The States and Territories spend far more on programs for language and literacy through their school systems and have recently strengthened their statements of policy on these matters.

STOCK EXPRESSIONS

1.27 In an organisation, it is often convenient to use stock expressions and phrases. Since everyone in the organisation knows what they mean, it would be tedious to spell them out every time they were used. However, writers should realise that people outside the organisation will probably not be familiar with these terms and will often resent them as unpleasant jargon.

1.28 'Aged Persons Units', for example, is a standard term for a range of housing provided for elderly people. It is a convenient term for planners, welfare officers and other officials concerned with providing such accommodation, and it may have to be used to explain what laws and regulations say on the subject. But in general writing on the subject of housing the elderly, it should be used sparingly if at all. To the general public, the term sounds offensively bureaucratic and heartless, especially when it is abbreviated to 'APUs'. When people grow old, they still like to think that they live in their home, not in an 'APU' or a 'dwelling'.

JARGON

1.29 Even worse is the use of other people's technical language. The vocabulary of sociology or computer science has its place within those disciplines, but to use terms such as 'socio-economic profile', 'interface' or 'parameters' in non-technical documents suggests to readers that the author is trying to impress them with her or his superior knowledge.

CLICHÉS

1.30 Clichés are trite, overused expressions which have long since lost their freshness and are used to save the trouble of finding straightforward, simple expressions. 'Trials and tribulations' is the cliché cited by *The Macquarie Dictionary* in its definition of the word. Other familiar clichés are:

to explore every avenue	from time immemorial
conspicuous by his / her absence	the powers that be
to damn with faint praise	through thick and thin
few and far between	an uphill battle

Most of us could readily quote dozens of similar expressions, all of which should be avoided.

EUPHEMISMS

1.31 Euphemisms, words that make things sound better than they really are, may have their place in rhetoric but should generally be avoided. The following are just a few of the more familiar ones:

senior citizens (= the old, the elderly)	revenue augmentation (= tax increase)
to pass away (= to die)	frank discussions (= disagreement)
rodent operative (= rat-catcher)	to misspeak oneself (= to lie)

Most euphemisms are harmless enough, but those that hide the truth can be vicious and dangerous—for example, the word 'pacification', used in wars by the military authorities in order to conceal the reality of mass killing.

1.32 Sometimes euphemisms are used in a well-meaning but misguided attempt to avoid giving offence. Thus, 'persons of low economic status' may be mistakenly thought to be a kinder way of referring to the poor; but poverty is a harsh thing which needs to be dealt with resolutely,

and resolute action is less likely to be taken if the poor are described in such bland, impersonal terms.

SLANG AND COLLOQUIALISMS

1.33 Slang and colloquialisms belong to speech or to light literature; they should be avoided in other forms of writing. It may sometimes be tempting to use a slang expression to avoid seeming pompous, but there is usually a better way of doing this. Colloquial forms such as the contractions 'can't' and 'don't' sit awkwardly in formal writing.

FOREIGN WORDS AND PHRASES

1.34 The use of foreign words and phrases often seems pretentious, especially if there is a ready English equivalent. If you do feel it necessary to use a phrase such as 'ad nauseam', at least make sure that you spell it correctly (it is *not* 'ad nauseum'). Some commonly used words and phrases are:

de rigueur	noblesse oblige
sine die	bête noire
Weltanschauung	mutatis mutandis
la dolce vita	joie de vivre

VOGUE WORDS AND PHRASES

1.35 Official writing is often characterised by the use of a special set of words or phrases that happen to be in vogue at a particular time. Usually these do not mean anything very precise. Sometimes writers want to show that they are up to date with the latest fashion, sometimes they wish to impress the reader with high-flown language, or they may simply want to save themselves the trouble of thinking of alternatives. Vogue words and phrases make the sentence in which they occur simply vague or, at the worst, obscure.

1.36 In the two examples below, the vogue words are italicised. The words and phrases in brackets are possible alternatives, although it is sometimes not clear which of these would be accurate, since the vogue words disguise what the writer really means. One commonly used vogue word is the verb 'to address', as in the following example:

The Commonwealth has commissioned an evaluation of these programs and will *address* issues arising from this evaluation once the study is completed. [consider, discuss, deal with]

To say that the Commonwealth will 'address' something is to say virtually nothing at all; it certainly does not commit the Commonwealth to action of any kind.

1.37 In the next example we see the vogue use of the verb 'to identify':

The Government will continue to pay close attention to needs in these areas in *identifying* priorities for allocating any additional higher education student places which it funds. [choosing, deciding on, establishing, selecting, determining]

To 'identify' something is to recognise it or put a name to it, as when we identify a flower or a make of car. It presupposes that the thing in question already exists. In this case, the priorities

do not exist until the Government has made its mind up about them. The common use of the verb 'to identify' sometimes suggests that writers wish to imply that the things to be 'identified' are not the result of discussion or invention, but are somehow handed down to us by nature or a higher force.

1.38 Consider the extract below:

The program is targeted at alleviating environmental problems caused by deforestation. The impact of establishing fast growing, highly productive tree plantations can have both short-term and long-term consequences to environmental values.

Here, in addition to the mistake of 'consequences to' instead of 'consequences for', we have three examples of vogue words. 'Target' is not a verb (nor, we may note, is 'impact') and nothing is gained by using it as one. The first sentence says only:

The aim of the program is to alleviate the environmental problems caused by deforestation.

In the second sentence, 'impact' is unnecessary. In any case, trees grow, they do not usually hit anything unless they fall! The expression 'consequences for [to] environmental values' conveys little, and particularly the vogue word 'values'. Are the consequences beneficial or harmful? And what is the difference between 'the environment' and 'environmental values'? Furthermore, it is difficult to see what the connection is between the two sentences.

1.39 The context suggests that this passage might mean:

The aim of the program is to alleviate the environmental problems caused by deforestation. But if denuded areas are replanted with highly productive, fast-growing species, this too can adversely affect the environment in both the short and the long term.

This may or may not be an accurate rewriting of the paragraph: the writer's use of vogue words makes it impossible to be sure.

1.40 Many other examples can be found in official writing and elsewhere. Readers can make their own lists, for the vogues and fads change constantly. The remedy is to be vigilant and to keep a dictionary handy. Certainly words change their meaning, but when they are used vaguely to save the trouble of thinking of a precise alternative, then they do not merely change their meaning—they lose it.

FORMING SENTENCES

1.41 Even if a writer uses clear words and phrases, the meaning of a sentence will not be clear if they are put together in a muddled or confusing way.

1.42 A sentence is clearest when it makes a single statement. If it is necessary to refer to other matters, or to qualify what you are saying, it is best to use either another sentence or a footnote. Where a sentence has to list, for example, a series of options, these can be set out in point form.

1.43 Sentences can easily lose their clarity if they are too long: the writer can lose control of the structure. Fortunately, it is no longer the fashion to write long, involved sentences. The test is

whether you can make a sentence clearer by breaking it up. That can be done both by forming separate sentences and by using colons or semicolons. If you are not sure about punctuation, remember that you need less of it in short sentences. The following sentence is not unduly long:

The Committee recognises that there are good technical arguments for the use of samples in the collection of statistical data, but believes that the practice can only be condoned within the Census context when it has been a consequence of a totally planned operation where Census users at all levels have been consulted on the relative merits of 100 per cent collection as distinct from the use of samples.

Its message would be clearer, however, if it were broken up in the way shown below:

The Committee recognises that there are good technical reasons for the use of samples in the collection of statistical data. It believes, however, that the practice can only be condoned within the Census context when it has been a consequence of a totally planned operation; that is, where Census users at all levels have been consulted on the relative merits of 100 per cent collection as distinct from the use of samples.

1.44 The too frequent appearance of such words as 'when', 'where', 'while', 'although', 'if' and so on is often a signal that the sentence should be broken into smaller units.

SOME POINTS OF GRAMMAR

1.45 Sentences must be grammatically correct. Participles, for instance, are often misused. When a participle is used as an adjective, it refers to the subject of the main verb. If you forget that rule the result can be ludicrous, as in the following example:

Looking over Booker's shoulder, Major Promo's chest swelled with pride at the obvious effect this display of teamwork had on his client.

1.46 Adjectives, too, should be used correctly. They should not be used as adverbs. In such a sentence as 'Consistent with the Government's policy, the committee has decided to . . .', the literal meaning is that it is the committee rather than its decision which is consistent with the policy. 'In accordance with' should be used instead of 'consistent with'.

1.47 Adverbs may easily be used wrongly. The word 'hopefully' strictly means 'in a hopeful manner', as in R. L. Stevenson's adage 'To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive'. Its recent use to mean 'we hope that' may be justified by analogy with the long-standing use of words such as 'fortunately' and 'luckily' in a similar way. Nevertheless, care should be taken not to misuse adverbs.

1.48 Unfortunately, many Australians have never been taught grammar, or have been taught it in such a way that they have rebelled against it. Its importance, however, lies in the fact that it is the key to clear rather than muddled writing. Those who feel doubtful about the subject can refer to several books which help to make the problems of grammar clearer. These and other relevant books are listed in the Bibliography.

Conciseness

1.49 Long-windedness tires the reader and makes it more difficult to get your message across. It also wastes the reader's time. It is a fallacy, especially in official writing, to imagine that lengthy sentences and documents are more impressive or profound than short ones. The story has often been told of Winston Churchill's insistence, during the feverish activity of war, that any submission made to him must occupy no more than one side of a sheet of foolscap-sized paper. His ministers and subordinates found that the discipline of condensing their thoughts in this way resulted in much more effective submissions. A similar discipline would be welcome today.

1.50 Clarity and conciseness go hand in hand: it will often be found that the clearest words, expressions and sentences prove also to be the shortest.

1.51 In speech, we often repeat ourselves or say the same thing in a different way so as to emphasise important points and make sure our listeners have clearly understood. In writing, this is usually unnecessary.

The use of

- *italics*
- underlining
- **bold type**

and setting text out in points, as above, will often serve to draw attention to the most important items.

1.52 The great enemy of conciseness is rambling. Sentences that go on too long and deal with too many points leave the reader wondering what you are really trying to say. A mixture of longer and shorter sentences adds variety and makes your text more readable; but a sentence should never be longer than it needs to be to cover a single point in the discussion.

Style

1.53 The word 'style' is commonly used to refer to two different, but overlapping, aspects of writing.

- 'Style of writing' refers to the words an author chooses and the way in which he or she puts them together in paragraphs or sentences to create a tone or impression.
- 'Written style' refers to the set of conventions that are used in print to make the meaning clear. These include spelling, punctuation marks, spacing, symbols, underlining and many other conventions that are discussed later in this book.

STYLE OF WRITING

1.54 Novelists and other creative writers often have a personal style of writing which is as distinctive as their signature. In organisations, this is generally undesirable; it draws attention to the personality of the author rather than to the organisation's message. This does not imply,

however, that writers in organisations should retreat into a stuffy, official style which is so impersonal that it gives the reader an unfavourable impression of the organisation.

1.55 The question of style will largely solve itself if you are careful about clarity and conciseness, even when the subject matter is complex or technical. It helps to put yourself in the reader's shoes and ask whether what you are writing is the sort of thing you would want to read if the roles were reversed.

1.56 The following paragraphs provide further hints on how to produce a good style of writing.

1.57 Address the reader rather than using impersonal constructions. This can often be achieved by using the word 'if'. 'If you wish to apply for a grant, please complete this form' is obviously less stuffy than 'Persons desirous of obtaining a grant are required to complete the attached form'.

1.58 Use figures of speech sparingly, especially if they border on the cliché. Most current fads should be totally shunned. They include:

the bottom line	to lift one's game
on a learning curve	the cutting edge
a level playing field	fast-tracking
a ball-park figure	the big picture
a different ball game	to take on board

However, your style will not suffer from the occasional use of familiar figures of speech if they convey vividly what you want to say:

It is worth noting that in the United States the Supreme Court has taken a *dim view* of electoral practices which ...

1.59 Avoid words, phrases and constructions which may make your reader pause to puzzle over your meaning. Here are some of the pitfalls to avoid.

Vague statements. In the following statement, 'a number' probably means a number of local governments rather than a number of people, but that is not certain. Vagueness puzzles the reader.

It appears that there is some measure of local government support for staged approvals, though a number would argue that propositions such as 'approvals in principle' will be problematic.

Unnecessary technicalities. Technical expressions should be used only in a technical context, especially if they may be unfamiliar to your reader. The following sentence is taken from a paragraph in which the otherwise puzzling terms are explained; but it would be quite inappropriate to use it on its own in a general letter.

'Signed English' is the principal means of manual supplementation.

Unusual words. Your vocabulary does not need to be deliberately limited, but neither should you compel your readers to reach constantly for the dictionary.

Mixed metaphors. Metaphors and similes can enliven a piece of writing, but if they are used too enthusiastically, the result can be absurd. The following quotation conjures up a hilarious image of elephants sinking ships:

[China and Japan] could become rogue elephants, who could scuttle carefully wrought out international political trading agreements.

(Presumably, also, the writer meant to say either 'carefully thought out' or 'carefully wrought'.)

Pompous wording. As well as using jargon, those who wish to impress the reader with their own importance often adopt a pompous style by using high-flown words and expressions when ordinary ones would do perfectly well. For example, advertisements for quite junior clerical positions frequently demand 'communication skills of a high order' when what is meant is simply that applicants should be able to speak and write correctly.

Incongruities. Styles should be consistent as far as possible. The effect is incongruous if colloquial expressions which may be quite acceptable in other contexts are suddenly inserted in a text which is otherwise severely factual or technical. Also, what may be acceptable in one context may be ludicrously incongruous in another. The architect who wrote the following sentence apparently forgot that he was writing for a public brochure and not for a professional magazine:

At this point the central turret engages in an amusing conversation with the lift-well.

Tautologies. Tautologies repeat an idea without adding anything new. In the following example, either the word 'repeat' should be changed to 'make' or the word 'again' should be deleted:

The team will not repeat the same mistake again.

Redundancies. Redundancies are words which are not needed by the sense of the sentence. In the following example, such words are italicised:

We offer you *good honest* value for money. Our large range of door finishes and trims means we can match the *existing* decor in your home.

1.60 Avoid irritating the reader by constantly repeating the same word. The use of a thesaurus can help you find alternatives, and many software packages now offer a quick way of looking for them, although it is wise to check that you are being offered a genuine synonym. But do not overdo it. Your style will suffer if you use too many variations.

WRITTEN STYLE

1.61 Correct spelling is essential, if only because spelling mistakes give a bad impression of the organisation which produces them:

If you *accidently* pay too much you will need to have the driver verify that you have paid more than you should have.

That mistake should have been avoided, since the document in which it appeared was almost certainly produced on a personal computer, and modern software packages are nearly always

provided with a spellcheck of some kind. The advantage of a spellcheck is that it will pick up typing errors and words which you may unknowingly have spelt incorrectly. Remember, however, that a spellcheck cannot tell you whether you have used the wrong word. If you have written 'hear' instead of 'here', for example, the computer will not indicate it as a mistake. For that and other reasons (see [para. 3.3](#)), it is better to check the spelling of a word in the dictionary. No one should be ashamed of using a dictionary; but everyone should be ashamed if failure to do so results in spelling mistakes.

1.62 Punctuation and the other marks and signs, such as quotation marks, dashes, exclamation marks, and bold or italic type, are conventions which attempt to convey what in speech would be conveyed by emphasis, pauses, intonation and body language. Their correct use is therefore essential if your reader is to understand you correctly. Later chapters in this book provide a guide to their proper use.

1.63 Sometimes the conventions are changed, or different people prefer a particular convention for some reason. For example, it is common now to omit the full stops between initials, as in NSW rather than N.S.W. for New South Wales. There is also much disagreement about the use of hyphens when two words are compounded. Is it best, for instance, to write 'rate payer', 'rate-payer' or 'ratepayer'? Whatever the preferred convention may be in your organisation, what matters is to be consistent and to adhere to the convention wherever possible.

1.64 The conventions recommended by the Australian Government Publishing Service are set out in this book, and a writer who consults and follows these from the first draft of a document will be able to achieve consistency of style.

Revising the draft

1.65 Checking what you have written is an important part of responsible writing. Few of us will find nothing that needs correction or improvement. In particular, the revision stage allows you to check for the following faults, which can easily be overlooked while you are writing:

- lack of logic or continuity;
- rambling sentences or structure;
- unduly long paragraphs, sentences or words;
- a monotonous style resulting from the use of too many sentences of the same length or with the same structure;
- clichés, jargon, ambiguous or awkward expressions;
- incorrect grammar or punctuation, and spelling mistakes;
- unnecessary repetition;
- tautologies and redundancies.

1.66 It is often a good idea to get someone else to read your draft. What may be clear to you may be unclear to another reader; or your colleague may find phrases and expressions which, while they may be quite correct, nevertheless cause the reader to hesitate and wonder exactly

what you mean to say. This will give you the opportunity to improve your text before it goes any further.

Conclusion

1.67 The principles, suggestions and warnings set out here will not automatically make you a good writer, but if you study them and apply them, they will set you on your way to responsible writing, the aim of which is always to communicate clearly, concisely and logically.