

**An Ethos CRS  
and VisibleThread**  
readability report

**The 2021  
readability  
scorecard:  
Australian  
Government  
agencies**

ethos<sup>η</sup> crs



## CONTENTS

Executive summary	1
Introduction	2
Methodology	3
Measuring readability	4
Findings	6
Issues	11
Sources and references	15
List of agencies	16
About us	17

Our aim in  
***The 2021 readability  
scorecard: Australian  
Government agencies***

is to compare the readability  
of documents produced by  
agencies of the Australian  
public service.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*The 2021 readability scorecard: Australian Government agencies* measures, for the first time, the readability of documents and reports produced by Australian Government agencies.

Ethos CRS reveals that Australian Government agencies use a form of English with overlong sentences and excessive use of the passive voice.

We assessed the readability of documents using a language analysis platform developed by VisibleThread.

This platform measures school grade level, sentence length and percentage of sentences that are active or passive. Based on these metrics we calculated a readability index. The higher the score on this index, the more readable the text. A score of 100 indicates that a document meets recommended readability standards.

The top 3 agencies in our survey were:

- » the Australian Securities and Investments Commission, with a readability score of 34.5
- » Defence Housing Australia, with a score of 34.3
- » the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications, with a score of 33.6.



The agencies that produced the most readable reports were: the Australian Securities and Investments Commission; Defence Housing Australia; and the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications.

For grade level, Defence Housing Australia had the best score, recording an average of 13.0 across 4 documents. Services Australia was close behind with 13.2, followed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics with 13.7.

On sentence length, Defence Housing Australia had the best score, with an average of 21.9% long sentences. Next was the Australian Taxation Office with 25.1%, closely followed by Services Australia with 25.2%.

The agency that used active voice the most was the Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources with an average of 85.1% active voice sentences. Next were the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional

Development and Communications with 83.4% active sentences and the Australian Securities and Investments Commission with 83.2%.

We analysed 136 documents from 35 agencies — those with 400 or more staff. We also undertook 2 case studies of large agency websites: Services Australia and the Australian Taxation Office.

The website case studies showed the enormous dividends from investing in clear writing. Services Australia was outstanding, with a readability score of 119.3, higher than our benchmark of 100. This was far above the best document in our document survey, which scored 50.8.

## INTRODUCTION

### The aim of *The 2021 readability scorecard: Australian Government agencies* is to shine a light on the quality of writing in the public service.

Government has a duty to be open and clear with citizens about its activities. Clear communication helps government do its job better and more efficiently.

Government in Australia scores lower for competence and ethics than media, business and non-government organisations, according to the *Edelman Trust Barometer* (Edelman 2020).

Government can do better. The best way to improve trust is for government to be open, clear and transparent about what it's doing and why.



All agencies face the challenge of delivering complex information to a diverse range of audiences – including citizens whose literacy levels vary widely. Readability, accessibility and clarity are important because people who use government services should be able to understand their rights and responsibilities. Only half of Australians have ‘adequate or better’ skills at reading documents, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2013).

Creating documents that are readable and clear is an important first step for governments to take to address these challenges. In *The 2021 readability scorecard*, we:

- » summarise key concepts of readability
- » detail our key findings
- » outline the important issues that arise
- » explain our research methodology.

# METHODOLOGY

## Our aim

Our aim in *The 2021 readability scorecard* is to compare the quality of writing across agencies of the Australian public service. This research is the first of its kind in Australia to measure and compare the readability of government agencies' documents. The metrics we use will help agencies to produce more readable documents in future.

## Our method

We identified agencies with more than 400 staff and selected 3 or 4 documents from each. In this report we use 'agencies' to include departments.

To ensure a reliable result, we converted each document to unformatted text and removed all text except complete sentences. This meant removing headings, lists, captions and references. The VisibleThread platforms are designed to assess full sentences and are most accurate when sentence fragments, extraneous coding and graphic elements are removed.

## The readability index

The readability index is a weighted average, inverted so that a higher value indicates a better result. This value is calibrated against a document that meets benchmark scores for the 3 component factors. This document would score 100. Other documents can then be compared with this benchmark.

## Selection of documents

We used the annual report and corporate plan from each agency because requirements for these are standard across government.

To broaden the sample, we also selected, in most cases, 2 other documents. For the other documents, we looked for the most recent reports of 20 pages or more. We preferred reports of 50 pages or more from 2020, if we could access them. We used shorter reports back to 2015 if required to meet our quota. There were 4 agencies with only one other suitable document. For those agencies we analysed 3 documents each.

We excluded agencies that did not have at least 3 documents that met the selection criteria. The agencies we excluded were: Administrative Appeals Tribunal, Australian Government Solicitor, Australian Signals Directorate, Federal Court, IP Australia, National Indigenous Australians Agency, Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions and Office of the Fair Work Ombudsman.

This left us with 136 documents from 35 agencies. The agencies are listed at page 16. To find out more about the results for your agency or to obtain a list of the documents we analysed, contact Ethos CRS.

## Website case studies

For each website case study, we reviewed 10 webpages for a user undertaking a typical task. The Services Australia user was looking for information about Jobseeker payments during the COVID-19 pandemic. The ATO user was a newcomer to the workforce wanting to find out about how to lodge tax returns.

The methodology for analysing the text in the websites was the same as for the documents in the main study. We removed headings, bullet lists and other material so as to measure only complete sentences. Then we calculated the readability score based on the readability index.

## MEASURING READABILITY

**To assess the writing quality of documents in our survey, we used VisibleThread's VT Writer to score for grade level, percentage of long sentences, and percentage of active and passive voice sentences. Based on these 3 metrics, we calculated a readability index.**

### The readability index

The readability index is a measure made up of multiple elements that we combined to create a composite, single score.

A higher readability score in the readability index indicates more readable text. The benchmark for a document is a readability score of 100. We used benchmarks recommended by the Australian Government Style Manual and VisibleThread:

- » a grade level of 7 or lower
- » no more than 5% long sentences
- » at least 96% active voice sentences.

The benchmark readability score of 100 is most relevant for content designed to communicate with the broader Australian public. Many of the documents in this survey have a more specialised readership, and a benchmark of 100 would not be appropriate. However, the readability score is still a useful tool for comparing the readability of any type of document.

By way of comparison, *The 2021 readability scorecard* has a readability score of 62.8, which is better than any of the 136 documents in the document survey.



The illustration shows a stylized person with dark hair, wearing a red long-sleeved shirt and blue pants, standing with one arm raised. They are holding a white rectangular sign. The sign contains the text 'Readability index elements' followed by a bulleted list. The background is a light gray circle with faint horizontal lines representing text.

### Readability index elements

- grade level
- long sentences
- active voice



## Readability elements contribute to reading clarity

### Grade level

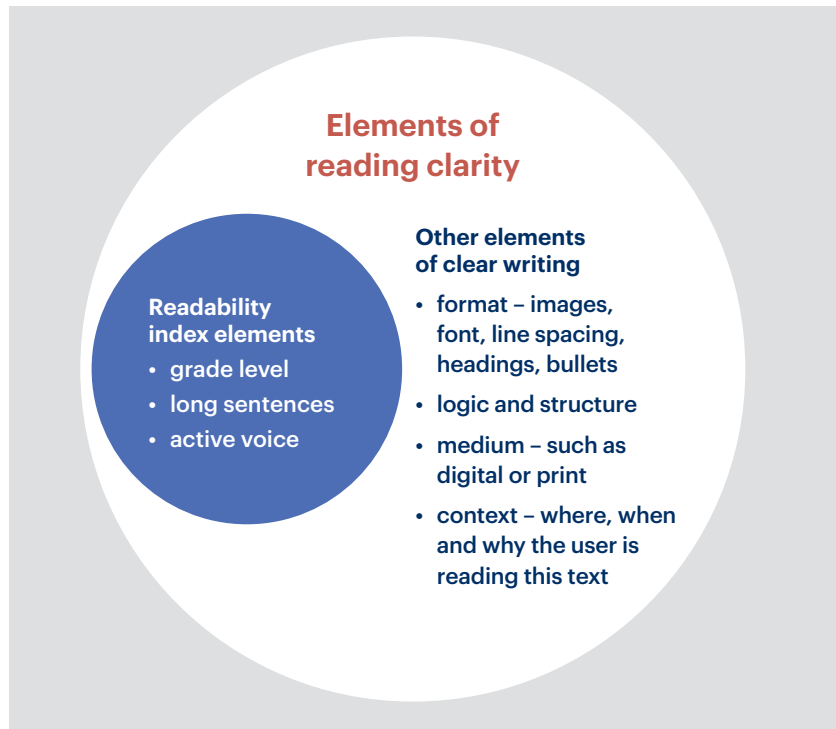
The grade level metric uses the Flesch-Kincaid grade level test, an industry-standard formula. The formula is based on sentence and word length. It measures how easy or difficult a text is for someone to read. A lower grade level means a text is easier to read.

The Style Manual recommends writing to a year 7 level or below. Year level is called grade level in the Flesch-Kincaid test. Grade level is an American term. Writing at this level ensures content can be understood by most Australians. Some government documents, such as many of those we analysed in *The 2021 readability scorecard*, are about complex topics that may require using longer words and sentences. For this kind of content a benchmark higher than year 7 is appropriate.

### Long sentences

The Style Manual recommends you write sentences that average up to 15 words and are no longer than 25 words. This is in line with advice from VisibleThread, which identifies sentences with 25 or more words as being long. It recommends keeping long sentences below 5% of the total.

As the Style Manual explains, sentences that contain just one idea are easier to read. Longer, complex sentences are harder to read.



### Active voice

Writing is clearer when you use the active voice. The Style Manual states: ‘Use active rather than passive voice. Active voice helps users understand who is doing what. It can also help people know exactly what their responsibility is’ (DTA 2020). In short, the active voice builds in accountability and transparency.

VisibleThread reports the percentage of sentences that are written in the active and the passive voice, and recommends that passive voice sentences make up fewer than 4% of sentences. This means you should use at least 96% active voice sentences.

### Other aspects of clear writing

The metrics used in the readability index are a useful way to analyse and compare the readability of documents, but they are only a partial guide.

In this report we use ‘readability’ to mean the scores created by the readability index. These only measure some of the factors that make up clear writing.

The scores measure what is easily quantified – sentence length, word length and active voice. They don’t take account of other aspects of readability. There are many of these, including:

- » logical flow and coherence of text
- » complexity of ideas
- » structure
- » structural formatting elements such as line spacing, use of headings, images and other visual aids
- » the varying ways people read digital and print content.

# FINDINGS

## Finding 1

### The Australian Securities and Investments Commission had the most readable documents

The top agency for readable text was the Australian Securities and Investments Commission with a readability score of 34.5. Next were Defence Housing Australia with 34.3 and the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications with 33.6.

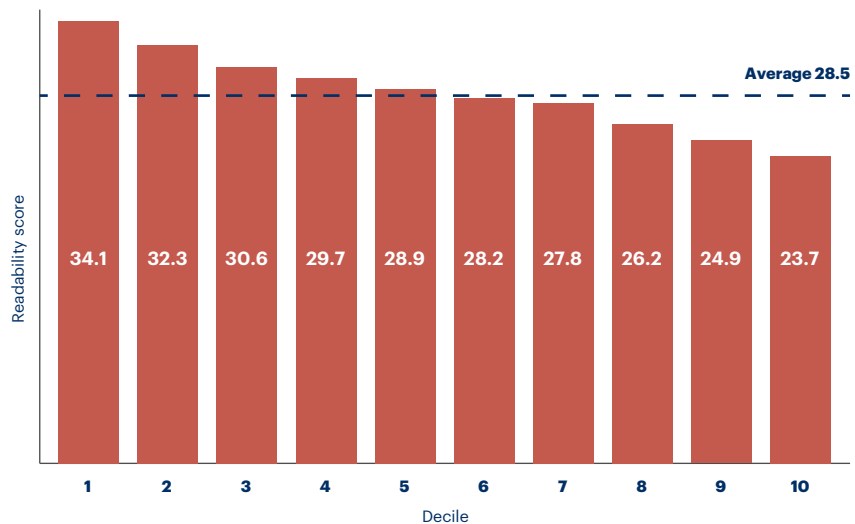
The best individual document, the Defence Housing Australia corporate plan, had a readability score of 50.8. The average readability score across all 35 agencies was 28.5. The lowest agency score was 23.2.

Readability scores for the top 5 agencies

Rank	Agency	Readability score
1	Australian Securities and Investments Commission	34.5
2	Defence Housing Australia	34.3
3	Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications	33.6
4	Australian Taxation Office	33.5
5	Services Australia	33.4
<b>Average of all documents</b>		<b>28.5</b>

See Methodology for details of how scores are calculated

Readability scores for all agencies by decile and average



Deciles are a way of splitting a set of data into 10 approximately equal sections. In this chart, the decile rank arranges the average of each section from highest to lowest. In some other charts, the ranking is from lowest to highest.

## Finding 2

### Defence Housing Australia had the best grade level score

Defence Housing Australia had the best score for grade level, recording an average of 13.0. Services Australia was close behind with 13.2, followed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics with 13.7.

The average grade level for all documents was 15.2, suitable for third-year university students.

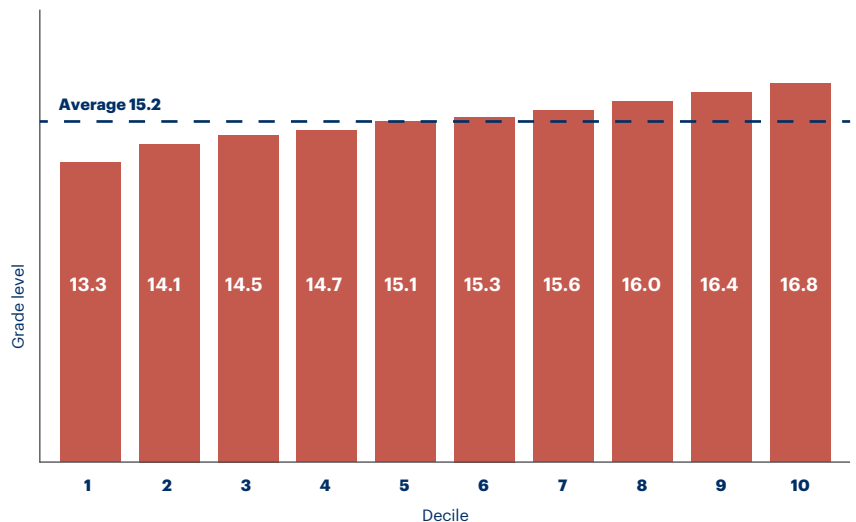
The 2 best documents scored around 11. These were Defence Housing Australia's annual report and a Department of Health report on students' use of tobacco, alcohol and drugs.

#### Grade level for the top 5 agencies

Rank	Agency	Grade
1	Defence Housing Australia	13.0
2	Services Australia	13.2
3	Australian Bureau of Statistics	13.7
4	Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet	14.0
5	Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission	14.0
<b>Average of all documents</b>		<b>15.2</b>

See Methodology for details of how scores are calculated

#### Grade level scores for all agencies by decile and average



### Finding 3

## Defence Housing Australia had the best score for short sentence length

Defence Housing Australia had the best score for sentence length, recording an average of 21.9% long sentences. Next was the Australian Taxation Office with 25.1%, closely followed by Services Australia with 25.2%.

The best individual document for sentence length was Defence Housing Australia's corporate plan. It had 8.8% long sentences. This compares with the 35.7% average for all 136 documents in our survey.

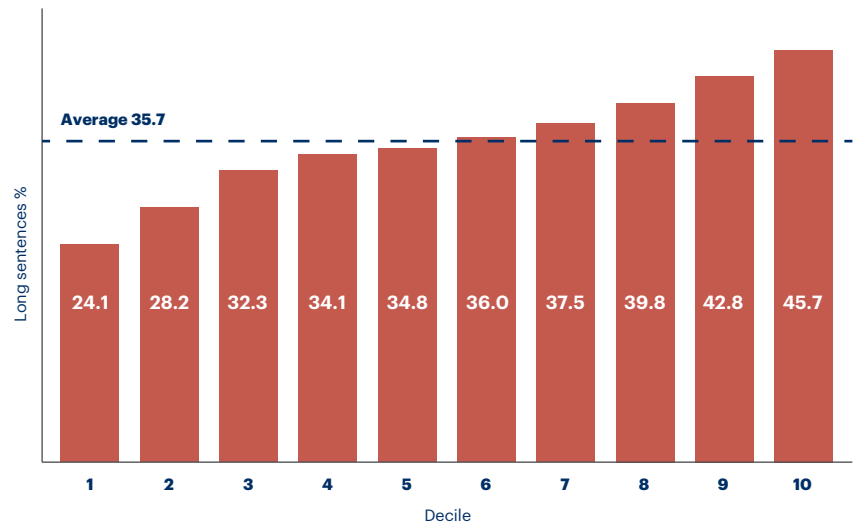
Next best was Defence Housing Australia's annual report, with 12.4% long sentences.

### Long sentence scores for the top 5 agencies

Rank	Agency	Percentage of long sentences
1	Defence Housing Australia	21.9
2	Australian Taxation Office	25.1
3	Services Australia	25.2
4	Australian Securities and Investments Commission	25.7
5	Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications	26.9
<b>Average of all documents</b>		<b>35.7</b>

See Methodology for details of how scores are calculated

### Percentage of long sentences for all agencies by decile and average



## Finding 4

### The Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources had the highest use of the active voice

The agency that used active voice the most was the Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources. It had an average of 85.1% active voice sentences. Next was the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications, with 83.4%. Then came the Australian Securities and Investments Commission with 83.2%.

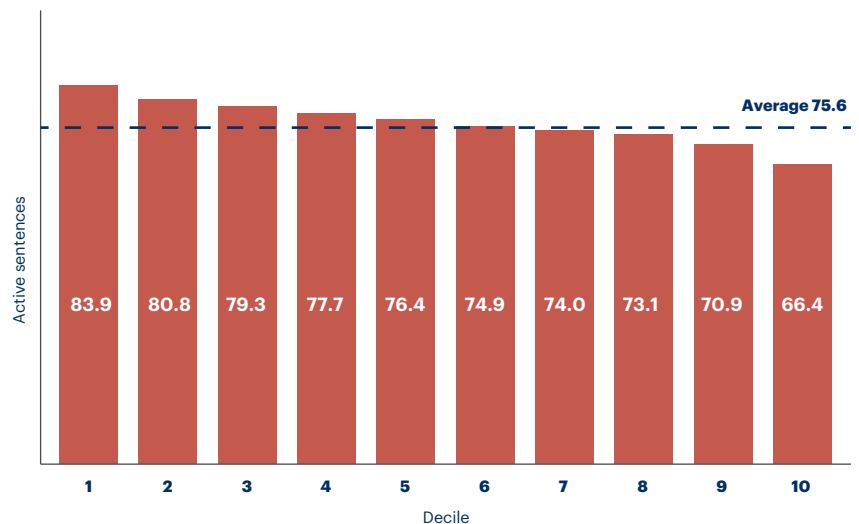
The best individual document for active voice was the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet's corporate plan, with 87.9% active voice sentences.

#### Active voice scores for the top 5 agencies

Rank	Agency	Percentage of active sentences
1	Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources	85.1
2	Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications	83.4
3	Australian Securities and Investments Commission	83.2
4	Australian Competition and Consumer Commission	81.2
5	Australian Financial Security Authority	81.1
<b>Average of all documents</b>		<b>75.6</b>

See Methodology for details of how scores are calculated

#### Percentage of active voice sentences for all agencies by decile and average



## Finding 5

### The websites in our case studies are more readable

As well as our document survey, we undertook case studies of 2 large agency websites:

- » Services Australia
- » the Australian Taxation Office (ATO).

The public engage with these agencies through their websites. The websites are a core part of the agencies' business, so agencies have invested time and resources to make them as easy as possible for users.

For the website case studies we used the same metrics as for the documents in the main study. Again, we only tested complete sentences.

This means we did not take account of other features that would improve readability, such as use of bulleted lists and headings.

The readability scores for the websites were substantially better than for any of the documents in our document survey.

Services Australia's readability score was 119.3, higher than our benchmark of 100. This was far above the score of 50.8 for the best document we surveyed.

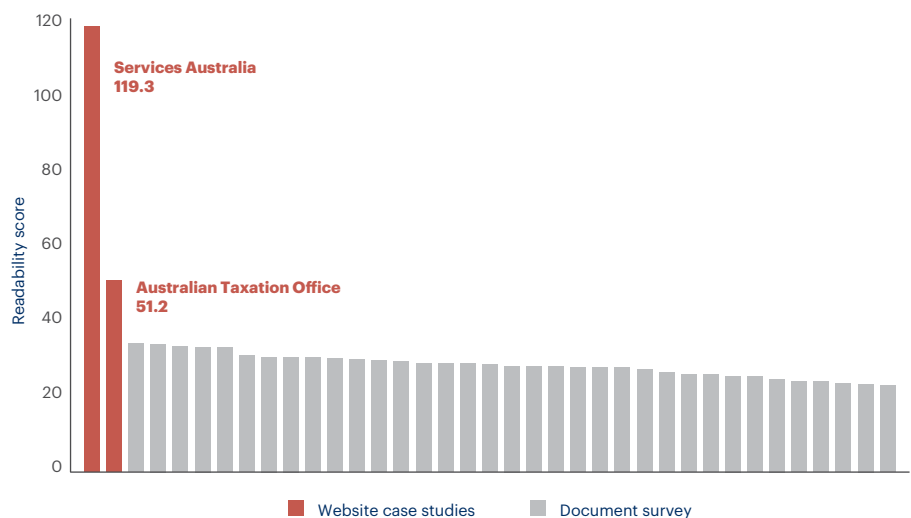
The readability score for ATO case study was 51.2 – also better than any of the 136 documents we assessed in the document survey.

With a grade level of 7.6, the Services Australia website pages met the Style Manual benchmark. Their result of only 0.3% long sentences was outstanding, better than the benchmark of 5%. Active voice sentences at 98.0% were better than the benchmark of 96%.

The ATO website pages had a grade level of 8.9. There were 17.4% long sentences and 86.0% active voice sentences.

These exceptional results show what is possible, even with complex information.

#### Readability scores of website case studies, compared with agencies in the document survey



## ISSUES

### The 2021 readability scorecard shows that when agencies invest in clear writing the readability of their text improves greatly.

Improving readability makes organisations more effective and saves them and their users time and resources.

All 136 documents in our document survey fell below our benchmarks for good readability, to varying degrees.

But our case studies of the websites of Services Australia and the ATO showed how readability can be improved. The lifeblood of these two agencies is providing services. When it really mattered, these 2 agencies produced text with vastly better readability than the documents in our document survey.



#### Effect of the size and type of an agency on readability scores

There was no significant correlation between the size of an agency and its readability scores in our document survey. There were smaller agencies in the higher and lower deciles and larger agencies in the higher and lower deciles.

In the same way, there was no significant correlation between readability scores and the type of agency. There were central agencies with readability scores in the second decile and the eighth decile. There were regulatory agencies in the first, fourth, fifth and tenth deciles. Line agencies ranged across the field.

This raises the question: If it's not the type of work an agency does or its size that determines its readability scores, what is it?

Why do readability scores vary across agencies regardless of agency size and type?

Most likely, this reflects differences in agencies' cultures and the investment they have made in developing the writing skills of their staff.

A well-written, highly readable document is the product of many things, for example:

- » the standards writers work to
- » the resources devoted to clear writing
- » the agencies' systems and processes.





## Benefits of high readability scores

The work of producing clear, readable documents requires a sustained investment, but generates a huge social and financial pay-off. This pay-off comes in 2 ways.

The first is the benefit to users and organisations themselves.

The second benefit is about productivity within organisations. Readable documents imply a skilled workforce and a clear writing culture, which allows for more efficient production of documents.

## Users and organisations

In 2019–20, users viewed pages on the Services Australia website 324 million times (Services Australia 2020). It had 9.3 million Centrelink customers during the year. It's no wonder Services Australia makes a huge effort making its website clear and easy to read and understand. The better the website and its other documents explain its services, the better the agency can do its job.

The ATO also has a huge task. Its clients include 11.5 million individuals and 4.2 million small businesses (ATO 2020).

There are big savings for both agencies and users. It's hard to put a cost on users' time, but let's say an agency servicing a million users saves each of them, on average, an hour per year. If their time is valued at \$50 per hour, the savings total \$50 million per year.

Services Australia and the ATO make huge cost savings by encouraging people to use digital service channels. Users will be less likely to use more expensive face-to-face and telephone service channels if they can easily use digital channels. That means information on these channels has to be written clearly.

Other agencies are not as large as Services Australia and the ATO, but their fundamental task remains the same – communicating effectively to get the job done.

## Productivity benefits of producing readable documents more efficiently

For the Australian public service as a whole, we can calculate the benefits of efficiently producing clear documents in 2 ways.

First, the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates public sector cash wages and salaries in 2018–19 as totalling \$167 billion (ABS 2019). Let's say that public sector employees spend at least 20% of their time writing or reviewing documents. The annual cost of this time is \$33.4 billion.

If an organisation reduces the time spent researching and drafting and reviewing documents by just 1%, productivity benefits would total \$334 million each year.

Second, think about the costs and benefits of investing in clear writing for a team of 10 staff. Imagine an APS manager invests \$25,000 over 5 years to build the writing skills of their team. Say the team comprises APS and EL officers and to produce documents of the required standard they work 99 hours instead of 100 – that is, they are 1% more efficient.

Using a cost–benefit framework, Ethos CRS estimated that the returns on such an investment would be considerable. Such a program would generate a return on investment of 113%. That is, an investment of \$100 generates productivity benefits of \$213.





## Improving readability

Simple changes to the way you write can have a big impact on readability. These changes are easy to list, but harder to achieve:

- » Write shorter sentences.
- » Use shorter words.
- » Use the active voice.

Here is an example.

## Short sentences are easier to read

This is a long sentence from a document in our survey. We have rewritten it with shorter sentences to make it more readable.

### ORIGINAL COPY

While all of the above approaches will attract motivated young people who are likely already engaged in voluntary organisations or other forms of civic engagement, feedback from consultations on models that work to support marginalised young people identified the need to use existing networks and relationships (whether that be service providers, with youth workers, or through advocacy/peak bodies and their affiliates) and meeting in trusted environments.

**This sentence has 66 words, and a grade level of 33.**

### SUGGESTED COPY

These approaches will help motivated young people who are already involved with, for example, voluntary organisations. However, to support marginalised young people, we must build on existing networks and relationships. Service providers and youth workers therefore provide essential support. Marginalised young people also need safe places to meet.

**Now we have 4 sentences, averaging 12 words, and a grade level of 12.2.**

Simple changes to the way you write can really improve readability.



## CAVEATS

### **The 2021 readability scorecard readability metrics are very useful, but they have limitations.**

First, the readability metrics don't capture all the aspects of clear writing. They are useful, but they don't measure the overall structure, logical flow and coherence. They also don't include formatting elements.

Second, not all documents are equal. The biggest difference in our readability scores was between reports and websites. There was also big variation among the reports.

One reason for variation among the reports is that their purposes were different. They had varying goals and audiences. The other reason they varied is that the quality of writing ranged widely, even among documents with similar goals and audiences. For any type of document, readability can be improved.

Third, the variation in purposes means the benchmarks aren't always right for all documents. We used single benchmarks for each metric to make it easy to compare documents. Agencies may want to adjust their benchmarks according to their purpose.

The benchmarks we have used here, and those defined in the Style Manual, may be too ambitious for some sorts of government writing. Instead of aiming for a score of 100 on our readability index, 50 may be a more appropriate score for some documents. Achieving that score would still represent a big improvement.

## SOURCES AND REFERENCES

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## LIST OF AGENCIES

In our document survey we analysed documents from these 35 agencies.

Aboriginal Hostels Ltd	Department of Education, Skills and Employment
Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission	Department of Finance
Attorney-General's Department	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
Australian Bureau of Statistics	Department of Health
Australian Communications and Media Authority	Department of Home Affairs
Australian Competition and Consumer Commission	Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources
Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission	Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications
Australian Electoral Commission	Department of Parliamentary Services (Parliament of Australia)
Australian Federal Police	Department of Social Services
Australian Financial Security Authority	Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
Australian Prudential Regulation Authority	Department of Veterans' Affairs
Australian Securities and Investments Commission	Geoscience Australia
Australian Taxation Office	National Disability Insurance Agency
Australian Trade and Investment Commission	Services Australia
Bureau of Meteorology	Therapeutic Goods Administration
Comcare	Treasury
Defence Housing Australia	
Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment	
Department of Defence	

## ABOUT US

# ethos<sup>n</sup> crs

Clear writing.  
Effective teams.  
Coherent policy.

**Ethos CRS is Australia's leading firm for advice on clear writing and clear English for government and business.**

### Our expertise

Ethos CRS specialises in designing, developing and delivering training and professional development programs. These include virtual and face-to-face workshops, targeted coaching sessions, and modern and accessible eLearning modules.

Over 17 years, Ethos CRS has developed and delivered over 2,700 training programs to more than 90 public sector agencies.

### Ethos CRS and the Australian Government Style Manual

The new Style Manual went live in September 2020. Our team of writers and editors completely rewrote the manual for the digital age, in partnership with the Digital Transformation Agency. Like its predecessors over the past 50 years, the new Style Manual is the definitive Australian guide on writing style.

### Writing compelling documents – programs and workshops

Ethos CRS offers these professional writing workshops:

- » *Principles of clear writing*
- » *Essentials of Australian Government writing style*
- » *Writing for compelling decision documents*
- » *Meeting briefs and talking points*
- » *Persuasive reports and business cases*
- » *Writing effective letters and emails*
- » *Writing clear procedures*
- » *Writing a compelling speech*
- » *Creating a clear writing team.*

Ethos CRS also offers training in policy, regulation, negotiation, leadership and teams.

To find out more about how we can improve writing skills in your organisation and about our other training programs contact:

**02 6247 2225**

**[service@ethoscrcs.com.au](mailto:service@ethoscrcs.com.au)**

**[www.ethoscrcs.com.au](http://www.ethoscrcs.com.au)**

# VisibleThread

Let clear communication improve user experience

**VisibleThread is a cutting edge language analysis platform. By using VisibleThread, government departments and agencies, and private sector corporations set themselves up to efficiently produce consistent and clear content.**

Unclear content undermines the message that organisations are seeking to communicate. Readers become frustrated because they waste time clarifying points that should be clear in the first place. The risk then is that they lose interest and trust and that they disengage altogether.

VisibleThread's platform is being used by government agencies such as the Australian Taxation Office; the Civil Aviation Safety Authority, the Fair Work Ombudsman; Services Australia; the departments of Education, Skills and Employment; Health; Home Affairs; Industry, Science, Energy and Resources; Prime Minister and Cabinet; and the NSW Department of Communities and Justice.

## Lower costs and improve your bottom line

Greater clarity improves the bottom line. A VisibleThread financial services customer changed just 11 customer letters. As a result there were 19% fewer help desk calls. That equals an annual saving of \$445,000. More importantly, customers didn't require further clarification. Their experience with the organisation remained intact and positive.

**19%** 

**Fewer help desk calls**

**\$445k** 

**Annualised savings**

BASED ON VISIBLETHREAD CUSTOMER CASE STUDY/  
CALL CENTRE COST REDUCTION

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## VisibleThread Language Analysis Platform

### **VT Writer – For mission-critical business writing**

VT Writer is part of the VisibleThread Language Analysis Platform. It improves the quality of business writing using tried and tested metrics. Use VT Writer to analyse MS Word documents, PDFs and raw text for plain language and complex, jargon-laden copy.

VT Writer supports teams by allowing them to assess critical documents and text in one click.

- » Writers test and fix their own content for single tone of voice.
- » Editors instantly flag jargon and corporate-speak.
- » Managers analyse both offline and online content, letters, disclosure statements, directives and blog copy.
- » Subject matter experts communicate their technical knowledge in easy-to-understand language.
- » Managers have visibility of teams' and individuals' performance, permitting continuous improvement in business writing across an agency.



Improving readability  
makes organisations more  
effective and saves them  
time and resources.



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