

WRITE LESS, SAY MORE: EFFECTIVE GOVERNMENT WEB WRITING

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Clear and concise copywriting for government is key to engaging online audiences.

...most visitors to a website decide whether to stay or leave within a few seconds. They do NOT give you a fair go. If you genuinely want your stakeholders to pay attention to your project you need to give them a clear and easy-to-read reason to stick around.

It is the tradition of the public sector that we ... expect our stakeholders to take the time to inform themselves by reading all relevant information and telling us what they think. This remains the expectation (or hope) of most of the community engagement industry.

Well, I'm here to tell you that the general public won't cop it. They have better things to do than expend energy working their way through complex concepts and issues (not say heavy reports). That is unless you make those issues truly accessible through simple language and good writing.

So, with that in mind, here are my 6 tips for effective online copywriting for government.

1. Write in plain English

Sadly, thanks to the bureaucrats of public service industries, local councils, banks, building societies, insurance companies and government departments, we have learnt to accept an official style of writing that is inefficient and often unfriendly.

There are lots of online resources about plain English writing. My personal favorite is this document by the [Plain English Campaign \(PDF\)](#) responsible for the quote above.

The authors explain that plain English *is a message, written with the reader in mind and with the right tone of voice, that is clear and concise.*

- It's written with the reader in mind.
- It's written with the right tone of voice.
- It is clear.
- It is concise.

And that's all.

2. Include a clear call to action

It's a simple sad fact that most online spaces set up to receive community 'input' about public interest projects do not include a call to action (CTA), let alone a good one.

The CTA should be the first thing your reader sees (after the campaign title – which needs to be written with SEO in mind).

Unfortunately, almost all of the online advice about CTAs is directed at commercial websites.

There are some (occasionally mutually exclusive) tips:

1. Use a strong verb to start your CTA

e.g. 'Share your story' or, 'Tell us what you think', or, 'Complete the survey', or, 'Join the discussion', or, 'Create an account', or 'Upload your pictures' etc.

2. Give your stakeholders a reason

*e.g. Share your story to help improve lives of everyone living with a disability
e.g. Share your idea to create an even better place for us to live*

3. Create a sense of urgency

*e.g. Share you feedback on the draft recommendations before they go to Council
e.g. Upload pictures of your favourite places by Friday to win an iPad!*

4. Don't be afraid to make your CTA into a whole sentence

You'll notice that the examples above are not able to be replaced by three-letter-acronyms (TLA). The key message should be able to be condensed to a TLA (or shorter) for buttons, tabs and headlines.

4. Keep it brief

Government reports are long.

Web writing should be short.

This is the essential conundrum.

It is tempting to want to put the entire introduction to a report, or the same copy you might have used in a print advertisement, on your campaign landing page. Resist this temptation and you will reap the results.

Here's the key.

Write less, say more.

Short paragraphs and sentences give relief to tired eyes. Don't over explain. On the Web, the less you write, the more people remember.

Use:

- Short web pages.
- Short paragraphs.
- Short lists.

- Short sentences.
- Short words.

If you need to provide all the detail, put it behind a tab, in a library, in the FAQs. There are lots of options, just don't make it first thing your stakeholders are expected to read and interpret. Or you WILL lose them.

5. Turn your 'essay' upside down

Years of government and academic writing has left me with the "need" to tell a story from beginning to end: This happened, then this happened, and then we did this, and now we want you to do this.

Wrong.

The "*now we want you do this*" bit should be right at the top.

It should be followed by "*this is what the project is about and this is how it could affect you.*"

And finally, this is what happened in the past that lead to this project existing and getting the point it's at now.

6. Conversational tone

My final point is a more explicit restatement of the need for plain English written in a conversational tone (at every possible opportunity).

My naive advice, read something else before you translate that technical document for the web. A children's book would be ideal.

The simplicity of the language doesn't mean you are condescending your audience. It means you are respecting their time poverty by taking a few extra minutes to clarify your needs, motivating them to pay attention and get engaged with the subject.

A conversational tone reminds your community that your organisation is not just four walls and a small door, rather it is a collection of human beings, just like them.

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