
SOUTH AFRICA
GOVERNMENT

2016

PROVINCIAL
WEBSITE CLARITY
INDEX

VisibleThread[™]
Clarity Index



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The VisibleThread Clarity Index, South Africa Provincial Gov. – 2016

Executive Summary

The basis of civilization and government is anchored in writing. And yet, of all forms of communication, writing has some of the greatest shortcomings. Writing can be hard to understand. Government needs written communication to be understood for it to run efficiently. The purpose of this paper is to explore how well the provincial governments of South Africa communicate through the copy in their websites.

VisibleThread focused on three major provinces in South Africa: Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and Western Cape. The government in these areas serve South Africa’s largest populations and regulate its largest economies. Communication here, good or bad, impacts the Republic’s fortunes more than anywhere else.

When communication is poor, the cost of government increases and service delivery programs fail. As a result, many governments internationally have clear language policies to simplify communications. Plain language is a standard that mandates writing that is clear. It promotes concise and well-organized copy, appropriate to the intended audience. Governments that have adopted plain language programs are better able to serve their communities. South Africa does not yet have such a mandated policy.

The government of South Africa operates through a complex structure of national, provincial and local bodies. While the internet has helped simplify administration and communication, reading levels in South Africa remain low. Eleven official languages further compound the situation. Although English is the lingua franca of commerce and government, it is not the first language of the majority of the population.

These factors make it all the more important to use clear language in order to communicate effectively with a very diverse population. For government departments that serve large populations and economies, the stakes are even greater. Citizens that encounter clear, concise and well-organized writing on provincial websites will engage better. And greater engagement correlates with efficiency gains and improved service delivery.

VisibleThread has created an Index of 38 provincial government websites in South Africa based on clarity of written content. We measured up to 100 pages on each website, across these four dimensions:

- [Readability](#) – How readable is the content?
- [Passive Language](#) – Active Language communicates clearly. What proportion of sentences is passive?
- [Long Sentences](#) – What proportion of all sentences are too long?
- [Word Complexity Density](#) – Complex words make web pages hard to understand.

These are internationally accepted norms relating to clear language.

What did we find?

Analysis suggests copy on South Africa’s provincial government websites needs improvement. In some cases, significant improvement. Fewer than 10 percent of South Africans have a college diploma. With average writing scores for copy on provincial websites are at college levels, most citizens will have difficulty engaging. A more detailed analysis appears below in this report.

Key Findings

Clear Language:

The following guideline definitions will help you understand the information we present in the Key Findings section:

- Readability – a score of 50 or above is ideal.
- Passive language – 4% or less is ideal.
- Long Sentences – 5% or less across all content is ideal.
- Complex language density – complex words/total words*100 – lower is better.

You can find detailed definitions of ranking criteria in the Methodology section.

Overall Leaders

The websites of KwaZulu-Natal occupied the Top 3 places in the rankings. KwaZulu-Natal’s [Department of Social Development](#) and [Public Works Department](#) (tied for 1st) topped the 2016 rankings, followed by the [Provincial Treasury](#). These sites fell short of most ideal levels, but were the closest among those indexed. The province’s sites also appeared most in the Top 10, holding five of the ten rankings. Four sites from the Western Cape also placed in the Top 10.

- Western Cape sites had the highest average Clear Writing Index scores (16.76) across the entire index.
- Education, Human Settlements and Public Works departments appeared in the Top 10 with greater frequency than other administrations.
- KwaZulu-Natal’s Department of Social Development ranked first in Readability and Complex word use.
- KwaZulu-Natal’s Department of Public Works ranked first in passive voice.
- The Provincial Treasury of KwaZulu-Natal ranked first in percentage of long sentences.

VisibleThread Clarity Index South Africa Regional Government – Q3, 2016			Clear Writing		Readability		Passive		Long		Complex		Num Words
		Num Pages	Index	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank		
1	Social Development	http://www.kzndsd.gov.za	100	8.75	52	1	6%	5	27%	28	1.44	1	22014
1	Public Works	http://www.kznworks.gov.za	100	8.75	47	8	2%	1	10%	2	2.36	24	8317
3	Treasury	http://www.kzntreasury.gov.za	100	10	51	3	3%	2	9%	1	3.72	34	11113
4	Local Government	http://www.westerncape.gov.za/dept/local-government	100	10.75	50	5	10%	15	20%	18	1.69	5	36107
5	Transport and public Works	https://www.westerncape.gov.za/dept/tpw	100	13	43	16	9%	12	19%	14	2.08	10	32156
6	Human Settlements	http://www.gdhs.gpg.gov.za	37	13.25	52	1	10%	19	27%	30	1.57	3	7123
6	Education	http://www.westerncape.gov.za/dept/education	100	13.25	47	8	7%	7	21%	21	2.24	17	20912
8	Education	http://www.kzneducation.gov.za	100	14	33	32	4%	3	16%	5	2.19	16	15101
8	Human Settlements	http://www.westerncape.gov.za/dept/human-settlements	100	14	51	3	11%	28	18%	7	2.25	18	32171
10	Health	http://www.kznhealth.gov.za	100	14.5	45	13	11%	27	16%	3	2.16	15	28285

Notable Mentions

- **Agencies that maintained Readability levels below college levels:** Writing levels should be at 50 or above to adequately serve the public interest. Only 13% of the provincial websites included in the Index achieved Readability scores above ideal levels. In addition to those in the Top 3 index rankings, the following agencies achieved high school level readability scores:
 - [Gauteng Department of Human Settlements \(52\)](#)
 - [Western Cape Department of Local Government \(50\)](#)

Room for Improvement:

The bottom five places in the rankings were occupied by the following six provincial departments:

- [Provincial Treasury of Gauteng \(33rd\)](#)
- [Gauteng Department of Roads and Transport](#) and the [Department of Human Settlements of KwaZulu-Natal](#) (tied for 34th)
- [Gauteng Department of Economic Development \(36th\)](#)
- [Gauteng Department of e-Government \(37th\)](#)
- [KwaZulu-Natal Department of Arts and Culture \(38th\)](#)

VisibleThread Clarity Index South Africa Regional Government – Q3, 2016			Clear Writing		Readability		Passive		Long		Complex		Num Words
		Num Pages	Index	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank		
33	Provincial Treasury	http://www.treasury.gpg.gov.za	100	26.75	33	32	10%	16	28%	31	2.59	28	46202
34	Roads and Transport	http://www.roadsandtransport.gpg.gov.za	100	27	40	23	15%	38	36%	38	1.99	9	25500
34	Human Settlements	http://www.kzndhs.gov.za	100	27	32	35	9%	9	27%	27	7.04	37	5082
36	Economic Development	http://www.ecodev.gpg.gov.za	100	28.75	40	23	15%	35	32%	35	2.29	22	39143
37	e-Government	http://www.egov.gpg.gov.za	100	31.25	32	35	14%	34	33%	36	2.27	20	40967
38	Arts and Culture	http://www.kznac.gov.za	100	33.75	33	32	15%	37	30%	34	3.04	32	16034

Websites operated by the bottom 6 agencies scored in the bottom half of the rankings in almost all categories.

Factors making these the worst performers were:

- Poor readability ratings: With an average score of 35, these websites would be very difficult to read for most citizens, even those with college educations.
- High proportion of long sentences: Long sentences (between 27% and 33% in this sample) make the task of reading more complex. For example, the [Gauteng Department of Roads and Transport](#) ranked dead last in this category as a result of content like this:

“Interventions such as the introductions of dual carriageways on most roads, provision of safe overtaking opportunities to avoid head-on collisions as well as mainstreaming of road infrastructure for non-motorised transport especially for pedestrians were also discussed.”

- High levels of passive language – An average of 13% of all sentences contained passive language – more than 3x that of recommended levels. The formal tone of passive language is hard to read for people with lower-level reading skills.
- Readability and long-sentence levels had the greatest impact on overall scores for this group of agencies.

The Gauteng Department of e-Government and KwaZulu-Natal Department of Arts and Culture had the worst copy of sites included in the Index.

With scores of 31.25 and 33.75 on the Clear Writing Index, the sites were more than two full points behind the next group of agencies in the rankings. Long-sentences were present at 6x the recommended rate. Use of passive voice was more than 3x of ideal levels. These factors, coupled with poor readability and complex language scores contributed to last place finish.

Takeaways:

1. **Wide variability between best and worst performers**

South African provincial websites fall into five distinct categories: Top Performers, Leaders, Strengths and Weaknesses, Stragglers and those that should be considered for Complete Overhaul. Statistical gaps between consecutive rankings in the Index define categories.

- In this Index, there are four agencies in the Top Performers category. Each has a score of 10.75 or below.
- Leaders have scores between 13 and 18. A three-point difference in Index scores separate the Leaders category and those in the Top Performers category.
- Agencies in the Strengths and Weaknesses have Index scores ranging between 19.25 and 22.75. Websites in this category often score high in one category and poorly in another. Teams in this category have a clear opportunity to improve communication by focusing on key aspects of plain language.

- Websites with scores between 25.25 and 27 fall into the Stragglers category. Sites in this category trail their peers in almost every category:
 - Straggle category sites have very poor readability – average score of 35.16
 - Passive voice levels (11% avg.) are at nearly 3x recommended levels
 - Long sentences appear 27 percent more frequently than in the Strengths and Weaknesses set.
 - Complexity scores average 4.36 – 79 percent higher than the Strengths and Weaknesses category.
- Websites in the Complete Overhaul category scored at 28.75 or higher, 1.75 points worse than sites at the bottom of the range in the Stragglers category. When site quality is this poor, a complete rewrite of all website content with Plain Language principles is the most efficient path to improvement.

2. **Even the best sites have an Achilles heel**

The best provincial websites scored well in certain areas but stumbled on at least one category.

For instance, the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Treasury holds Top 3 rankings for readability, passive voice usage and long sentences. Yet, the score for complexity (3.72) ranks 34th. The Treasury would see immediate improvement by auditing its content for complex words.

3. **Subject matter is not a predictor of quality or complexity**

Content teams frequently point to subject matter complexity as the cause of poor copy. Subjects such as health and economics are assumed to be more difficult to write about with clarity. Yet, as this Index demonstrates, subject matter is not a predictor of clarity. Sites dedicated to health, economics and other complex subjects fall into the top, middle and bottom of the Index.

4. **The majority of South Africa's Provincial websites are too hard to read**

With the exception of a handful of top ranking sites, the majority of South Africans would struggle to read provincial government sites. Only four sites of the 38 included in the Index met target levels for passive voice. Worse yet, the best site in the Index was still at almost 2x recommended levels for long sentences. The average score across the entire Index (22%) was more than 4x of ideal levels.

Detailed Results Tables

We show the full detailed tables below.

We color-code, green to red, each score in the Index. Green indicates best, red indicates worst. Color-coding helps us to understand sites where one or two specific scores may be dragging down the overall ranking. Flaggering specific areas (for instance, passive language) pinpoints areas for improvement.

VisibleThread Clarity Index			South Africa Regional Government – Q3, 2016										Num Words
ID	Category	URL	Num Pages	Clear Writing	Readability		Passive		Long		Complex		Num Words
				Index	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	
1	Social Development	http://www.kzndsd.gov.za	100	8.75	52	1	6%	5	27%	28	1.44	1	22014
1	Public Works	http://www.kznworks.gov.za	100	8.75	47	8	2%	1	10%	2	2.36	24	8317
3	Treasury	http://www.kzntreasury.gov.za	100	10	51	3	3%	2	9%	1	3.72	34	11113
4	Local Government	http://www.westerncape.gov.za/dept/local-government	100	10.75	50	5	10%	15	20%	18	1.69	5	36107
5	Transport and public Works	https://www.westerncape.gov.za/dept/tpw	100	13	43	16	9%	12	19%	14	2.08	10	32156
6	Human Settlements	http://www.gdhs.gpg.gov.za	37	13.25	52	1	10%	19	27%	30	1.57	3	7123
6	Education	http://www.westerncape.gov.za/dept/education	100	13.25	47	8	7%	7	21%	21	2.24	17	20912
8	Education	http://www.kzneducation.gov.za	100	14	33	32	4%	3	16%	5	2.19	16	15101
8	Human Settlements	http://www.westerncape.gov.za/dept/human-settlements	100	14	51	3	11%	28	18%	7	2.25	18	32171
10	Health	http://www.kznhealth.gov.za	100	14.5	45	13	11%	27	16%	3	2.16	15	28285
11	Infrastructure Development	http://www.did.gpg.gov.za	47	15.5	38	29	8%	8	20%	19	1.74	6	11664
12	Treasury	http://www.westerncape.gov.za/dept/treasury	100	16.25	43	16	10%	14	18%	12	2.29	23	29462
12	Cultural Affairs and Sport	http://www.westerncape.gov.za/dept/cas	100	16.25	49	6	14%	33	19%	15	2.08	11	28740
14	Economic Development and Tourism	http://www.westerncape.gov.za/dept/edat	100	16.5	42	18	9%	11	18%	11	2.47	26	25482
15	Sport Arts Culture and Recreation	http://www.sacr.gpg.gov.za	70	17.5	40	23	9%	10	24%	25	2.09	12	15255
15	Social Development	http://www.socdev.gpg.gov.za	100	17.5	47	8	11%	26	21%	22	2.14	14	24029
17	Health	http://www.health.gpg.gov.za	100	17.75	44	14	10%	13	20%	17	2.48	27	27496
18	Social Development	http://www.westerncape.gov.za/dept/social-development	100	18	42	18	10%	20	16%	4	2.75	30	13450
19	Community Safety	http://www.kzncomsafety.gov.za	33	19.25	38	29	4%	4	18%	8	4.09	36	4766
19	Environmental Affairs and Development Planning	http://www.westerncape.gov.za/dept/eadp	100	19.25	40	23	13%	31	18%	10	2.13	13	21294
21	Health	http://www.westerncape.gov.za/dept/health	100	19.5	41	21	11%	22	20%	16	2.26	19	31256
21	Agriculture	http://www.westerncape.gov.za/dept/agriculture	100	19.5	48	7	12%	29	19%	13	2.74	29	20021
23	Community Safety	http://www.westerncape.gov.za/dept/community-safety	100	20	41	21	11%	25	26%	26	1.95	8	34517
24	Agriculture and Rural Development	http://www.gdard.gpg.gov.za	100	21	42	18	10%	17	24%	24	2.36	25	34110
25	Sport and Recreation	http://www.kzndsr.gov.za	100	21.25	44	14	14%	32	36%	37	1.45	2	61972
26	Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs	http://www.cogta.gpg.gov.za	81	21.5	34	31	10%	18	29%	33	1.60	4	30340
27	Premier	http://www.westerncape.gov.za/dept/department-premier	100	21.75	46	12	15%	36	17%	6	3.05	33	31531
28	Community Safety	http://www.gautsafety.gpg.gov.za	29	22.25	39	27	10%	21	20%	20	2.28	21	6056
28	Agriculture	http://www.kzndae.gov.za	100	22.25	39	27	11%	23	18%	8	2.78	31	22335
30	Cooperative Governance	http://www.kzncoogta.gov.za	100	25.25	28	38	11%	24	28%	32	1.92	7	17282
31	Education	http://www.education.gpg.gov.za	100	25.5	47	8	13%	30	27%	29	4.06	35	26350
32	Economic Development and Tourism	http://www.kzndedt.gov.za	100	26	31	37	7%	6	23%	23	8.58	38	6925
33	Provincial Treasury	http://www.treasury.gpg.gov.za	100	26.75	33	32	10%	16	28%	31	2.59	28	46202
34	Roads and Transport	http://www.roadsandtransport.gpg.gov.za	100	27	40	23	15%	38	36%	38	1.99	9	25500
34	Human Settlements	http://www.kzndhs.gov.za	100	27	32	35	9%	9	27%	27	7.04	37	5082
36	Economic Development	http://www.ecodev.gpg.gov.za	100	28.75	40	23	15%	35	32%	35	2.29	22	39143
37	e-Government	http://www.egov.gpg.gov.za	100	31.25	32	35	14%	34	33%	36	2.27	20	40967
38	Arts and Culture	http://www.kzndac.gov.za	100	33.75	33	32	15%	37	30%	34	3.04	32	16034

The Rank Category chart shows how the Index divides agency websites by performance, relative to their peers.

VisibleThread Clarity Index			South Africa Regional Government – Q3, 2016										Num Pages	Num Words	
Clear Writing	Readability	Passive	Long	Complex	Index	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score			
1	1	3	4	5	87.5	52	1	6%	5	27%	28	144	1	22014	Top Performers
1	1	3	4	5	87.5	47	8	2%	1	0%	2	2.36	24	8317	
3	1	3	4	5	81	51	3	3%	2	9%	1	3.72	34	1115	
4	1	3	4	5	81.75	50	5	10%	15	20%	8	169	5	38107	
5	1	3	4	5	81	43	16	9%	12	9%	14	2.08	10	32156	
6	1	3	4	5	82.25	52	1	10%	9	27%	30	157	3	7123	Leaders
6	1	3	4	5	82.25	47	8	7%	7	2%	21	2.24	17	20912	
8	1	3	4	5	81	33	32	4%	3	6%	5	2.9	16	5101	
8	1	3	4	5	81	51	3	1%	28	8%	7	2.25	18	32171	
11	1	3	4	5	81.5	45	10	1%	27	6%	3	2.6	15	28285	
11	1	3	4	5	81.5	38	29	8%	8	20%	19	174	6	1654	
12	1	3	4	5	82.25	43	16	10%	14	6%	12	2.29	23	29482	
12	1	3	4	5	82.25	49	6	1%	33	9%	15	2.08	11	28740	
11	1	3	4	5	81.5	42	18	9%	11	6%	11	2.47	26	25482	
16	1	3	4	5	81.5	40	23	9%	10	24%	25	2.09	12	18295	
16	1	3	4	5	81.5	47	8	1%	26	2%	22	2.14	14	24029	
17	1	3	4	5	81.75	44	14	10%	10	20%	17	2.48	27	27496	Strengths & Weaknesses
18	1	3	4	5	81	42	18	10%	20	6%	4	2.75	30	10450	
19	1	3	4	5	81.25	38	29	4%	4	8%	8	4.09	36	4766	
19	1	3	4	5	81.25	40	23	10%	31	6%	10	2.0	13	21294	
21	1	3	4	5	81.5	41	21	1%	22	20%	16	2.28	19	31258	
21	1	3	4	5	81.5	48	7	12%	29	9%	13	2.74	29	20021	
23	1	3	4	5	80	41	21	1%	25	26%	26	1.95	8	34517	
24	1	3	4	5	81	42	18	10%	17	24%	24	2.38	25	3410	
25	1	3	4	5	81.25	44	14	1%	32	36%	37	145	2	61972	
26	1	3	4	5	81	34	31	10%	18	29%	33	160	4	30340	
27	1	3	4	5	81.75	46	12	1%	36	1%	6	3.05	33	31531	
28	1	3	4	5	82.25	39	27	10%	21	20%	20	2.28	21	6056	Stragglers
28	1	3	4	5	82.25	39	27	1%	23	6%	8	2.78	31	22335	
30	1	3	4	5	82.25	28	38	1%	24	28%	32	192	7	17282	
31	1	3	4	5	82.5	47	8	10%	30	27%	29	4.06	35	26360	
32	1	3	4	5	81	31	37	7%	6	23%	23	8.58	38	8925	
33	1	3	4	5	82.75	33	32	10%	15	28%	31	2.59	28	48202	
34	1	3	4	5	82	40	23	1%	38	39%	38	199	9	25600	
34	1	3	4	5	82	32	36	9%	9	27%	27	7.04	37	5082	
36	1	3	4	5	82.75	40	23	1%	35	32%	35	2.29	22	39143	
37	1	3	4	5	82.25	32	35	1%	34	33%	36	2.27	20	40967	
38	1	3	4	5	83.75	33	32	1%	37	30%	34	3.04	32	10034	

Methodology – what are the metrics?

- We analyzed the sites in July, 2016.
- We scanned up to 100 pages of content using automated crawling techniques. In some cases, we found less than 100 pages, so we included the page count and word count for each agency.
- We crawled starting from the publicly available URL.
- Certain pages within the sample of 100 contain non-textual content (e.g.: videos). We omitted these pages from our scan.

We calculated the index based on 4 metrics. Each metric contributes equally to the final score. The metrics are:

Metric	Formula
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1. Readability

Readability ranges from 1 to 100. 100 is the top mark. If communicating with citizens, aim for at least 50.

This is based on the [Flesch Reading Ease](#) index.

$(206.835 - (1.015 \times \text{Average Sentence Length}) - (84.6 \times \text{Average Syllables per Word}))$

2. Passive Language

The % rating is the proportion of sentences with a passive construction. Passive language is where the subject acted upon appears before the verb. For example:

"Quality is monitored" vs. "We monitor quality"

If you use active voice, you will increase clarity & strength.

You will also flush out the 'actor', i.e. who did the action?

$(\text{Passive Sentences} / \text{Total Sentences} * 100)$

3. Long Sentences

The % rating is the proportion of sentences that are longer than 25 words. Long sentences mask multiple concepts. Splitting up these sentences will result in a clearer message.

$(\text{Long Sentences} / \text{Total Sentences} * 100)$

4. Complex Word Density

The density rating is the proportion of complex words relative to the total word count. This scan looks for complex words/phrases based on Federal Guidelines. See <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/wordsuggestions/implewords.cfm> for the list scanned. Replacing complex words with simpler words helps your readers concentrate on your content.

(Complex Words/Total Words * 100)

About VisibleThread

VisibleThread helps executives in large organizations govern content quality with less cost and risk. Sales and marketing teams in diverse industries use our technology to improve many functions, including proposal development, contract review and brand audits. Our software finds brand compliance, poor readability and other issues in websites and documents. Unlike consumer-grade analysis tools, VisibleThread processes hundreds of documents and web pages in minutes. Fuelled with greater organizational intelligence, customers drive efficiency and reduce cost across their organizations. For more information, visit www.visiblethread.com

For questions or if you want a specific sector index:

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