AUSTRALIA / NZ GOVERNMENT

2016

WEBSITE CLARITY

INDEX
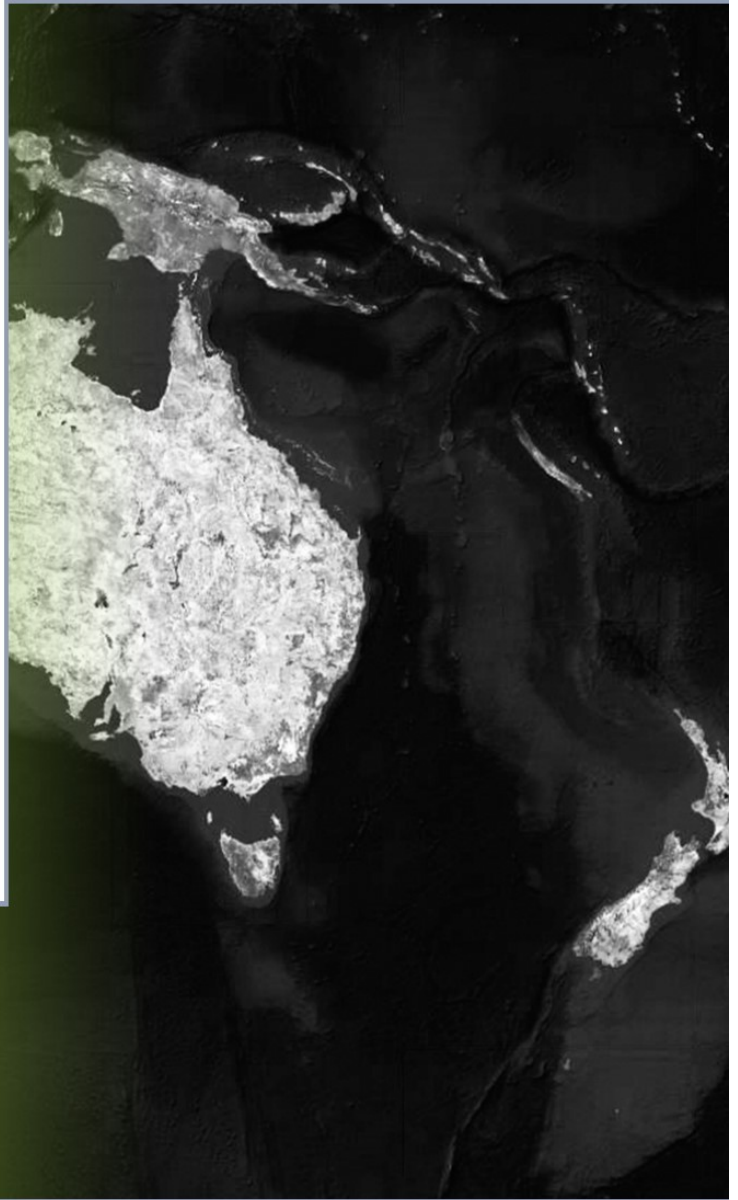
VisibleThread™
Clarity Index

**The VisibleThread Website Index,
Government Agencies Australia
and New Zealand 2016**

Contents

The VisibleThread Website Index, Government Agencies Australia and New Zealand 2016

Executive Summary

The Governments of Australia and New Zealand have taken a positive stance on how each government should communicate online. Both governments aim to communicate in a clear, concise and well-organized way that benefits all citizens.

In 2015, the Australian Government delivered on this commitment by establishing the DTO (Digital Transformation Office) as a part of the Prime Minister's portfolio. The DTO published the Digital Service Standard, a design guide specifically tailored for clear online writing.

 "Sometimes in government people write in convoluted ways using language which hides or confuses the real message they want to convey," said The Hon Jay Weatherill MP and Minister Assisting the Premier in Cabinet. "*Plain English saves time and effort – for citizens, the private and community sectors and other parts of government*"

The New Zealand Government similarly states in its Govt.nz style guide that "*our goal is to make things as simple and clear as possible for our users — to make what government does easier to understand."*

Clear writing helps government departments achieve two goals:

- **Improve engagement and compliance:** essentially, when more people understand what you want them to do they are more likely to do it,
- **Reduce costs:** When people know what the government asks of them, there's a better chance they'll comply. Improved compliance **reduces the need** for costly extra mailings, follow-up calls and even litigation.

In Q2 2016, VisibleThread analysed the web pages of 4 New Zealand government agencies and 28 Australian government agencies based upon clarity of written content. We measured up to 100 pages on each website, across the following 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 – How many complex, hard-to-understand words does the content contain?

We undertook this analysis on 19th April 2016 and all scans were completed within 24 hours.

The Top 5 agencies were:

1. [Queensland Dept of Transport & Main Roads](#)
2. [South Australia Health](#)
3. [Inland Revenue New Zealand](#)
4. [South Australia Police](#)
5. [Victoria police](#)

			Num Pages	Clear Writing Index	Readability Score	Readability Rank	Passive Score	Passive Rank	Long Score	Long Rank	Complex Score	Complex Rank
1	Queensland Dept of Transport & Main Roads	http://www.tmr.qld.gov.au/	100	5	60	2	9%	7	13%	3	2.50	8
2	SA Health	http://www.health.sa.gov.au	100	5.25	49	9	5%	1	9%	1	2.55	10
3	Inland Revenue New Zealand	http://IRD.govt.nz	100	5.75	62	1	8%	2	14%	4	3.07	16
4	South Australia Police	http://www.police.sa.gov.au	100	7.75	45	12	8%	3	9%	2	2.73	14
5	Victoria Police	http://www.police.vic.gov.au	100	8	47	10	10%	11	14%	5	2.31	6

The bottom 5 agencies were:

28. [Dept of Health & Human Services Victoria](#)
29. [Victoria Department of Education](#)
30. [NSW Police Force](#)
31. [Australian Federal Police](#)
32. [Australia Electoral Commission](#)

			Num Pages	Clear Writing Index	Readability Score	Readability Rank	Passive Score	Passive Rank	Long Score	Long Rank	Complex Score	Complex Rank
28	Dept of Health & Human Services Victoria	http://www.health.vic.gov.au	100	22.5	34	28	13%	22	17%	8	9.65	32
29	Victoria Department of Education	http://www.education.vic.gov.au	100	22.5	38	22	12%	16	24%	23	5.08	29
30	NSW Police Force	http://www.police.nsw.gov.au	100	23.25	44	13	18%	31	26%	27	3.96	22
31	Australian Federal Police	http://www.afp.gov.au	101	25.5	33	30	15%	28	32%	31	2.69	13
32	Australia Electoral Commission	http://aec.gov.au/	100	26	38	22	21%	32	33%	32	3.34	18

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 higher is ideal, approximately a UK year 9 equivalent reading level.
- Passive language – 4% or less is ideal.
- Long Sentences – 5% or less across all content is ideal.
- Word Complexity Density – How many complex, hard-to-understand words does the content contain?

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

High Fliers and Bottom Dwellers - Australia

Queensland Department of Transport and Main Roads topped the 2016 Australia Government Agency rankings. It scored very highly in Readability and ranked in the top 10 for all categories. However, the Department can improve its overall clear writing score by reducing sentence length and using active voice.

The South Australia Health Authority also performed well. Readability was slightly under the target score. However, it boosted its overall clarity by achieving target scores for using active voice and short sentences.

Unfortunately, the Australian Electoral Commission website fell well below VisibleThread's recommended scores in all categories. Incredibly, 33% of all sentences encountered contained more than 25 words. It also had a relatively high score in terms of complex sentence use. These two factors combined affected its overall clear writing score.

Similarly, the Australian Federal Police fared poorly in its use of long sentences. Phraseology was less complex and its use of active voice ensured that it did not hit rock bottom.

The clear writing index shows a wide distribution of overall scores ranging from 5 (good) to 26 (poor). This indicates an inconsistent approach in the adoption and implementation of the clear writing guidelines produced by the Australian Government.

Only 6 out of the 28 Australian Government Agencies achieved a passable readability index of 50 or higher. This indicates that departments need a concerted effort to achieve recommended levels of clear writing.

High Fliers and Bottom Dwellers – New Zealand

As we analysed only four New Zealand Government Agency, we display all results below. It is encouraging that 2 of the 4 departments feature in the top 10. The Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment just missed out on a top 10 place coming in a passable 11th place.

Inland Revenue New Zealand had the highest readability score of the entire list, indicating well constructed content. Improvement can still be made by concentrating on shortening sentences.

New Zealand Post trailed the group in 22nd place with long and complex sentences negatively affecting its overall placing.

			Num Pages	Clear Writing Index	Readability Score	Rank	Passive Score	Rank	Long Score	Rank	Complex Score	Rank
3	Inland Revenue New Zealand	http://IRD.govt.nz	100	5.75	62	1	8%	2	14%	4	3.07	16
6	NZ Transport Agency	http://nzta.govt.nz	100	9.25	47	10	11%	13	19%	11	2.07	3
11	Ministry of Business Innovation & Employment	http://business.govt.nz	100	13.75	56	3	9%	4	20%	18	5.55	30
22	NZ Post	http://nzpost.co.nz	100	19.5	51	7	15%	27	25%	25	3.39	19

Leaders and losers by category

Readability: Only eight Government Agencies achieved an acceptable readability index score of 50 or higher. The Inland Revenue New Zealand scored 62 and Queensland Dept of Transport & Main scored 60. Australian government guidelines state that *"By writing in plain English and using consistent spelling, grammar, tone and structure we make services easier to use*."

New Zealand Government Guidelines support this aim: *"Our goal is to make things as simple and clear as possible for our users — to make what government does easier to understand"*

Passive language: None of the Government Agencies analysed met the target Passive Language score of 4%. However, South Australia Health only just missed out with a score of 5%. The Australia Electoral Commission came last by a considerable margin with 22% of the content analysed using the passive voice.

These figures display significant room for improvement especially since the Australian government's guideline states *"Active voice clearly identifies who is doing what to whom, is more immediate and generally uses fewer words."*

The New Zealand Governments comment on the passive voice mirrors VisibleThread's findings: *"For some reason public sector writers seem particularly prone to using the passive voice."*

Long sentences: South Australia Health came out joint top in this category, alongside South Australia Police with a score of 9%. This remains considerably off of the target mark of 5%. The remaining departments and agencies ranged between 13% and 33%. The Government Agency using the highest percentage of long sentences was the Australia Electoral Commission. A staggering 33% of its content comprised long sentences of more than 25 words.

New Zealand Government states *"The longer the sentence the harder it is to follow."*

This is echoed by the Australian Government guidelines *"Use short sentences that contain a single message."*

Complex Language: The Western Australia Department of Education was number one in complex language category with a website using simple sentences. The South Australia Department of Planning and Transport, although a middle runner (19th) overall, also shows strong use of simple sentences on its website. Dept of Health & Human Services Victoria was the tail ender in this category demonstrating the need for significant improvement.

Room for Improvement: The worst performing departments were: New South Wales Police Force, Australian Federal Police and the Australia Electoral Commission.

Factors making these the worst performers were: high proportion of long sentences (between 26% and 33%), high levels of passive language (15% to 21%), high degrees of complex language (density between 2.69 and 3.96), and poor readability ratings (between 44 and 33).

Editors should shorten sentences like this:

"If, within the time period specified on the notice, you fail to reply, cannot provide a valid and sufficient reason or decline to pay the $20 penalty, then the matter may be referred to a court."
Note: We found this sentence on the Australia Election Commission website

1 sentence 36 words => 1 sentence, total word count 21.

"Unless you have a good reason for not paying the fine on time then you may be referred to a court."

- **Takeaways:**

    1. **Wide variability between best and worst performers**
       There is very wide variably between the best and lowest scoring websites. This applies across all metrics.

       For example, readability ranges from 62 (out of 100) for 1st place Inland Revenue New Zealand in contrast with a very low 32 (out of 100) for bottom placed Department of Education and Training, Australia. This means that someone reading the Department of Education and Training website would need a Bachelors Degree level of comprehension; while a person in their second year of primary school (7-8 year olds) are able to make sense of the New Zealand Inland Revenue website.

    2. **Government Agencies can dramatically improve clarity by focusing on a few key areas**
       Many agencies scored well in certain areas and poorly by one or two areas.

       For instance, Ministry of Business Innovation & Employment ranks 11th overall. However, it ranks a much higher 3rd on readability but very poorly (30th) in the use complex sentences. Rapid improvement to Government Agency websites is possible by spending a little attention on the relevant key metrics.

    3. **Sites catering to non-native English speakers have room for improvement**
       Australia and New Zealand are multi-cultural societies with many primary school pupils speaking English as a second language. Our results indicate that there remains considerable work to do to bring Government Agency websites up to a level where a great majority of its citizens are comfortable reading them.

    4. **Improving online clarity can reduce costs**
       Public Sector websites, which have improved the clarity of their online content can save significant sums of money. The Australian Government is correct when it states *"Clear content also means it's easier for people to keep using digital services independently without having to phone government or visit us in person."*

       When citizens can find information, understand content and complete tasks online, Local Authorities can reduce support costs and free up staff time to work on other important tasks.

Detailed Results Table

We show the full detailed table below.

Colour-coding helps us to understand sites where one or two specific scores may be dragging down the overall ranking. Flagging specific areas (for instance, passive language) pinpoints areas for improvement.

KEY: **Green** = On or near target, **Amber** = Some work needed, **Red** = Well below target level

	AU and NZ Government – Q2, 2016		Num Pages	Clear Writing Index	Readability Score	Readability Rank	Passive Score	Passive Rank	Long Score	Long Rank	Complex Score	Complex Rank	Num Words
1	Queensland Dept of Transport & Main Roads	http://www.tmr.qld.gov.au/	100	5	60	2	9%	7	13%	3	2.50	8	32177
2	SA Health	http://www.health.sa.gov.au	100	5.25	49	9	5%	1	9%	1	2.55	10	24647
3	Inland Revenue New Zealand	http://IRD.govt.nz	100	5.75	62	1	8%	2	14%	4	3.07	16	33989
4	South Australia Police	http://www.police.sa.gov.au	100	7.75	45	12	8%	3	9%	2	2.73	14	26110
5	Victoria Police	http://www.police.vic.gov.au	100	8	47	10	10%	11	14%	5	2.31	6	26716
6	NZ Transport Agency	http://nzta.govt.nz	100	9.25	47	10	11%	13	19%	11	2.07	3	26078
7	WA Dept of Transport	http://www.transport.wa.gov.au	101	11.5	52	4	10%	9	15%	6	4.77	27	50633
8	NSW Roads & Maritime Services	http://www.rms.nsw.gov.au	100	13	50	8	13%	20	19%	15	2.54	9	62867
9	SA Dept of Education & Child Development	http://www.decd.sa.gov.au	100	13.25	39	19	9%	5	25%	24	2.26	5	13215
10	WA Dept of Education	http://www.det.wa.edu.au	100	13.5	32	31	10%	10	19%	12	1.23	1	33397
11	Ministry of Business Innovation & Employment	http://business.govt.nz	100	13.75	56	3	9%	4	20%	18	5.55	30	49302
12	Australian Taxation Office	http://www.ato.gov.au	101	15.5	52	4	9%	5	29%	30	4.18	23	83763
13	Dept of Health Queensland	http://www.health.qld.gov.au	100	16.5	44	13	10%	12	20%	16	4.64	25	12052
14	Western Australia Police	http://www.police.wa.gov.au	100	16.75	43	16	12%	17	21%	19	2.92	15	34154
15	Department Human Services	http://www.humanservices.gov.au	100	17.25	44	13	12%	19	21%	20	3.17	17	54467

	AU and NZ Government – Q2, 2016		Num Pages	Clear Writing	Readability		Passive		Long		Complex		Num Words
				Index	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	
16	Dept of Health Western Australia	http://www.health.wa.gov.au	100	17.5	35	26	11%	14	25%	26	2.10	4	21855
17	NSW Dept of Education & Training	http://www.dec.nsw.gov.au	100	17.75	34	28	12%	15	23%	21	2.47	7	37756
18	Victoria Dept of Transport & Planning	http://www.dtpli.vic.gov.au	100	18	39	19	13%	23	18%	10	3.52	20	44368
19	Tasmania Dept of Transport	http://www.transport.tas.gov.au	100	18.5	52	4	16%	30	17%	9	7.75	31	34125
19	SA Dept of Planning & Transport	http://www.dpti.sa.gov.au	100	18.5	41	18	15%	26	26%	28	1.70	2	36264
21	NSW Ministry of Health	http://www.health.nsw.gov.au	100	18.75	42	17	14%	24	24%	22	2.62	12	33889
22	NZ Post	`='Raw Data (NZAUS)'!B33	100	19.5	51	7	15%	27	25%	25	3.39	19	52645
23	Department of Education & Training	http://www.education.gov.au	100	19.75	32	31	9%	8	27%	29	2.61	11	28270
24	Department of Immigration and Citizenship	http://www.immi.gov.au	100	20.25	38	22	12%	18	19%	13	4.86	28	73986
25	Tasmania Dept of Education & Training	http://www.education.tas.gov.au	100	20.75	35	26	16%	29	16%	7	3.64	21	33025
25	Queensland Dept Education & Training	http://www.education.qld.gov.au	100	20.75	39	19	13%	21	20%	17	4.71	26	20542
27	Department of immigration & Border Control	http://www.border.gov.au	100	22	37	25	14%	25	19%	14	4.60	24	64592
28	Dept of Health & Human Services Victoria	http://www.health.vic.gov.au	100	22.5	34	28	13%	22	17%	8	9.63	32	42612
28	Victoria Department of Education	http://www.education.vic.gov.au	100	22.5	38	22	12%	16	24%	23	5.08	29	25227
30	NSW Police Force	http://www.police.nsw.gov.au	100	23.25	44	13	18%	31	26%	27	3.96	22	42449
31	Australian Federal Police	http://www.afp.gov.au	101	25.5	33	30	15%	28	32%	31	2.69	13	55678
32	Australia Electoral Commission	http://aec.gov.au/	100	26	38	22	21%	32	33%	32	3.34	18	55154

Methodology – what are the metrics?

- We analysed the sites on 19th April 2016
- We scanned between up to 100 pages of content as a result of using automated crawling techniques.
- We crawled starting from the publically available URL.
- Certain pages within the sample contain non-textual content (eg: videos). We omitted these pages from our scan.
- If scan had fewer than 100 pages, we included the page count and word count for each agency.

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

Metric	Formula
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 x Average Sentence Length) – (84.6 x Average Syllables per Word))
2. Passive Language	
The % rating is the proportion of sentences with a passive construction. Passive language is where the subject is acted upon by 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?	(Passive Sentences / 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.	(Long Sentences / 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/Total Words * 100)

complex words/phrases based on Federal Guidelines. See
http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/wordsuggestions/simplewords.cfm for the list scanned. Replacing complex words with simpler words helps your readers concentrate on your content.

About VisibleThread

VisibleThread provides document content analysis solutions for sales and marketing professionals. We flag poor quality and complex language for documents and websites. This eliminates tedious manual review cycles, saving you time and cost.

Our solutions & reports allow customers to:

- Scan docs and websites in minutes
- Identify risky and complex language with objective metrics
- Benchmark web sites against sector peers
- Flag compliance issues

For corporate teams, government agencies and non-profits, our solutions make review teams 40% more efficient and increase sales and marketing conversions.

For questions or if you want a specific sector index:

- For a specific agency or bureau index, email: sales@visiblethread.com
- For questions on the metrics or methodology, email: support@visiblethread.com