



2017

# AUSTRALIA GOV. PROCUREMENT CLARITY INDEX



**VisibleThread**  
Clarity Index

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## The VisibleThread Clarity Index, Australia Gov. Procurement – 2017

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### Executive Summary

A deal is a deal, as the saying goes. But what makes for a good deal? How do government agencies, and the contractors that serve them, ensure more good deals? At the heart of any deal is an agreement. But what happens if the terms of the agreement aren't well understood by one, or more, of the parties involved? Terms, after all, are the summary of the expectations for those involved in a deal. Who does what and by when? What must the contractor deliver? How will parties be compensated and by when? Far too often, poorly worded documentation ruins potentially good deals. And few documents influence deal outcomes more than procurement documents.

For Australians, government procurement documents (RFIs, RFQs, RFPs, etc.) create unnecessary costs and waste if they are hard to read and understand. Unclear writing leads to confused responses from bidders and creates more costly bidding processes, in the form of delays and protests.

And the costs are not limited to the RFP selection process. Confusing RFPs create problems well after agencies award a contract. They can lead to sub-optimal solutions that do not meet the actual requirements. It follows that Australia's government creates a lot of risk when it issues poor quality RFPs.

Clear writing in procurement documents helps government agencies achieve several objectives:

- **Lower costs:** When respondents understand what the government requires and instructions to respond are clear, the process requires less time and fewer resources.
- **Find the best contractor for the requirements:** The best contractors may disqualify themselves or choose not to respond to an RFP if they misunderstand what it says. Clear writing helps to attract the best contractor for the job.
- **Increased compliance and performance:** Accurate and easy-to-understand requirements enable contractors to supply what the government needs.

In October 2017, VisibleThread conducted a clear writing analysis of recent RFPs issued by the Australian government. The three RFPs we analysed were:

1. Department of Immigration and Border Protection – Visa Service Delivery
2. Department of Defence – IT Training

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### 3. Department of Defence Joint Health Command – Next Generation Health Services

Our analysis aims to reveal opportunities for improved communication. We chose to focus on RFP sections that have the greatest influence on government Return on Investment (ROI). We focused our analysis on documents that define work requirements, response requirements and evaluation criteria.

Based on our analysis, we created an Index of these RFPs based on clarity of the written content. We measured each set of documents across these four dimensions:

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

Our analysis suggests the following:

- Australian government RFP documents are poorly written and difficult to understand.
- Writing clarity varies significantly between agencies.
- Writing clarity varies a lot from RFP to RFP even within the same agency.
- Sections that define government needs are the most poorly written.
- A comparison to a 2016 analysis of United States government RFP documents finds Australian RFPs are harder to read, trailing in all but one of the four key areas of evaluation.

We show a more detailed analysis later 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 is considered acceptable, approximately an 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading level.
- 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

Target levels are determined by published third-party standards. Governments created some of these standards. For example, the United States Navy developed the [Flesch-Kincaid reading level test](#) in the 1970s to improve the impact of technical documents, such as training manuals.

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

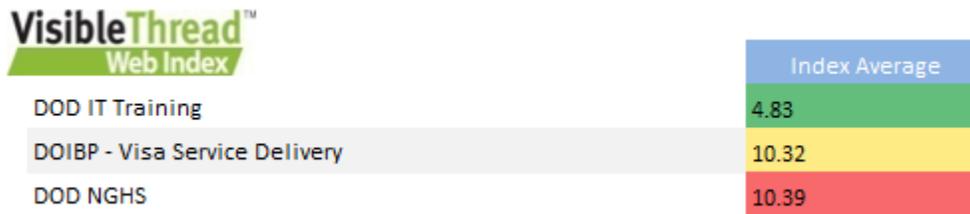
### Overall Leaders

While the purpose of this study is not to assess any individual department's performance, the Department of Defence's IT Training RFP documents graded best. It is notable that the DoD's "Statement of Requirements" (SORs)

document rated highest among all documents. The SOR communicates what the government expects to receive. Poorly written language in this kind of document leads to misunderstanding and poor outcomes.

| VisibleThread™<br>Web Index |   |         | Aus Gov Procurement – Q4, 2017 |       |             |       |         |       |      |       |         |       |           |
|-----------------------------|---|---------|--------------------------------|-------|-------------|-------|---------|-------|------|-------|---------|-------|-----------|
|                             |   |         | Clear Writing                  |       | Readability |       | Passive |       | Long |       | Complex |       | Num Words |
|                             |   |         | Index                          | Score | Rank        | Score | Rank    | Score | Rank | Score | Rank    |       |           |
| 1                           | RFT 3207.SPIG.ASD.DATT.doc  | SOW     | 15                             | 41    | 1           | 3%    | 2       | 6%    | 1    | 2.56  | 2       | 5386  |           |
| 2                           | 7. REDI Visa Service Delivery - Part 7 - REDI Response Forms - FINAL.DOCX | General | 5.25                           | 35    | 5           | 12%   | 3       | 15%   | 5    | 3.20  | 8       | 12734 |           |
| 2                           | 6. NGH5 - ITR - Att D to COR - Respondent Checklist.pdf                   | General | 5.25                           | 39    | 2           | 20%   | 12      | 13%   | 2    | 2.90  | 5       | 551   |           |
| 4                           | 3. NGH5 - ITR - Att A to COR - Deed of Confidentiality.DOC                | General | 5.5                            | 32    | 8           | 16%   | 7       | 15%   | 4    | 2.64  | 3       | 1782  |           |
| 5                           | RFT 3207.SPIG.ASD.COT.doc   | General | 6.5                            | 36    | 4           | 15%   | 6       | 17%   | 7    | 3.35  | 9       | 2508  |           |
| 5                           | RFT 3207.SPIG.ASD.TANN.doc  | General | 6.5                            | 38    | 3           | 15%   | 5       | 13%   | 8    | 3.45  | 10      | 3566  |           |

Arguably, some subjects are more complex than others. Challenging subjects make for challenging writing. Most consider information technology to be a complex subject. And yet, the DoD’s IT Training documents were far easier to read than the others included in our analysis.



**Room for Improvement:**

It’s worth noting that we did not review one document that met ideal readability standards. In other words, these RFPs all have significant room for improvement.

- The average readability score across the Index was 30.1 – this is college graduate level reading, considered very hard to read.
- We found passive voice in 18% of sentences – more than 4x the recommended level for clear writing.
- 22% of sentences exceed recommended levels for length – more than 4x recommended levels.
- The average complexity score was 3.43 across the Index – suggesting opportunities to simplify word choice.

But, some sections were much more poorly written than others. As noted before, Statement of Requirements (SORs) documents should be as clear as possible, given their purpose. SORs had the worst scores in the Index on average.

| VisibleThread™<br>Web Index    | Index Average |
|--------------------------------|---------------|
| General Response Documentation | 9.15          |
| SORs                           | 11            |

- Readability scores average 28 in SOR documents included in this review.
- Passive voice levels averaged 24%.
- Average long sentences frequency was 20%.
- Complexity measured at 3.82.

Agencies can quickly improve the quality of their RFPs by focusing on key areas. Requirements and response instructions are obvious candidates. A review of individual paragraphs outside of the RFP can often reveal just how confusing poor writing can be. Here is an example from one of the SOR documents:

“The Commonwealth's preference is to enter into a contractual arrangement with a single legal entity for the full scope of the Services described in this SOR. However, the service delivery model and the underlying contractual construct for the performance of the Services is a matter for each Respondent to consider. In this regard, the Commonwealth encourages Respondents to propose innovative solutions for delivery of the Services that supports the provision of those Services with high levels of integration, governance, transparency and efficiency that meet the Commonwealth's vision and objectives as described in this SOR.”

It has:

- 94 words,
- 1 very long sentence of 44 words. (in purple),
- 2 long sentences of 26 and 24 words respectively,
- a reading grade level of 19, meaning the reader must have 19 years of education to easily understand this,
- and a readability score of 13 out of 100. This means the text is extremely difficult to understand.

Does the above paragraph include important information for a contractor to consider? If so, could it be more concise? The paragraph appears to say that the Commonwealth prefers a single legal entity, but is it required? Agencies should make their needs and concerns as easy to understand as possible.

Here's a suggested rewrite:

“We would prefer to award this contract to a single legal entity. If your proposal includes multiple entities, then we can consider that. But your proposal must be innovative, and must support high levels of integration, governance, transparency and efficiency.”

This has;

- 40 words (down from 94),
- a reading Grade Level of 11.6 (down from 19),
- and a Readability score of 35 out of 100 (up from 13).

Here's the before and after scores:

|                         | BEFORE REWRITE  | AFTER REWRITE   | CHANGE      |
|-------------------------|---|---|-------------|
| NUMBER WORDS            | <b>94</b>   | <b>40</b>   | <b>-54</b>  |
| GRADE LEVEL             | <b>19 (requires 19 years of education to easily understand)</b> | <b>11.6 (requires 11 years of education to easily understand)</b> | <b>-7.4</b> |
| READABILITY             | 13 (out of 100)   | 35 (out of 100)   | <b>+22</b>  |
| NUMBER OF SENTENCES     | 3   | 3   |             |
| AVERAGE SENTENCE LENGTH | 31 words  | 13 words  | <b>-18</b>  |
| NUMBER - LONG SENTENCES | 3   | 0   | <b>-3</b>   |
| NUMBER - PASSIVE VOICE  | 0   | 0   |             |
| NUMBER – HIDDEN VERBS   | 2   | 0   | <b>-2</b>   |
| NUMBER – ADVERBS        | 0   | 0   |             |

Interesting, when we simplify this, notice how fuzzy the actual requirement seems to be:

“But your proposal must be innovative, and must support high levels of integration, governance, transparency and efficiency.”

What contractor would claim that they are not “innovative”? What about “high levels of integration, governance and efficiency”. What is a high level of integration? Can we define that? Could it form part of an SLA (Service Level Agreement)?

It is always best to quantify requirements like this. Plain language often flushes out risky and un-enforceable language like this.

Long sentences also make language hard to read. Here's an example:

If the Authorised Officer is agreeable to the Quotation submitted by the Contractor, an Authorised Officer may deliver an Official Order to the Contractor for the Services at the prices in the Quotation.

The sentence is 33 words long. Try this simpler 17-word revision:

“If we find your quotation acceptable, an authorised officer may extend an official order for the services.”

Long sentences are often collections of items. Agencies can eliminate a lot of difficulty by breaking those concepts out into bullets or lists.

**Takeaways:**

**1. Wide variability of quality between RFPs**

Variability between RFP content is high. Readability differences in programme requirements can be explained by the type of subject matter. But it may also reveal a need for training. Skill gaps may be easier to detect if there are major quality differences in documents produced by the same agency.

**2. Hard-to-read RFPs increase agency risk**

Poorly worded RFPs increase the likelihood that both government agencies and contractors misunderstand the requirements. Confusing language at the outset of a project can lead to missed timelines, and cost overruns. Unclear language may also shift liability to the agency from the contractor, creating exposure. And unclear requirements can lead to protests, and extended delivery cycles.

**3. Agencies experience increased operating costs due to poor quality RFPs**

- Poorly worded RFPs increase contractors' response costs. Contractors pass these along to government agencies.
- Agencies increase administrative costs when confused contractors make multiple requests for clarification within RFP documents. Poor communication can create delays in the procurement process and cause project timelines to be compromised.
- Contractors that are good matches for projects may opt to not participate based on confusing procurement language.
- Murky language may compromise compliance and evaluation criteria. The result may be increased legal exposure and/or increased programme administration costs.

## Detailed Results Tables

We show the full detailed tables below.

We colour-code, green to red, each score in the Index. Green indicates best, red indicates worst. 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.

| VisibleThread™<br>Web Index |  |          | Aus Gov Procurement – Q4, 2017 |               |       |             |       |         |       |      |       |         |       |           |
|-----------------------------|--|----------|--------------------------------|---------------|-------|-------------|-------|---------|-------|------|-------|---------|-------|-----------|
| ID                          | File Name  | Category | Num Pages                      | Clear Writing |       | Readability |       | Passive |       | Long |       | Complex |       | Num Words |
|                             |  |          |                                | Index         | Score | Rank        | Score | Rank    | Score | Rank | Score | Rank    |       |           |
| 1                           | RFT 3207 SPIG ASD DATT.doc   | SOR      | 0                              | 1.5           | 41    | 1           | 9%    | 2       | 6%    | 1    | 2.56  | 2       | 5986  |           |
| 2                           | 7. REOI Visa Service Delivery - Part 7 - REOI Response Forms - FINAL.DOCX      | General  | 0                              | 5.25          | 35    | 5           | 12%   | 3       | 15%   | 5    | 3.20  | 8       | 12734 |           |
| 2                           | 6. NGHS - ITR - Att D to COR - Respondent Checklist.pdf                        | General  | 0                              | 5.25          | 39    | 2           | 20%   | 12      | 13%   | 2    | 2.90  | 5       | 551   |           |
| 4                           | 3. NGHS - ITR - Att A to COR - Deed of Confidentiality.DOC                     | General  | 0                              | 5.5           | 32    | 8           | 16%   | 7       | 15%   | 4    | 2.64  | 3       | 1782  |           |
| 5                           | RFT 3207 SPIG ASD COT.doc  | General  | 0                              | 6.5           | 36    | 4           | 15%   | 6       | 17%   | 7    | 3.35  | 9       | 2508  |           |
| 5                           | RFT 3207 SPIG ASD TANN.doc   | General  | 0                              | 6.5           | 38    | 3           | 15%   | 5       | 19%   | 8    | 3.45  | 10      | 3566  |           |
| 7                           | 8. NGHS - ITR - Part 3 - Response Returnable Attachments.DOC                   | General  | 0                              | 7.75          | 27    | 13          | 9%    | 1       | 14%   | 3    | 4.06  | 14      | 4678  |           |
| 8                           | 2. REOI Visa Service Delivery - Part 2 - Overview of Immigration Reform ...pdf | General  | 0                              | 8             | 23    | 15          | 12%   | 4       | 23%   | 9    | 2.67  | 4       | 4421  |           |
| 9                           | 4. REOI Visa Service Delivery - Part 4 - Overview of REOI process - FINAL.pdf  | General  | 0                              | 8.75          | 34    | 7           | 22%   | 15      | 17%   | 6    | 3.19  | 7       | 3295  |           |
| 10                          | 5. NGHS - ITR - Att C to COR - Glossary.pdf                                    | General  | 0                              | 10.25         | 21    | 17          | 19%   | 11      | 26%   | 12   | 2.40  | 1       | 2837  |           |
| 11                          | 5. REOI Visa Service Delivery - Part 5 - Evaluation - FINAL.pdf                | General  | 0                              | 10.75         | 28    | 11          | 17%   | 9       | 24%   | 10   | 3.58  | 13      | 3322  |           |
| 11                          | RFT 3207 SPIG ASD COD.doc  | General  | 0                              | 10.75         | 35    | 5           | 16%   | 8       | 28%   | 13   | 4.50  | 17      | 10266 |           |
| 13                          | 1. REOI Visa Service Delivery - Part 1 - REOI Details and Guidance-FINAL.pdf   | General  | 0                              | 12            | 29    | 10          | 18%   | 10      | 30%   | 16   | 3.56  | 12      | 2079  |           |
| 14                          | 6. REOI Visa Service Delivery - Part 6 - Terms and Conditions - FINAL.PDF      | General  | 0                              | 12.25         | 30    | 9           | 21%   | 14      | 28%   | 15   | 3.47  | 11      | 11713 |           |
| 15                          | 2. NGHS - ITR - Part 1 - COR.pdf   | General  | 0                              | 13.75         | 23    | 15          | 23%   | 16      | 32%   | 18   | 3.13  | 6       | 8224  |           |
| 16                          | 1. NGHS - ITR - Cover Letter.pdf   | General  | 0                              | 14            | 28    | 11          | 20%   | 13      | 30%   | 17   | 4.12  | 15      | 1310  |           |
| 17                          | 3. REOI Visa Service Delivery - Part 3 - Statement of Requirements - FINAL.pdf | SOR      | 0                              | 15.25         | 24    | 14          | 24%   | 17      | 28%   | 14   | 4.13  | 16      | 17029 |           |
| 18                          | 7. NGHS - ITR - Part 2 - SOR.pdf   | SOR      | 0                              | 16.25         | 19    | 18          | 31%   | 18      | 25%   | 11   | 4.77  | 18      | 9758  |           |

## Methodology – what are the metrics?

- We analysed the RFP documents in October, 2017.
- RFPs were randomly selected from public lists of the largest contracts issued by the Australian Government in 2017
- We scanned more than 100,000 words of content using automated crawling techniques.

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

| Metric   | Formula   |
|--|---|
| <b>1. Readability</b><br><br>Readability ranges from 0 to 100. 100 is the top mark. If communicating with citizens, aim for at least 50.<br><br>This originates from the <a href="#">Flesch Reading Ease</a> index.  | $(206.835 - (1.015 \times \text{Average Sentence Length}) - (84.6 \times \text{Average Syllables per Word}))$ |
| <b>2. Passive Language</b><br><br>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:<br><br>"Quality is monitored" vs. "We monitor quality"<br><br>If you use active voice, you will increase clarity & strength. You will also flush out the 'actor', i.e. who did the action? | $(\text{Passive Sentences} / \text{Total Sentences} * 100)$   |
| <b>3. Long Sentences</b><br><br>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)

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### About VisibleThread

VisibleThread helps executives in large organisations govern content quality with less cost and risk. Sales and communications 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. Fueled with greater organisational intelligence, customers drive efficiency and reduce cost across their organisations. For more information, visit [www.visiblethread.com](http://www.visiblethread.com)

#### For questions or if you want a specific sector index:

- For questions regarding VisibleThread technologies, email: [info@visiblethread.com](mailto:info@visiblethread.com)
  - For questions on the metrics or methodology, email: [support@visiblethread.com](mailto:support@visiblethread.com)
  - For inquiries from members of the press or media, email: [pr@visiblethread.com](mailto:pr@visiblethread.com)
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