

The basics of developing good content

Good content – with a logical structure, plain language and effective visuals – helps people to understand information. Here are some tips on how to get there.

Start early

With any communication product, content isn't an optional extra. Considering content from the beginning of any project and developing it in step with policy needs, user research and web design will make the whole product much more effective.

Listen to your audience

Content developers and writers often think about what they need to say, and not what the audience wants to hear. Think about what your audience needs to know and consider their background and the language they will understand. Testing will make all the difference – check the structure, words and visuals with members of your audience and adjust till they all work.

Get the structure right

Is your website or report set up according to an internal departmental structure? If so, is that something your audiences will find logical and intuitive? How many times do people need to click or turn a page to find key information? Will they give up before they get there?

Get the words right

Clarity is the key to effective communication. The very best writing, whether nonfiction or fiction, speaks directly to us – it isn't hidden in unnecessary syllables and phrases. If you think of the most memorable phrases from history's greatest speeches, they are plain and simple: 'We choose to go to the Moon,' not 'We select the option that involves the transportation of a team of individuals to Earth's nearest natural satellite.'

Clear language makes your content more relatable to users, and helps them understand your message. You may need experts to help, especially if you're dealing with complex content. Content writers and editors can take dense drafts and transform them into clear content.

Get the visuals right

Infographics that engage your audience; graphs that allow people to understand the data at a glance; and designs that support and don't clash with your message, will all make a difference.

Polish

Don't forget the proofreading. Poor content can be easily overlooked; for example, in the [46 million banknotes with a typo](#), or mugs that [misspelled the name of a world leader](#). Careful content design and review avoids mistakes and saves money..

Did you know? Good content can also affect your bottom line. Studies have quantified the difference that good content can make. For example:

- [Research into United States government websites](#) in 2020 found that of the 10 billion visits annually, 1.2 billion visitors could not complete the task they came to do; of these, 31% called the agency and 18% visited a local office. These calls and visits cost an average of US\$9.30 each. If people could find what they needed in the first place, almost US\$5.5 billion would be saved each year.
- [In 2017](#), it was estimated that poor writing was costing American businesses \$400 billion a year through lost time and productivity.
- [A study of United States naval officers](#) in 1989 who read a plain or bureaucratic memo found that officers who read the plain memo had significantly higher comprehension, took 17–23% less time to read it and felt less need to reread it. The study estimated that, if everything naval officers had to read in a year was plain, savings in their time would be worth \$53–73 million.