



Government of **Western Australia**  
Department of the **Premier and Cabinet**  
Office of **Digital Government**

# Digital Services Policy Framework

## Digital Services Content Guidelines

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# Document Control

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## Purpose

The following guidance provides information and recommendations to assist agencies in complying with the Digital Services Content Standard (the Standard) to create content which is easily accessible and understandable to all audiences.

## Policy context

This guideline forms part of the Digital Services Policy Framework that provides guidance for agencies in the delivery of digital services, including websites and supports the [Digital Services Policy](#).

You can also refer to the:

- [Digital Services Content Writing Guide](#) - as the single point of reference for common terms, spelling, punctuation, and naming conventions.
- [Digital Services Content Readiness Checklist](#) - to help you assess your content readiness
- [Accessibility and Inclusivity Standard](#) - defines the minimum accessibility standards that agencies must meet when designing, developing and delivering digital products, services and content.

## How to comply with the requirements of the Standard

### *Requirement 7.1* Content must be designed to meet a valid user need

Based on research into behaviour, analytics and feedback, good content focuses on what the user wants and needs to know, versus what we think we should be telling them.

You should consider the following areas to assist with compliance to the standard.

#### Research and define user needs

You can learn about users and their needs by:

- reviewing existing evidence (for example, analytics, search logs, call centre data, previous research reports)
- interviewing and observing actual or likely users
- talking to people inside and outside your organisation who work with actual or likely users

You should document user needs to explain why a user need exists.

#### Further guidance: user research toolkit

For further guidelines to assist in planning research, preparing for research sessions, as well as sharing and analysing findings, please refer to:

- [UK Government's Service Manual](#)
- [SA User Research Guide](#)

- [VIC Research User Experience – Digital Guide](#)
- [Digital NSW – User Research Methods](#)

## *Requirement 7.2* All websites must use an analytics tool to measure website performance

Use analytics tools and data to support your findings and evaluate content. We recommend Google Analytics.

Use the data from analytics tools to measure, rate, test and evaluate content - this can include things like page views, bounce rate, page referral, search referral, new versus returning visitors, and user feedback. Google analytics provides comprehensive documentation on [configuring your analytics account](#).

Regularly review and use data from your analytics to improve content - if users are looking for specific content on your site and not finding it (either because it doesn't exist or it is not findable) it may show a content gap. It may also show a need to update how content is written or where it is published.

There are popular analytic tools which can be used to measure website performance. Popular resources include [Hotjar](#), [Sentry](#) and [Uptrends](#).

### Whole of government analytics

The WA.gov.au operational support team coordinates a whole of government analytics dashboard that is used to inform us of community demand for government information and whole of government reporting.

Agencies who wish to join this initiative can register their interest by emailing [dgov-strategy@dpc.wa.gov.au](mailto:dgov-strategy@dpc.wa.gov.au).

Note: at this time, access to individual agency's analytic data is restricted to the participating agency and the Office of Digital Government.

### Usability testing

Usability testing helps establish how well a digital service works by watching how users actually use it. You should research and define user needs as well as test at key points during the content design and development process to identify problems and fix them before releasing a service.

Usability testing should include a diverse group of users including people with disability and those using assistive technology such as screen readers.

Some simple points to validate with users include:

- Can people easily complete key tasks?
- How quickly can people complete those tasks?
- Can people complete the task on their first try?
- What distractions or barriers do people face? Can you remove those?

- After using the service once, can a person remember enough to use it effectively the next time?
- How much do people like using your service?

For more information around usability you can also refer to the [Accessibility and Inclusivity Standard](#).

Popular usability testing applications include:

- [NVDA Screen Reader](#)
- [Vision Australia's Web Accessibility Toolbar for IE](#)
- [aXe](#)
- [SiteImprove's accessibility checker \(Chrome extension\)](#)
- [WAVE web accessibility evaluation tool](#)
- [HTML CodeSniffer](#)
- [Vision Australia's Colour Contrast Analyser](#)
- [Hemingway App readability checker](#).

## Responsive design

Responsive design ensures that users can interact with your service regardless of their device size or type, and browser or device processing power.

The service should:

- Follow mobile-first design principles
- consider users on slow internet connections, using assistive technologies or people with limited download data
- factor the locale and regions of users
- work well for keyboard devices
- use front-end technology that works well regardless of device processing power.

Use responsive design methods to design content that adapts to a range of devices and screen sizes, and to test on the full range of browsers and platforms that your audience may be using.

## *Requirement 7.3* Digital services must be designed for everyone

The benefits of providing user-centered content include:

- improved user experience — good user experiences will increase uptake of digital services over alternative methods
- users are able to access a digital service they might not otherwise be able to access — for example, users who speak languages other than English may not need to use interpreters
- savings in money and time by avoiding unnecessary re-work of products and services.

## Audience

Understand the diversity of your audience.

Write in plain language so everyone can understand. For further information please refer to [Australian Government Style Manual](#).

If you're writing for a specific target audience, you still need to make sure everyone can understand what the content is about.

Test content with users to ensure it is fit for purpose for example unambiguous, concise and well understood.

Make sure someone whose primary language may not be English can understand your content.

All government information produced by agencies should be respectful of:

- disability
- cultural differences
- differences in socioeconomic background
- differences in educational levels and systems
- generational differences
- gender roles
- perceptions of social and support concepts
- political impacts on life events
- pre and post effects of wars
- religious affiliations
- values or philosophical differences

### **Using inclusive terms**

Avoid words that treat some people differently. Use inclusive terms such as:

- Worker — instead of workman.
- Business manager or business person — instead of businessman or businesswoman.
- Chairperson — instead of chairman or chairwoman.
- People with disability — not people with a disability, disabled or handicapped people.
- People with intellectual disability — not intellectually disabled.
- People who are deaf — not unable to hear.
- People who are blind — not unable to see.
- People who use a wheelchair or wheelchair user – not wheelchair bound.
- Older people or seniors — not pensioners, old-age pensioners or the aged.
- Young people — not youth or juveniles.

### **Avoid gendered pronouns**

Rewrite the sentence to avoid using gender-specific singular pronouns (he/she, her/his, her/him).

Use they / them.

### **Communicating with Aboriginal audiences**

The terms 'First Australians' and 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' (note the plural) include distinct and diverse cultural groups. These terms do not represent a homogenous group.

Use the correct language group name if possible.

Use 'Aboriginal peoples' (note the plural) if you are not sure of the local language group or are talking about multiple groups.

First Australian is not generally used in reference to an individual.

If appropriate you can use the terms 'Aboriginal peoples' and 'Torres Strait Islander peoples' on their own.

## Writing cultural terms

Make sure of the context and relevance before using cultural terms such as:

- First Peoples
- On Country
- Men's Business
- Women's Business
- Traditional Owners or Traditional Custodians

### Further guidance: using inclusive language

More [guidance on inclusive language](#) is available from the Australian Government Style Manual.

People with Disability Australia have [examples of how to talk about disability](#).

The [AUSTLANG](#) from Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) may help you identify the appropriate local language.

## Use plain language

Government content needs to communicate in a way that most people understand. The best way to do this is by using common words, or plain language. Plain language is direct, everyday language and improves readability for all users, including technical audiences.

By avoiding jargon, acronyms and initialisms and using clear and direct words, content is easier to understand, helps people make decisions and builds trust.

## How to write using plain language

- Avoid jargon so the user can understand the content the first time they read it.
- Use active voice — not passive.
- Use the shorter term, sentence and paragraph rather than a more complex choice.
- Minimise sentence length. Use several short sentences instead of a long sentence broken up with punctuation.
- Aim for a maximum reading level of Year 7 to 8 (12 to 14 year old), preferably aged 9.

An [Easy Read format](#) can also be used to publish content to improve usability and inclusivity. This is a method of presenting information in a simplified way, using pictures to support text.



It is helpful when communicating with people with cognitive or intellectual disability, adults with low levels of literacy, or older people. When creating content specifically for these audiences, consider the use of an Easy English version of your material.

### Further guidance: Easy English

Easy English is designed to make sense to people who have difficulty reading and understanding English.

It:

- is a style of writing that is simple and concise
- focuses on presenting key information rather than the detail
- uses a mix of words and images to enhance the message for the reader.

Key features:

- simplified language and grammar
- minimal punctuation
- simplified font, layout and design
- images that illustrate headings and key messages.

More information is available from the South Australian Government's [Online Accessibility Toolkit](#).

## Readability

Readability is about how easy or hard it is for a user to understand text.

Content with a good readability level helps users know what to do. This includes users with lower comprehension skills.

Aim to make content as readable as possible. This makes it more accessible for everyone, not only users with low literacy. Plain language helps specialist and technical audiences too.

## Reading level

The minimum standard for reading levels should comply with WCAG criteria 3.1.5 (Level AA) which recommends information is written for a lower secondary education level. This is Year 7 to Year 8 in Australia, or between 12 to 14 years old.

In support of research that shows 44% of Australian's have low literacy levels<sup>1</sup>, the [Digital Transformation Agency](#) recommends that it's good to aim for age 9 reading level<sup>2</sup>. Someone who is age 9 would be in Australian Year 3 or Year 4.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics – Programme for the International Assessment for Adult Competencies, Australian, 2011-2012

<sup>2</sup> Digital Transformation Agency – Writing for Everyone: <https://www.dta.gov.au/blog/writing-for-everyone/>

A readability checker can assist with testing content, however many of these tools refer to US grades as opposed to Australian levels. Also, while these tools may offer suggestions for improvement, it is good to review recommendations in context.

## Readability tools and scales

The 'Flesch reading ease' index is a common measure for content (in conjunction with the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level). Many readability tools use it. The index is a scale from 1 to 100. A higher score is easier to read.

There are other popular scales used by readability tools. Popular free resources include [Hemmingway Editor](#) which uses the automated readability index or [Grammarly](#).

You can also [enable readability statistics in Word](#).

## Don't just test the reading level

As well as readability, you need to test:

- findability — can users easily find it?
- comprehension — can users understand it?
- engagement — do users read enough of it to understand or skim over it?
- effectiveness — does it provide the right information/answers and cover what the user needs to know?

## Tone

The modern government tone is direct, calm and understated:

- Speak politely and use language that is positive but sensitive and respectful.
- Be aware who you are writing for.
- Be conscious of what the user needs to do.
- Tell the user what they need to know.

More guidance is available from the [Australian Government Style Manual](#).

## Pronouns

Use first and second pronouns (I, we, us and you) to establish a connection with the user.

Avoid third person nouns (Australian Government Department of X) and pronouns (he, she, it and they).

Use 'they' and 'them' when talking about, rather than to someone or something.

## Voice

Use active voice (subject-verb-object). This will help with writing concise, clear content and make it easier for users to understand.

Use first and second person (we, us) instead of third person (he, she, it and they).

Active voice gets straight to the point.

Avoid passive voice (object-verb-subject).

Passive voice usually makes it difficult to know who did what to whom and sends the reader backwards.

Using the passive voice is not wrong, but if you consciously write in the active voice your sentences will probably be shorter and to the point.

Example: active versus passive

- Use: You must include the following information in your application.
- Not: The following information must be included in the application for it to be considered complete.
  
- Use: We proposed new regulations.
- Not: New regulations were proposed.

## *Requirement 7.4* Content must be regularly reviewed

As a minimum, content should be reviewed once a year.

Users should be able to clearly see when content was last updated so that they are aware of the currency of the information that is being provided.

The ROT methodology can be used to unpublish information and improve information quality and efficiency. This involves identifying, addressing and removing redundant, outdated and trivial information, enabling agencies to ensure that information remains relevant and accurate.

Further guidance on criteria which can be used to review and evaluate the relevancy of content can be found on the New South Wales Government's [Digital Service Toolkit](#).

As part of the [Website Visual Standards and Functional Guidelines](#), websites are required to include the Page Review date, to assist people in understanding the currency of the information.

### Further guidance: content lifecycles

You can refer to the Digital Transformation Agency's guide on [using the content lifecycle](#) for further information.

## *Requirement 7.5* Content must be structured to make it easy for people to find what they need

Well-structured content helps a user understand the key messages.

## Plan your structure

Structure the content around meeting the user's needs first, then meeting requirements around mandated information. Mandated information will be any information that is required to be published by law, rule, or regulation.

Design content to:

- give the user only the information they need to complete the service
- lead the user to the information they need

## Avoid duplication

When large blocks of content are completely the same or very similar, search engines don't know which content to link to.

When you start to write about a government service, tool, or program make sure that you:

- are the owner of what you are writing about (for example is your agency funded to provide the service)
- search for existing information provided by other agencies (or internally) to avoid competing for search results and causing confusion for people looking for information
- work with other content owners to identify the source of truth and adopt a "create once publish everywhere" philosophy.

Taking this approach means that:

- the owner of the content is responsible for providing accurate and updated information
- users are more likely to find the information they want without having to navigate through competing and possibly irrelevant search results
- content authors start to work together to produce whole of government content regardless of which agency they belong to.

## Use the WA Government visual design and functional standards

The visual design and functional elements are mandatory under the Digital Services Policy, to make your website look and operate consistently across all WA Government websites.

The WA.gov.au [Website Design Style Guide](#) details all the required style elements, for example: colours, typography, headings, links, icons and hover states.

Using this typography and accessible contrasts makes text readable on all devices.

Refer to the [Website Visual Design and Functional Standards](#).

## Design for mobile devices first

### Design for mobile first and use responsive design techniques

People use a variety of devices to access government information and services. It can be much harder for some people to use a mobile device rather than a desktop or laptop computer. Think about how the content will work on a mobile device first. Then think about how it will translate to a larger screen.

Use responsive design methods to ensure people can read your content no matter which device they are using.

### **Communicate with text first**

Don't rely only on video and images to convey important information.

Plain text can reformat and resize to fit all size screens (reflow).

It's harder to make images and video accessible across different mobile devices.

All visual elements should have a text alternative, including images with complex information. All videos that are published and shared should be captioned.

Users may not be able to watch a long video in the context where they are using a mobile device (for example, on a bus).

### **Get to the point**

Find out the user needs and plan to meet them first. To enhance communication, make sure to top load sentences by ensuring that the most crucial information is presented at the outset and not buried within the text.

It's harder for users with mobile devices to consume long content.

### **Make forms work on mobiles**

Plan forms that are easy to use on small touch screens. For further guidance refer to the [Australian Government Style Manual](#).

### **Create accessible PDFs and other documents**

Don't bury information in PDFs or other documents. It is crucial that important information is easily accessible on web pages, as websites loaded with PDFs can complicate the process of discovering and accessing content. Content should be made into HTML wherever possible. HTML is the most accessible format, it improves Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) and is easier to update.

PDFs and Word documents are not accessible on mobile devices if the document is not made with accessibility in mind.

Refer to the [Global Standard for PDF Accessibility](#) for further guidance.

### **Paragraphs**

Use short, simple paragraphs.

Limit paragraphs to 2 or 3 sentences containing 1 idea. Or break text up into bullet point lists.

Allow for lots of white space, blocks of dense text are hard to read.

Do not use justified text.

Accordions can be used to simplify long content pages and minimize scrolling; however, they can also diminish content visibility. For further guidance on when and how to use accordions for desktop and mobile devices refer to [Accordions on Desktop](#) and [Accordions on Mobile](#).

Avoid using italics for large blocks of content, as it can impede readability for individuals with sight issues, dyslexia, low vision, or processing disorders. Use italics sparingly to ensure better accessibility for a wider range of readers.

Many people with cognitive disabilities have a great deal of trouble with blocks of text that are justified (aligned to both the left and the right margins). The spaces between words create "rivers of white" running down the page, which can make the text difficult to read.

## **Give examples**

Examples help people relate to your information by clarifying complex concepts. They are an ideal way to help readers. Like in spoken discussions, when you ask for clarification of something, people often respond by giving an example.

## **Headings and subheadings**

The user should be able to get an understanding of the content by scanning the headings.

## **Make the title short and accurate**

Write a clear title and lead summary. Tell the user what the page is about and who it's for. Titles and summary are critical for SEO and content discoverability (including voice activated searching).

Headings are the first words users read to check the relevance of content before they commit to reading it.

Make headings short and succinct enough to stand alone when read out of context, for example in search results and on social media.

Google searches show 70 characters of the page title.

Use only 1 top level (H1) heading per page.

## **Break up content with subheadings**

Users lose track if there are too many heading levels.

Break up blocks of text and draw the reader in with short, interesting headings.

Help the user to understand the relationship between sections of text.

Short content should only use 2 subheading levels (H2 and H3).

## **Frontload keywords in headings**

Start headings and subheadings with keywords that help the user to make a connection.

This will also help search engines find your content.

Avoid meaningless words such as 'more' and 'related information'. State what the paragraph says.

## **Use sentence case for headings**

Use sentence case (an initial capital then lower case) for headings, except when using proper nouns.

## **Bullet point list**

Break up long sentences with lists to make it easier for the user to scan.

## **Consistent list items**

Write lead-in content that introduces the list and ends with a colon (:). Don't add a colon if it's a heading.

Use a parallel structure for items so they all start in the same way. For example, start each item with a noun or a verb that is a familiar keyword for the user. For further guidance refer to the [Australian Government Style Manual](#).

Aim to make each list item a similar size. This makes lists easier to scan.

Don't add a semicolon to the end of list items with the exception of conveying an 'or' or 'and' statement for clarity.

Example: Use of semicolon in lists

The environmental protection plan may include:

- a site inspection
- a sustainability report; or
- ongoing benchmarks.

## **Sentence fragment bullet point list**

For lists of fragments use minimal punctuation.

Add a full stop after the final point.

Example: sentence fragment bullet point list

The environmental protection plan includes:

- site inspection
- sustainability report

- ongoing benchmarks.

### **Full sentence bullet point list**

For a list of full sentences, use a capital letter at the start of each point and end each item with a full stop.

### **Numbered (ordered) lists**

Only use a numbered list for ordered steps or to show priority.

Example

When writing an effective email, there are three things to consider:

1. **Choosing** a clear subject and addressing the email correctly to the appropriate recipient.
2. **Stating** your message concisely and using paragraphs or bullet points for clarity.
3. **Closing off** with an appropriate sign-off and including your name, title, and contact information.

### **Avoid second and third level lists**

Rewrite content to avoid multi-level lists.

It makes it harder for the user to understand a list if it has more than 1 level.

## Hyperlinks

### **Use precise link text**

Make the destination of the link clear.

Think about the user and their context when reading the information. Be helpful.

Don't use meaningless terms such as 'click here', 'read more' or 'useful links'.

Don't make the link text too long. Only link the keywords that describe what is being linked.

### **Place links carefully**

Add links wherever they are most useful to the user.

Embed links in paragraphs to help the user scan for the information they need.

Be careful of overcrowding paragraphs with links as this can affect readability.

Grouping links together at the bottom of a page can disrupt readability too. Users may skip the text and just read the links.



## **Make calls to actions (CTAs) accurate and prominent**

Use keywords the user will understand that accurately describe the action.

## **Use the email address as the link**

Hyperlink all email addresses.

Use mailto: prefix in the URL but not in the link text.

## **Visited links**

Differentiating visited links from links not visited is not a requirement under the latest version of WCAG. However, from a usability perspective you may wish to differentiate between the two states and to do this you still have to take accessibility into consideration.

WCAG requires that the foreground and background colours have a 4.5:1 contrast ratio at Level AA and a 7:1 contrast ratio at Level AAA. You can use a contrast checker tool to determine what the ratio is between any foreground and background colour.

## **Browser behaviour**

WCAG states that it is better not to open new windows and tabs since they can be disorienting for people, especially people who have difficulty perceiving visual content. However, there are some situations where it is preferable from an accessibility perspective to open a new window or tab:

1. Opening a page containing context-sensitive information, such as help instructions, or an alternate means of completing a form, such as a calendar-based date picker, will significantly disrupt a multi-step workflow, such as filling in and submitting a form, if the page is opened in the same window or tab.
2. The user is logged into a secured area of a site, and following a link to a page outside of the secured area would terminate the user's logon. In this case opening external links in an external window allows the user to access such references while keeping their login active in the original window.

It is recommended that when links are opened to a new window, there is advance warning.

## **Tables**

Tables are difficult to display on mobile phone screens.

Only use tables for displaying numbers and figures, and information that is too detailed for the text.

Use a table only if there is not a simpler way to present your content, such as a list, paragraph of text or diagram.

Accessible tables need HTML mark-up that indicates header cells and data cells and defines their relationship. Assistive technologies use this information to provide context to users.

Further guidance on structuring tables can be found from the [Australian Government Style Manual](#).

### Further guidance: creating accessible tables

The Web Accessibility Initiative provides [a tutorial on creating accessible tables](#).

## Navigation labels

Write the navigation label to meet the user's needs.

The label should tell all users what they will find at the destination. Often it will be the same as the page title.

Keyword analysis tools can help.

Use sentence case (an initial capital then lower case) for navigation labels, except when using proper nouns.

## *Requirement 7.6* Content must follow a consistent 'one government' writing style

Taking a consistent approach to producing content reduces confusion for both the author and person reading the information.

Use plain language and write short and simple sentences in an active voice. All content authors should refer to the [Digital Services Content Writing Guide](#).

## *Requirement 7.7* Content must be provided in the most useful and accessible format for the community

Provide content in a format that a wide range of users can access regardless of the technology they are using, location or digital proficiency. HTML is the most widely accessible format, and has benefits for SEO as well.

Refer to the [Digital Services Accessibility and Inclusivity Standard](#) for more information on this standard.

## *Requirement 7.8* Content must be designed for easy discovery

If you have web-based content available to the public, your website should be designed to expose your information to search engines.

Most users will find your content through a search engine like Google, not through your home page or website. Optimising your content so search engines can index it will ensure your

content is discovered more easily. For further guidance please refer to the Website Metadata Tagging [Standard](#) and [Guidelines](#).

## Page content

Use clear introductions, heading structure, conclusions and topics to organise content into paragraphs.

Check for correct spelling and grammar.

Cite any sources properly using internal or external links.

Use keywords naturally throughout your content.

Use synonyms that Google uses to determine a page's relevancy.

Tools like Google's AdWords Keyword Planner or Keyword Tool will also suggest keywords you can use. These tools also give you an estimated monthly search volume.

## URL path

The website page's URL should include the main keywords for that page (note agencies who are on boarded to the whole of government portal will use the WA.gov.au URL standard).

Each word in the URL should be separated using dashes (-) and lower case.

Length: try to keep it below 100 characters.

## Title tags

Describe what the page is about and use tags that are unique to each page.

Use your main keywords.

Length: about 60-70 characters.

## Meta description tag

Use a description that accurately summarises the page content and is unique to each page.

Use keywords to create a compelling description that a searcher will want to click.

Length: up to 300 characters long.

## Header tag

Your h1 heading tag should give users a quick overview of the content on the page. It should support the keyword theme from the metadata and use the main keywords.

Adding h2 and h3 heading tags helps structure your content more clearly. Try to include main keywords in at least 1 subheading and keyword variations in lower headings.

Ensure that heading structure is semantically correct and that heading levels are not skipped. Avoid using bold for headings. This practice is crucial to enhance accessibility, readability and SEO.

## Images

Include descriptive captions in the image alt tag, caption and file name. For further guidance please refer to the [Accessibility and Inclusivity Standard](#).

## Internal links

Link to other pages on your website as appropriate.

Make sure your links use keywords in the link text that is relevant to the page it's linked to.

## Search engine listings

Ensure your website information, for example addresses, phone numbers, opening hours, photos, and maps are displayed correctly by major search engines.

For example, create a Google My Business account and manage your business listing on Bing.

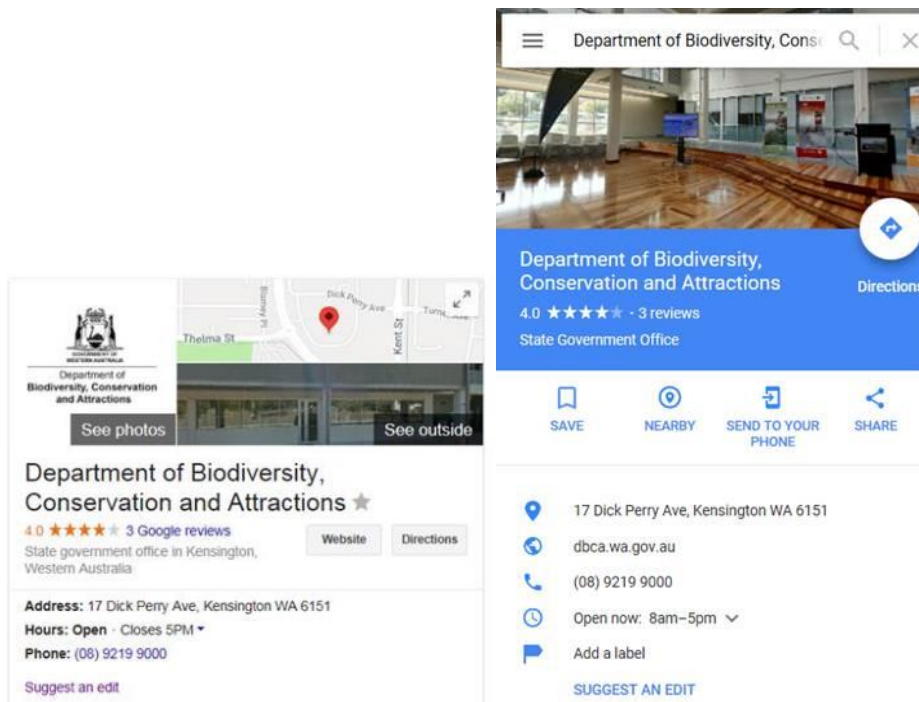


Figure 1: Google Business Listing

If an organisation is not owned, click the 'Own this business?' link next to the Suggest an edit link to take ownership.

[Suggest an edit](#) · [Own this business?](#)

Figure 2: Take Ownership of your Google Business Listing

Further information is available to:

- [add or claim your business listing on Google](#)
- [verify your local business listing on Google](#)
- [edit your business listing on Google](#)
- [manage your business listing on Bing](#)

Further guidance: [writing for search engines](#)

For further information, refer to the Digital Transformation Agency guide on [Understanding search engines](#).

## References and sources

This content guide was developed in consultation with a cross agency working group.

We have also been closely guided by and used content from the:

- [Australian Government – Digital Service Standard](#)
- [UK Government – Government Digital Service Style Guide](#)
- [Digital Transformation Agency](#)
- [NSW Digital Service Toolkit](#)
- [Australian Government Style Manual - Writing and designing content](#)

Other style and design guides consulted:

- [US Plain Language Action and Information Network](#)
- [18F Content Guide](#)