

Reducing sludge on websites

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Behavioural Insights in Action

Reducing sludge on websites

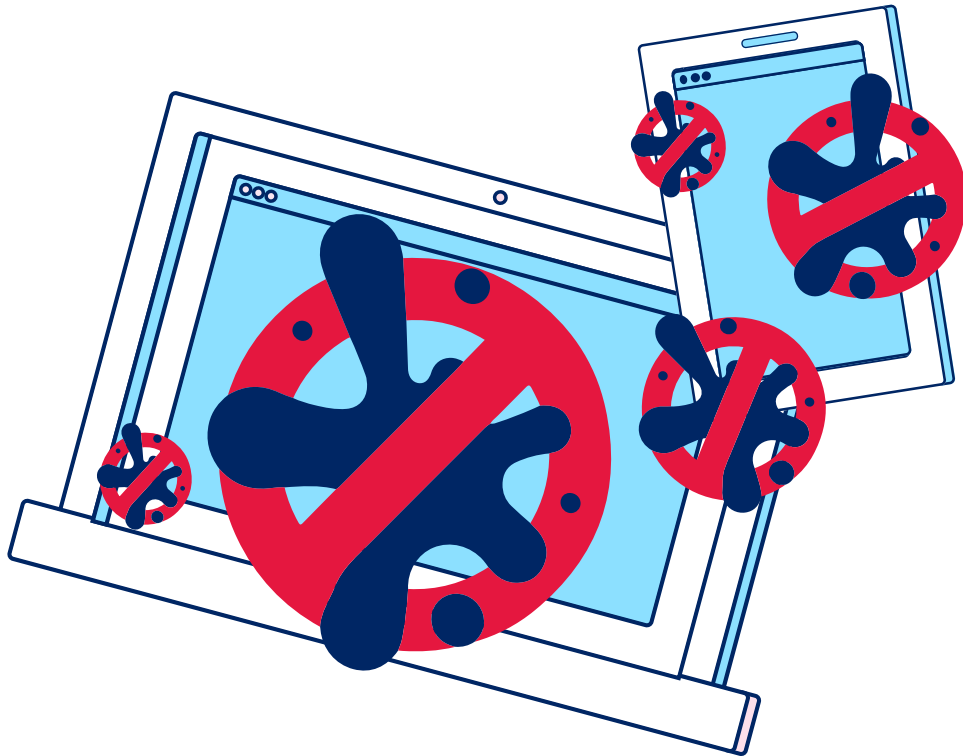
Published 2022

This guide was created by the NSW Behavioural Insights Unit, with assistance from the Behavioural Insights Team, the Reading Writing Hotline and NSW Government partners.

If you have comments, questions, or feedback on the guides get in touch with us at sludge@customerservice.nsw.gov.au

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Reducing sludge on websites

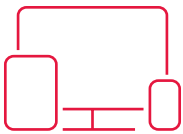
Websites are essential to our relationship with our customers – our websites are the ‘go-to’, the first port of call and the most central channel that customers will interact with.

Customers use our websites to find information, to make applications, to make queries, complaints, payments, suggestions, and more. The content on our websites must be accessible, clear, and easy to use. Our web content must meet our customers’ needs and make their lives easier, not harder.

This guide is mostly around written and visual content and is intended to be accessible and usable for public servants without technical training. While you may have limited control over what you can directly change about a website’s architecture, you can use the following strategies to guide conversations with web developers and digital content professionals.

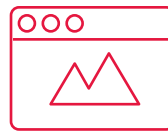
Where to begin

There are four key elements to think about when identifying and reducing sludge from websites.



1 Access and navigation

- Can customers easily find the website?
- Is the website easily accessible, including on mobile phones?
- Is the website easy to navigate?



2 Design

- Have you simplified your website for users to find and understand key information?
- Are visual techniques used consistently throughout the website to highlight key information?
- Does the most important information stand out?



3 Language and content

- Is terminology used consistently throughout the website?
- Is the language easy to understand and written with an active tone?
- Are languages other than English offered?
- Is unfamiliar jargon removed or succinctly defined?

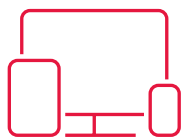


4 Outcome and feedback

- Can customers provide feedback to inform website improvements?
- Is customer engagement and drop-off monitored?

Reducing sludge on websites

Quick reference guide



1 Access and navigation

✓ Can customers find your website?

Ensure your website is easy to find

- Use search terms your customer would actually use
- Drive traffic to your website by adding links from places where customers are already interacting with the government
- Ensure hyperlinks take customers to the specific webpage

✓ Is your website fully accessible?

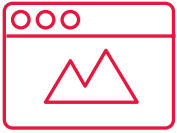
Ensure your website is accessible to people with disability, and works on a broad range of browsers and all devices

- Ensure your website meets the latest version of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)
- Ensure your website is optimised for mobile phones

✓ Is your website easy to navigate?

Guide your customer through the website

- Personalise the user experience by grouping relevant content into relatable sections or segments that your customers will identify with
- Give customers navigation control by providing easy-to-use search bars
- Use pull-down menus with a limited set of 5-7 choices
- Make your hyperlinks to headings, pages and downloads as descriptive as possible



2 Design



Is the relevant information easy to access?

Simplify your website to make it easier to find and understand key information

- Breaking up sections of text into shorter, digestible “chunks”
- Using headings that are short, descriptive, and relevant to the reader
- Use white space to increase comprehension and avoid visual clutter



Does the website visually highlight the most important information?

Use visual design elements to increase the salience of key information

- Placing the most important information at the top of a list, and in the middle of the screen
- Using symbolic icons to reinforce the meaning conveyed by the text
- Using colour to make the most important information more salient



3 Language and content



Have you minimised the workload for customers?

Simplify vocabulary and sentence structures to make your website content easier to understand

- Use plain language and short sentences
- Clear links to translated material (where present)
- Replace jargon and legal terms with easy-to-understand alternatives
- Use pop-up definitions for complex terms and be consistent
- Use first-person questions to break up chunks of information



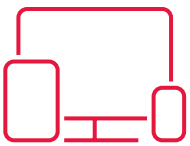
4 Outcome and feedback



Do you understand how customers are engaging with the website?

Monitor customer engagement and provide customers with the opportunity to give feedback

- Monitor customer engagement and drop off
- Provide a way for customers to share their experience with the website in real-time



1 Access and navigation

In this section

[Make your website easy to find](#)

[Guide your customer through the website](#)

Make your website easy to find

Example

Find it

Improving customer experience



Top results

[Behavioural insights in action](#)

[Reducing sludge on websites](#)

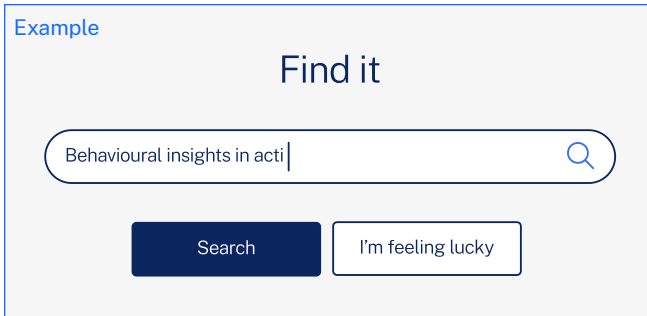
[Department of Customer Service](#)

Most customers, even customers who are familiar with your process, will not remember the full name of the web page they are after, let alone the URL. For most people, Google is their home page. This means that you need to make sure you can find your web page from Google using key words.

There are around 1.9 billion websites, so you should aim for your website to appear at the top of the Google search for your priority keywords, and to be linked directly from other channels.

How do I do this?

Use search terms your customer will use.

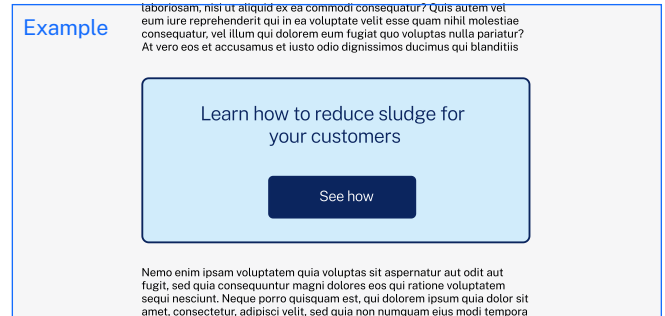


One study revealed that the top three links returned in a search accounted for 44 per cent of all clicks on a search engine.¹

Every extra search or click that your customer must undertake to find your website adds sludge to the process.

One way to find these keywords is to ask real customers what they search to find your website. Then ask people who haven't visited the website what they think they'd have to search to locate it.

Drive traffic to your website by adding links to it in places where your customers are already likely to be.*

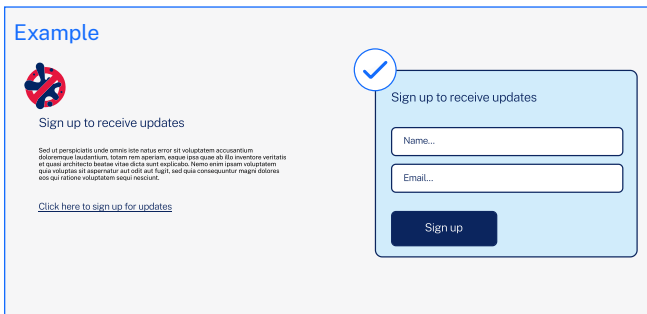


*Especially channels that deal with large numbers of customers.

This can expand your customer reach and increase traffic to websites that might otherwise not be searched for.

For example, the UK government increased sign-ups to the organ donor register by putting a prompt to join on the national car tax website (the government's highest traffic website).²

Ensure hyperlinks take customers directly to the specific webpage.

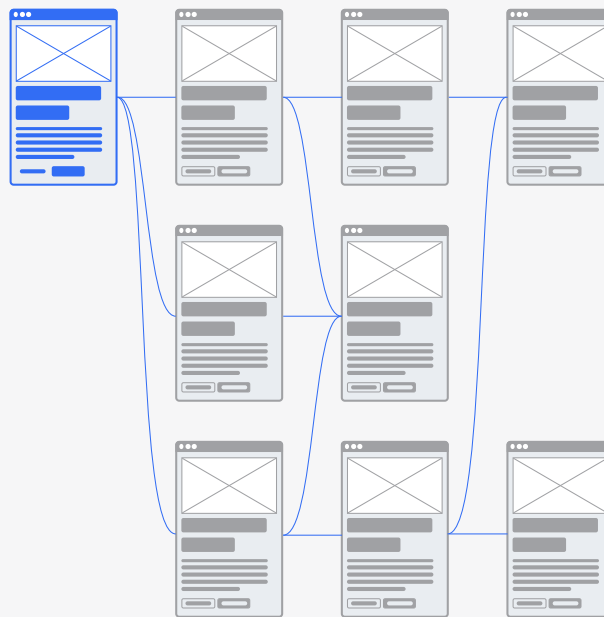


For example, a trial in the UK found that directing customers to the specific form, as opposed to the webpage that contained the form, increased completion of the form from 19% to 23%.³

A note on accessibility and optimisation.

All NSW Government web content should meet **accessibility standards** and be optimised for mobile phone users. Talk to your digital content professional if you have concerns about the accessibility/optimisation of any web content you are working on.

Guide your customer through the website

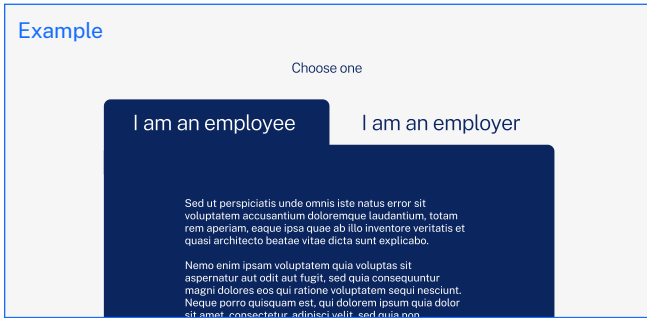


Customers who can't easily find the specific information they need will likely leave the site without it. One study tracked behaviour across 2 billion page views and found that over half of readers spent less than 15 seconds actively viewing a webpage.⁴ It's important to design your website to be easy to navigate.⁵



How do I do this?

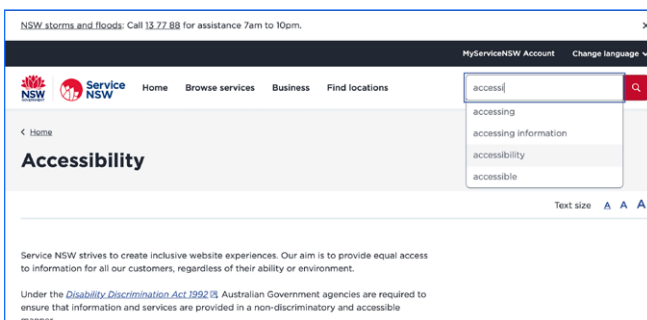
Group information relevant to specific groups together.



Signpost this information with a heading describing the audience, for example 'I am an employee' or 'I am an employer'.

Presenting information this way helps to personalise your content. Your customers will be drawn to the headings which describe them.

Give customers navigation control by using search bars.



Many websites have now integrated a search bar to mimic the Google search bar/functionality that most customers are familiar with. For example, Amazon and **Service NSW** allows users to efficiently search for products and services by displaying a prominent search bar on every page of their websites.⁶

Use pull-down menus with a limited set of 5-7 choices.

Providing too many options can make users feel overwhelmed, resulting in 'choice overload'. Customers are most likely to experience choice overload when faced with time constraints, complex choices, and when they aren't familiar with the content they're engaging with.⁷ To prevent choice overload, limit menus and other sets of choices to 5-7 items wherever possible.

Digital literacy

Navigating websites and accessing digital tools can be very challenging for some customers.

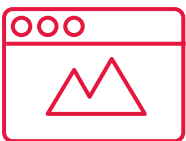
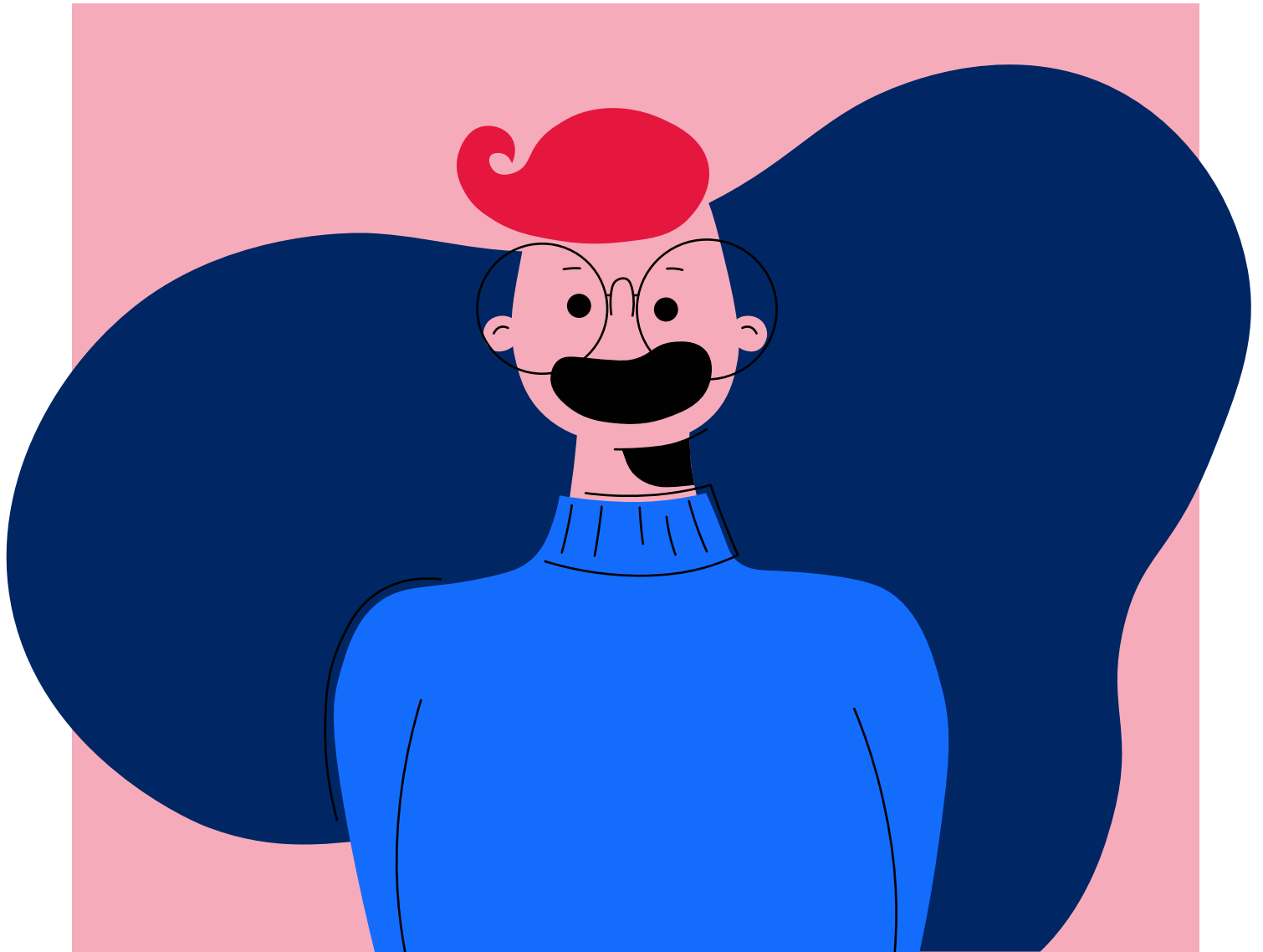
Approximately 34% of Australians aged 50 years and over (about 2.7 million people) had either low digital literacy levels or did not use digital devices or the internet.⁸

We shouldn't assume that all our customers will be comfortable with accessing web content. When working on your website, bear in mind that some of your customers will need help (from Service NSW centres, libraries, or other programs) to access digital content.

Make your hyperlinks to headings, pages and documents as descriptive as possible.

The eye is drawn to underlined text, which makes hyperlinks on a page stand out. By making these hyperlinks descriptive, customers can use them to quickly and easily see how to navigate through your website.

For example, instead of saying "Use this tool to check your eligibility for this program", you should hyperlink the descriptive text, "[Use this tool to check your eligibility for this program.](#)"



2 Design

In this section

[Simplify your website to make it easier to find and understand key information](#)

[Use visual design elements to increase the salience of key information](#)

Simplify your website to make it easier to find and understand key information

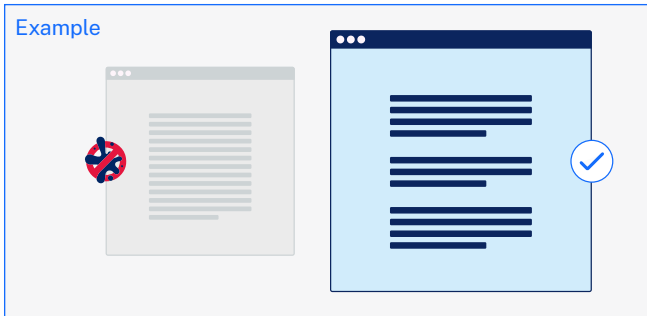
Example



Customers reading on a screen perform more poorly in comprehension tasks (compared to reading on paper).⁹ Your web design should be simple and comprehensible .

How do I do this?

Break up sections of text into shorter, digestible “chunks”.



Long paragraphs and blocks of text are hard to read. We can make it easier for our customers by breaking text into shorter paragraphs which focus on one point at a time. This is called chunking.

Chunking information can make it easier to learn, remember and process information.¹⁰ This is important for websites, where customers are looking for quick answers to their questions. Therefore, paragraphs on websites should be shorter than on paper.

Remember these simple rules-of-thumb: 1-2 sentences per paragraph, and 1 idea or topic per paragraph.¹¹

Use short and descriptive headings that are relevant to the reader.

This makes it easy for customers to understand where they are, and signposts where they want to go next. A good website heading will describe who the information is for and what is on that page or in that paragraph. For example, ‘For parents of children in early childhood’ can be more descriptive if changed to ‘How to support your child’s development from age 0-8’.

Use white space to help with comprehension and avoid visual clutter.



Too much content will overwhelm the reader and make it difficult to find what they’re looking for.¹² To avoid this, you can use white space to simplify your website.

White space refers to the blank space (1) in margins, paddings and gutters, (2) around graphics and images, and (3) between columns, lines and letters. ‘White space’ doesn’t necessarily need to be white, it could be whatever colour the background of your website is.

White space rules-of-thumb¹³

- The more white space around an element, the more the eye is drawn to it, so use this when you want to draw attention to something
- The amount of white space on a page should be balanced.
- Things that are related should be visually grouped together, and things that are unrelated should be far apart, with more white space between them (this is known as the ‘proximity design’ principle)¹⁴
- Consistent space should be used for margins

Use visual design elements to increase the salience of key information

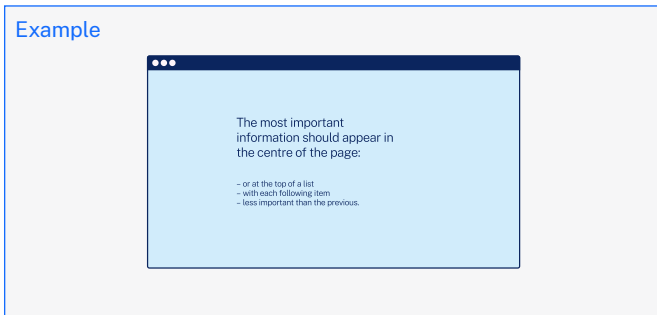
Example



Appealing websites that use accent colours and other visual elements are perceived as more usable, trustworthy and increase user retention.¹⁵

How do I do this?

Place the most important information at the top of a list, and in the middle of the screen.



Our attention naturally gravitates toward the top of a page or list.¹⁶ Draw on this tendency by placing the most critical information at the top and in the middle of each page.

Use colour to make the most important information more salient.¹⁸



Using colour makes the page more visually appealing, and attracts readers to specific content.¹⁹ One study found that using a salient colour helped to attract users' attention to important links and increased users' sense of control when using a mobile search directory.²⁰

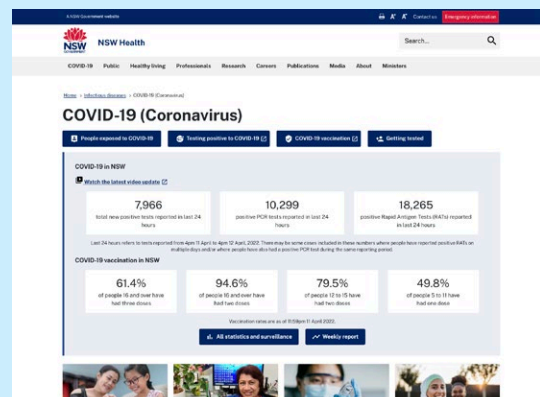
Make sure you use colour sparingly, as any more than 3 or 4 colour tones will overwhelm readers with visual stimuli.²¹ In addition, use contrasting colours for text (e.g. light letters on a dark background) to improve accessibility for people with visual impairments.²² For guidance on which colours to choose, consult the **NSW Government colour palette guide**.

Use icons to reinforce the meaning conveyed by the text

Icons are a great way to quickly convey meaning and help users find information with a quick scan of the page. It is important that icons are used consistently and sparingly, so customers don't need to keep track of and remember too many symbols.

Choose icons that are commonly used and recognised to represent the term you are conveying. You can also pair them with a written explanation. Pairing icons with an explanation of key terms increased customer understanding of contractual terms and privacy policies by 34% compared to text-only definitions.¹⁷

The NSW Health web page on COVID-19 info for the community uses icons to quickly convey meaning and make options salient for customers.





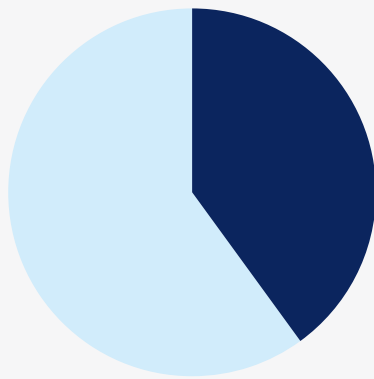
3 Language and content

In this section

[Use plain language to make your website content easier to understand](#)

[How do I know if a website is easy to read?](#)

Use plain language to make your website content easier to understand



40% of Australian's have low literacy skills.

Writing content for this group improves comprehension for all other groups too.
There's no downside.

Why is writing in plain language so important?

Plain language is important because we want to communicate to all our customers, including those with lower literacy skills.

Evidence from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) shows that over 40% of Australians, more than 7 million people, have literacy skills below Level 3.²³

Level 3 is needed to read everyday texts. This means that many of your customers will find it difficult to read and comprehend text on your website.

By simplifying your language choices, you are making your website more accessible for more of your customers.



We should not think of these things as deficits but as factors to plan for. Ask yourself: given our audience, what do we need to do for them?

Remember – there's no downside to making your websites as easy to use, as readable, and as simple as possible.

How do I do this?

Replace jargon and legal terms with easy-to-understand alternatives.

Example

	
Applicants can utilise the customer assistance channel to enquire about the status of their ongoing application.	Once you have applied, you check where your application is up to <u>with this link</u> .

Aim to use the simplest terms possible to help users quickly and easily comprehend the site with a quick skim. Users will rarely read through all the text on a website, instead, they quickly scan the page.

When we refer to jargon, we're talking about words and phrases which are complex or obscure. In government we often use jargon as shorthand to make our work easier, but these terms make things harder for customers.



Using jargon and legal terms make it difficult to scan and digest content. For example, instead of saying "applicants can utilise the customer assistance channel to enquire about the status of their ongoing application" you could say "Once you have applied, you can check where your application is up to with this link".

Use pop-up definitions for complex terms and be consistent.

When a technical or legal term must be used, consider adding definitions that appear when the user hovers their cursor over them. It also helps to use terms consistently throughout your website to avoid confusion.

Use first-person questions to break up chunks of information.

Example

	
Required documentation	What documentation do I need to provide?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Lorem ipsum- Dolor sit amet- Nemo inam sit ipsum	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Lorem ipsum- Dolor sit amet- Nemo inam sit ipsum

Most people come to a government website with specific questions. Make their experience easier by pre-empting their questions and organising your content to answer them. For example, a page about a service application could include headings like "Am I eligible?" and "What documentation do I need to provide?"

This technique has been found to increase comprehension of contractual terms and privacy policies relative to the use of headings that are topics (e.g., "Required documentation").²⁴

Note that this should not be confused with FAQ pages, instead try and think 'what questions will customers have on this page' and weave the answers into the content, rather than creating a separate 'FAQ' section.

Clearly signpost translated information.

If you are providing translated information, like downloadable resources or a translated version of a web page, make sure it is easy for customers to find.

Prominent buttons which use text in the language of the translation help to draw customer attention to the translation. This is more effective than just writing in English 'click for X language version'.

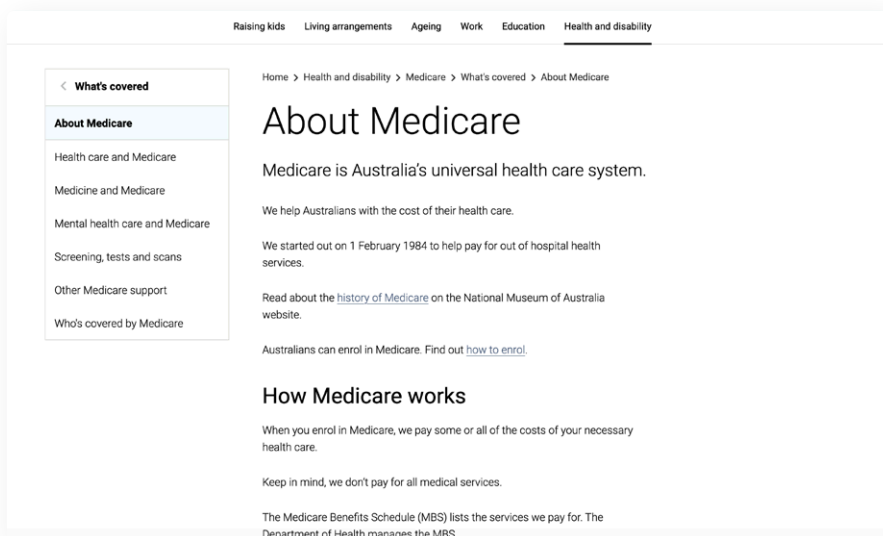
How do I know if a website is easy to read?

Reading web content from the perspective of your customer can be challenging, especially if you wrote it. The best way to assess readability is to test website with customers of different literacy levels.

We understand that this is not always possible, particularly if you are rapidly developing multiple versions of a webpage.

If you can't test your work with customers, we recommend using digital tools to assess the readability of your website.

The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level test is designed to measure how many years of formal education would be required, on average, to understand a passage of text.²⁵ The fewer years of formal education required, the easier the text is to read and understand.



The Medicare website makes use of plain, simple English, abundant whitespace, and a personalised tone ('When you enrol in Medicare...'). This creates a navigable, easy to read website which helps customers find out key information quickly.

Note

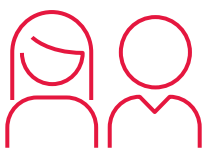
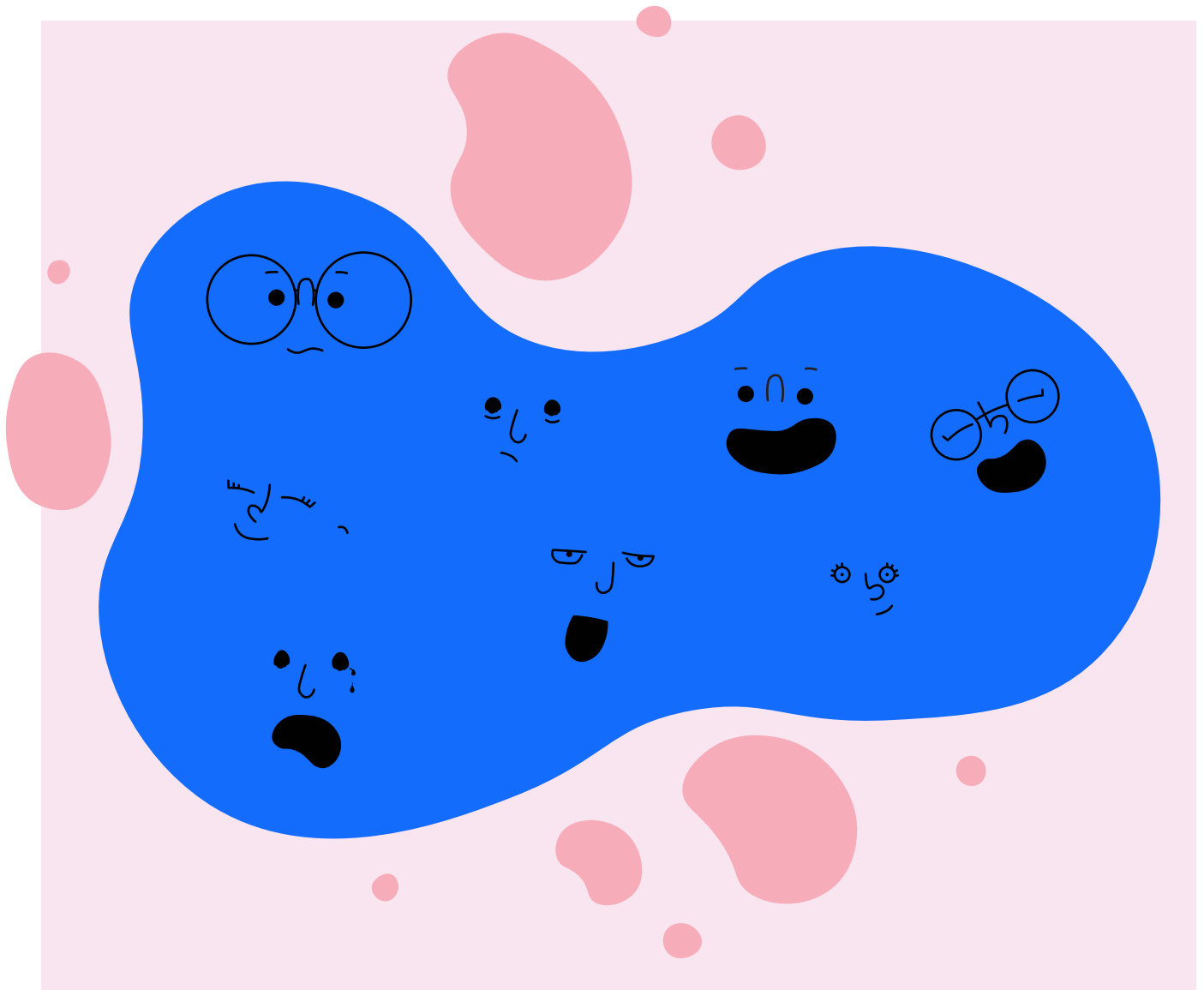
In the Australian context these 'grade levels' and years of formal education do not apply. You should not take the results to literally indicate that a given piece of text is readable for someone with X many years of formal education.

That said – the grade levels remain as useful indicators of change. If you use the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level test on a webpage and it says 'grade level 11-12', then revise the webpage and

get a 'grade level 7-8' result, you can tell you've changed it for the better.

You can use online tools to conduct a Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level test on your own writing and it has even been built into many word processors.

The Hemingway Editor is a helpful online tool, which identifies lengthy complex sentences and common writing errors.



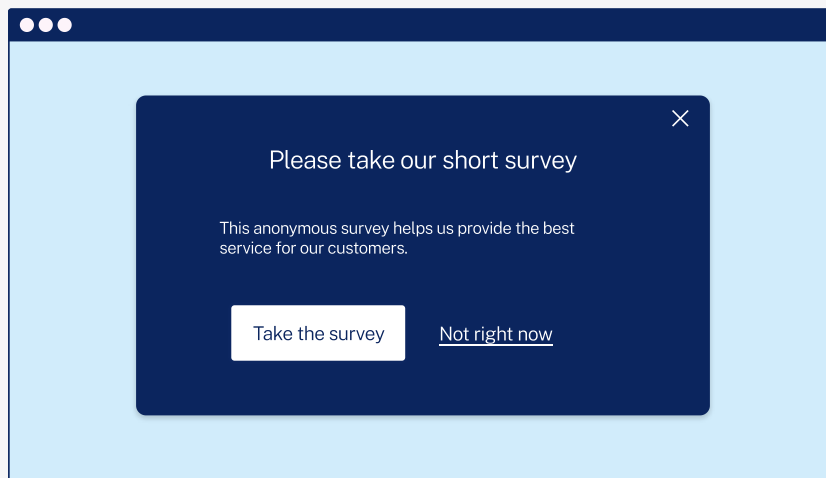
4 Outcome and feedback

In this section

[Monitor customer engagement and provide customers with the opportunity to give feedback](#)

Monitor customer engagement and provide customers with the opportunity to give feedback

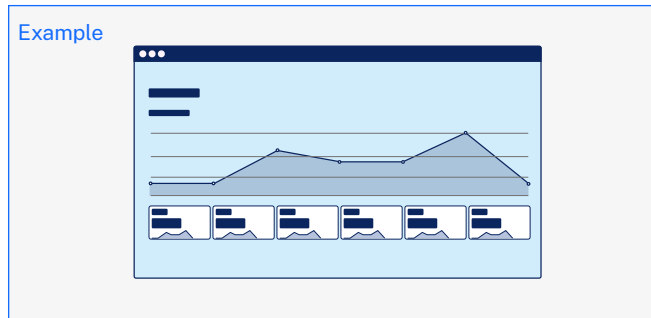
Example



This will help you identify customer pain points and insights that can inform website improvements.

How do I do this?

Monitor customer engagement and drop off.



Most websites can now collect data on how long customers spend on specific pages, and where you find common errors or drop off points. This information can be especially helpful for websites that involve processes like applications because it can show the part of the process that could be made easier for customers.

For example, in a trial in the US the Behavioural Insights Team were able to identify specifically where in the process customers dropped off when applying for a subsidized travel scheme.²⁶

Provide a way for customers to share feedback in real-time.



Online environments enable quick and easy collection of in-the-moment customer feedback. This has been widely implemented in NSW with the adoption of the customer sentiment check widget. Customers can quickly provide positive or negative feedback on their experience of a webpage by selecting the thumbs up or down, as well as providing additional comments. This feedback can then help improve the user experience design.

How to test whether changes to your website work

What works is not always consistent or certain.. Even when we use evidence-based behavioural insights, we cannot always be sure what will work and what will not in a particular context. Testing proposed changes to your websites is a critical step because it:

- Enables you to be confident that your changes yield the desired benefits
- Helps you minimise unintended consequences
- Helps you maximise cost-benefit because you will only implement and scale the changes that are proven to work

One of the most useful testing methods you can use for web content is A/B testing, this involves showing half of your users one version of a page and the other half a different version. The allocation of which page ('A' or 'B') is displayed to each user is done randomly, so you can get a good idea of which version performs better.

To learn more about A/B testing and find out how to do it, <https://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-05/How-to-test-whether-your-behaviour-change-intervention-works.pdf>

Endnotes

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We want to hear from you!

If you have comments, questions, or feedback
on the guides get in touch with us at
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