



User-Friendly Forms

Key Principles and Practices to Effectively Design and Communicate Australian Government Forms



Better Practice Guide

January 2006



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Auditor-General's Foreword

This guide aims to increase the useability and effectiveness of forms¹ provided by Australian Government agencies to individuals, to support service delivery and to satisfy other government objectives.

Australian Government agencies issue and receive back millions of paper forms each year. Well-designed forms make it easier for members of the public to access government services, and support administrative efficiency. This is why effective forms are a crucial element in the efficient and effective delivery of services to customers. Common principles of useability and accessibility apply to all forms regardless of the channels (such as in person, by telephone, online and by post) through which they are received and lodged.

This guide is intended as a reference document for people responsible for the design and testing of Australian Government forms. Its guidance on sound practice was developed in the course of the Australian National Audit Office's (ANAO's) audit, *Forms for Individual Service Delivery (Audit Report No. 26 2005-06)*. The guidance reflects principles of management observed in some of the agencies covered in that audit, as well as the fundamentals of good practice identified by experts in various aspects of form design and accessibility.

The guidance in this booklet is presented as a series of checklists. However, not all components of the checklists need necessarily be adopted for all forms. Agencies should assess the relevance of these principles and practices for each form and form development project. Conversely, agencies may actively consider their reasons for not adopting the suggested principles and practices.

I would like to thank those agencies, organisations and individuals that provided assistance to the *Forms for Individual Service Delivery* audit, and in turn the development of this guide.



Ian McPhee
Auditor-General

¹ A form is a template containing space for the input of variable information

Structure of this Guide

Attributes of Useable Forms:

- Clear purpose
- Quick start
- Short and concise
- Reading ease
- Minimum complexity
- Effective layout
- Logical sequencing
- Accessibility

Provides a checklist of attributes of useable forms (pages 5 – 12)

Effective Form Design and Communication Processes and Practices:

- Understand and implement clients' requirements for form design
- Understand and implement clients' preferred communication channels
- Adequate online forms
- Effective business processes and practices

Provides a checklist of processes and practices for effective form design and communication (pages 13 – 16)

Suggested Reading

Provides sources of guidance for form design (page 17)

Attributes of Useable Forms

This section provides a checklist of attributes of useable forms.

Clear purpose

The form should clearly inform the users of its purpose from their perspectives.

■ Does the title succinctly reveal the form's purpose?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
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■ Does the form immediately explain its purpose?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
--	------------------------------	-----------------------------

■ Is the explanation clear, using concise language which avoids the use of acronyms and other obscure terms?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
--	------------------------------	-----------------------------

■ Does the form display a unique identifier (but not in the title)?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
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■ Does the form briefly explain the rationale for questions?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
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■ Does the form explain why it requests intrusive personal information?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
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Quick start

First impressions are important, so the form should allow the user to easily and quickly begin to fill it in, while still providing sufficient guidance.

■ Is introductory material kept to a minimum by:

- ▶ avoiding long preambles? Yes No
 - ▶ integrating contextual information with the questions to which it relates in the form, rather than explaining it up-front? Yes No
-

■ Is introductory material well laid out and clear by:

- ▶ using features such as icons and diagrams at the outset of the form, to enable the applicant to quickly begin to fill it out? Yes No
 - ▶ ordering early questions so that the user gets a sense of progress? Yes No
-

■ Are essential messages signposted at the front of the form, such as where eligibility criteria and customers' rights are outlined?

Yes No

■ Does the beginning of the form contain the agency's confidentiality or privacy undertakings?

Yes No

Short and concise

To improve completion rates and reduce administration costs, forms should be as short and concise as possible.

■ Is all information directly used for the purpose of the form? Yes No

■ Does the form ask only for personal details that are not otherwise readily available to the agency issuing the form? Yes No

■ If guidance is extensive, is it in a separate booklet or document? Yes No

■ If the form is long or multi-use, can it be transformed into separate forms or modules tailored for specific groups? Yes No

Reading ease

To assist all users, but especially those with low literacy levels, forms should be easy to read and understand.

■ Is the language simple, using everyday terms? Yes No

■ Are there few words per sentence and few sentences per paragraph? Yes No

■ Are there many icons, which assist understanding? Yes No

■ Is there minimal use of acronyms, legal and technical terms? Yes No

■ Does the form use words that mirror users' thinking and language, rather than that of the form's author? Yes No

■ Does the agency use readily available software tools to test the readability of forms? Yes No

Minimum complexity

Complex forms can be daunting for people to fill in, so forms should be as simple as possible.

■ Are users **not** required to:

- ▶ perform intricate calculations? Yes No
 - ▶ sort through a large number of options? Yes No
 - ▶ recall information from the distant past? Yes No
 - ▶ assemble and assimilate a large range of information? Yes No
-

■ Do writing instructions and questions **not** assume that the user of the form possesses complex or technical information? Yes No

■ Do most questions have pick lists of answers? Yes No

■ Are the instructions for completion clear and simple? Yes No

■ Does the form provide examples of how to respond? Yes No

■ Is there a form checklist, especially where attachments are required? Yes No

■ Are significant fields in the form pre-populated, to the extent possible? Yes No

Effective layout

Layout is the placement of elements in a given space and format. Good layout assists users to fill out forms accurately and with ease.

■ Is the form as self-instructing as possible, by using navigation aids, such as icons, symbols and diagrams? Yes No

■ Are regularly occurring elements, such as question and answer boxes, placed consistently and predictably? Yes No

■ Is there sufficient room for the range of anticipated answers, including a facility for additional comments? Yes No

■ Are there guides or grids to assist the user to fill in numbers? Yes No

■ Is the form legible, in that it:

▶ avoids small print sizes, decorative fonts, italics, extensive capitalised text, long line lengths, close line spacing and poor colour and shading contrast? Yes No

▶ effectively uses borders and shading, font size and spaces? Yes No

▶ uses colours visible to those with vision impairment? Yes No

Logical sequencing

Proper item sequencing on a form can increase the speed and accuracy of reading and completing answers, as well as generating a good data flow.

■ Does the form anticipate the normal left to right, top to bottom sequence used by readers of English? Yes No

■ Is appropriate alternative sequencing used for forms provided in other languages? Yes No

■ Is there a consistent and predictable sequence throughout the form? Yes No

■ Are there conventional and familiar approaches to collecting common information, such as name, address and phone number? Yes No

■ Does the form keep branching and question skips to a minimum, but adequately signpost those that are required? Yes No

■ Is there little need for the user to move back and forth between questions? Yes No

■ Are the questions that apply to most people up front, with the questions that apply to only some groups further down the form? Yes No

Accessibility

Forms should be available in a range of styles or formats that take account of the particular needs people may have as a result of their cultural background, language, literacy constraints, physical or mental disability, or geographic location.

■ Is the form and relevant information translated into other, major languages used by the main client groups? Yes No

■ Is the form and relevant information available in various formats that are legible or accessible for those with vision impairment, such as large print, Braille, audio and Easy English? Yes No

■ More generally, is the form accessible for people with a disability consistent with the guidelines provided by Vision Australia?² Yes No

■ Where the agency's website contains forms and related information packages in only one format, such as portable document format (PDF), does the website notify that alternative formats are available? Yes No

■ Does the agency's website explain how members of the public can access alternative formats, such as by telephone call or email? Yes No

■ Did the agency train staff sufficiently that they demonstrate disability/accessibility awareness, understanding and respect? Yes No

² See reference at the end of this guide.

Effective Form Design and Communication Processes and Practices

This section provides a checklist of business processes and practices that support effective form design and communication.

Understand and implement clients' requirements for form design

Form design should be based on understanding clients' requirements for useable forms.

-
- Has the agency researched client preferences for form design, especially relating to language and overall format of the form, by:
 - ▶ obtaining direct feedback from clients, including via customer satisfaction surveys, focus groups, and pilot studies? Yes No
 - ▶ studying broad demographic profiles of clients and analysing question completion patterns? Yes No
 - ▶ gathering information about clients' perceptions of its forms in the course of daily business, for example from Customer Service Officers, Ministerial and departmental correspondence, Call Centres, complaints, and staff suggestions? Yes No
 - ▶ collecting client information from more than one source, and carefully considering the results of research? Yes No
-
- Has the agency consulted community groups to identify communication needs and preferences? Yes No
-

Understand and implement clients' preferred communication channels

Forms can be cost effectively issued and received by providing options for alternative communication channels.

■ Has the agency considered issuing and receiving the form by all major channels? Yes No

■ Does the agency offer telephone-assisted form completion? Yes No

■ Is the form available online? Yes No

■ If the form is available online, does the agency regularly test the links? Yes No

■ If the form is **not** available online, does the agency provide information on alternative ways of obtaining and completing it? Yes No

■ Has the agency researched client preferences for communications channels (modes), by:

▶ obtaining direct feedback from clients, including via customer satisfaction surveys, focus groups, and pilot studies? Yes No

▶ gathering information in the course of daily business? Yes No

Adequate online forms

Online forms must satisfy Australian Government requirements, and be easily accessed.

■ Does the form satisfy the requirements of the *GovernmentOnline* strategy, especially that:

▶ it is available online, to be electronically completed? Yes No

▶ it observes the World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C's) Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 1.0? Yes No

■ Does the form satisfy the requirements of the *Australian Government Access and Distribution Strategy*?³ Yes No

■ Is the form discoverable (that is, able to be found easily)? Yes No

³ This strategy was developed at the request of the Australian Government's Information Management Strategy Committee which reports to the Australian Government's Management Advisory Committee. When published in 2006, the strategy will provide guidance to agencies on how, and through which means, services may be delivered to customers.

Business processes and practices that support effective form design and communication

Agencies must have good business processes to provide useable forms by appropriate channels on an ongoing basis.

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- | | | |
|--|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| ■ Did the agency establish clear responsibility for the form's management by a designated Forms Officer? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
|--|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
-
- | | | |
|--|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| ■ Did content owners in the agency consult the design experts? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
|--|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
-
- | | | |
|---|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| ■ Did the form design bring together operational and policy perspectives from across the agency, as well as external expertise? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
|---|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
-
- | | | |
|--|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| ■ Did relevant managers 'sign off' the content of the form, as quality assurance and risk management measures? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
|--|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
-
- | | | |
|---|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| ■ Was the form developed according to protocols, design standards and checklists? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
|---|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
-
- | | | |
|---|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| ■ Was there systematic form design, testing and review processes, including: | | |
| ▶ regular or normal reviews that are open-ended, resulting in usually small-scale improvements? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| ▶ re-engineering reviews with specific policy or operational objectives, which are likely to result in major changes? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
-
- | | | |
|---|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| ■ Was there a protocol to ensure that the content of forms is substantively the same, no matter which channel a customer uses to access the form? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
|---|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
-
- | | | |
|---|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| ■ Does the agency actively manage expenditure on form design and review, and its impact on administrative efficiency? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> |
|---|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
-

Suggested Reading

Australian Government Access and Distribution Strategy – to be published by the Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO) in 2006.

Australian Government Information Management Office, *Australians' use of and satisfaction with government services*, AGIMO, Canberra, 2005.

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Snooks and Co, *Style manual: for authors, editors and printers*, 6th edn, John Wiley and Sons Australia Ltd, Milton, 2002.

UK National Audit Office, *Improving and reviewing government forms: A practical guide* [Internet]. The Stationery Office, London, 2003, available from <http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/nao_reports/02-03/02031145_good_practice_guide.pdf>.

UK National Audit Office, *Difficult forms: How government agencies interact with citizens* [Internet]. The Stationery Office, London, 2003, available from <http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/nao_reports/02-03/02031145.pdf>.

Vision Australia factsheets and resources, available from <<http://www.visionaustralia.org.au>>.

World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C's) *Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 1.0*.

