

Audit Report Writing Guide

A guide for
writing audit reports
to the Ministry of Health

Revised November 2014

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Introduction

This Audit Report Writing Guide offers guidance on preparing audit reports for the Ministry of Health so that each report provides clear, consistent and helpful information.

Good written communication is essential so that Ministry advisors can interpret and act on the information you have gathered. Your reports also need to be accessible to other readers and be to a publishable standard. Any member of the public may read the full audit report, as a published document. It is important that full audit reports do not contain information that could breach the Health Information Privacy Code 1994 when published.

Communicating well involves paying attention to all areas of written language, from using plain English and correct grammar to formatting in a way that assists understanding and guides your readers through your audit report. This guide covers:

- key elements in completing the Audit Report Tool (Section 1)
- how to write clearly and consistently (Section 2)
- how to structure a sentence accurately (Section 3)
- principles of inclusive language (Section 4)
- how to format a report to make it easier for your readers to understand and navigate (Section 5)
- how to use clear, correct punctuation (Section 6)
- how and when to use abbreviations (Section 7)
- what style to follow for numbers and symbols (Section 8)
- what spelling style to follow (Section 9).

This guide presents broad principles and offers some specific guidelines, consistent with the Ministry of Health's *Communication Standards for the Ministry of Health: Revised June 2013*. However, no guide can cover every circumstance of writing that you will meet. What is important is to apply the broad principles to your own writing and, where you meet a specific term or an aspect of writing that is not mentioned here, use it accurately and consistently throughout your audit report (seeking additional information from another source if needed).

1 Completing the Audit Report Tool template

This section focuses on the requirements specific to completing the Audit Report Tool. Later sections cover principles of style and substance that apply to all writing, and in particular completing a clear, consistent and useful audit report.

Write a complete report

In your audit report, complete all relevant fields. Refer to the instructions in the front of the Audit Report Tool and within the *Designated Auditing Agency Handbook* (DAA Handbook) to ensure you have completed all relevant fields.

Enter the full name of each auditor

In the 'Audit Team' section of the Audit Report Tool, enter the full name of each auditor on the team as entered into the auditor register within the Provider Regulation Monitoring System (PRMS). Providing this complete information assists with data analysis and avoids audit reports being rejected when submitted in the PRMS.

Examples

Correct entry	Incorrect entry
Josephine Smith	J Smith Jo Smith Josephine Smith (lead auditor) Josephine Smith (RN)
Michael Mann	MK Mann Mike Mann Michael Mann/Josephine Smith

Write facts

Base your audit report entirely on the evidence you have gathered. Avoid any statement of opinion. State your findings:

- unequivocally, so that your readers can clearly understand what you have observed
- in the past tense without any statement of intent unless it is appropriate to use the present tense, for example a statement of fact that is unlikely to change, such as, a building's location or an onward requirement arising from the audit (ie, past events require a past tense).

Examples

Incorrect tense

Seven files are reviewed

A doctor is interviewed

The provider was required to ...

Correct tense

Seven files were reviewed

A doctor was interviewed

The provider is required to ...

Avoid value statements or adjectives such as 'commendable'. Consider other options that better describe why the auditor considered the finding to be commendable. For example, it may be because it was comprehensive.

Examples

Vague or opinionated statement

The staff made only two errors.

In the first sentence, 'only' is an implied judgement of the seriousness of making two errors. Simply delete 'only' to amend the sentence.

The new buildings are impressive.

Replaced with unequivocal, factual statement

The staff made two errors.

The new buildings are spacious and designed to cater to the needs of staff and residents well.

As well as being judgemental, 'impressive' conveys no substantial information. The second sentence provides a precise description of the benefits of the new buildings without casting a general judgement on them.

Provide precise but concise evidence

Be specific in the evidence that you present. Consider whether you have answered key questions such as when, where, by whom and how and, if you have not, add further detail. Ensure that the forms of evidence collected are easily identified so that triangulation or corroboration of evidence is obvious. Also be clear whether an issue identified relates to policy or practice.

Examples

Partial presentation of evidence

Staff discuss advocacy services with residents and their families.

Key question: When?

Staff have access to a comprehensive education programme.

Key question: By whom?

The rest home has improved its procedures for hand hygiene.

Key question: How?

Improved by adding precise detail

Staff discuss advocacy services with residents and their families on admission to the service.

Staff have access to a comprehensive education programme delivered by ...

The rest home has improved its procedures for hand hygiene by ...

Make results of the audit less susceptible to misunderstanding by providing sufficient and appropriate evidence to support findings and conclusions. The reader needs to understand the nature and extent of the issues being reported so they can judge the prevalence and consequence.

Include statements of cause and effect as this assists in determining the risk. For example, if stating that a procedure has not been followed, you need to also state the resulting effect. If the procedure was not followed and this resulted in an error, the risk would be higher than if a procedure not followed because it was out of date and had been superseded by a different procedure.

Do not provide unnecessary information

Information reported needs to be material to the facts that form the audit evidence.

Avoid using irrelevant information, especially where such information may identify an individual or provide a level of detail that is unnecessary.

Limit use of intensifiers (for example, 'clearly', 'special', 'key', 'well', 'reasonable', 'significant', 'very') as they lack precision and reflect personal values without serving any real purpose. For example 'significant' compared to what?

Ensure privacy of individuals is maintained. This includes staff of a service as well as any consumers of the service. Never use unique identifiers in audit reports.

Avoid providing information in the audit report that would be better placed in auditor field notes. The audit report should reflect the analysis from the field notes and group evidence accordingly.

Example

Unnecessary information

A 54-year-old patient with a history of diabetes and hypertension was admitted three days ago with angina.

Improved by removing potentially identifiable information.

Improved by removing unnecessary information

A patient recently admitted to the medical service.

Distinguish between services in presenting evidence

Where the audit covers more than one service (eg, a hospital and a rest home, or multiple services within a DHB), record the evidence in a way that distinguishes between the services in terms of the findings and level of compliance specific to each service. For example, within an evidence field, you could add subheadings identifying each service. See Section 5 for more information on formatting subheadings.

Example

Ourtown Health

Ourtown Rest Home [Specific evidence]

Ourtown Rest Home Dementia Service [Specific evidence]

Ourtown Hospital [Specific evidence]

Where the audit evidence is generic across all services for a particular criterion or criteria, you do not need to use subheadings, but when presenting the evidence, you should state clearly that it is generic.

Use paragraph sub-headings to ensure evidence is distinguished. Be clear as to whether evidence relates to the whole service or a part of the service.

Avoid duplication

Avoid duplicating information across an audit report. When reporting evidence, the information should differ at the standard level compared with the criterion level.

Standard level

- Summary level evidence of the Standard that includes all relevant criteria (should not be a repeat verbatim of criterion level reporting).
- Evidence is not reporting “this is an opportunity for improvement”.

Criterion level

- Evidence
 - Triangulated evidence of conformance and non-conformance.
- Finding
 - A statement that describes the non-conformance.
- Corrective action
 - The requirement to remedy the non-conformance.

Avoid duplicating evidence across an audit report. If necessary, cross-reference information to avoid duplication, but use cross-referencing sparingly.

Avoid cutting and pasting information that creates duplication.

Avoid using find and replace as this often creates unintended grammar issues.

2 Writing clearly and concisely

It is important to write clearly and concisely so that, when people read your audit report, they take from it the meaning that you intended to convey.

This section summarises some key techniques for communicating your information clearly and concisely. In particular, it emphasises writing in plain English.

Helpful assumptions

1. No one wants to read it.
2. Almost no one will read all of it.
3. Almost everyone will misunderstand some of it.

Use consistent terminology. For example do not interchange the words ‘patient’, ‘resident’, ‘consumer’, ‘service user’, ‘client’ in an audit report. If there is a particular reason for doing so, include an explanatory note and be as consistent as possible. For example, if referring to a consumer in a mental health service, ensure all evidence about the mental health service consistently uses the term consumer.

Present your information in manageable ‘chunks’

Generally keep your paragraphs and your sentences short.

- Make each sentence about 16–20 words on average. Communicate one idea in each sentence.
- Make each paragraph eight lines or fewer on average. Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence that tells the reader what this paragraph will be about, and keep it to that one topic. If you are dealing with a complex topic, break it down into two or more paragraphs to help your readers understand it.

However, another useful technique in making a report easier to read is to vary the length of its sentences and paragraphs so you should include a few longer ones too.

Write ‘actively’ wherever practicable

In most circumstances, write in the active voice rather than the passive voice to achieve simple, direct communication.

- When you write a sentence in the active voice, you put the subject – the person or thing who is undertaking the action – in front of the verb (the action).
- When you write a sentence in the passive voice, you put the subject after the verb or leave it out altogether. The object of the sentence (what is being acted on) goes in front of the verb.

Examples

Passive voice

Satisfaction with the rest home was expressed by the residents interviewed.

The subject, 'residents' (as the people who are expressing satisfaction), appears after the verb, 'expressed', in the passive sentence. In the active sentence it appears before the verb.

Advocacy services are discussed with residents and their families on admission to the service.

Active voice

In interviews, residents expressed satisfaction with the rest home.

Staff discuss advocacy services with residents and their families on admission to the service.

The subject (the people who are doing the discussing) has been lost altogether from the passive sentence. The active sentence confirms the subject is 'staff', which appears before the verb, 'discuss'.

Exceptions

You might consider writing a sentence in the passive voice in the following circumstances.

- You wish to emphasise the object of the sentence (the person or thing being acted on), while the subject is unknown or not particularly significant. For example: All residents are escorted for toileting and hygiene needs. (The subject, staff, is not identified because the point of the sentence is to emphasise that all residents receive this service.)
- You wish to avoid blaming or identifying a particular individual. For example: The standards were breached on the day of the audit. (You do not wish to identify the particular staff member who breached the standards.)

Before you use the passive voice, however, consider whether there is another way of writing the sentence in the active voice. Often an effective alternative is available.

Examples

Passive voice

Hand sanitiser is placed at the entrance.

The writer wishes to emphasise the availability of hand sanitiser; the person who put it there is less significant.

Privacy standards were breached on the day of the audit.

The writer intends to avoid identifying anyone through using the passive voice.

Improved by restructuring to active voice

Hand sanitiser is at the entrance.

By deleting 'placed', the writer eliminates the passive voice and explains about the availability of hand sanitiser simply.

A staff member breached privacy standards on the day of the audit.

By referring to the subject in a general way, the writer still avoids blaming a particular staff member.

In some cases, you may be able to avoid the passive voice simply by deleting the passive part of the sentence and rewriting accordingly.

Examples

Passive voice

Residents were noted to move around easily with walkers.

It was found that staff have access to a comprehensive education programme ...

Improved by deleting the passive part of the sentence

Residents moved around easily with walkers.

Staff have access to a comprehensive education programme ...

In both the above examples, the passive part of the sentence ('were noted', 'It was found') is unnecessary because the whole of the report is about the auditor's observations and findings.

Use a verb instead of a noun where you have the choice

In many cases, you can simplify your writing by using the verb form of a word rather than its noun form.

Examples

Sentence with noun form

The rest home has made improvements to its procedures for hand hygiene by ...

The Health and Safety Plan made reference to objectives to address risks identified in the hazard register.

Improved by changing to verb form

The rest home has improved its procedures for hand hygiene by ...

The Health and Safety Plan referred to objectives to address risks identified in the hazard register.

Also avoid long strings of nouns, which make reading difficult. You may be able to clarify by changing some nouns to verbs or restructuring the sentence in another way.

Examples

Sentence with a long string of nouns

The rest home has a patient restraint minimisation implementation process consistent with its policy.

The rest home has a hand hygiene practice improvement programme.

A protection of personal belongings for residents and staff policy is in place.

Improved by restructuring sentence

The rest home implements a process of restraint minimisation for its patients that is consistent with its policy.

The rest home has implemented a programme to improve hand hygiene practices.

A policy to protect personal belongings of residents and staff is in place.

Use plain, concise words

Like your audit report as a whole, the individual words you use should get straight to the point. Where you have a choice, use:

- the simpler alternative rather than the long and/or difficult word
- one word rather than a lengthier term.

Examples

Long and/or complex term	Improved by replacing with plain and concise term
amongst	among
at the present time	now
emergency situation	emergency
in view of the fact that	given that
on a daily basis	daily
terminate	end
utilising; by usage of	using
whilst	while

Use plain, concise sentences

All of the principles identified above will help you to structure a plain, concise sentence. For each sentence, consider whether you need to:

- restructure the sentence to an active form
- change a noun to its verb form
- change a string of nouns to a simpler structure
- replace individual words with simpler, more concise ones
- simply cut out words because they are unnecessary.

One technique to make sentences more accessible is to refer to the actual audit process only in those cases where it is essential to identify the process. In most instances, it can be assumed that you are reporting your observations and findings so it is not necessary to include terms such as 'it was identified' or 'it was noted'. (Of course, where discussion of the method is a crucial part of what you are reporting, you should do so.)

Examples

Sentence with unnecessary reference to process

All hospitals were noted to be light and clean.

It was identified that the decking meets the building code.

The service demonstrates continuous improvement with regard to its team approach by ...

A bathroom area was identified where auditory and physical privacy was not ensured for patients.

Client interview confirms their awareness of the complaints procedure.

Improved by deleting process and restructuring sentence

All hospitals were light and clean.

The decking meets the building code.

The service is continuously improving its team approach by ...

In one bathroom area, patients did not have auditory and physical privacy.

In interviews, clients confirmed that they are aware of the complaints procedure.

3 Structuring sentences accurately

When you structure sentences accurately (ie, use correct grammar), you make your audit report more accessible and reduce the chances of your readers misunderstanding the information you are presenting. This section focuses on some common issues to watch for.

Write in full sentences

Although you should be concise, you are writing a report, not a series of notes. Use full sentences, with a verb (describing action) in each one. As well as being correct grammar, this technique will clarify your information considerably in many instances.

Examples

Note form

Initiative greatly improved communication.

Informed consent training Feb 09

Improved by using a full sentence

Staff report that this initiative has greatly improved communication.

All staff underwent informed consent training in February 2009.

Check that your nouns and verbs are in agreement

It seems obvious that when you are writing about:

- one thing (a singular subject), your verb ending should be a singular form
- more than one thing (a plural subject), your verb ending should be a plural form.

However, in some circumstances the agreement between the noun and verb can be difficult to spot. For example, when:

- a singular subject is part of a larger phrase, it remains singular even though some plural words in that phrase may be distracting
- two singular nouns are joined by 'and', they become a plural subject and take a plural noun.

Examples

Correct singular agreement

The residents' specialised equipment is available ...

The singular subject is 'equipment' and the verb 'is' agrees.

Discussion with the residents confirms ...

The singular subject is 'discussion' and the verb 'confirms' agrees.

Correct plural agreement

Specialised equipment and support to use it are available ...

Two singular nouns joined by 'and' become a plural subject and the verb 'are' agrees.

Discussions with the residents confirm ...

The plural subject is 'discussions' and the verb 'confirm' agrees.

Use 'it' for an organisation

When referring to an organisation (eg, a service, agency or ministry), use:

- 'it' (not 'they') as the pronoun
- 'its' (not 'their') as the possessive pronoun (something belonging to the organisation)
- a singular verb form (agreeing with the organisation as a singular entity).

Use the singular form consistently throughout the sentence about the organisation.

Examples

Incorrect use of plural form with an organisation

The organisation have updated their incident reporting policy.

Ourtown Rest Home are continuously improving their interdisciplinary process.

Corrected to singular form

The organisation has updated its incident reporting policy.

Ourtown Rest Home is continuously improving its interdisciplinary process.

Check for missing words

Proofread your work carefully. Watch for words that may be missing from a sentence as the grammar check will not reliably pick up all such instances. It is easy to leave out 'to', 'and', 'at' and other words that may be small but are essential to understanding the sentence. Ensure you use words correctly such as:

- is
- are
- was.

Avoid using overused phrases

Avoid using overused phrases, such as:

- generally improved
- significant risk
- areas requiring attention
- recommendations for improvement
- this is an opportunity for improvement
- some weaknesses
- strengthen procedures.

Consider whether the overused phrase is required and edit it out if possible. For example, it is not necessary to state something represents an opportunity for improvement as part of evidence. If it cannot be edited out, reword it.

4 Using inclusive language

Your audit report should comply with the Ministry of Health's policy that all its communications are free of sexism, racism, ageism and other forms of discriminatory language to ensure equity and effective communication.

Use appropriate terms in regard to age

Ministry of Health policy is to use 'older people' when referring to this age group, not 'the elderly'.

Where age is an issue for consideration, provide a factual description only.

Example

The resident, who is 92 years old, ...

Use appropriate terms in regard to disability and impairment

Views vary as to which terms are acceptable in regard to disability and impairment. A generally workable principle is to 'put the person first' in any description so that the person is the focus rather than being defined by their disability.

In writing about someone with a sensory disability, use 'impairment' to describe the disability.

Examples

Discriminatory language

the dementia residents

the residents who are confined to a wheelchair

the hard-of-hearing residents

a blind resident

Inclusive alternative

the residents with dementia

the residents who use a wheelchair

the residents with hearing impairments

a resident who is blind

Use gender-neutral language

When referring to a group that includes or could include both males and females, choose a term that is inclusive of both of them.

Examples

Discriminatory language	Inclusive alternative
chairman	chairperson, chair
man hours	work hours
manpower	human resources, workforce
cleaning lady	cleaner

Similarly, where a statement applies equally to males and females, choose pronouns that recognise both of them. Aim for a simple approach to inclusive pronouns, such as by:

- structuring the sentence in the plural
- using ‘they’ and ‘their’ to refer to a singular person (which is an acceptable approach for Ministry of Health publications).

Avoid using ‘he or she’ or ‘he/she’ as this approach tends to produce long and/or complicated constructions.

Examples

Discriminatory language	Inclusive, simple alternatives
Each resident has his own toilet facilities.	Each resident has their own toilet facilities. Residents all have their own toilet facilities.
Every staff member contributes her progress notes to the meeting.	Every staff member contributes their progress notes to the meeting. All staff members contribute their progress notes to the meeting.

5 Making the layout accessible

When you set out your audit report, use the following presentation techniques to make it easier for your readers to read and understand the information.

Add subheadings

Although the Audit Report Tool pre-sets the major headings, you can assist your readers through a lengthy section by breaking it into subsections with a concise subheading for each one.

In the subheading, capitalise the first letter on the first word only (unless other words in the subheading are part of a title) and leave a return space above the subheading so that your readers can see at a glance the range of subsections covered. If bold is an option in the program you are working in, apply it to your subheadings to help them stand out clearly.

Example

Under 1.3 Continuum of Service Delivery, subheadings might include:

Access
Activities
Admission
Care planning
Evaluation

Use bullet points for long lists

You can help your readers to take in each item in a list by presenting it in bulleted form. The following examples show the two styles you should use, with your choice between them depending on the kind of list you are writing.

When you are writing a list that runs on from an introductory phrase or clause, you should:

- add a colon at the end of the introductory phrase or clause
- start each bullet point with a lower-case letter
- not use 'and' or 'or' for the second-to-last bullet point
- only use a full stop at the end of the last bullet point.

In some cases it is more useful to introduce a bulleted list with a full sentence.

- The introductory sentence then ends with a full stop.
- Each bullet point must be a complete sentence, starting with a capital letter and ending with a full stop.

Note

If you are working in a program that does not provide automated bullets, you can follow these principles using a dash in place of the standard dot bullet.

6 Punctuating for clarity

Use the correct punctuation to produce a polished, readily understandable audit report. Punctuating well includes being accurate and consistent in your use of:

- capital and lower-case letters
- full stops (as well as question marks and exclamation marks, but you are unlikely to need these in your report)
- colons, semicolons and commas
- apostrophes
- quotation ('speech') marks
- parentheses (round brackets)
- dashes and hyphens.

This section focuses on general principles of using punctuation as well as on some specific areas of punctuation that you may have to deal with in your report.

Use punctuation to help break up your information

As noted in Section 2, you communicate more clearly when you break up your information into manageable chunks. To assist you in giving concise information in generally short sentences and short paragraphs, your main punctuation tools are the:

- full stop (along with capital letters) to break up a long sentence into two or more shorter sentences
- comma to indicate a pause in a sentence.

Occasionally a semicolon may be useful to indicate a stronger pause in a sentence. However, in many instances where you need to use a semicolon, it may be an indication that the sentence is too long. Consider whether you could put a full stop in the place of the strong pause and break the sentence into two sentences.

Examples

Original sentence

Quality and safety meetings identify issues and corrective measures and the manager communicates these matters to staff directly.

Break the original sentence into two shorter sentences.

Under the residents' personal possessions policy items of equipment such as walking sticks are for personal use only.

Add a comma to the original sentence to clarify where the pause comes.

Restraints are documented the alternatives are not.

Add a semicolon to the original sentence to indicate a strong pause (change of direction) in the sentence. Here the sentence is short enough to justify using a semicolon rather than breaking it into two sentences.

Improved by adding further punctuation

Quality and safety meetings identify issues and corrective measures. The manager communicates these matters to staff directly.

Under the residents' personal possessions policy, items of equipment such as walking sticks are for personal use only.

Restraints are documented; the alternatives are not.

Make consistent choices

In many cases, the final decision about what punctuation to use is a matter of style (set by an organisation or your own personal preference) rather than definite rules. For example, some people use commas more than others. There is also a variety of alternative spellings with and without a hyphen ('coordinate' or 'co-ordinate'; 'decision making' or 'decision-making'). Both alternatives tend to be strictly 'correct', but an individual or an organisation chooses to follow a particular style of spelling, including or excluding the hyphen.

Section 9 sets out the preferred style for a number of words that you are likely to include in your audit report. In other instances where you are faced with a choice, what is important is to set one style and use it consistently throughout your report.

Use the apostrophe correctly

Use an apostrophe if you wish to show that:

- someone or something owns something
- some letters are missing in a word that you have created from two separate words.

Using an apostrophe to show ownership

When you are showing ownership, the way that you use the apostrophe depends on whether there is only one 'owner' or two or more. The general rule is that when the phrase contains:

- only one (a singular) 'owner', you add an apostrophe and an 's' to the end of the word for the owner
- two or more (plural) 'owners', you add an apostrophe to the end of the word (and add no extra 's').

Examples

Intended meaning

the opinion of the resident

the opinion of the residents

the involvement of the family

the involvement of the families

the business plan that belongs to the rest home

Term with apostrophe

the resident's opinion

Add apostrophe + s.

the residents' opinion

Add apostrophe only.

the family's involvement

Add apostrophe + s.

the families' involvement

Add apostrophe only.

the rest home's business plan

Add apostrophe + s.

As with all grammar, there are exceptions to the general rule. For example, we say:

- 'children's area' – adding an apostrophe + 's' even though there is more than one owner
- 'The rest home presented its business plan' – 'its' indicates ownership but has no apostrophe because it has a special status as a possessive pronoun (like 'his', 'her', 'their' and 'our').

However, the general rule above will provide you with the guidance you need in most instances.

Using an apostrophe to show one or more missing letters

When you join two words together to create a single word, add an apostrophe in the place where one or more letters are missing.

Examples

Original words

do not

it is

they would

he will

Combined word with apostrophe

don't

it's

they'd

he'll

Note that this use of the apostrophe tends to be associated with more informal writing. Generally in your audit report you should write the complete form of each word ('it is' rather than 'it's', etc). However, you need to understand this principle in order to understand also when not to use an apostrophe.

When is an apostrophe incorrect?

Do not use an apostrophe with:

- ‘its’ in the sense of ‘its system’ or ‘its procedures’ (when it is a possessive pronoun rather than a shortened form of ‘it is’)
- plural nouns that are simply plural, not possessive, such as ‘residents have spacious rooms’ (but add an apostrophe when such a noun is used in a possessive sense, such as ‘the residents’ rooms’ – referring to more than one resident)
- plural abbreviations are simply plural not possessive, such as ‘the OTs on this shift’ (but add an apostrophe when such an abbreviation becomes possessive, as in ‘the OTs’ shift’ – referring to more than one OT)
- decades (eg, 1990s not 1990’s).

Use capital letters selectively

In modern English, lower case is used wherever possible, and this is the preference of the Ministry of Health. For example use general practitioner, not General Practitioner.

Use a capital letter with:

- a proper noun – that is, the actual name of someone or something (eg, Josephine Smith, Better Practice Group or Infection Control Committee)
- the start of a sentence
- each major word in the title of a publication (eg, *Quality Plan of Ourtown Rest Home 2010–2015*).

Do not use a capital just because a word or concept is important, relates to a key area of the audit report and/or needs emphasis.

Prepositions (eg, ‘in’, ‘by’, ‘on’, ‘to’, etc) should be in lower case when part of a title or name of an organisation. For example, the Ministry of Health.

Examples

Incorrect use of capitals

monthly Quality meetings

the Incident reporting policy

There are Policies and Procedures in place.

Although all the above are important subjects, they do not take a capital letter.

Restraint Minimisation and Safe Practice Policy

Corrected use of capitals and/or lower case

monthly quality meetings

the incident reporting policy

There are policies and procedures in place.

restraint minimisation and safe practice policy or (preferably) policy on restraint minimisation and safe practice policy

Policies in relation to a particular area still take lower case.

Incorrect use of capitals

Corrected use of capitals and/or lower case

Registered Nursing staff

registered nursing staff

Clinical Review

clinical review

Employment Agreements

employment agreements

Quality Reports

quality reports

a pamphlet on Advocacy

a pamphlet on advocacy

The topic of advocacy on its own does not take a capital letter. However, if the title of the pamphlet was 'Advocacy', you could indicate this with a capital and quotation marks.

the rest home's Quality Plan

the rest home's quality plan

Quality Plan of Ourtown Rest Home 2010–2015

'Quality Plan' as it is used on the left is not the title of the plan so should not take capitals. With the full title, all the major words in the title take a capital letter.

If you wish to emphasise a particular subject, consider introducing a subheading to highlight it. (See more on this technique in Section 5.)

Know the difference between colons and semicolons

Use a:

- colon to introduce either a list within a paragraph or a bulleted list
- semicolon as a strong pause in a sentence.

Examples

Existing policies and procedures cover: abuse and neglect; code of rights; and complaints and neglect.

The colon introduces a list within a paragraph while the semicolons show the break between each item in the list.

Existing policies and procedures cover:

- abuse and neglect
- code of rights
- complaints and neglect.

The colon introduces a bulleted list. No semicolons are needed as the bullet points themselves identify each item in the list.

Individual care plans undergo regular review (at least six-monthly); some documentation on communication with families remains uncompleted.

A semicolon indicates a significant change in direction in the sentence. Alternatively consider using a full stop in place of the colon to break the sentence into two sentences.

Note that given the essence of your audit report is to give concise information in generally short sentences and short paragraphs, it is likely that you will use colons and semicolons only rarely.

Use single quotation marks

Use single quotation ('speech') marks where quotation marks are required, which will be when:

- quoting someone's spoken words directly (eg, from an interview)
- quoting from a document such as an Act or a Ministry of Health publication
- drawing attention to a particular word that you are using in an unusual way (but use it in these circumstances only sparingly if at all)
- giving the title of an article, or a chapter or section heading.

7 Making abbreviations useful

In writing a clear, accessible audit report, keep your use of abbreviations to a minimum. Although abbreviations help to shorten a report, they can also make it more difficult to read if the report uses them excessively and/or uses relatively obscure abbreviations that readers may not know.

Ministry of Health advisors, as readers of your audit report, may be familiar with many of the abbreviations you use. However, they are less likely to know organisation-specific abbreviations, and you also need to keep in mind that the report may also go to a wider audience. Some terms may also share the same abbreviation (eg, Ministry of Health and medical officer of health) such that using the abbreviation increases confusion.

Use abbreviations sparingly

An abbreviation is useful when it:

- shortens a long term that appears frequently throughout your audit report or in a particular section of your report
- is a widely known term that readers are likely to be highly familiar with and perhaps recognise more readily than the full term (eg, ACC, RSA).

It is particularly important to be selective in your use of abbreviations in the executive summary, given that it is published for a general readership.

If you decide to abbreviate a term, use the full term the first time you mention it, and include the abbreviation in parentheses (round brackets).

Example

The Valuing the Lives of Older People (VLOP) project is the major model of care. Under the VLOP project ...

Note

- Abbreviations do not have a full stop between each letter.
- If a term appears frequently in a particular section but occurs rarely in other parts of the document, consider only abbreviating in the section where it occurs frequently and spelling it out in full for all other occurrences.
- When adding 's' to an abbreviation to indicate plural, do not add an apostrophe as well (eg, 'several GPs and RNs' not 'several GP's and RN's').

Exceptions

Other than in the executive summary, where you should spell out all abbreviations, you do not need to spell out general terms that are well known in the health and disability sector, such as:

- CAR for corrective action requests
- DAA for the designated auditing agency
- DHB for District Health Board
- GP for general practitioner
- HCA for health care assistant
- HDC for Health and Disability Commissioner
- the Ministry for the Ministry of Health
- NA for not applicable
- PA for partial attainment
- RN for registered nurse
- UA for unattained.

Avoid abbreviations in most cases

In the executive summary, avoid abbreviations in cases where the original term:

- is not particularly long, such that little is gained by using the abbreviation (eg, 'IC' for 'infection control' – which may also be confused with 'informed consent' and is therefore even less useful in abbreviated form)
- is much more readily understood by a general reader (eg, 'multidisciplinary team' rather than 'MDT').

In the audit report as a whole, try to avoid abbreviations that are specific to an organisation or area. If you decide that a particular abbreviation would be useful, because the term is long and frequently repeated, introduce it as described under 'Use abbreviations sparingly' above.

Do not abbreviate 'for example' (eg,), 'that is' (ie,) or 'note' (NB) unless you are using one of these terms in parentheses (round brackets).

Avoid using 'etc' and its long form 'and so on' wherever possible as both can be a vague way of ending a point. Your audit report is providing precise information so should specify all important elements of an observation.

Avoid jargon such as nursing language (eg, nursing obs, subcut). If the term can be put in plain English, then this should be the preference. If the term cannot be put in plain English, write it in full.

Avoid writing controlled drug names especially for reports that will be published. Use the words controlled drugs rather than 'morphine' for example.

8 Using numbers and symbols

This section sets out the style you should follow to use numbers and symbols in your report consistently and clearly.

Follow the one to nine, 10 + rule

For numbers in your audit report, use:

- words for numbers one to nine, and for ordinal numbers ‘first’ to ‘ninth’
- numerals for the number 10 and above, and for the ordinal number ‘10th’ and higher.

Note

In giving quantities, do not use ‘x’ (ie, the multiplication symbol) with a number, such as ‘x11 records’; ‘11 records’ is sufficient.

Examples

Words for one to nine

two residents

three-monthly

four to five registered nurses

Numerals for 10 and above

10 staff members

every 12 weeks

between 20 and 30 visitors

Exceptions

- When a number begins a sentence, always present it in word form (eg, ‘Ten residents held this view.’).
- When you are presenting two numbers in the same sentence, use the same form for both (eg, ‘There are between 9 and 13 staff at each meeting.’).
- When you are writing a measurement or percentage, always present it in numeral form (eg, 5 mL, 4%). (See more on the styles for measurements and percentages below.)

Use the numeral + symbol for a measurement or percentage

When you are writing a measurement:

- write the number in numeral form
- use the symbol for the unit of measurement
- add a space between the numeral and the symbol
- do not add an 's' to the end of the symbol.

Examples

Avoid	Use this style
five millilitres 5mLs	5 mL
100 kilojoules 100kJs	100 kJ

Exceptions

Do not include a space between the numeral and the symbol for:

- measurements of temperature (eg, 25°C)
- percentages (eg, 4%).

Follow the date and time style consistently

When you are writing a date:

- follow the order of day (numeral), month (word), year (numeral)
- do not add -st, -nd, -rd or -th to the date.

Examples

Avoid	Use this style
1st June 2010 June 1 2010	1 June 2010
25th of May 2009 25/5/09	25 May 2009

When you are writing a time:

- write the time in numeral form
- use 'am' or 'pm' without full stops
- add a space between the time and 'am' or 'pm'.

Examples

Avoid

2.30a.m.

4 o'clock

Use this style

2.30 am

4 pm

9 Following the spelling style

Your audit report should use the spelling style set out in this section so that your report is internally consistent as well as consistent with other reports and Ministry of Health documents.

This section lists the preferred spelling form for some of the words that you may use in your report. For a general reference, use *The New Zealand Oxford Dictionary*.

Note

- Use British rather than American spelling.
- Use '-ise' rather than '-ize' spelling (eg, 'realise' and 'tranquilliser' rather than 'realize' and 'tranquillizer').
- The Ministry of Health's standard convention is to use a macron to indicate a long vowel sound in Māori words. It is acceptable to leave out the macron if you are unable to add one due to the technical limitations of the program you are working in.
- After finishing your report, run a spell check and proofread your work carefully as the automatic spell check will not pick up missing words, or use of the wrong word (eg, 'president' instead of 'resident').

A spelling guide for common terms

acknowledgement	spell with an 'e'
Act	the first time you mention an Act, write the full name including its date (eg, the Privacy Act 1993)
advisor	not adviser
aged care	lower case
ageing	spell with an 'e'
age-specific/age specific	use hyphen when the term is used as a compound adjective in front of a noun (eg, age-specific mortality rate) / no hyphen when the term sits by itself (eg, the mortality rate is age specific)
annual practising certificate	lower case; note 's' in practising
benchmarking	one word
benefited, benefiting	use only one 't' before -ed or -ing
CAR	corrective action request; you can use the abbreviated form without explanation in your report
Careerforce	one word; Community Support Services Industry Training Organisation, previously known as CSSITO
caregiver	one word
chart book	two words
checklist	one word

community-based	use hyphen
co-morbidities	use hyphen
cooperation	no hyphen
coordinate	no hyphen
coordinator	no hyphen
corrective actions	actions the service provider must take to remedy the non-conformity that has resulted in award of a partial attainment or unattained criterion
cost-effective	use hyphen
cross-reference	use hyphen
decision-making	use hyphen
DHB	district health board (lower case if generic, capitals when it is part of a specific title, eg, 'Waitemata District Health Board is one of three Auckland district health boards')
diarrhoea	not diarrhea (American spelling)
dietitian	not dietician
district nurse	lower case
eg,	no full stops, follow with a comma; avoid using abbreviation in body text (use 'for example,' or 'for instance,'); only use abbreviation in parentheses (round brackets) if at all (eg, like this)
email	use lower case and no hyphen
emergency department	lower case; if using in the executive summary, spell in full on first use and give abbreviation (ED) in parentheses
enrolled nurse	lower case
evidence	information gathered through documentation, observation or interview that allows the auditor to reach reliable and reproducible audit conclusions
ex-smoker	use hyphen
factsheet	one word
feed back(verb)	two words where you are referring to an action (eg, 'these two staff members feed back information to the rest of the team')
feedback (noun)	one word when you are referring to a set of information (eg, 'the manager reported residents' feedback')
findings	evidence that gives rise to a partial attainment or unattained criterion that will then result in a corrective action requirement
first aid	lower case
focused, focusing	use only one 's' before -ed or -ing
follow up (verb)	no hyphen when you are referring to an action (eg, 'The manager follows up all complaints.')
follow-up (noun or adjective)	use hyphen when referring to a fixed process (eg, 'follow-up consists of') or using it as an adjective (eg, 'the follow-up process')

framework	one word
fundraising	one word
gram	not 'gramme'; use the abbreviation 'g' when giving measurements
hapū	group of whānau with common ancestral links; use macron whenever technically possible
health care	two words
ie,	no full stops, follow with a comma; avoid using abbreviation in body text (use 'that is,'); use abbreviation only in parentheses (round brackets) if at all
inpatient	one word
interagency	one word
internet	lower case
intersectoral	one word
-ise	use -ise rather than -ize (eg, 'realise' and 'tranquilliser' rather than 'realize' and 'tranquillizer')
iwi	tribe; use lower case
judgement	spell with an 'e'
kaumātua	adult or older person
kilogram	not kilogramme; use the abbreviation 'kg' when giving measurements
labelled, labelling	use double 'l' after -ed or -ing
lifestyle	one word
lifetime	one word
long term (adjective + noun)	no hyphen when used by itself, in the sense of 'in the long term' or 'over the long term'
long-term (adjective)	hyphen when used as a compound adjective in front of a noun (eg, 'long-term objectives')
manager	lower case unless you are using the full title of a particular role (eg, the Nurse Manager); do not abbreviate
Māori	initial capital; use a macron whenever technically possible
marae	lower case
matua	parent
mātua	parents; add macron for plural whenever technically possible
multidisciplinary	one word
multifaceted	one word
national certificate	lower case
nationwide	one word
Ngāti (in an iwi name)	initial capital; use a macron whenever technically possible

non-Māori	use hyphen; use macron whenever technically possible
non-smoking	use hyphen
non-violent	use hyphen
noticeboard	one word
older people	use this term, not 'the elderly'
on call (freestanding adjective)	no hyphens when used standing free of a noun (eg, 'always on call')
on-call (adjective before noun)	use hyphen when used as a compound adjective before a noun (eg, 'the on-call system')
on the whole	no hyphens; consider replacing with 'generally'
ongoing	one word
online	one word
organise, organisation	spell with -ise, -isation not -ize, -ization
OT	occupational therapist; if using in the executive summary, spell in full on first use and give abbreviation in parentheses
outpatient	one word
overcrowded	one word
override	one word
Pacific peoples	use to refer generally to the groups of people who have their ethnic origins in the Pacific Islands region; note that when referring to one or more individuals you should use 'Pacific' plus whatever noun is appropriate (eg, 'Pacific woman' or 'Pacific residents')
Pākehā	use initial capital; use two macrons whenever technically possible
people	use as plural of person (not 'persons')
per year	not per annum
physiotherapy	not physio
policy maker	two words
preventable	not preventible
preventive	not preventative
programme	not program (unless referring to a computer program)
quality monitoring programme	lower case
quality report	lower case
registered nurse	lower case
registered nursing staff	lower case
rest home	two words

RNs	no apostrophe before 's' when referring to more than one RN; if using in the executive summary, spell in full on first use and give abbreviation in parentheses
rūnanga	iwi council; lower case, use macron whenever technically possible
self-medicate	use hyphen
senior management	lower case
set up (verb)	no hyphen when the term is used as a verb, referring to an action (eg, 'management has set up a comprehensive orientation programme')
set-up (noun)	use hyphen when the term is used as a noun referring to a structure or process (eg, 'the set-up has changed')
short term (adjective + noun)	no hyphen when the term is used as a noun, in the sense of 'in the short term' or 'over the short term'
short-term (adjective)	use hyphen when the term is used as a compound adjective in front of a noun (eg, 'short-term objectives')
smokefree	one word (but note: the Smoke-free Environments Act 1990)
sociodemographic	one word
socioeconomic	one word
tangata/tāngata	person / people; add macron for plural whenever technically possible
tāngata whenua	people of the land; use macron whenever technically possible
targeted, targeting	use only one 't' before -ed and -ing not two
te reo Māori	use in full (not 'te reo' on its own) and with lower case for the first two words
timeframe	one word
timeline	one word
trialled, trialling	use a double 'l' before -ed and -ing
uncooperative	no hyphen
uncoordinated	no hyphen
under-report	use hyphen
under-represent	use hyphen
under way	two words
up-to-date/up to date	use hyphen when the term is used as a compound adjective in front of a noun (eg, 'an up-to-date plan') / no hyphen when the term sits by itself (eg, 'the report is up to date')
website	one word, lower case
wellbeing	one word
whānau	extended family; use macron whenever technically possible
workplace	one word

A quick guide to avoiding common pitfalls

affect vs effect	<p>Use affect as a:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• verb to mean 'to act upon or have an influence on'• noun in a psychological text to mean 'emotion'. <p>Use effect as a:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• verb to mean 'bring about'• noun to mean 'result' or 'consequence'.
aid vs aide	<p>Use aid to mean:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• help• a form of mechanical assistance (eg, mobility aid). <p>Use aide to refer to a person's assisting role (eg, nurse aide).</p>
alternately vs alternatively	<p>Alternately means 'in turn' (eg, 'nurses work alternately on morning and afternoon shifts').</p> <p>Alternatively means 'as another option' (eg, 'alternatively the service is considering an in-house training programme').</p>
criterion vs criteria	<p>Criterion is the singular form (eg, 'the sole criterion is ...').</p> <p>Criteria is the plural form (eg, 'the selection process rests on these five criteria: ...').</p>
dependant vs dependent	<p>Dependant (noun) means someone who is financially dependent on the person (eg, 'she has five dependants').</p> <p>Dependent (adjective) means relying or contingent on in some sense, such as financial, emotional or physical (eg, 'the resident is dependent on staff at mealtimes').</p>
gender vs sex	<p>Today the tendency is to use:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• gender to mean the cultural or social identity of being male and female• sex to mean the biological state of being male or female.
its vs it's	<p>Its is the possessive pronoun that shows something belongs to 'it' (eg, 'the organisation is training its staff').</p> <p>It's is the shortened form of 'it is' (eg, 'it's clear that ...'). Avoid using this informal term in your report.</p>
practice vs practise	<p>Practice is the noun indicating an established approach or way of doing something (eg, best practice, restraint practices).</p> <p>Practise is the verb indicating action (eg, staff consistently practise the policy).</p>

Editing

Use a three-step process to edit:

1 Is the report well organised?

Ensure the report is objective, logical, complete and addresses the issues and findings are evidenced.

2 Is it readable?

Check that the report is easy to understand: ensure jargon is eliminated, sentence length is short (removing redundant words) and you have used the active voice wherever possible.

3 Have you proofed the report?

Check grammar, misspelt words, misused words and incorrect amounts.

How to write an executive summary

The executive summary should provide an overview of the whole report so that it could be read alone without the accompanying report.

The summary should include:

- strengths and weaknesses
- continual improvement
- other key performance indicators
- impacts of any significant changes
- an overview of findings that represent non-conformity and actions taken on previous audit issues
- conclusions reached.

It should be written in a formal writing style without jargon.

Ensure major findings are reported.

Avoid unnecessary words and sentences.

Use an impersonal writing style.

Do not recycle sentences/paragraphs from the body of the report.

Top tips

- Write in plain English.
- Keep sentences short.
- Choose short familiar words.
- Use the active voice.
- Avoid abbreviations.
- If a term is frequently used, write it in full before abbreviating it.
- Avoid over capitalising.
- Write dates as 20 March 2014 rather than 20th March 14.
- Write eg, and ie, without full stops and only use within brackets.
- Spell out 'for example' if an example is provided within the main body of the text.
- Write numbers under 10 in words and 10 or above as numerals but do not begin a sentence with a number unless you spell it out.
- Be consistent with any abbreviations.

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