2. Writing for the OECD

This chapter explains how to best organise and structure OECD content so that it is clear and accessible. It provides guidelines on titles and headings, abstracts and executive summaries, as well as advice on how to signpost effectively, and avoid plagiarism.

Clarity and **consistency** are the keys to good writing. Good writers can reach the widest possible audience, no matter how complex the material. A consistent style is particularly important for an organisation with an international readership.

To strengthen the accessibility and impact of your writing, we recommend that you:

- **Identify your readers and key messages:** what are the various ways in which they might want to access the information?

- **Group your information logically:** think carefully about the logic and coherence of your publication's structure (table of contents) or webpage's navigation.

- **Ensure reader-friendly, dynamic, opening and introductory texts,** notably the foreword, the executive summary and chapter abstracts, all of which are mandatory in OECD publications.

- **Keep titles and headings clear, succinct and meaningful.**

- **Start strong:** place the main point of your paragraphs up front. Your opening sentence and paragraph should tell the reader what you are writing about and why it is significant.

- **Be relevant and concise:** write short sentences (20 words or fewer) and keep paragraphs succinct (one idea per paragraph). Keep background information to a minimum, omit unnecessary information and do not overuse citations.

- **Be clear:** use clear, straightforward language, even when discussing complex ideas. Use the active voice and avoid jargon. Present your data and group your ideas through effective signposting (use of headings, figures, tables, boxes, endnotes and bulleted lists).

- **Edit:** reread your own text, and have a non-specialist read it as well. Send an early draft to your PAC editor for feedback.

Organising your content

Organise your content so that the reader is able to grasp important information quickly and navigate your document or webpage with ease.

The following models for setting out information can be mixed, matched and applied at any point. Varying your approach helps keep the reader's attention:

- **The Inverted Pyramid** puts the most important information first – generally the conclusion or recommendations – then follows with lesser information in order of priority (based on its importance to the reader). This model is especially important when writing on the web.

- **Questions and answers** work well to feed reader interest throughout a work.

- **The problem-cause-solution approach** first presents the issue, creating sufficient interest for the reader to read further, and then explains the causes and proposes solutions.

- **Chronological order** can be useful when giving background information or explaining historical context. Nevertheless, in most cases, your reader is more likely to prefer information presented using one of models above. Findings and recommendations are more compelling than the history of how they were reached.

See also: Who are our readers? p. 10; Specifics on web writing, p. 33.

Regardless of the chosen model(s), all OECD publications follow a standard general structure, some elements of which will shift according to the specific publication category.

See also: OECD standard publication structure, pp. 24-27; What do we publish? pp. 12-13.

Start and finish strong

First sentences and first paragraphs (of a webpage, a chapter in a publication, a section in a chapter, etc.) are the most important in terms of hooking the reader's attention. If you can get people to read the first 200 or 300 words of anything, they will probably read on.

A good lead gets to the main subject quickly. Opening text should provide enough hard details (key facts and findings) to let readers know why they should bother reading further. Make readers curious to know more.

Avoid generic openings (e.g. "This paper is intended to provide…", "This report aims to address"). Such openings overstate the obvious and tell the reader nothing: if your paper provides X, surely it is because that was your intention or aim. Instead, start directly with the problem or issue you are addressing.

☺ **Man-eating squirrels have become a major problem in city parks, causing 50 deaths every year. This report offers some possible solutions.**

☹ This paper is intended to provide some insights into the problem of squirrel behaviour in city parks, with the aim of finding some possible solutions.

The next most frequently read part of a chapter or an article is the end. A reader may skip everything in between to get to the concluding paragraphs. Make them clear, concise and pertinent by reminding readers of the main take-away messages and concluding facts.

Signpost effectively

1) Group information types together:

- **Boxes:** boxes allow you to present ancillary information, such as case studies or additional details, as well as related information complementing the main theme. Do not use a box for information that is essential. Consider boxes to be like small articles, with their own beginning, middle and end. They should not be longer than one printed page and must be properly sourced.

  NOTE › Figures and tables presented within boxes should be numbered consecutively within the chapter as a whole.

- **Lists:** use vertical lists to present information in manageable chunks. Use them to arrange related elements of text in a form that is easy for the reader to grasp. Maintain consistency in structure, capitalisation and punctuation, both within the list and across lists in your publication as a whole. Number or bullet items in a vertical list, depending on the objective.

See also: *Part II, Rules and conventions, p.50 ff.*

2) Avoid multiple headings, which can disorient readers: use subheadings sparingly to signpost key elements. You can also bold key words and phrases – sparingly and strategically – through the narrative for easy scanning of take-away information, such as essential facts and figures or country names, depending on the objective. This facilitates online reading and ensures that a reader pressed for time still gleans the main points of a given chapter.

See also: *How do people read? pp. 16-17; Specifics on web writing, p. 33.*

Maintain clarity, consistency and cohesion

To increase readability at all levels (the whole text, the paragraph and the sentence):

- Keep paragraphs down to single ideas. Each paragraph should start with the main idea of the paragraph. Subsequent sentences in the paragraph should contain details the reader needs. Discuss new topics in new paragraphs.

- Put the main idea in the main clause.

- Be consistent in your use of tense.

- Use similar constructions for similar ideas and details:
  ☺ **The committee responded quickly and enthusiastically.**
  ☹ The committee responded quickly and in an enthusiastic way.

- Place emphatic words at the end of the sentence. In the middle, they will be swallowed up:
  ☺ **The problem must be solved immediately.**
  ☹ The problem must be immediately solved.

- Avoid vague references. These occur when the relationship between words is unclear, particularly between pronouns and the nouns they refer to. When in doubt, repeat the noun.
  ☹ The contractors received the initial payment late and never received the second payment. This delayed the project.
  (What does "this" refer to? The late initial payment? The undelivered second payment? A combination of both payment problems?)

- Use transition words to indicate the passing of time, contrast or opposition, comparison or similarity, concession or admission, sequence, result and summary: **and**, **but**, **while**, **or**, **then**, **such as**, **on the other hand**, **however**, **next**, **therefore**, **for example**, **finally**, **furthermore**, **consequently**, **in addition**, **nevertheless**, **meanwhile**, **accordingly**, **thus**. They are important tools for clarity and continuity, to be used but not over-used. Vary their placement in the sentence in order to avoid repetition.

See also: *Drafting tips and principles of style, pp. 34-49.*

Titles and headings

How to choose a title

Your main title should be clear, concise and meaningful, adapted both to the nature of the contents and to its intended audience(s).

- **Think carefully about the core intended audience:** how will the title help that audience identify the work? Will it entice people to read it?

- **Choose a title that is clear and meaningful:** avoid all-purpose words (like "main challenges" or "lessons learnt"), redundant words and insider expressions, Latin and foreign words, unnecessary technical terms and acronyms. Avoid jargon, puns, colloquialisms and quotes.

  Remember that much of the audience will be reading in a second language so titles need to be clear and simple. Your title should also be easily translatable into other languages (and cultures).

- **Use pertinent keywords** that indicate the subject matter covered and make it more likely that it will come up in online search results. If absolutely necessary, add a subtitle that provides further information but does not try to exhaustively describe the content.

- **Keep titles short and to the point:** long titles are illegible on line and unwieldy on covers. Remember, many search engines only "read" the first 60 characters.

- **Check the titles of previous OECD publications,** as well as those in the process of being published, through the publication database Kappa. It could be useful to link your title to another OECD publication or, on the contrary, disassociate it in the case of unwanted overlap.

- **If your book is part of a series,** ensure that the title follows the established structure of publication titles in the series and that, more generally, the title makes sense in the context of other publications in the series.

- **If you are devising a series title for the first time,** think about whether it will be appropriate for all the books in the series.

- **Check the titles of non-OECD work in your field:** has anyone else recently released a book or article with a similar title?

Your PAC editor can help you choose the best title for your work.

Book and series titles cannot be changed once they have been bibliographically referenced. Breaking ISBN or ISSN publication records makes your work harder to find.

See also: *Who are our readers? p. 10; What are metadata? p. 16.*

Once you have a shortlist of possible titles, test them out on other people, both inside and outside of your field, as well as your PAC editor, to be sure the final title works well.

▼ **Examples of reworked titles**

☹ BEFORE	☺ AFTER
The Tax/Benefit Position of Employees	**Taxing Wages**
Closing the Gap: Alliances for Skills	**Skills Upgrading: New Policy Perspectives**
Countering Public Sector Corruption: An Overview of Corruption Prevention Measures in OECD Countries	**Public Sector Corruption: An International Survey of Prevention Measures**

Chapter titles and headings

These should follow the titles rules outlined above, notably:

- capture the central idea using keywords
- orient the reader
- be descriptive and meaningful, yet succinct
- stand on their own.

The **stand-alone principle** applies to all subtitles and graphics titles, as well as working paper and press release titles.

Figure and table titles

Figure and table titles should be:

- **clear and concise:** ideally, the title should include enough information to enable the table or chart to stand on its own. Units and time periods should only be included if not explicit in the figure or table.
- **unique:** no two titles should be identical. Add the focus country, time period or unit of measurement to differentiate between similar titles.
- **simple:** avoid jargon, puns, colloquialisms and quotes. Titles must be understandable to non-native readers and easily translatable into other languages.
- **short:** in general, titles should not exceed 55 characters, including spaces, and the subtitle should not exceed 90 characters, including spaces, for use on different publishing mediums. On a smartphone, the maximum is 35 characters.

If the figure or table is from another OECD publication, use the original title and StatLink, and source accordingly.

See also: How do we publish? pp. 14-15; Figure and table presentation, p. 30.

Structuring your publication

The **table of contents** is an essential navigation tool for readers, both on line and in print. Component titles , such as chapter and figure or table titles, serve as key signposts, guiding readers through the logical progression of the work.

The table of contents may include up to two levels of titles. On OECD iLibrary, parts function as structural markers: they group together stand-alone components (i.e. chapters, indicators, country profiles or tables). They do not contain text of their own, such as a part abstract or a part introduction.

See also: *Titles and headings, pp. 22-23.*

▼ **Standard OECD publication structure**   *(Mandatory elements are in bold)*

PUBLICATION PART	ELEMENT	DESCRIPTION
PRELIMINARY PAGES (FRONT MATTER)	**Title page**	· Prepared by PAC.
	Copyright page	· Prepared by PAC. · Includes disclaimers, key bibliographic identifiers, any co-publishing information, official citations, and image copyright permissions. ***See also:*** *Disclaimers, p. 77; Bibliographical referencing: Sources and citations, pp. 56-64.*
	Preface (signed)	· In OECD publications, the preface is usually written and signed by a distinguished person, and acts as an endorsement of the content.
	Foreword (not signed)	· Situates the publication in the context of the OECD's programme of work and briefly describes the project background and purpose of the book. · You should also use the foreword for brief acknowledgements of help received in the preparation of the publication.
	Acknowledgements, contributors and credits	· If extensive, acknowledgements can be provided in a separate section. · You may choose to thank colleagues, including those involved in the production of the book, experts and others who contributed ideas and assistance.

PUBLICATION PART	ELEMENT	DESCRIPTION
	Editorial	· A piece signed by an OECD director, SG or DSG that gives an OECD voice and opinion on the information in the publication. · It can be in the book or on line only so it can be completely up to date at the time of release. If the editorial is on line only, it should be included as a link within the table of contents in the print version, and part of the online identity of the publication. · Does not include: figures, tables, citations or references, footnotes. **NOTE ›** Editorials are mandatory for Outlook and At-a-Glance publications.
	Table of contents	· The table of contents includes the list of chapters, tables, figures and boxes.
	Reader's guide	· A reader's guide can be a useful feature when setting out a methodological framework, clarifying regional groupings or explaining complex datasets. · Can include abbreviations and acronyms.
	Abbreviations and acronyms	· This list spells out the abbreviations and acronyms used in the work. · It is usually arranged in alphabetical order. · Abbreviations and acronyms should also be spelled out on first occurrence in each chapter.
	Executive summary	· The executive summary should focus on key findings, conclusions and recommendations and be about 850-1 000 words long. ***See also:*** *Executive summaries, pp. 28-29.*
MAIN TEXT (BODY)	Assessment and recommendations *or* Chapter 1: Overview	· If readers were to read just one part of your report, this would be it, along with the executive summary. This chapter is a strategic chapter. It should expand upon the key findings and recommendations presented in the executive summary. And it should be accessible: make the content come alive for your readers, tell them a story (explain what's new since the previous edition, why your findings/recommendations matter, how the pieces of the puzzle come together, etc.). Use striking graphs to get your point across.
	Part (if appropriate)	· A publication may be divided into parts that contain chapters or other components.

PUBLICATION PART	ELEMENT	DESCRIPTION
MAIN TEXT (BODY) *cont'd*	**Chapters**	· Chapters represent the main components of an OECD publication. Each chapter should be self-contained in the sense that it has its own title, abstract, endnotes and references. Chapters, and the tables and graphs within them, need to be numbered carefully. · Clearly identify findings and recommendations. ***See also:*** *Annex A. Numbering OECD publications, pp. 104-107.*
	Chapter title page	· Chapter title · Author's name (if appropriate) · Chapter abstract · Territorial disclaimers (as appropriate to the chapter) ***See also:*** *Chapter abstracts, p. 29; Disclaimers, p. 77.*
	Chapter text	· Within a chapter, use effective signposting to enable readers to easily scan your content and capture the essential elements. ***See also:*** *Organising your content, pp. 19-21.*
	Chapter endnotes	· OECD publications use endnotes (which appear at the end of the chapter) and not footnotes (which appear at the end of the page). · Use these sparingly, numbered from 1 to n in each chapter, for additional information and commentary. Do not use for author citations. ***See also:*** *Bibliographical referencing: Sources and citations, pp. 56-64.*
	Chapter references	· References should come at the end of each chapter or component in the publication. · They must be complete, presented consistently according to the OECD rules and conventions, and include active links and DOIs for OECD published material. ***See also:*** *Bibliographical referencing: Sources and citations, pp. 56-64.* · Incomplete or inconsistent bibliographies do a huge disservice to readers. They also decrease the chances of listed titles being picked up in cross-referencing tools on line. Do not put off the bibliography until the last minute.

PUBLICATION PART	ELEMENT	DESCRIPTION
	Chapter annex (if appropriate)	· Place an annex that is relevant to a specific chapter at the end of that chapter. The annex should be followed by its notes and references, if any.
	Concluding chapter	· Some OECD publications have a concluding chapter that outlines the results of the study and presents policy recommendations. Please note that we recommend moving this information up to the front of the report instead. Should you decide otherwise, bear in mind that this content needs to represent a "chapter" and include descriptive key words in the title.
END PAGES (BACK MATTER)	General annex (if appropriate)	· A general annex offers a way of dealing with highly technical material or extensive background material that could confuse or distract the reader if placed in the body of the text. · Minimise the number of annexes by choosing only indispensable information and grouping the material (by theme or similarity of content). It may also make sense to publish annex material on line only. In specific cases, contact the PAC editorial team for advice. · Treat each annex as a self-contained entity with a clear purpose statement, and number annexes, and the tables and graphs within them, carefully.
	Glossary	· A glossary is an alphabetical list of technical and unfamiliar terms, with explanations and definitions. It is not a substitute for explaining them at first occurrence in the text. A glossary is more detailed than a simple list of abbreviations and acronyms, and so should be placed towards the end of the book.
	Publisher's page (also called the colophon or page d'achève)	· This page displays the printer identification, and the ISBN or ISSN. It also contains the OECD code and job number and the address of the Organisation, as well as a brief description of the Organisation's mission and work. ***See also:*** *What are metadata? p. 16.*

Executive summaries

Executive summaries are valuable tools for time-poor readers.

All OECD publications must contain an executive summary that serves as a brief round-up of the entire study or report. It is intended to give general readers an idea of what they can expect to learn from the book. It should also give readers who are more closely involved with the issue under discussion (such as government officials, corporate executives, journalists and so on) an overview of the main findings and recommendations of the study or report which they can digest easily and quickly.

The executive summary is also of value as a document that can be readily translated into other languages (multilingual summaries) and used to promote and distribute the book to a wider audience.

Since readers with very limited time may choose to read only the summary, it should be as clear and self-contained as possible. Use simple, straightforward language. As with the blurb, the summary should be accessible for non-specialist readers. If you include technical terms, define the terms simply where possible. The executive summary does not have graphs, tables, notes, or bibliographic referencing.

- The summary should be short (850-1 000 words) and contained in a double-page spread in printed format.
- It should begin by stating the main take-away findings and messages.
- It should then outline the issues covered, followed by clearly labelled **"Key findings"** and **"Key recommendations"** sections when possible, or at least **"Key findings"**, **"Key messages"** or **"Conclusions"**.
- The various elements within the summary should be clearly identified, and reflect the content of the publication itself.

For example:

Begin by sparking reader interest (one short factual paragraph): what is the context, situation, issue or complication that led to the project and study?

> At the beginning of the 21st century, 1.1 billion people still do not have access to safe water and 2.4 billion lack access to basic sanitation...

Describe the study (one paragraph maximum):

- What questions or perceived problems/concerns was the study intended to examine?

- What, specifically, was studied: government policies? Corporate policies? Different industrial sectors? The interplay between them? Which ones and why?

> **This study focuses on work and family in three OECD countries: Austria, Ireland and Japan. Since the 1980s, female employment aspirations in all three countries have risen while birth rates have dropped. There is clearly a link between these two phenomena, but is it causal? This study examines how…**

Then list, in bullet points, the main take-away messages, the major findings and the results, conclusions or main recommendations.

Chapter abstracts

Chapter abstracts should be about 100-150 words in length and briefly describe the contents of the chapter. They should include as many keywords as possible, related to the content covered in a given chapter.

They provide essential information to make the content inside chapters easier to find in an online search.

Chapter abstracts are not introductory paragraphs and should not contain conclusions or policy recommendations. They should not contain lists of facts, bulleted lists, or any kind of stylised content.

Example: OECD Employment Outlook 2013

Chapter 2. "Protecting jobs, enhancing flexibility: A new look at employment protection legislation", p. 65.

> **This chapter describes the employment protection legislation (EPL) currently in force in OECD countries and selected emerging economies (including all G20 countries). It also presents the latest quantitative estimates of the degree of stringency of EPL, which can be compared across countries. These estimates are the result of a comprehensive effort to update the OECD EPL indicators based on a more accurate collection methodology and taking into account the relevant legislation, collective agreements and case law. This effort has also led to a significant revision of historical time series of these indicators. The chapter also characterises different models of employment protection across OECD countries. In addition, it points to a clear tendency towards reductions of the degree of stringency of employment protection over the past five years, mostly focused on regulations governing individual and collective dismissals.**

Word count = **136 words.**

Figure and table presentation

The chief purpose of tables and figures is to assemble and present data clearly so that they can be quickly understood.

- **Tables** are best used to help look up information. If readers know exactly what they want, a table will answer their query with an accurate number. Tables are useful to describe data in place of lengthy summaries. Use commentary text to offer analysis, draw conclusions or point out trends (and not reiterate what is already obvious in the table).

- **Figures** work best when they are used to convey a message, and not just to show data. In other words, figures are the best way to highlight something remarkable about the data that would otherwise go unnoticed. They need to be instantly understandable and convey information that will be useful to the reader.

When including tables and figures, ask yourself the following questions:

- Does the presentation really enhance the information?

- Are the tables and figures concise and simple? A series of short tables may be more useful than one long, complex table.

- Do the tables and figures use consistent terminology, country names, abbreviations and formats?

- Do they contain redundant material or superfluous notes?

- Are the titles pertinent, short and clear?

- Have the tables and figures been properly numbered, consecutively, according to the chapter in which they appear?

- Have abbreviations been explained where necessary and added to the list of abbreviations in the front matter?

- Have the source(s) of the data been provided in full, including DOIs and URLs?

- Have copyright permission and a high-resolution version been obtained for reproduction of third-party material?

See also: *Sources of figures, tables and boxes, p. 61; Figure and table titles, p. 23.*

StatLink ⬚⬚⬚ In OECD publications, StatLinks are URLs beneath tables or figures which link to the source files, providing access to the underlying data. They are provided in the form of DOIs and the underlying data are uploaded as Microsoft Excel files.

See also: *Bibliographical referencing: Sources and citations, pp. 56-64;*
What are metadata? p. 16.

The marketing blurb

The marketing blurb is a short description of your publication (about 200 words) that will be used as a basis for promoting your book on OECD iLibrary, and in promotional brochures and catalogues, press releases, newspaper articles and professional journals. You are asked to provide a draft blurb in the manuscript submission form (MSF).

The marketing blurb should be short, precise and reader-friendly. It should "hook" the reader into wanting to learn more about what is inside your publication: the breadth and scope of the subject matter, the significance or originality of the approach taken, the quality of the information or analysis, and the book's potential audience(s).

The marketing blurb should avoid using technical terms and is not meant to give a brief summary of the policy recommendations of the book. It should not be a justification or a description of the institutional process that produced it, as these belong in the Foreword.

How to draft your marketing blurb:

- begin with a short, crisp statement that describes the content in the form of a short abstract (about 150 characters or so)
- include keywords in the text to improve online searchability
- outline the contents of the publication
- include a key fact
- highlight one or more of the following:
  - data quality (timeliness, reliability, comparability) and quantity
  - presentation of tables and graphics
  - objective analysis
  - extent of geographical coverage
  - comparability of countries and regions
  - original approach and analysis
  - participation of internationally known experts.

Watch out for plagiarism

We are all familiar with plagiarism in its form of direct copying, where authors take another's work and use it as their own. But did you know that there are many other actions that are considered plagiarism? Please be alert to the following:

1. **Use of a sentence or passage verbatim, without acknowledgement that it is a quotation:** when using other material unchanged in your text, you must use quotation marks and cite your source.

2. **Paraphrasing too closely:** keeping very similar vocabulary, sentence structure and flow of ideas between your source and your own text.

3. **Borrowing ideas without citing sources:** if your words are your own but your key concepts are not and your sources are not given, this is also plagiarism. Avoid this by citing all sources.

4. **Citing others' work properly but using too much of it:** this is more subjective, but in general, if your text is essentially a blend or summary of other authors' ideas and words (even if correctly cited) and there is no original content of your own, then it would be considered a form of plagiarism (unless in a review).

5. **Republishing your work:** once your text has been formally published, you cannot "republish" (also known as "double publish") the material in another way, unless you have substantially revised the text.

For more information, please see our plagiarism guidelines or contact your PAC editor.
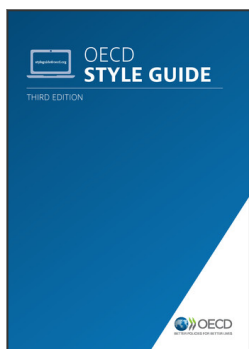
Specifics on web writing

The general "good writing" guidelines also hold true when writing for the web, but since online users tend to scan rather than read word-for-word, certain specific tips apply.

- **Write far less** for the online reader than you do for a print reader: 50% less. Tell readers what they need to know upfront and eliminate unnecessary words, fluff and false starts, jargon and bureaucratese.

- **Provide context.** Explain who, what, where, when, and why your report, fact or event is important. Use short, action-oriented words and sentences.

- **Tell the story backwards** by using the inverted pyramid model of writing:
  - Start with the conclusion.
  - Follow with the most important supporting information.
  - End with the background and/or technical details (link to related content).

- **Make your text very scannable.** Use bulleted lists as much as possible. Break content up using headings and subheadings.

- **Write to be found on line** by creating titles and descriptions with informative and precise keywords.

- **Link to specific, related OECD content** as much as possible.

KEEP IT SHORT	
TEXT	**NUMBER**
Characters in a word	6
Words in a sentence	20 or less
Words in a paragraph	70 or less
Sentences in a paragraph	1-3
Words in an abstract	20 or less
Words in a title	8-10
Words in a heading	3-5