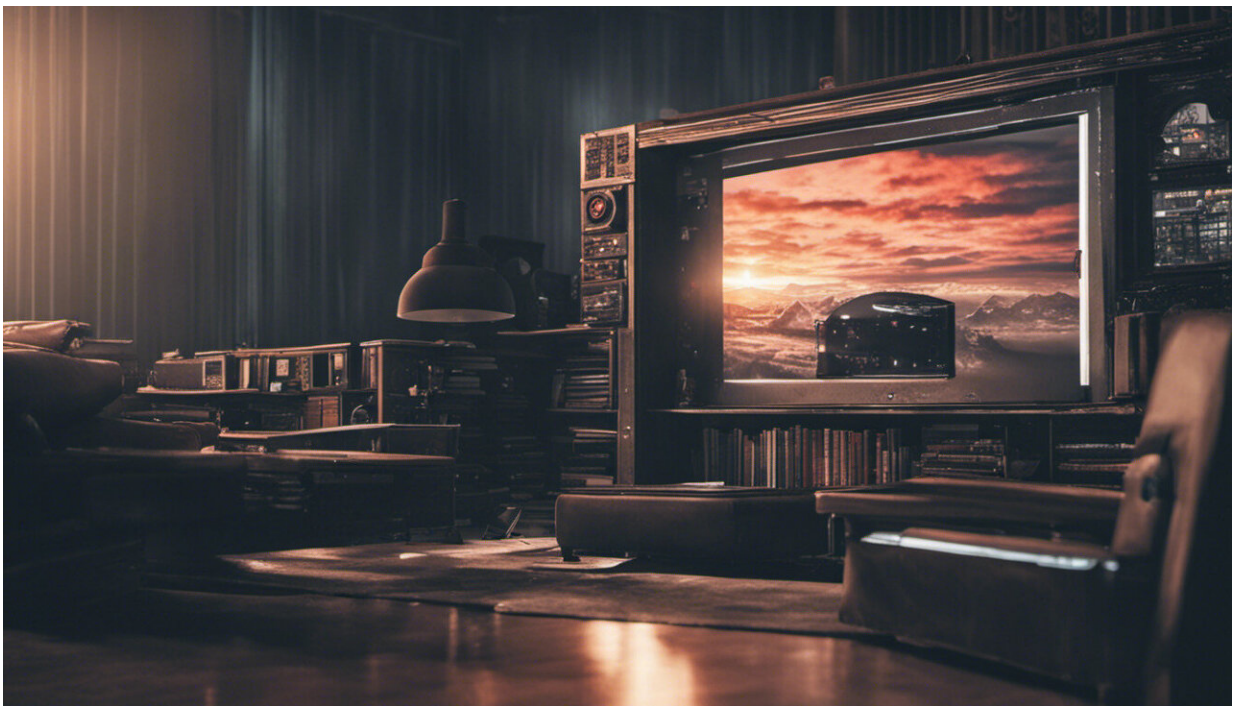# The many reviews of Australia's public service miss one vital problem—the language used to communicate ideas

September 26 2023, by Christiane Gerblinger

Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Australia's public service is no stranger to reform. In the past nine years, it has undergone [three](#) [significant](#) [reviews](#) of its policy advising capabilities, all of which broadly agreed that its policy advice tends towards reticence and needs to be strengthened.

While these reviews triggered reform processes to improve how [policy](#) advice is built, a glaring gap remains largely unexplored: the [language](#) of policy advice itself. How public servant policy advisers articulate arguments, communicate ideas and influence decision-makers has [profound implications](#) for how their [policy recommendations](#) land and whether the [public interest](#) is served. It's an area urgently in need of reform.

Policy advice needs the right language

Policy advice is not just about data and analyses—it's about conveying arguments, views and a compelling narrative that resonates with decision-makers and serves the broader public.

This means language wields immense power. It shapes perceptions, frames issues and influences decisions. Yet reviews of the Australian Public Service (APS) have not explicitly focused on the language used in policy advice.

Language can stymie policy. [A convoluted, risk-averse document](#) that avoids uncomfortable knowledge in case it is controversial or requested under Freedom of Information laws almost always obscures the proposal's merits. This in turn can make it difficult for people to gauge if it is in their interest.

Policy advice serves a dual audience: government [decision-makers](#) and the public. The language used to communicate policy directions must understand the needs of these audiences. And advisers must remember that policies are not only shaped by those in power, but are made in the public interest.

Moreover, the public's ability to access and scrutinize policy advice has expanded dramatically. If policy language remains inaccessible and

opaque, [public trust](#) erodes—not just in governments but within departments.

A language that shows context, addresses dissent, and provides clear directions fosters understanding and trust. This enables everyday citizens to make informed judgments about whether their interest has been served. Addressing the language used in policy advice is not a surface concern—it is a crucial factor in strengthening democratic participation and accountability.

Rectifying the challenge posed by policy language is not a straightforward undertaking. However, several potential avenues could lead the public service towards resolution.

How it can be fixed

As a first step, the importance of language to policy success must be explicitly acknowledged. This might spark a cultural transformation, where language becomes a cornerstone of policy advising rather than the afterthought it so often is. The public service also needs to explore why its language is as weak and ambiguous as it is.

From here, [professional development](#) focused on finding and distilling complex ideas into accessible language is also key. However, simply providing resources for plain language writing or increasing the amount of communication misses the mark. As [has been observed](#), the answer to better policy-advising is not to produce more rigorous, more relevant, less ambiguous, more timely or more appealingly presented evidence. Rather, it is for policymakers to develop a better awareness of how to communicate their ideas.

Finally, interdisciplinary and lateral collaboration could revolutionize policy advising as a fully robust form of knowledge communication. As

former Australian Public Service Commissioner Peter Woolcott [has noted](#), policymakers need to "get better at engaging in policy discussions with [civil society](#) to ensure a full understanding".

Following this thinking, collaborations between science communicators, [social scientists](#), citizen experts, organizational linguists and policy advisers could yield innovative approaches to framing and conveying policy ideas.

The public service's effectiveness hinges on its willingness to stare into the abyss of policy language. The language used in policy [advice](#) is not an inconsequential detail, but a pivotal determinant of success.

If it does not address this problem, the public service risks becoming an unwitting participant in its own decline. The path forward demands not just a cursory nod to the issue but a profound shift in policy advisers' perception and prioritization of policy language, as well as the culture in which it exists.

Only then can the public service empower its policy advisers to communicate with impact, cultivate public trust and navigate the complex landscape of policy-making in the 21st century.

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