# Reviewing workplace documents – Northpower case study

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Have you wondered how employees cope with the literacy and numeracy demands of the complex forms and documents they have to deal with at work?

Have you noticed that some documents are hard to follow, and wondered if there are some straightforward things that could be done to simplify these documents?

Andrea O'Brien (Northpower Safety and HR Manager), Kate Duggan (ESITO Quality and Project Manager), and Nicola Beentjes (Workbase Consultant) recently worked together to address these issues. The project was commissioned by ESITO with funding support from the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC).

## Background

Trainees and employees within the electricity supply industry have to use a range of compliance and health and safety forms in order to complete even small tasks. Because a company can contract to a number of asset owners, an employee might have to carry out the same task at several different companies in one day. It is common that each company will have a different form for the task. Different companies may use different terminology to describe the same thing, combine many purposes and audiences in the same document, and use layouts that are hard to follow. These factors were seen to be causing problems. Trainers and assessors across the electricity supply industry reported that some employees seemed to be confused about, or not able to use, the paperwork. The trainers and assessors were concerned that these problems could contribute to compliance issues and health and safety incidents.

ESITO wanted to work with a company to explore the literacy issues related to paper based document design and use. This was seen as one way to reduce the on job literacy demands on trainees undertaking ESITO qualifications. ESITO was also interested in exploring the possibility of standardising forms across industry, an idea raised by a number of assessors.

ESITO approached Northpower to be part of the project. Together they agreed to focus on what could be done to simplify Northpower paperwork as a first step to addressing literacy and numeracy skill development within Northpower.

Northpower had two main reasons for becoming involved with the project.

1) As a result of downsizing of the contracting business, Northpower assisted some staff to find new employment. Within that resettlement process employees needed to complete job application forms from other employers. Some of these employees were unable to interpret the forms.

2) Accurate reporting of safety incidents, and communicating information about safety incidents to employees, is very important to the company. Safety requirements are often communicated in written form and some employees may not understand what they read, or how they should complete report forms.

## Project scoping

Like other electricity supply industry companies, Northpower has an extensive range of workplace documentation, particularly relating to health and safety and compliance. The initial focus for the project group was to find ways to reduce the literacy and numeracy demands of Northpower paperwork. Northpower wanted employees to be able to easily fill out forms and read important health and safety information. They did not want employees to face unnecessary barriers caused by poor document design.

Once the project group had identified some key forms and documents to review, they identified about what else had to be done to make sure the project had the most impact. Completing a document review was a natural first step. As a second step, the group identified what people at Northpower who trained others, or who wrote workplace documents, needed to know:

- how to write better documents
- how to support employees who struggle to read and to complete company paperwork
- practical things to do to develop employees' literacy skills.

With the scope of the work outlined, Workbase worked on the project in two distinct phases:

1. Reviewing selected Northpower documents

2. Training Northpower trainers and writers in workplace document design principles, and how to coach and support employees to use the documents.

# Project phase 1: Reviewing selected Northpower documents

## Selecting the documents to review

Potentially all of Northpower's documents could have been reviewed. However, the review focussed on documents that related to health and safety and also:

- caused the most problems
- needed to be completed accurately
- were used by the biggest number of employees, including trainees.
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## Process for reviewing documents

Workbase interviewed the writers of the documents as well as employees who used them. This process identified many issues employees had with reading or filling out the documents. Using the information from these interviews, Workbase revised the documents using plain English principles and good literacy and numeracy design. Workbase then trialled some reviewed forms with employees, gathered feedback from the trial and used the feedback to further refine the documents.

The table on the next page shows the Northpower documents reviewed as part of the project. The table includes examples of the changes that were made to these documents.

## Table showing Northpower documents reviewed as part of the project scope

| Name of form | Description | Overview of recommended changes |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Induction presentation | Power point presentation used for induction of new staff. | Identify three to five key messages that new staff need to take away from the induction presentation.<br>Reduce the number of slides.<br>Add relevant photos, diagrams, and graphics to support written messages.<br>Simplify wording to make the instructions easier to understand.<br>*For example:*<br>*Minimum PPE requirements shall consist of the following - hard hat, full cover fire retardant overalls...*<br>*Changed to: You must always wear your – hard hat, full cover fire retardant overalls.* |
| Incident reporting form | Multi-purpose incident and accident report form. | Increase the white space on the form to make it look less crowded.<br>Rearrange questions for a more logical flow for reporting.<br>Remove items that do not need to be included on the form.<br>*For example, the form asked the writer to tick a risk assessment rating box. However the risk assessment rating was supposed to be done by a safety representative, so there was no need for people reporting incidents to complete this section.*<br>Simplify wording and use terms consistently throughout the document.<br>*For example:*<br>*Applicable to electrical incidents only:*<br>*Changed to:*<br>*If this was an electrical incident* |

| Name of form | Description | Overview of recommended changes |
|---|---|---|
| Hazard identification (tailgate meeting record) | Records details of hazards identified at tailgate meeting at beginning of shift. | Increase the white space on the form to make it look less crowded.<br>Use terms consistently throughout the document.<br>Review the language used. Change the language to simplify the instructions and clarify the expected outcome.<br>*For example:*<br>*What hazards with my personal tasks could potentially harm me / my team or the public?*<br>*Change to:*<br>*What could harm the team or the public as we carry out our job tasks? (Job task hazards)* |
| Safety alert | Explains details of recent safety incidents, using a set structure. | Change wording to make it consistent throughout the document. For example the original document used both "happened" and "occurred" when describing different aspects of the situation. In the review we chose to use the word "happen" consistently in the document.<br>Use words that tell the reader what to do, for example. *"Action required"* changed to *"What you must do in future".* |

## Key findings from reviewing the documents

The findings from the Northpower document review process can be applied generally.

1. It is important to have a clear purpose for each document.

2. If possible, when reviewing a document, talk to the original writer as they may be able to provide invaluable background information about its purpose.

3. If several people have been involved in re-writing documents over time, there is more likely to be confusion about the purpose and audience for the document.

4. Some documents are used for more than one purpose, and all purposes and users need to be considered when reviewing the document. For example, Northpower's health and safety incident report form is also used for environmental incident reporting, so it includes some items that only relate to environmental incidents. Some people suggested removing these items, but to do so would have meant the form no longer met company requirements.

5. Finding out how end users approached completing the document was critical to the review. Where possible, Workbase observed employees completing the forms.

6. Critical information for a review includes identifying who will use the information in the document; the specific information needed; and how that information would be used. If a document includes sections that no-one actually reads or uses, these sections should be removed. For example, the original event report form asked the writer for a risk assessment rating. However, risk assessment ratings are always done by trained members of the health and safety team, so other staff members did not need to do risk assessments.

7. Using consistent terms throughout documents is important. For example, if you use the word "Team leader" don't confuse people by later using the terms "supervisor" or "line manager"

8. It may take a number of attempts before all aspects of the revised document works. For example, five drafts of the Northpower incident report form were produced before all users and audiences were satisfied with the report form.

## Project phase 2: Training Northpower trainers and writers

Workbase ran a half day workshop for those Northpower Trade Coaches (on job trainers), and document writers who were able to attend. This workshop occurred while the document review process was underway.

At the workshop, Workbase asked participants to look at carefully selected examples of workplace documents, and asked them to identify good and not so good aspects of these documents. Workbase then provided a guide which supported many of the points that the participants had identified instinctively. These principles of good practice for workplace documents, include:

- Knowing your audience.
- Language and word choices.
- Layout and design.

Workbase trained participants to use a systematic approach to assist other employees to read and complete documents.

The original project plan included more workshops for other Northpower trainers and writers. However, after the workshop, Northpower staff felt able to do this training themselves and Workbase produced a resource so that Northpower could develop its own staff's capability.

A copy of this resource is attached as Appendix 1.

> *"This has been an extremely positive exercise to go through for Northpower and has helped us to identify simple changes within key documentation to make it easier for our employees to complete critical safety paperwork. The training has also assisted in helping our document writers to consider the end user of the documentation and has given them some simple tools to make it easier".* Andrea O'Brien, Northpower.

## Project timeframes

This project took longer than the original project timeframe of six to eight weeks. Because of the geographical spread, workloads and changing commitments of Northpower personnel involved in the project, it was not possible to schedule all the interviews and training within the original timeframe.

The nature of the electricity supply industry, and the challenging environment in which industry personnel operate, means that contingencies need to be built into these types of projects. Workbase would recommend allowing longer time frames for any future projects of this type.

## Conclusion

This project showed that by making a number of changes, Northpower created workplace documents that were easier to read and use. Some changes were quite simple – for example using the same terms consistently in documents. Other changes, such as those which required analysis of the purpose and function of a form, were more difficult. For Northpower, these more difficult changes produced the greatest improvements – for example greatly reducing the amount of detail employees had to write on the event report form and reduced the complexity of the form.

This project also showed that the Northpower personnel were very interested in getting assistance to learn how they could improve workplace documents and train others in the company to develop similar skills.

It seems likely that other companies in the electricity supply industry would also benefit from getting assistance to review their own workplace documentation from a literacy and language perspective. Assistance can come from external sources, for example, contracting writers with a good understanding of literacy and language to review company material. Alternatively, industry personnel can be trained how to write better documents.

The experience of reviewing the Northpower event report form showed how important it is to be clear on the purpose and function of complex forms, and that within one company there can be different understanding of these things. Across the whole industry, there are likely to be even more diverse views. Any efforts to develop standard forms for the electricity supply industry will have to start with a process of identifying what each form is for, who will be using it, and what information they need to write on it. Once these things are agreed, it will be easier to create industry forms using plain English principles and following good literacy and language practice.

# Appendix 1:  Resource developed for Northpower by Workbase

## Writing and using workplace documents

## Introduction

This resource was developed as part of a workplace document review project at Northpower. The project was funded by ESITO and completed by Workbase in late 2009 and early 2010.

One part of this project was a half day workshop with Northpower Trade Coaches. During the workshop, we looked at examples of workplace documents, and used these examples to generate discussion about what we need to do to write good written material. We also shared good practice points.

The resource is designed to help you work through a similar process in pairs or small groups in a workplace training setting. Most sections begin with an example, and include key questions for discussion. Use the half pages to cover the “b” examples when you are looking at the “a” examples.

Each section has a checklist or set of good practice points for you to use when you write or review your own forms and written material.

The final section provides a step by step process to use when you are introducing other people to a written document, or showing them how to fill out a form.

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May 2010

## Contents

*Cut or fold this page in half and use to cover the “b” example until you are ready to use it.*

**Example 1:**

1a

**OUT OF SERVICE CARDS**

Out of Service Cards are attached to machinery and equipment, to prohibit their operation or use, whilst under repair or in such a condition that they are unsafe to use.

To operate machinery to which an OUT OF SERVICE CARD is attached, or to remove an OUT OF SERVICE CARD that is already on equipment will render the employee to instant dismissal.

1b


This is an out of service card.

The out of service card is put on equipment to stop you from using it.

The out of service card means that the equipment is unsafe to use, or under repair.

If you use equipment when it has a out of service card on it you can be fired (instant dismissal).

## Discussion question

Which one of these examples is easier to read?  Why?

## Why are some documents harder to read?

Most people find example 1a harder to read.

- The writer included words that people don’t usually use in daily conversation – e.g. whilst, prohibited.
- The sentences are long, and include some words that aren’t needed – e.g. “in such a condition that”.
- The meaning is not as clear as it could be.

Example 1b is easier to read because:

- The writer used more words that people use in everyday conversation.
- The message is addressed to the reader, e.g. - “to stop **you** from using it”
- It includes a relevant picture to support the message.
- The writer has considered what the audience (the people reading the document) need.

## Who are you writing for, why are you writing, and what are you trying to say?

**Before you start writing you should ask yourself:**

- Am I clear about why I am writing?
- Am I clear about who my audience is?
- What information does the audience need?
- How will I explain difficult words or ideas?
- Will my audience be familiar with this type of writing?
- Will the audience know about the topic?
- Have I got a clear idea what the document will look like when I've finished?

In example 1a, the writer has not really considered the audience, or the reason for writing (training material).

In example 1b, the writer has thought about the purpose of the document and who will be reading it.

*Cut or fold this page in half and use to cover the “b” example until you are ready to use it.*

## Example 2:

### 2a

When reviewing a document, ask yourself:

Have I used a plain font? Do the headings stand out? Is the size of the font easy to read?

Have I left enough white-space to make it look uncluttered on the page?

Have I been consistent with the size of the headings and sub-headings?

Have I used pictures/graphics to add interest and to help explain information?

Some fonts are much harder to read than others.

The smaller the font, the harder it is to read

If you fill the space up with too much text, it looks cluttered and harder to read. Some people reduce the font size to fit more text on to a page. They reason that people will be more likely to read a document if it is only one page, so they squash as much information as possible onto that one page. This can actually make it even harder to read because the reader ends up squinting to see the text. If you are using Arial, the smallest font size you should use is 10pt. This text is written in Arial 8pt and it is very small. Older people and those with eyesight issues will find this tricky to read. When you put too many words in a small space it can make your reader think that the document will be harder to read than it really is. Using white space breaks up the text, and shows your reader where they can take a break from concentrating. You should also use a consistent hierarchy for your headings. Main headings should be the largest font size. Subheadings should be a smaller font size than main headings. This piece of text is not an example of what you should do. Tired of trying to read this tiny little paragraph? Wish the font was a bit bigger or there were actually some white spaces, even just a few paragraph breaks? You probably wouldn't be alone in wanting that! Or have you not actually read most of what was above and gone straight to this, the last line?

### 2b

**Document layout questions**

- Have I used a plain font?
- Do the headings stand out?
- Is the size of the font easy to read?
- Have I left enough white-space to make it look uncluttered on the page?
- Have I been consistent with the size of the headings and sub-headings?
- Have I used pictures/graphics to add interest and to help explain information?

## Layout and design

Example 2a is provided to show just how hard some fonts and layout options can be to read.

Example 2b provides some tips you can follow for layout and design.

*Cut or fold this page in half and use to cover the “b” example until you are ready to use it.*

**Example 3:**

**3a**

## 2.2 Effects of current on human beings.

For a given current path through the human body, the danger to persons depends mainly on the magnitude and duration of the current flow. However, the time/current zones specified in this publication are, in many cases, not directly applicable in practice for designing measures of protection against electrical shock. The necessary criterion is the admissible limit of touch voltage (i.e. the product of the current through the body called touch current and the body impedance) as a function of time. The relationship between current and voltage is not linear because the impedance of the human body varies with the touch voltage, and data on this relationship is therefore required.
*From ESITO TAR 15851 p9*

**3b**

**Section 2.2 How current flow affects your body**
You can be injured if electrical current flows through your body. The higher the current (magnitude) and the longer it passes through you (duration), the more likely it is to cause serious injury.

There are three things you need to understand about what happens when you come into contact with electricity.

1) Body impedance. This is the term we use to explain the body's opposition to current flow. Body impedance varies. For example, if you are sweating your body impedance is lower and you will conduct more current than if you are not sweating.
2) Touch current. This is the amount of current that can potentially flow through your body if it becomes part of the electrical circuit.
3) Touch voltage. The level of voltage you come into contact with causing different current values. Touch voltage values are calculated using touch current and body impedance measurements.

The following table gives a guide to how much effect electric current levels will have on your body, and shows the maximum touch voltage you should be exposed to. Remember, these figures are only a guide because our body impedance levels change in different situations.

## Use the right language

The language used in example 3a is harder to understand. The sentences are long, and the text includes difficult words like “admissible”, “applicable” and “criterion”.

Example 3b uses simpler language. The sentences are shorter. The text uses the active voice e.g. – “you can be injured….”. Relevant technical terms are still included in the text e.g. “body impedance”, “current levels”.

### When reviewing a document, ask yourself:

- Is the language used in the document clear?
- Are the words used in the document suitable for the readers?
- Have I used technical vocabulary that is suitable for the audience?
- Have I given the readers some help to understand the technical words?
- Have all unnecessary words been cut?
- Are difficult ideas explained clearly?

## Know your audience

If you want your audience to understand what you have written, you must write it in a way they will understand. Ask yourself the following questions

- Who is the target audience?
- What will the audience already know about the topic?
- Why will the audience read this document?
- What are the needs, wants and expectations of the audience in terms of the document?
- What level of education and English reading ability does my audience have?
- Is the audience familiar with this form of document t?
- What sort of words does the audience use to talk about the topic?
- Will the document need to be used for a number of purposes?
- Under what conditions will the audience read the document?
- What will the audience expect to 'take-away' in terms of the benefits/outcomes from reading the document?

## How to help people read a workplace document

This approach can be used for helping people to read a workplace document. The idea is to get the person to ask questions and seek information, and interact with the document. This helps them to understand what they are reading.

### Stage 1: Build background knowledge of the document

Show them an example of the document. Ask questions to help the person think about what the document means and what it is for.

Examples of questions:

- Why do you have to read this document?
- Who needs to read it?
- Where would you find it?
- When would you read it
- Who wrote it?
- Why did they have to write it?
- What sort of words and information would you expect to see in this document?

### Stage 2: Work with the document

Ask the person to read the headings. Make sure they can read them and pronounce the words correctly.

Talk about technical terms or abbreviations that might be in the document.

Find any words or information the trainee thought would be in the document.

Ask the person to discuss meanings of words or look them up in dictionary.

Discuss why the information is formatted in a particular way.

Discuss language used.

### Stage 3: Review the document

Ask the person to tell you in their own words what the document covers.

Discuss whether the writer has met their purpose.

Discuss whether the document could have been written in a different way to achieve same purpose.

## How to help someone complete a form

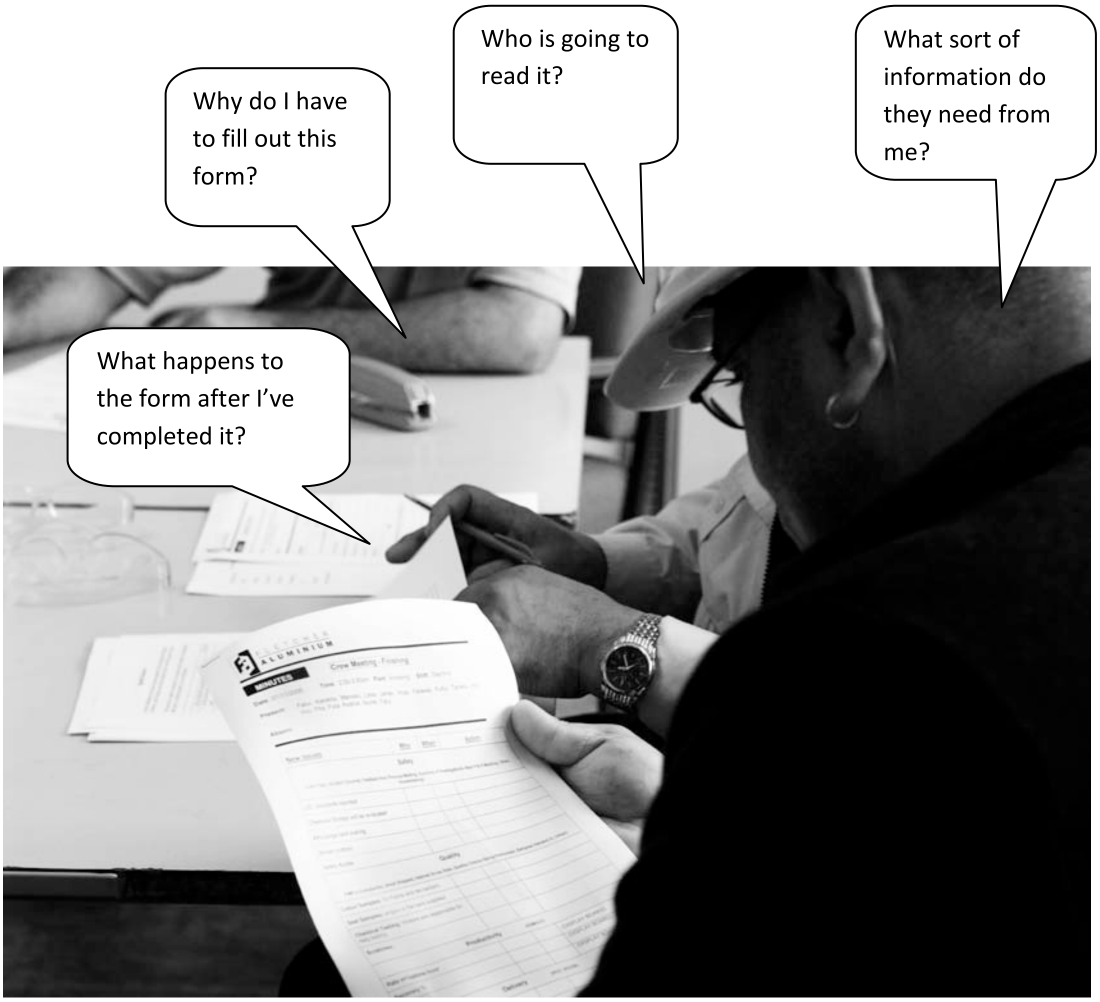
The worked example below shows how you can work with someone who needs to complete a workplace form. The approach works well with a group of people.

### Stage 1: Build background knowledge of the form

Talk about the form together, and ask questions to help the person think about what they have to do. Have some examples of completed forms on hand.

Examples of questions:

- Why do we fill in these forms .... (e.g. event reports)?
- Who needs to read them?
- Who else is allowed to read them?
- What sort of information has to be in the form?
- What is this information used for?



## Stage 2: Model the form

Choose or create two good examples and two poor examples of the completed form.
Ask the person to compare the good and poor examples and tell you what the good and bad points are (this can also be done in small groups or pairs).
Ask if there are any barriers or reasons why people might not want to complete the forms e.g.

- other people in the company don't
- time consuming

Reinforce why it is important to complete this form.

Discuss language used – what is OK and what isn't OK.

## Stage 3: Joint completion of the form

Use a real scenario.

Project a copy of the form on to whiteboard, or make a big paper copy of the form. Get the person to tell you what you should write. You fill out the form following their instructions.

## Stage 4: Individual completion of the form

Give the person at least three scenarios, and ask them to complete the form on their own.

If you are working with a group, and you think some trainees may be struggling, make sure that they have the chance to do the task away from the others.

Give them a chance to practise a few times, and then review the results with them.

Reference:
"Effective Communication and Training" by Annabelle Lukin and
"To write?...Too Right" by Pam Bossard, Jill Hollway and Jonquil Mackey.