HEADINGS: ARE REASONABLY BRIEF (NO LONGER THAN 1 LINE)

See **4.5** of the Checklist

HEADINGS AS SIGN POSTS

Readers should be able to quickly scan a heading and still have a clear idea of the underlying information.

Headings act like signposts to different areas of a document. Like signposts, headings work best when they are reasonably brief and accurate.

Headings need substance. Without substance, they don't provide useful information.
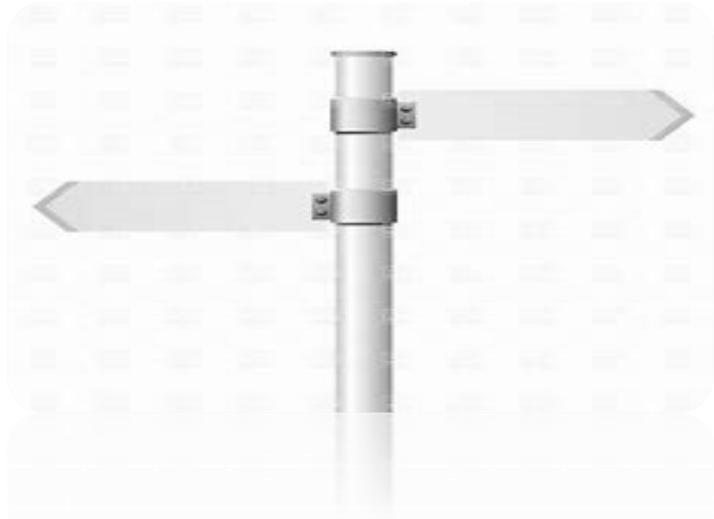
BENEFITS OF BRIEF HEADINGS

Brief headings:
- require less effort from the reader
- are more likely to be read and to be read in full
- don't overwhelm the information that follows:

EXAMPLE 1

❌ **Caster, a technology company, buys Mitchell, with assistance from Jon & Smith, for $1.2B**

✅ **Caster buys Mitchell for $1.2B**

This does not mean that short headings are always better than longer ones (see example 6). A heading must still provide enough information for the reader to assess its content quickly and accurately.

"NO LONGER THAN 1 LINE" – A GUIDE

This is not a hard and fast rule, but it is a useful guide.

The "no longer than 1 line" guide works well for print documents but makes less sense in the context of some electronic documents (eg, web pages). Some experts suggest between 5 and 10 words as a guide for headings in web pages.

LEGISLATIVE DRAFTING PRACTICES TO HELP KEEP HEADINGS SHORT

For legislation, we have drafting conventions or style rules that help us to keep headings short. For example:

- don't use definite or indefinite articles ("the", "a", or "an") in headings. Exceptions: definite or indefinite articles may be used in headings for "the Crown", in other phrases where it cannot be avoided, or if it is necessary for sense
- rely on abbreviations established in the defined terms (use EPA or Authority, not Environmental Protection Authority):

EXAMPLE 2

❌ **Authorising the Birkenhead Borough Council to pay annual levies made by the Birkenhead Fire Board out of moneys contributed and raised to aid in establishing a local fire brigade**

✅ **BBC authorised to establish local fire brigade**

USING "ETC" IN HEADINGS

Using "etc" in headings enables you to make the headings shorter but at the risk of omitting key words that readers are looking for. The effect can also be stiff, overly formal, or vague, so use "etc" sparingly.

> **TIP**
> If it is necessary to use "etc" in a heading, always consider whether the provision should instead be broken up.

DON'T USE "ETC" IN SHORT LISTS

If the list of items in a provision is short, including "etc" in the heading is usually unnecessary. In the heading in Example 3, "etc" replaces the third item in a list of 3 items:

EXAMPLE 3

❌ **30   Register of accidents, incidents, etc**
Every employer of seafarers on a New Zealand ship must maintain (in a form approved by the Director) a register of accidents, incidents, and mishaps.

✅ **30   Register of accidents, incidents, and mishaps**
Every employer [*as above*]

DON'T USE "ETC" IF UNLISTED ITEMS CANNOT BE REASONABLY INFERRED

It is misleading to use "etc" to shorten lists in headings if the unlisted items are not reasonably able to be inferred from the listed items. For instance, in Example 4, a reader interested in water transport may overlook the section because it would not be predictable or obvious that the subject of "water transport" would be addressed under that particular heading:

EXAMPLE 4

❌ **37   Road and rail transport, etc**
✅ **37   Road, rail, and water transport**

Another issue with the first heading above is that it is unnecessary to use "etc" to replace the third item when there are only 3 short items being addressed in the text.

LISTS THAT CONTAIN DISPARATE ITEMS

If items in a list are too disparate to be adequately described in a brief heading (eg, elephants, trains, and garden rakes), this may be an indication that you need to reconsider dealing with all the items in the provision together. The subjects might be better set out in separate provisions.

Alternatively, the heading could be amended to focus on another part of the key message. For example, if the above items are related because they are all items that may not be imported, the heading could be "Prohibited import items".

Although brief headings can be effective in guiding a reader, brevity can lead to ambiguity. For example, "Application" is often used to indicate the scope of a provision, but it could also be read as referring to the process of applying for something.

However, you don't want to make headings so long that they overwhelm the material itself. With rare exceptions, headings should be shorter than the content that follows them. For example, avoid headings that require one word answers:

EXAMPLE 5

❌ **27 Do I have to file a newspaper notice of my activities before I begin operations?**
Yes.

✅ **37 Do I need to publish a notice?**
You must publish a notice of your operations in a local newspaper before you begin your activities.

Don't sacrifice important information just to write a short heading:

EXAMPLE 6

❌ **254 Human rights**

✅ **254 How procedures in this Part affect human rights**

❌ **255 Applications**

✅ **255 Deadline for submitting applications**

❌ **256 Grants**

✅ **256 How to apply for grants under this Part**

❌ **257 Administrative requirements**

✅ **257 How regulator must deal with applications**

If the text itself is very short, be careful not to just repeat the text in the heading:

EXAMPLE 7

❌ **39 Exemption notices specified in Schedule are revoked**
The notices specified in the Schedule are revoked.

✅ **39 Exemption notices revoked**
The exemption notices specified in the Schedule are revoked.