Australian Government

emergency warnings

choosing your words

emergency warnings

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A reference document on how to construct the wording of emergency warning messages to the Australian community

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Emergency Warnings Choosing Your Words (the Guide) was developed in association with work being undertaken by Australian governments and the broadcast media industry to develop and implement nationally consistent arrangements for the request and broadcast of emergency warnings. It was initiated in recognition of a need for emergency services and management to have further information on the most effective choice of wording and phraseology to use when they are drafting warnings.

The Guide was developed through a review of the available literature on this issue and of words in current use in Australia and overseas. This was followed by qualitative focus testing in the Australian population of the most recommended and/or commonly used words.

The Guide contains information about specific words that, in the testing conducted, best conveyed the relevant concepts for warning messages. In most cases several alternatives are provided, to allow for more flexibility in wording to suit particular warning situations.

Concepts addressed include:

☐ Guiding principles for writing effective warning messages   p.5
☐ Names/titles of warnings   p.14
☐ Who issues the warning   p.15
☐ Describing the threat to promote a response   p.16

It is not intended that the Guide contradict or determine local guidelines and systems – rather it is intended to provide advice about word choices that are most effective in conveying particular concepts. It is expected that it will provide specific word choice advice to complement existing systems relating to the issuing of warnings.

Where groups of words are provided to convey changing degrees of seriousness or probability, these groupings reflect intuitive 'levels' for the community. They can be selectively used to match the *intention* of any existing categories or scales in use by emergency management authorities.

The words and principles identified in the Guide have been developed from related literature and from the preferences of community members. It is not, and can not be, a totally prescriptive template for writing a warning message. Rather, it offers specific advice on effective words to use in constructing a warning message.

It is recommended that consideration of appropriate wording against a variety of scenarios and incident levels be regularly undertaken as part of planning preparation and training programs. In this way, the information provided in the Guide can be considered in conjunction with the local circumstances and expertise of the emergency services to develop the best possible 'template messages', which can be quickly amended and used in times of emergency.

As part of the continuing work on the national guidelines, the effectiveness of the wording contained within the Guide, may be reviewed and any review will be completed in consultation with the State, Territory and Australian governments.
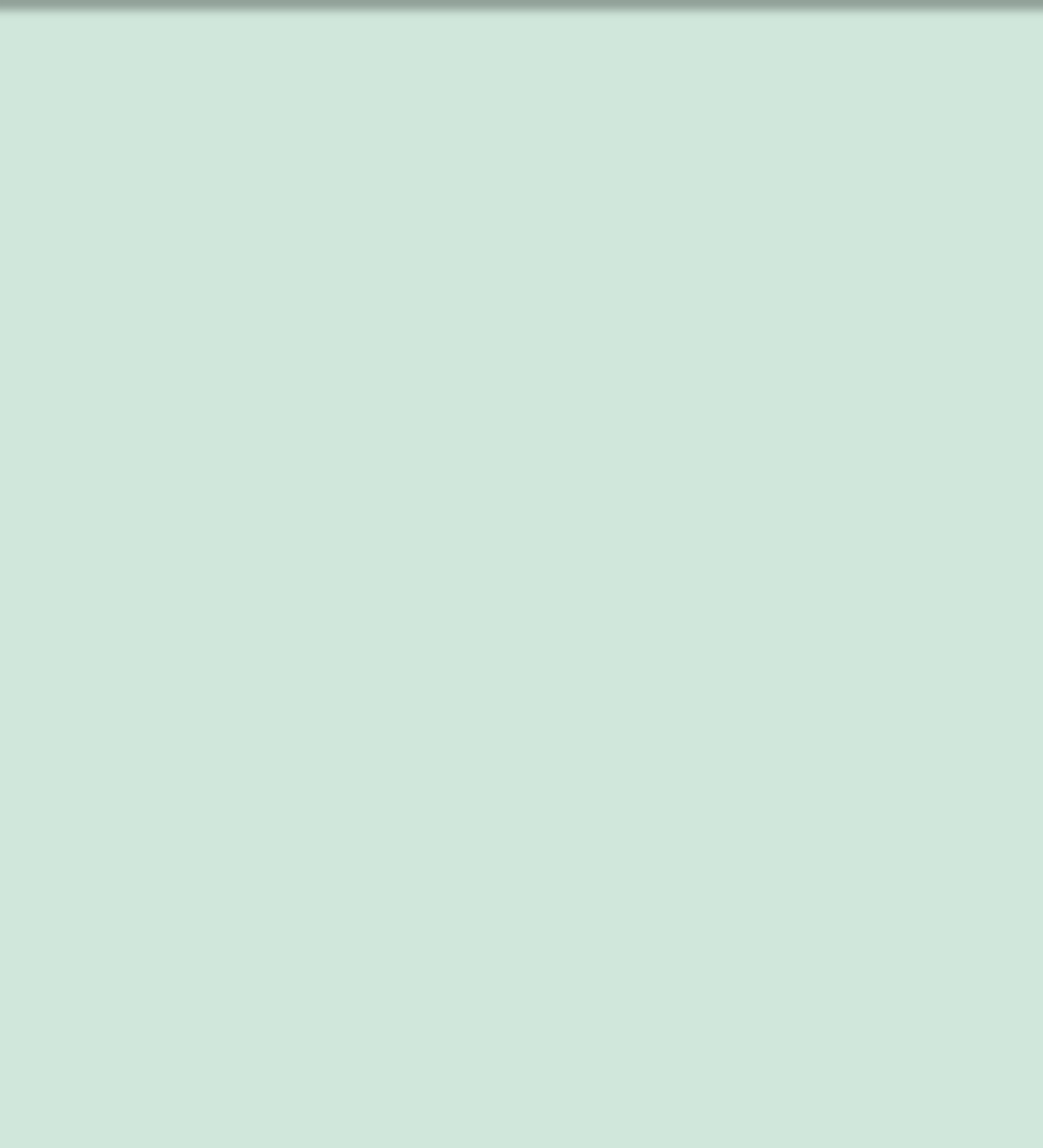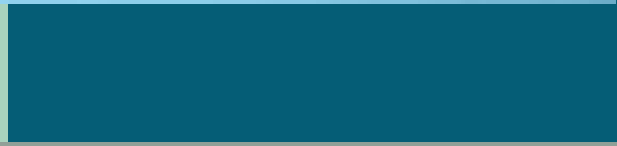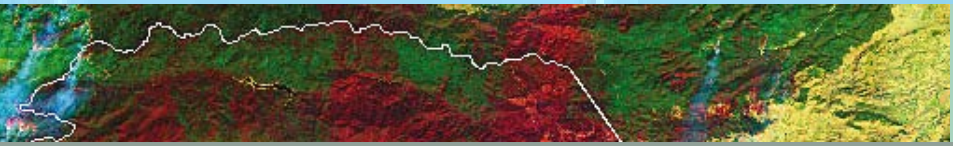
1 PURPOSE OF EMERGENCY WARNINGS

Emergency warnings are intended to achieve two outcomes:

1   Inform the community of an impending or current threat.

2   Promote appropriate responsive actions.

Be very clear about whether you need to achieve one or both of these outcomes when writing an emergency warning.

2 GUIDING PRINCIPLES

There are several important principles that need to be considered when writing an emergency warning.

2.1 Don't make assumptions

- There will be a wide range of audiences who may:
  - Have different knowledge of the local area
  - Have different previous experience with the type of threat
  - Have different understanding of the meaning of specific technical or local terms
  - Be in different situations (at home, at work, in the car, visiting an area).

2.2 It is a dialogue with the community, not a command situation

- In most cases you are seeking *co-operation* with a suggested action, not compliance with an 'order'.
  - This is best achieved through recipients being convinced by the information they get that a course of action is the best one for them to take.
  - Your role is not that of a 'King' to issue orders – a better analogy is to be a marketer who is selling the product of 'appropriate action' and needs to convince the audience to accept the advice.

2.3 Responding to warnings is a process, not a single step

- There is not a 'stimulus-response' reaction to emergency warnings, recipients generally go through a series of steps before they decide to take action. They:
    - ☐ Receive the message
    - ☐ Understand the message
    - ☐ Believe the message is credible
    - ☐ Confirm (or acknowledge) the message
    - ☐ Personalise the message (it applies to me and my circumstances)
    - ☐ Determine whether action is required
    - ☐ Determine whether action is feasible.
- Don't expect recipients of the emergency warning to immediately take the recommended action without going through this type of process.

2.3a Recipients of the message will have a need to *confirm* the message before they are likely to take action

- They may:
    - ☐ Confirm the threat exists
    - ☐ Confirm that it applies to them
    - ☐ Confirm how they should respond.
- Unless they have proof, they will tend to believe that the situation is normal.
- People confirm emergency warnings in several ways:
    - ☐ Personal observation
    - ☐ Speaking to other people (in person, by phone)
    - ☐ Seeking additional information (internet, radio, TV).
- If the emergency warning is not confirmed then it may be ignored. If possible direct recipients to sources for confirming information.
- So long as information is *consistent*, emergency warnings issued from two or more relevant agencies may help to confirm and reinforce the information.

2.4　Consistency is critical

- ☐ Within each message
- ☐ Between messages
- ☐ Between information from different sources.

■ Where the situation has changed be explicit about what the changes are and why they have changed rather than allowing changes to look like inconsistencies.

■ In particular, ensure consistency in the recommended actions people should take.

2.5　Accuracy is important

■ Messages must:
- ☐ Reflect current conditions in order to match self-confirmation experiences (be up to date/timely)
- ☐ Be correct information
- ☐ Be complete information.

■ If information does not match personal observations or other confirmation sources then this may discredit the emergency warning.
- ☐ If it is likely that information in the emergency warning *will* vary from observations – try to explain how and why.

2.6　Be as specific as possible

■ People are likely to want as much information as possible.
They will want to know:
- ☐ Where the threat is
- ☐ When it will be there
- ☐ How bad it will be
- ☐ What they can/should do to respond.

2.7 Don't leave gaps

☐ If some information is not available – state this specifically rather than leave 'holes' in the information which may discredit the warning.

☐ People do *not* like the word 'unknown'. Rather, try to describe what is being done (for example: '_____ is still gathering information about _____').

2.8 If people are likely to be familiar with previous similar emergencies, use these to 'benchmark' the impending situation

■ Not everyone will have experienced the past emergency (and some will have had different experiences of it), but this can help to create a sense of scale for some people in the community.

2.9 Recipients may be getting the messages under conditions of stress

■ Under pressure or stress, people's capacity to or ability to process information and make decisions may not be the same as in less stressful conditions.

☐ Attention and concentration can be affected

☐ Emotional responses are more likely

☐ Memory and physical skills can be affected

☐ Decision making ability can be affected

☐ They may need more specific instructions/direction
– Keep instructions simple, clear and specific

☐ They may need reassurance of their ability to execute normal skills.

2.10 Where the target audience includes people who do not speak English as a first language there may be a need to simplify word choices

- Simple, intuitively meaningful language is the basis of this guide. However, for some communities and individuals who speak English as a second, third or even fourth language, even the language of this guide needs to be further simplified. This includes indigenous audiences and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

- Audiences where most people have basic English skills may only require a simplified version of standard warnings which will be well understood.

    For audiences where only rudimentary English skills are the norm, a specific alternative message may need to be provided (see section 5 of this guide).

- Simplification means:
    - ☐ Using shorter and more common words where possible
    - ☐ Short, to-the-point sentence construction
    - ☐ Less use of subtlety
    - ☐ Using fewer steps in a continuum.
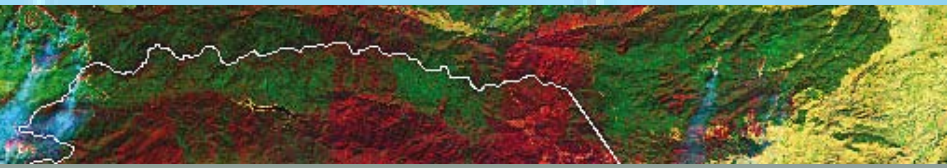
3 STRUCTURE OF AN EMERGENCY WARNING MESSAGE

There are a number of specific pieces of information that should be included in an emergency warning.

3.1   The name/title of warning

3.2   Who is issuing the warning

3.3   The type of threat (and preferably a description)

3.4   How likely it is to happen

3.5   How bad it is expected to be

3.6   Where the threat applies/who is affected

3.7   When it is expected to happen

3.8   What to do

3.9   A point of contact for more information or to report events.

> **Advice on wording for each of these points can be found in the next section.**

Note: the order of information shown here is not definitive.
This is a reasonably natural order of information, but variations
that encompass the same range of information may be equally effective.

4 LANGUAGE TO USE

General advice on language choice

- Use intuitive terms where possible, not words that require 'taught meaning'.
- Certainty of tone is critical – be specific and unambiguous.
- To inspire recipients to take action there is a need to:
    - ☐ Get their attention
    - ☐ Make a message that is personally relevant
    - ☐ Motivate then persuade them to choose the desired action
        - Use colourful/emotive/persuasive language – not a 'boring' or a technical-sounding message.

4.1 The name/title of warning

	Recommended name of warning to use	
Desired meaning	*Mainstream*	*Simplified*
Be aware/keep an eye out: – for early use or – to downgrade an existing threat	**Advice**	**Advice**
Be aware/keep an eye out	**Preliminary Warning**	
Prepare: – for further warnings – for the impending situation	**Warning**	**Warning**
Take action	**Emergency Warning** Alternative name: Severe Warning	**Emergency Warning**

Add the **name** of the threat into the title

Example

☐ Emergency Bushfire Warning

☐ Bushfire Warning

☐ Preliminary Bushfire Warning.

CAPITALISE the title of the threat to get attention in a visual warning

Example

☐ EMERGENCY BUSHFIRE WARNING:
and then the message in lower case ...

4.2 Who is issuing the warning

Include the name of the agency or organisation that is issuing the message.

If an *acronym* is to be used, be confident that almost all the people who hear it will know what it stands for and what it means.

People will respond more confidently to information coming from an agency that would be *expected to be an authority on the emergency situation* (eg: a fire department for a bushfire, a Health Department for a disease outbreak or a road authority for an emergency relating to road travel).

- These agencies have wider credibility across all emergencies:
  - ☐ Police
  - ☐ Fire
  - ☐ Emergency Services.

Note: Information from more than one agency

The community will likely respond positively to information being provided by more than one agency/organisation – but ONLY if:

- The information is **totally consistent** between messages

AND

- The information **makes sense** to come from different agencies (ie: it is in their area of expertise – eg: a road authority for road closures or a health department for the release of toxic chemicals).

4.3 The type of threat (and preferably a description)

Don't just name the threat, but also describe **why** and **how** it is a threat

Example

☐ … thunderstorms capable of damaging houses and making travel dangerous …

☐ … release of gas which could be dangerous to breathe …

■ Describing the threat has three effects:

1 Allows recipients to make **more specific responses**

2 Makes recipients more likely to **feel it applies to them**

3 Can make it seem more **urgent to respond**.

Good words to use when describing a threat

■ **You** rather than 'people' or 'residents'

■ **Home(s)** rather than 'property(ies)'

■ **Safe/safety**

■ **Risk**

■ **Threaten**.

Do **not** use

■ 'killed', 'kill', 'death' – these words are considered too strong (especially for children).

☐ If this level of warning is necessary say something like: 'there is a risk to lives and homes'.

4.4   How likely it is to happen

Good words to describe how likely it is that an event will happen

■ Choose the most appropriate words to fit into a sentence.

	Recommended words to use	
How likely	*Mainstream*	*Simplified*
Very low Most people would not expect a warning at this level but it can be used for downgrading a threat	**Not expected** **Unlikely**	**Not likely**
Low	**Could** **Possible***	**Could**
Medium	**Probable*** **Likely**	**Likely**
High	**Very likely** **Significant risk**	**Very likely**
100% ONLY to be used if 100%	**Definite** **Will** **Certain**	**Will**

*   **Note**: There is a chance that some people may confuse the meaning of the words 'possible' and 'probable'. When describing a change in how likely an event is, you should use only one of these terms.

☐ If you used 'possible' to describe a low likelihood then use 'likely' to show an increase to medium likelihood.

☐ If you used 'probable' in a warning, use 'could' rather than 'possible' in a later warning if down-grading the likelihood of it happening.

4.5 How bad it is expected to be

Good words to describe how bad an event might be

■ Choose the most appropriate words to fit the situation.

Recommended words to use

How bad	*Mainstream*	*Simplified*
Low Most people would not expect a warning at this level but it can be used for downgrading a threat	**Low risk**	
Medium	**Damaging** **Significant***	**Could**
High	**Severe** Suited to: more generic descriptions **Dangerous** Suited to: threats to people/manmade threats **Destructive** Suited to: threats to property/natural disasters	**Dangerous**
Very high	**Extremely severe** Suited to: more generic descriptions **Extremely dangerous** Suited to: threats to people/manmade threats **Extremely destructive** Suited to: threats to property/natural disasters	**Very dangerous**

* **Note**: In the same message, **do not** use 'significant' to describe how bad the event might be and 'significant risk' to describe how likely the event is to happen.

4.6   Where the threat applies/who is affected

This is one of the hardest aspects of a warning message

- There is no single way of describing a geographical area that will *always* work for everyone.

- You need to consider the:
  - ☐ Type of threat (coming from a direction; spreading from a point)
  - ☐ Local geography and landmarks (dominant features that can be used as reference points)
  - ☐ Total area affected (the larger the area the more likely for the apparent threat to be diffused)
  - ☐ Size of population centres (small towns, regional centres, major urban cities).

- If possible, provide additional/detailed geographic information to the media for use alongside official emergency warnings in news coverage.

- If *maps* can be used with visual emergency warnings these can be very effective – especially with remote indigenous communities.

Most effective: name of streets, towns or suburbs

- ☐ The most specific level of information possible is best: hearing your street, town or suburb named is most effective.

- ☐ BUT: Anyone NOT in the list of affected areas is likely to assume that the *warning does not apply* to them (even if they are next to or surrounded by areas that are named).

- ☐ When naming suburbs or towns, if possible use a logical sequence (eg: proximity to the threat; moving north to south; moving away from the coast; etc) as this will create a mental map for many people.

- ☐ Use alphabetical order if no other logical sequence is obvious.

- ☐ If naming towns, state whether the warning is for the township itself and/or for surrounding areas. Names of regions that have local meaning should ONLY be used if these are *very well defined and it is confirmed that they are very well known*. If so they may be able to be used in a similar way to towns and suburbs.

Considerations

- Landmarks:
  - ☐ Only use extremely well known or visible landmarks.
  - ☐ Dominant local landmarks can be a good way of defining specific areas (eg: rivers, mountains, lakes, major roads, etc).
  - ☐ Generally better for non-English speaking audiences than compass directions or distances.

- Compass point directions:
  - ☐ Many people are *not* able to orient themselves to a compass from where they are *currently located*. Using North/South/East/West directions is likely to confuse some people.
  - ☐ Many – but not all people are better able to use North/South/East/West directions to visualise a 'map' of the region in which they live.
  - ☐ It is not recommended to use compass directions alone, but they can be used in conjunction with other area information (eg: dominant landmarks).
  - ☐ Limited meaning for remote indigenous communities.

- Distances:
  - ☐ Many people are not able to estimate distances accurately.
  - ☐ Distances are better understood when used to define quite small areas or very large areas.
  - ☐ Kilometres are generally better than miles – but some older people still use miles rather than kilometres.
  - ☐ Distances have limited meaning for remote indigenous communities.

Other options to describe an area under threat

Between _____ and _____:

This type of description works for quite small distances, and encourages people to have a 'linear' impression of the area described. Most suited to areas with linear geography – eg: coastlines; along a river or road.
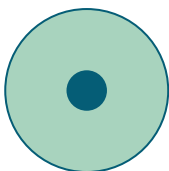
Within ___km of _____:

This type of description gives people an impression of a circular area. This may be good for threats that emanate from a specific site. People will not be good at estimating distances.

Example
- ☐ 'within 5km of Parliament House'.
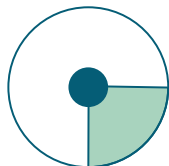
Within ___km to the _____ of _____:

Adding a direction to this form gives the impression of a segment rather than a full circle, but relies on understanding of the distance, the direction and the landmark.

Example
- ☐ 'within 5km to the south east of Parliament House'.

Do **not** use

- ■ local government boundaries
  (when tested, these were not effective descriptions for many people).

4.7   When it is expected to happen

To express **future** times

- Use time of the day

    Example

    - Between 2pm and 4pm
    - Before 6pm.

These times make it easier for people to visualise what they and their family will be doing at those times, and how they will be affected. These times are also easier for most people to remember.

To express **short** times starting from now (especially if less than 1 hour)

- Use relative time

    Example

    - Anytime within 45 minutes.

This type of time seems more urgent for people to respond to.

The use of 'anytime' helps overcome a tendency for people to expect something to happen at the long-end of the time specified.

Do NOT use 'anytime' when creating a simplified language warning.

When this option is being used, it is very important to include *when* the warning was issued in the emergency warning.

For **remote indigenous communities**, both the time of day and relative time may have little meaning.

- If possible, use these in conjunction with 'natural time' markers, such as:
    - Sun-up
    - Lunchtime
    - Sunset

To express that something is happening/needs to happen **now**

- Use the word **immediate**
- The simplified alternative is: **Now**

Note: 'Imminent' means slightly longer than 'immediate' to many people, but some people with lower language skills may not understand it at all.

4.8   What to do

Note: These are particularly important for unfamiliar threats
where people will have less awareness of how to respond.

Provide information about how to respond/actions to take

- People do **not** like to get information about a serious threat with no information about what to do to prevent harm to themselves, their family and their property.

Provide specific details about the actions recommended

- Tell people HOW to take the suggested action

  Example

  - ☐ 'Evacuate at least 15km along Smith Road towards Jonesville.'
  - ☐ 'create a reserve water supply using buckets, troughs and baths'

- Tell them WHY to take the suggested action
  - ☐ This comes from the combination of describing the threat and describing the actions to take.

  Example

  - ☐ 'create a reserve water supply using buckets, troughs and baths in case it is needed to put out spot fires'.

Be aware that people will hear the message in different situations – and may need different information about what to do

- Some will be at home
- Some will be at work
- Some will be in the car
- Some will be in a particular area they are not familiar with
- Some will be separated from family (especially children at school)
  - ☐ Parents will attempt to reach children unless otherwise instructed and reassured that the children are being taken care of (and some even then will probably attempt to reach them).

Personalise the actions

- Use the word **you** when describing the action
- Use the phrase **For personal safety** before describing the action

  Example

  - ☐ 'For personal safety you should …'

4.9 Point of contact for more information or to report events

It is important, if possible, to provide a telephone number or web site address where people can get more information about specific incidents or information about who to contact regarding developments relevant to the emergency.

5 WRITING EMERGENCY WARNINGS FOR NON-ENGLISH SPEAKING AUDIENCES

For some audiences where English is a second, third or fourth language (remote indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse – CALD – communities), even simplified versions of warnings written for mainstream audiences may not be effective.

In these cases, it may be necessary to prepare secondary warning messages specifically for these audiences. These secondary messages may not then be effective for a broader mainstream audience.

Presented below are two examples of warnings using the principles outlined in this guide followed by modified secondary warning message examples that are more likely to be understood by audiences with limited English literacy skills.

Example 1a – original message

Take action	**EMERGENCY** Storm **WARNING**
	Emergency Services have issued a **severe weather warning** to everyone living **within 150km of Weipa**.
	A thunderstorm **will** bring **destructive** conditions **capable of damaging homes and making travel dangerous anytime within the next two hours**.
	Take shelter and do not travel outside unless necessary.
	For more information ring the Emergency Services hotline on 132 500.

Example 1b – modified as a secondary message

Take action	**EMERGENCY** Storm **WARNING**
	Emergency Services ~~have issued a severe~~ **are giving a bad** weather **warning** to ~~everyone~~ everybody ~~living within 150km of Weipa~~ **in Maningrida.**
	A ~~thunderstorm~~ **cyclone will** bring ~~destructive~~ dangerous ~~conditions~~ **weather** ~~capable~~ **that could damage your home and community making travel dangerous anytime** ~~within the next two hours~~ **before sun-down**.
	~~Take~~ Go to a shelter now and do not ~~travel~~ go outside again unless ~~necessary~~ you have to.
	~~For more information ring the Emergency Services hotline on 132 500.~~ **Ring 132 500 for more information.**

Example 2a – original message

Threat is easing but some risk remains	Storm **Advice**:
	Emergency Services advise that the risk of severe weather conditions has eased.
	Further severe storms are **unlikely**, but due to storm damage **you** are advised to keep travel to a minimum **until 6am**.
	For more information ring the Emergency Services hotline on 132 500.

Example 2b – modified as a secondary message

Threat is easing but some risk remains	Storm ~~Advice~~ **Notice**:
	Emergency Services ~~advise~~ say ~~that the risk of severe weather conditions has eased~~ that the bad weather has settled down [or passed by].
	Further ~~severe~~ bad storms are **unlikely**, but ~~due to~~ because of storm damage **you** ~~are advised to keep travel to a minimum **until 6am**~~ need to stay inside until sun-up [or until you hear the all clear].
	~~**For more information ring the Emergency Services hotline on 132 500.**~~ **Ring 132 500 for more information.**

Because these type of warnings will be prepared for specific audiences, agencies are recommended to pre-identify likely communities where these will be needed and to consult with these communities to obtain specific advice as to how to communicate effectively with them.

If there is time, drawings and posters may also be appropriate ways of informing indigenous people about what actions to take before, during and after an emergency. Some indigenous people were asked to design a communication suitable for informing community members about what to do in a tsunami emergency. A selection of these are presented below.
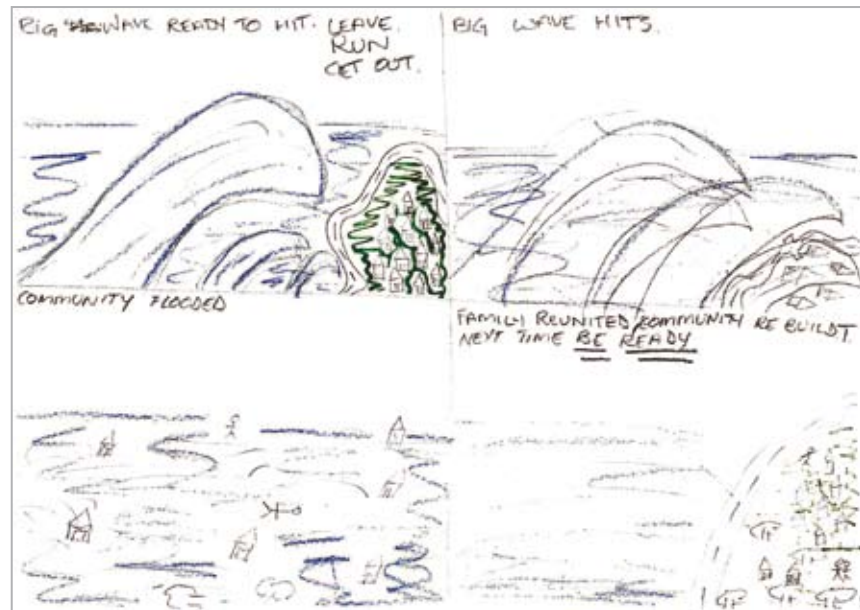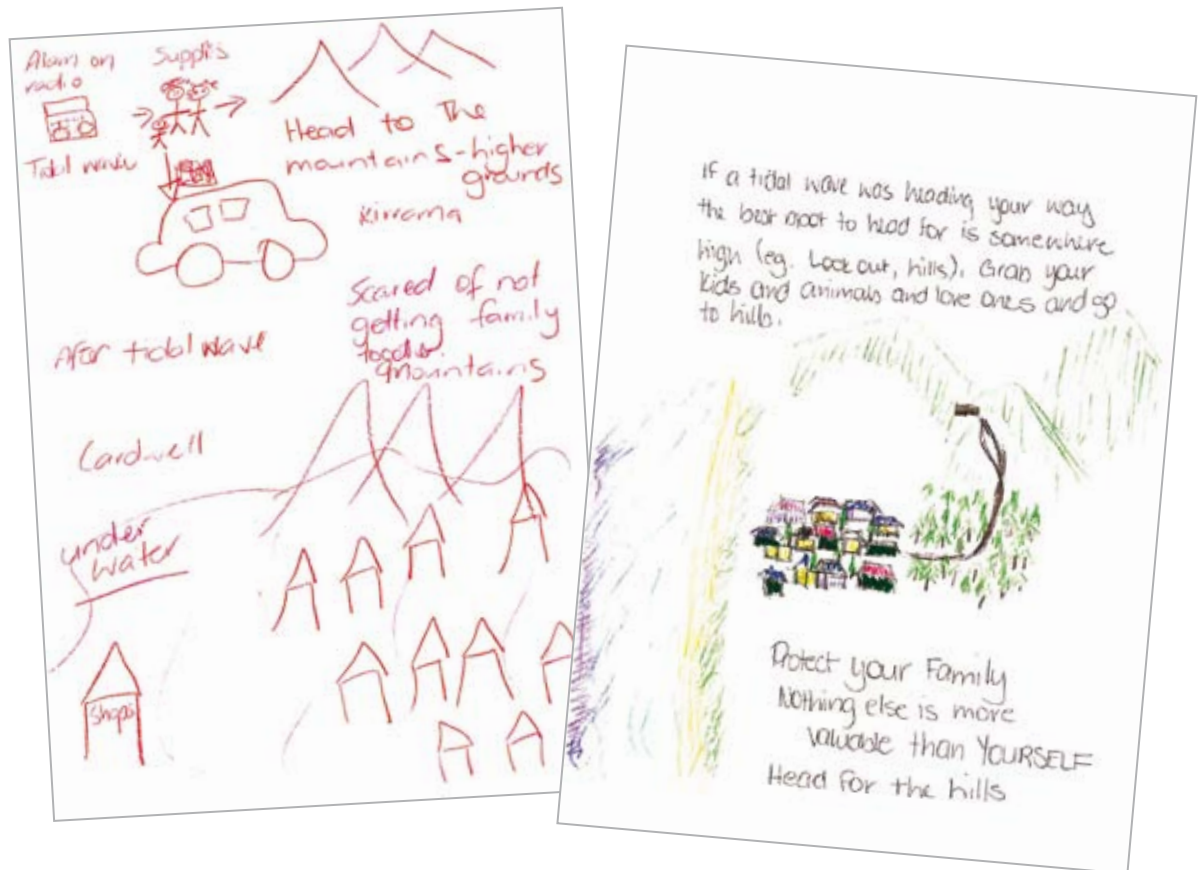
Booklets that showed 'real-life' photographs of what happens when an emergency hits a community and what people have done in the past to protect themselves and their families and survive may also be helpful. An example of such a booklet is provided by Maningrida in the Northern Territory. The booklet *A Cyclone Came*[1] details the story of what happened to Maningrida when Cyclone Monica hit the community in April 2006. The commentary is written in language (with English translation provided at the back) as a story outlining what happened before the cyclone hit, what happened during the cyclone and how people survived and cleaned up their community after the emergency had passed.

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[1]   *A Cyclone Came* is copyrighted by the Northern Territory Government, Department of Education and Training.

Some pages from the booklet are presented below.

BALAWÚRRWURR YA-WOLA-BÉNA
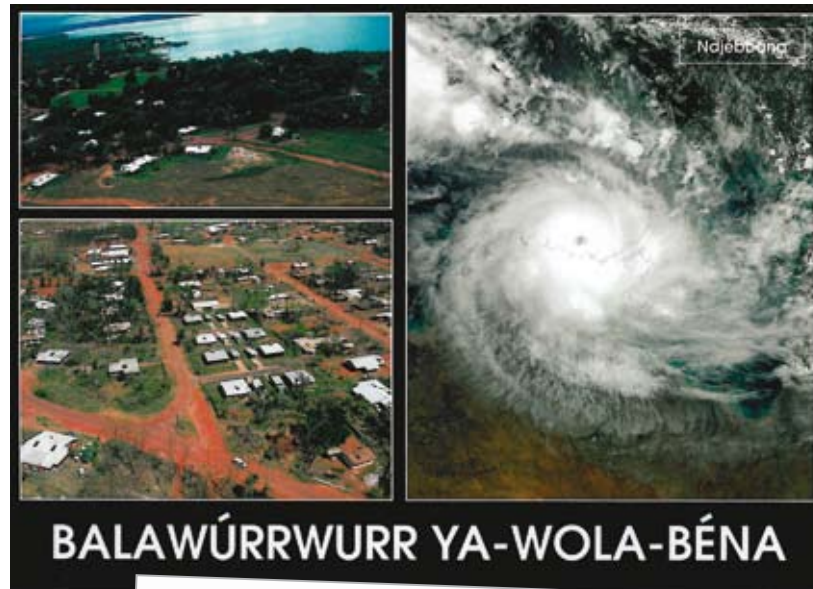
Njarra-nána kalúkku ya-bangóna,
djambákkang, kúrla, wáya
bardólbbardbol ka-ddjórrkka.
Wíba nga-náwarla ka-nabíyana.
Njarra-nána njarra-njínjdjana
yána wíba yaláwa.

Ya-wola-béna balawúrrwurr njanarra-bbóna
yángaya njarra-merabína njarrúka-na
djadjórla kádja. Njarrúka-na kádja djadjórla,
njarra-laláyiba kála njarrúka-na nábu
ná-marnabba wárrwarra ya-wola-míba
ya-wola-béna. Ka-bbóna djadjórla,
wáya bardólbbardol ka-ddjórrkka, kúrla
ka-ndayárrbana ka-bbánjdjanga rénjmarla
yi-béna. Kábba ka-wéranga ya-wola-béna
djadjórla kádja. Béya n-kárla ka-nabéra.
Béya njárra-lakarra njarra-rnabína kómabba.

Notes

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