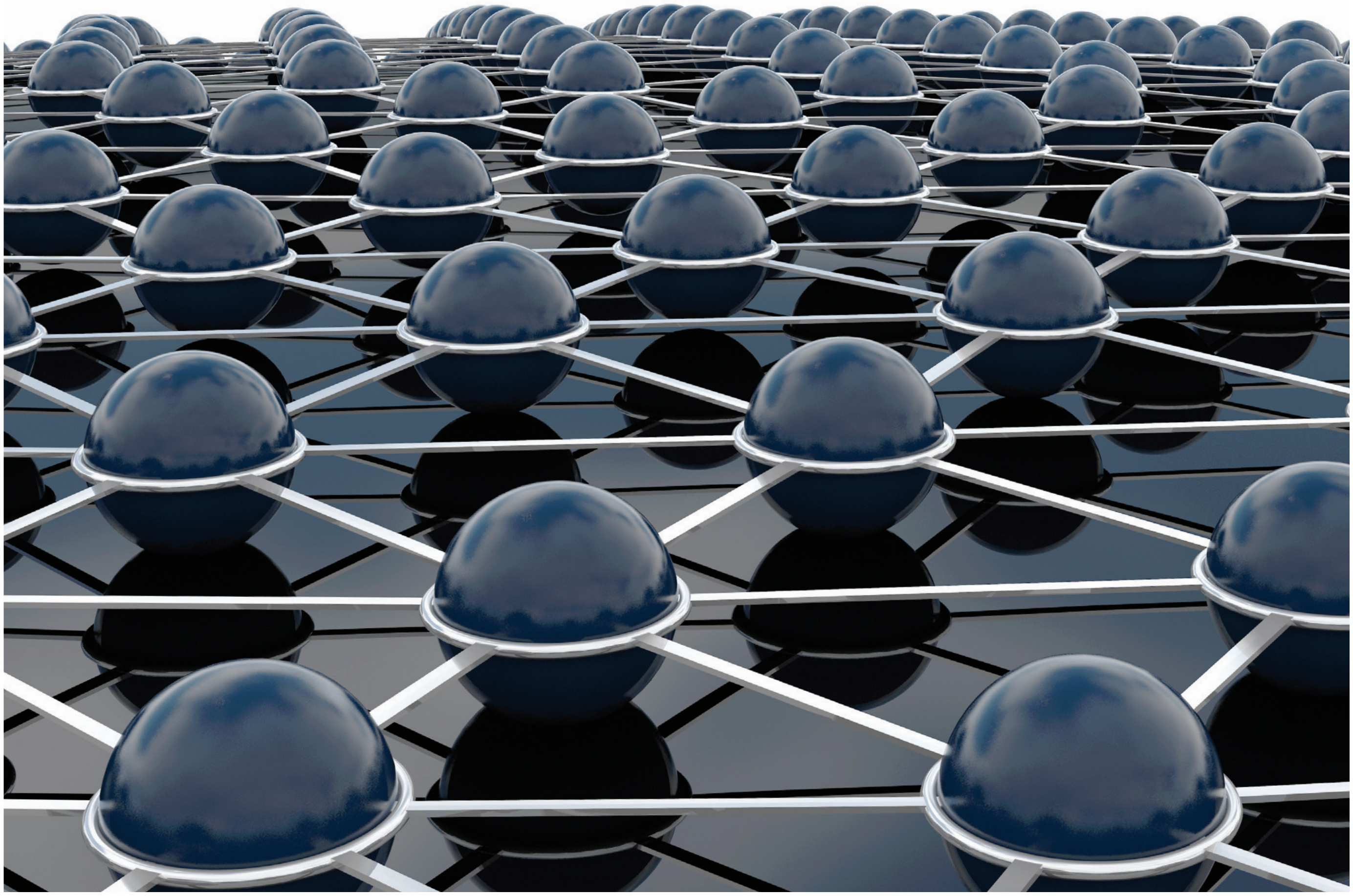
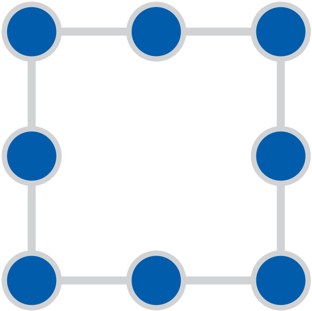
BRITISH
COLUMBIA

Inter-Ministry
Forms Committee

Standards for Forms Management and Design

April 2011





Revised April 2011
Written by the members of the
Inter-Ministry Forms Committee
(formed 1988).
Layout and Design by Kathy Macovichuk

This living document represents over
150 years combined experience in forms
design and records management in the
B.C. Government.
Thank you to all who have contributed.

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Forms Management and Roles

What is Forms Management?

Forms Management involves the administrative processes around the creation, deployment, use, filing and archiving of business forms used by the B.C. Government.

Why is it Important?

Forms are integrally linked to most business processes within government. They are a basic business tool for communicating vital information to ensure things get done. However, poorly designed forms, redundant or obsolete forms can not only cause confusion, they can incur needless cost to the government. Well-designed forms fulfill your business needs and act as a marketing tool for your ministry.

Who Manages Ministry Forms?

In accordance with Core Policy, each Ministry in the B.C. Government is required to have a Forms Management Program in place. The program includes policies and procedures to ensure forms meet business or operational needs, adhere to Freedom of Information requirements, controls the proliferation of inefficient, ineffective or redundant forms, and comply with design standards outlined in this document.

If your ministry does not have a Forms Administrator, Queen's Printer offers forms services. Contact the Director of Printing Services at Queen's Printer for details on what services are available.

Who are the Inter-Ministry Forms Committee (IMFC)?

The Inter-Ministry Forms Committee (IMFC) is comprised of forms designers and administrators who develop policy and procedures around the design and management of government forms. The IMFC invites representatives from across government and outside government to discuss issues, technologies, advancements, design standards and best practices in relation to government forms. They also provide mentoring, training opportunities and support around forms design technologies and management. The IMFC convenes monthly.

Inter-Ministry Forms Committee (IMFC) Mission Statement

The mission of the IMFC is to develop and maintain consistent standards and best practices in forms management, design and implementation across government. The IMFC seeks to provide educational opportunities and mentoring to all forms offices in government, and endorses collaboration and knowledge-sharing with outside agencies and companies who have similar goals regarding forms management.

The IMFC is a cross-government committee that promotes best practices for all ministry forms.

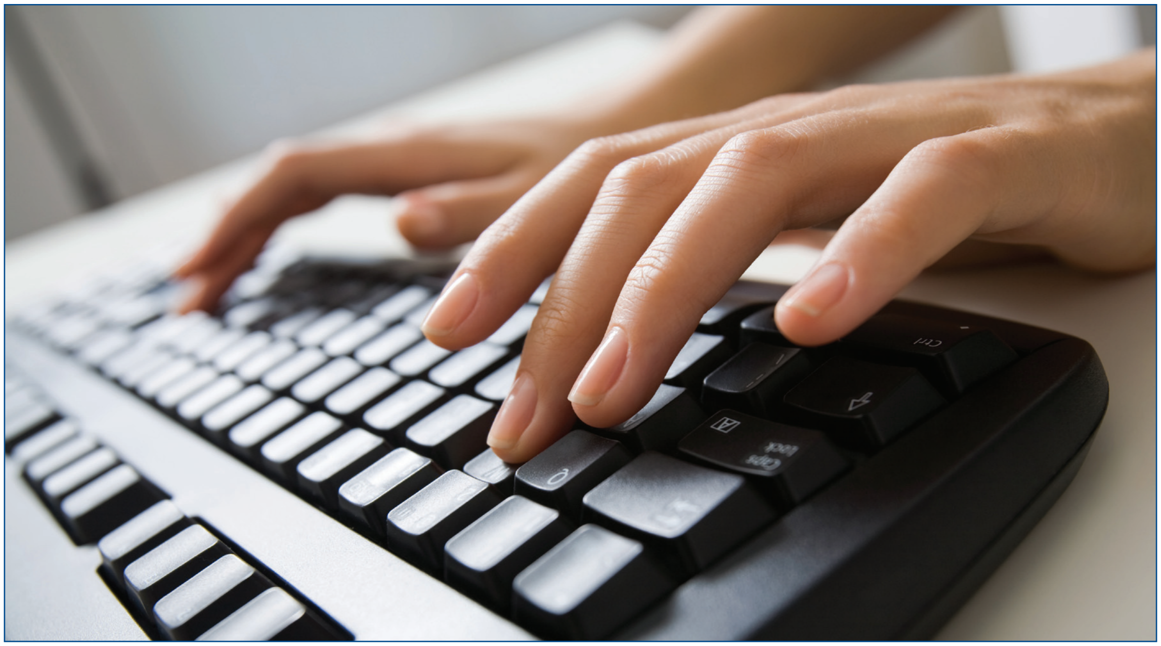
Each Ministry is responsible for developing a forms management program that meets their particular needs.

The Role of the Ministry Forms Administrator

Forms Administrators can be anyone who oversees the processes around the creation, distribution and maintenance of forms for their Ministry's forms management program. They often perform a final review of all new and revised forms, to ensure forms meet basic design and usability standards; FOI requirements; and that information about the form (meta-data) is complete.

The Role of the Ministry Forms Designer

The Ministry Forms Designer can work with you to develop the best possible form to meet your business requirements. They will help you decide on the type of form you need (paper, electronic or otherwise) and then design it using the best possible tools. Designers are trained to ensure maximum clarity and usability of the form, ensure it meets FOI requirements, follows design standards and is included in your Ministry's forms management program.



The Role of the Form Owner

The Ministry Form Owner is a representative of a particular business area or organization within a Ministry who has the authority to create a new form, revise it or declare it obsolete. They act as an important liaison between the Forms Designer and the business area, and are generally aware of the requirements of their Ministry's Forms Management Program.

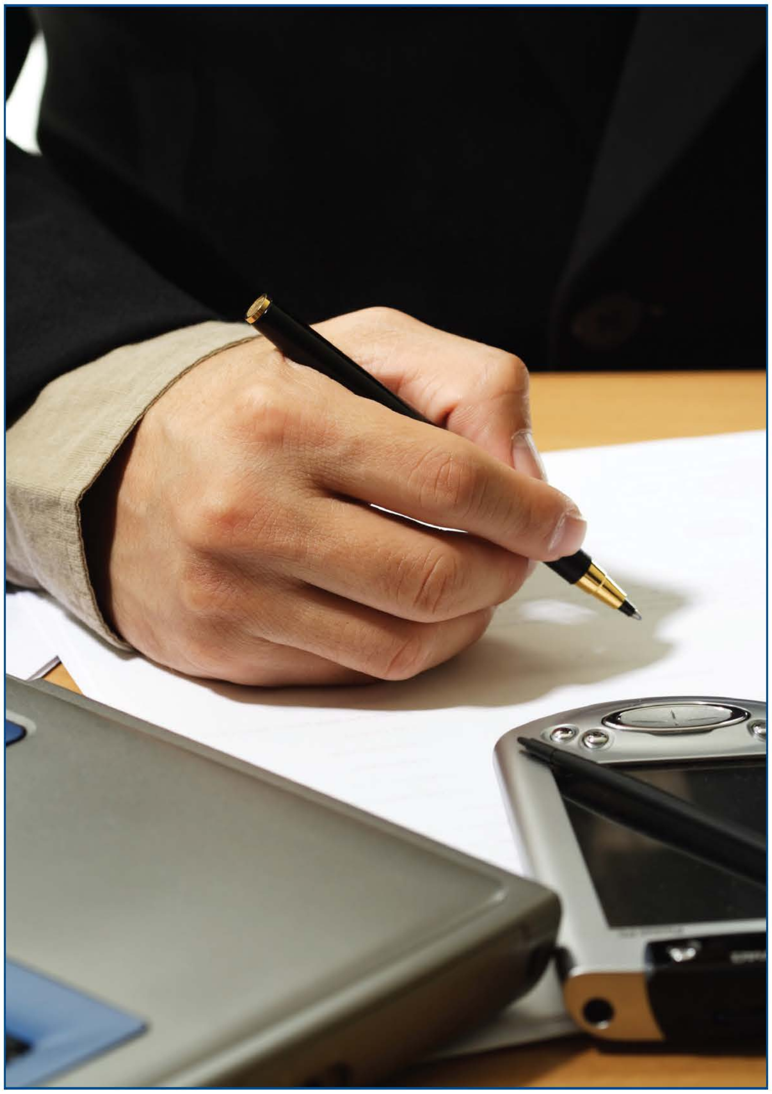
Forms Procedures – First Steps

If you have determined that:

- a new form is needed; or
- an existing form should be revised; or
- a form is obsolete and should be removed from your Ministry's forms archive;

your first step should be to contact the Forms Owner for your business area. They will provide you with links to important information around development of a form, and work with you and a ministry Forms Designer to ensure you get a form that efficiently meets your business requirements.

If your business area does not currently have a designated Form Owner, contact the Administrator of your ministry Forms Management Program. They will work with you to ensure your form meets your business area's needs and the requirements of your Ministry's Forms Management Program.



Forms Information

General

Form standards provide general design guidelines and requirements for all ministry forms, whatever their specific function. These standards are meant to promote a common look and feel for all ministry forms, both to ensure that they are easy to read and use, and to facilitate their design and production.

Analyzing Your Form Requirements

There are many types of forms, including pre-printed paper, PDF, Word, web (HTML), application-based forms. Often the differences between the different types of forms blurs – technological advancements are quickly increasing the sophistication of forms and how they are used.

If you are trying to decide on the type of form you need, start by thinking about what it needs to do and who will be using it. For instance, is the form used for collecting data, and if so, should the data be going directly into a database? Is the user primarily a ministry employee, or the general public? Will the form need to be filled out and mailed in, or must it be filled out on-line and "submitted" electronically? Will your users have the software or plug-ins to fill out your form? As well, consider the cost of form design and development – can a printed form do the same job as an on-line application-based form, but involve less development? Or is the development of an on-line form warranted by the number of users, amount or kind of information collected, and eventual savings in clerical time?

You may also need to consider retention of the form and its data. How long is it necessary to keep the form and where whould it be filed in the office record keeping system? Is there an approved ARCS or ORCS classification and retention schedule for the records of the business activity? Your Ministry Records Officer should be consulted if a new classification is required.

This process is formally known as forms analysis and will help you decide on the type of form you need.

Types of Forms

For the purposes of this document, forms can be broken into the two main areas noted below. Whether pre-printed or electronic, all forms must follow the standards outlined in this document.

Pre-Printed Forms

Generally offset printed or printed on-demand, these forms are provided directly to the user as a paper form, or fillable PDF that can printed out and manually returned or faxed.

Electronic Forms

There are many variations of electronic forms, from submittable PDFs to HTML to database driven forms. A common characteristic is that they can be filled out and submitted electronically.

Components of a Form

All ministry forms are comprised of the following main components or sections (please refer to the form example in the Appendices)

Identification Section (Header)

Also called the Header, this section contains the form title, the provincial and ministry logo/identity, and the provincial and ministry names. The name of the branch or section that is the originator of the form can also be added in this section.

The size and position of the B.C. Visual Identity has been standardized to be identical for all forms.

The form user should be able to glance at the title of the form and immediately understand the purpose of the form. Each form title should be a combination of a subject name which denotes what the form is specifically about (e.g., office supplies, invoice, vehicle accident) and a function/purpose name which denotes what the form does (e.g., request, report, authorization). The title should be concise; redundant words such as "form" or "sheet" should not be used.

Instructions Section

This section identifies the purpose of the form, contains general instructions, and may make reference to more detailed instructions that are located elsewhere on the form.

Personal Information Proviso Section

If the form is used to collect personal information it must contain a Personal Information proviso. The proviso must specify the authority or legislation for collecting the information, must specify how the information will be used, and must identify a contact position and phone number where detailed information about the collection, use and disclosure of the data can be obtained.

"Personal Information" means recorded information about an identifiable individual other than business contact information.

Body Section

This is usually the largest area on the form and contains the main information or data the form is meant to collect.

Data fields within the body of the form should be grouped by function. For example, the body of a forms requisition may be divided into the following sections: form description; paper stock requirements; special instructions; form management information; and so on.

Closing Section

This section contains signatures, signing dates, routing instructions, form numbers and revision dates. If the approval signature refers to the entire form, it should be located in the closing zone at the bottom of the form. If it applies only to a certain section of the form, it should be located within the body of the form and below the appropriate section. Routing instructions, if not included in the Instructions Section (above) should be included here.

Unique Form Number

Form numbers and revision dates are integral to managing and monitoring form use in any forms management system and must always appear in the bottom-left corner of all ministry forms. Form numbers for new forms can be obtained from your Forms Administrator, Form Designer, and in some ministries, your Form Owner. Revision dates should be written in yyyy/mm/dd format and must be beside or directly under the form number.

File Classification Number

Wherever possible, include an ARCS and/or ORCS classification number and if relevant the office that is retaining a copy. For forms with multiple parts, the title of the office retaining the records and classification number may change.

Design Principles

The same basic design principles apply to all types of forms, either as hard copy/paper or electronic. The proper application of these principles will assist the forms designer in developing effective forms that are easy to use and follow Best Practices.

Simple Design

The form design should be simple to avoid detracting from the more important fill-in data. The printed items on a form direct what and where to write. They also help the reader to understand the fill-in data. These objectives can be accomplished without hi-lighting these items. Avoid unnecessary decoration on the form. Eliminate anything that is not necessary.

Logical and Sequential

The form items must be grouped into logically sequenced sections. If the form fields are grouped by function or related subject, data entry is faster and data extraction is easier with less searching required. Grouping of related data fields into sections makes it easier to design the form.

Spacing Compatible with Fill-in Method

Proper spacing is vital to the efficiency of a form. The spacing of form fields must be compatible with the method of fill-in so that the data can be entered quickly, easily and accurately. Online forms should be designed so that the border is compatible with most printers. Allow a 3/8″ (0.375″) border for printing Forms filled out "in the field" should be large enough to accommodate handwritten information – allow one inch for every five characters.

The standard spacing is six lines to the inch vertical spacing and 10 characters to the inch horizontal spacing. Remember that readability, or lots of white space, is more important than how much can you get on the page.

The form design style must promote efficiency for both fill-in and processing operations.

Basic Principles

- The placing and grouping of data entry spaces are important to consider when designing a form. Important or key information should go at the top of the form or in an easily identifiable location.
- Spaces for entries that are associated with each other should be grouped together.
- Data fields should be arranged on the form in a manner that accommodates quick and easy fill-in of data.
- The width of data columns should be dictated by the space required for the data not by the length of the column heading. Abbreviate headings, if required.

Standards

Signature

- Allow 1/2″ (0.5″) vertically and 3″ horizontally.

Margins

- Maintain a border minimum of 5/16″ (0.3125″) margin around the document for printer gripping and at least 1″ on the inside or left margin for binding, if required.

Handwritten Entries

- Allow five characters to an inch horizontally and three lines to an inch vertically.

Typewritten Entries

- Allow 10 pica characters to an inch horizontally and three lines to an inch vertically for double spacing.

Columns of Figures

- Allow eight handwritten figures to an inch, including spaces between dollars and cents or 10 typed figures to and inch, including spaces.

Data Fields Grouping

- Data fields that are similar in purpose or nature are grouped together, enclosed in a box and preceded by a section title.

Sequencing

- Data fields are organized on the form so that data entry progresses in a logical manner (left to right and top to bottom).

Design Style

The design style refers to how the captions (the field titles or questions) and the spaces (for data fill-in) are arranged on the form.

There are four basic styles:

Box Style is the most effective form style, where the caption or title is placed in the upper left-hand corner of the ‘fill-in’ box. This style emphasizes the fill-in data not the title/caption. The full width of the line is available for data fill-in. The box style provides a neat, clearly defined entry field. It readily accommodates both machine and handwriting.

Caption-on-the-line requires that the title or question be placed in front of the line. This style takes up a lot of form space.

Caption-under-the-line places the title under the line which is hidden when using a typewriter.

Column Style is a variation of the box style and is used where captions are the same for a number of fields.

> ***Box Style is the most effective form style… It readily accommodates both machine and handwriting.***

Design Considerations

Document Size

The standard size for all government forms is 8.5″ x 11″ but certain factors may dictate the optimum size of the form, such as:

- the amount of information that is required (a folded 11″ x 17″ sheet may be recommended);
- filing or user needs (half-sized pads are easier to handle for field recording);
- capabilities of available office equipment (will your copier handle legal size or 11″ x 17″ paper);
- size of other related forms used in the same process (consistency in size creates a packaged look); or
- size of envelopes being used to send the document through the mail.

Language Style

Language on a form should be clear and to the point in:

- instructing the user how to fill out the form;
- asking the user what data is being requested;
- telling the user what is the purpose of the data collection; and
- what the user should to do with the form after it is completed.

To avoid common errors, follow the basic principles and ministry standards.

Basic Principles

- Instructions and questions should be as clear as possible. Use words that are short, concise and familiar, avoiding complex, technical or ambiguous language. The average length of sentences should be 20 words or less.
- Be consistent in the choice of words.
- Use position titles rather than names of individuals as names can change over time.
- Use consistent spellings and references.
- Do not use ALL CAPS in instructions or notes.
- Use personal pronouns to create friendly and direct-communication forms (“if you make a payment late, we may or may not renew your insurance policy”—as opposed to— “it shall be optional with the company to accept late payments.”)

Standards

- Capitalize Ministry, Region, District and Branch when used as a proper noun, not as an adjective or adverb. (e.g., “Each Ministry should develop a good forms program” versus “The MFO is responsible for all ministry forms”).
- Capitalize all position titles and the names of all ministries, regions, districts and branches.

- Italicize all legislative Acts.
- Capitalize the names of offices and programs.
- Abbreviations and acronyms are to be used consistently. Write out the entire name or word phrase on the first reference with the abbreviation/acronym immediately following in brackets. The abbreviation/acronym should be used only in all subsequent references.
- Use proper gender-inclusive language.

Font/Type

One of the most important elements in a form's design is typography. Typography is concerned with the selection of a font and how it's arranged on the page. Poor typography can hinder readability, causing frustration and inaccuracy. To avoid common errors, follow the basic principles and ministry standards.

Basic Principles

- Instructions that use both upper and lower case letters are easier to read. Avoid using ALL CAPS, except for titles, major headings or other short text that needs to be emphasized.
- Bold type should be used sparingly. (Form titles, section headings, and totals.)
- Most type size should be between seven and 12 point. As a standard rule, form text should be nine point.
- Small point-size type requires smaller line lengths. If a large amount of six to eight point type is required, set it in two or more vertical columns like a newspaper page.
- Sans-serif italic is used for special instructions or highlighting.

Standards

Form Titles

- Arial, 14 point, ALL CAPS, bold type

Section Headings

- Arial, 10 point, upper/lower case, bold type for most section headings

Box Headings, Instructions, and Other Form Text

- Arial, 9 point, upper/lower case, and plain type (for most)

Routing Instructions

- Arial, 9 point, upper/lower case, bold

Form Numbers, Page Numbers, Other Forms Control Text

- Arial, 6 point, ALL CAPS, plain type

Justification

- Left justify most headings and other text

A serif font is a type of font with short, light lines or curves (feet) called serifs projecting from the top or bottom of a mainstroke of a letter. This note is written in a serif font (Garamond).

Sans-serif fonts don't have these projections. This note is written in a sans-serif font (Frutiger).

Lines/Rules

Lines are used to highlight, guide the eye, mark the boundaries of divisions or sections and indicate to the user where to enter data. To avoid common errors, follow the basic principles and ministry standards.

Basic Principles

- Lines should be no heavier than necessary to do the job. Always use a light touch.
- Stop the lines at least 5/16″ (0.3125″) from the edge of the paper. This space allows for printer grip that moves paper through your printer.
- Use lines sparingly and only for a definite purpose. Consider using white space as an alternative to divide or separate sections of the form.
- When one line is supposed to connect to another, make sure the connection is made as it will make a form appear more professional.
- Most forms can be designed using only two line sizes – 0.5 point and one point. Use hairlines (0.25 point) sparingly, as they can break up in photocopying and on some presses..

Standards

0.25 Point (Hairline)

- This line weight is used within the section/division boxes to separate groupings of input.

0.5 Point

- Use this line thickness for secondary boxes within the section/division boxes.

1 Point

- This is the standard line thickness for all the section or division boxes on the form.

2 Point or Heavier (Bold)

- Should not be used in most standard forms.

Dotted Lines

- Used to divide cents and dollars in accounting columns and to guide the eye in tabular columns.

Spacing

The spaces on a form consist of data entry fields (spaces enclosed by lines or margins) and areas for margins, headings and instructions. The objective of the forms designer is to provide just the right amount of space for all the required data, while ensuring a compact form that is easy to read and economical to produce.

Colour

Before using colour in the design of the form, or using coloured paper for the printing of the form, consider the form's distribution and use. Will it be pre-printed and given to the form's user as a paper form, or will it be printed by the user on their office or home printer? As well, colour needs to be used cautiously if the form is to be photocopied or faxed in its process as some colours do not copy or fax well. More and more, government forms are no longer being supplied as pre-printed but rather as PDFs on a website. If the form is to be printed by the user, it is recommended that the it be designed in black and white.

If the form is supplied only as pre-printed, colour can be used to distinguish different sections, and coloured paper can be useful to distinguish different forms in a set. In the case of coloured paper, pastel-coloured stock provides the best contrast for black type. Avoid bright colours – although pastel yellow provides excellent contrast, bright yellow causes eyestrain and possible nausea if looked at for too long.

Standards

Copy Paper Colours

- Original page is white, first copy is yellow canary, second copy is pink, third copy is golden-rod.

Ink/Toner Colours

- Standard colour is black.

Box Design

Creating boxes on a form is a process for allocating space proportionate to the size of the entry data and enclosing it within squared off lines in the form of a box.

Colour needs to be used cautiously…
as some colours do not copy or fax well.

Data Collection Identification and Restrictions

The *B.C. Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* was proclaimed on October 4, 1993. The Act covers all ministries, all Crown Corporations and over 200 provincial boards, commissions and agencies.

The requirements of the *Act* that relate to forms management are as follows:

- Personal information can not be collected without authorization, without informing the individual concerned.
- Personal information collected for one reason can not be used for an inconsistent purpose without authorization.
- Every public form must contain an FOI provision that states the authority or legislation for collecting the information, that specifies how the information will be used, and that identifies a contact person and phone number, where detailed information about the collection, use and disclosure of the information, can be obtained.

The analysis, design and control process for forms (forms management) must consider the above FOI requirements.

FOI Proviso Example

The personal information collected on this form is necessary for the administration of the Ministry's financial signing authorities and will be used to process the signing authority request for the position noted on the form. If you have any questions regarding the collection and use of this information, contact the Manager, Financial Policy at (XXX) XXX-XXXX, Fax: (XXX) XXX-XXXX

Privacy Impact Assessment

If a new form is being created where personal information is being collected, or if you are unsure that the information being collected is considered "personal information," it may be necessary to complete a Privacy Impact Assessment. In this case a draft copy of the form should be reviewed by your Ministry's FOI Advisor. A listing of advisors for each Ministry can be found at: www.gov.bc.ca/citz/iao/foi/.

More Information

About the IMFC

The IMFC had its first meeting in June 1988. The committee was formed based on the recommendation of the Report on Government Warehousing, Distribution and Stores Operations (January 25, 1988) that an inter-ministerial committee be established to develop policies on the management, design and distribution of pre-printed government forms.

The IMFC is primarily made up of forms management staff from a number of ministries who meet once a month to discuss the issues and solutions surrounding the administration, creation, distribution and maintenance of government forms.

Forms: Government Policy

12.3.3 III (a) v. Forms Management Program

Ministries must manage government forms in accordance with government legislation, policies and standards. Components of a forms management program include policies and procedures to ensure that ministries:

- Set guidelines for determining if a form is necessary to meet Ministry or agency operational needs (e.g., a statutory requirement).
- Develop forms that collect only the information needed to meet Ministry or agency purposes and adhere to the requirements of the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* and the *Document Disposal Act*.
- Work to control the proliferation of ministry forms by eliminating forms that are inefficient, ineffective or redundant.
- Comply with government design standards

About Portable Document Format (PDF)

LiveCycle Reader Extensions

LiveCycle Reader Extensions allow organizations to unlock advanced forms-processing features within the free Adobe Reader software at no extra cost to end-users. When a rights-enabled PDF document is opened, users can access advanced features such as digital signatures, submit, and offline save. When the user opens a rights-enabled PDF form in Adobe Reader, a dialogue box appears outlining the extended capabilities of the PDF file.

Queens Printer offers a service that will apply Reader Extensions for a per pdf charge. Contact your Forms Administrator for more information. If your ministry does not have a Forms Administrator, contact the Director of Printing Services at Queen’s Printer for details on what services are available.

Sections of a Form

HEADER
Form title should be simple and should not include the word "form".

Ministry of
Ministry Name

PROGRAM AREA NAME IF REQUIRED

REQUEST FOR APPLICATION

INSTRUCTION SECTION

Instructions need to be brief as many people will skip the instructions and go straight to filling out the form.

- instructions can work well in bullet form
- use upper/lower case and, if possible, 8pt type or larger
- recommended font is Arial

FOI PROVISO

If the form collects personal information, a Freedom of Information statement must be present on the form. Recommended location for the statement is either at or near the top of the form or at the bottom of the form. Work with your business area contact and the FOI office to obtain an appropriate statement.

BODY
A few sample styles are show to the right.

Things to avoid:
- shading
- colour
- multiple fonts

The design of a form will vary depending on a number of factors, including but not limited to intended audience, form processing, and space availability.

Many forms need to be 8.5 x 11", single or double sided so this plays a large role in the form design.

Form margins are often determined by the amount of content a form has – minimum margin should be 2 picas (3/8").

For line weight, .5 is recommended for regular lines on a form. Heavier lines should only be used as graphic elements (i.e. dividing sections).

White text on black lines as section headers should be used sparingly, and are not recommended if section titles are more than one line.

SECTION 1: BOX STYLE, SOLID (Allows for maximum use of space)

MINIMUM 6 PT TYPE (ALL CAPS)	BOX HEIGHT SHOULD BE 2 PICAS (3/8") OR MORE FOR HANDWRITING	
CHECK BOXES: RECOMMEND BOX ON THE LEFT, TEXT ON THE RIGHT ☐ ONE ☐ TWO ☐ THREE	INTERNATIONAL DATE FORMAT:	YYYY / MM / DD
If space allows, increase field height and font size, and use upper/lower case. Stay consistent throughout the form.		

SECTION 2: BOX STYLE, SUNKEN (Useful for online forms and for forms that will be scanned to process)

BOX HEIGHT CAN BE REDUCED IF NEEDED, ALTHOUGH LESS THAN 1p6 (1/4") NOT RECOMMENDED

ADDRESS (SAMPLE WITHOUT COMBS)

ADDRESS (SAMPLE WITH COMBS)

Combs (small dividing lines) can be useful, but if overall form space is tight there may not be room to have combs in every field. In the sample above, a person might be able to squeeze in address information on the left, but putting combs in the same amount of space only allows for 14 characters which is not enough for most addresses. Combs are often used in date fields to force entering the date in a specified format, and commonly used in number fields.

▶ **SECTION 3: BOX STYLE, COLUMN (useful when captions are the same for a number of fields)**

SURNAME	GIVEN NAMES	DATE OF BIRTH (YYYY/MM/DD)

Section 4: Caption-on-the-line

This style is easy to read, but takes up a lot of form space and if the lines are too close together there is a potential problem of people entering information on the wrong line. As well, this style does not work well if the caption is long.

Name: ____________________

Full Mailing Address Including Postal Code: ____________________

Section 5: Caption-under-the-line

This style has the potential problem of people entering information on the wrong line.

Name

Birthdate

Address

CLOSING/ SIGNATURE
Signatures take more space vertically than horizontally.

SECTION 6: APPROVAL

APPROVED ☐ YES ☐ NO	DATE APPROVED (YYYY / MM / DD)	SIGNATURE OF MINISTRY EXECUTIVE
PRINT NAME OF MINISTRY EXECUTIVE		

MIN 1234 REV 2010/05/31

Routing information and a unique identifier should go at the very bottom of the form.

BRITISH
COLUMBIA

Inter-Ministry
Forms Committee

For more information, please contact the Inter-Ministry Forms Committee (IMFC) through Tami Hayes, Chair of IMFC – Email: Tami.Hayes@gov.bc.ca