

Ombudsman Complaint Procedure

Organisation:	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
Responsible:	Ombudsman
Effective:	31 March 2026
Related Policy:	ABC Ombudsman Charter

Scope

This procedure outlines how the [Ombudsman's Office](#) will deal with complaints.

As set out in its [Charter](#), the Ombudsman is responsible for assessing and investigating **content complaints**.

The Ombudsman's Office is not responsible for general complaints about personal taste or preference, ABC workers (including any external public comments) or the ABC generally.

General information for the audience about how the ABC deals with complaints is available [here](#).

1. Complaint handling principles

- 1.1. Good complaint handling is an important part of self-regulation and builds trust. Audience complaints form part of a public exchange with the ABC from which all parties can benefit.
- 1.2. The ABC applies a proportionate approach to complaint handling. Complaints are assessed on their merits and the resources dedicated to handling them will be proportionate to the issues raised. To determine proportionate handling, the Ombudsman's Office weighs up:
 - (a) the merit of the complaint and the seriousness of the issues raised
 - (b) what will provide the greatest benefit to the audience
 - (c) the degree of risk or damage to public trust in the ABC
 - (d) scale of audience response or audience impact
 - (e) the resources available in the relevant ABC division and the Ombudsman's Office.
- 1.3. The ABC aims to address complaints as quickly as practicable. If a response is warranted, audience members will generally receive a response within 30 days. However, more complex investigations may take longer to finalise.
- 1.4. The ABC respects the confidentiality of complainants. However, where the complainant is an organisation, or a complainant's identity is a matter of public record, the ABC may identify the complainant publicly for reporting purposes.

2. The Ombudsman's Office

- 2.1. The Ombudsman's Office is a small team led by the Ombudsman within the ABC. The Ombudsman and Investigations Officers make decisions and exercise discretion under this procedure. However, the Ombudsman is ultimately responsible for all decisions of its Office.
- 2.2. Ombudsman decisions are made objectively and independently from ABC divisions, ABC management and the ABC Board. The Ombudsman's Office operates fairly, respectfully and in good faith with ABC divisions and audience members.

3. Assessing complaints

- 3.1. Complaints sent to the ABC through the online [complaints form](#) or by mail that are likely to meet the definition of a content complaint are recorded and generally directed to the Ombudsman's Office for assessment. This includes content complaints that are sent directly to the ABC Chair or Managing Director.
- 3.2. ABC divisions may refer any content complaint to the Ombudsman's Office to be handled in accordance with this procedure.
- 3.3. Where complaints raise substantively similar issues that appear campaign coordinated and are not submitted through the online complaint form, only one representative complaint may be recorded when it is referred to the Ombudsman's Office. The total number received will be disclosed in public reporting.
- 3.4. The Ombudsman's Office decides:
 - (a) if the complaint is confirmed as content complaint, and
 - (b) how it should be dealt with in the first instance.

Is the complaint a content complaint?

3.5. A content complaint:

- should be submitted through the online [complaints form](#) or by mail,
- must be in writing and refer to specific ABC content (complaints about different pieces of content must be submitted separately)
- must relate to ABC content that is already published or broadcast, and
- must raise concerns that relate to the editorial standards set out in the [Editorial Policies](#), or the [Code of Practice](#) (the complaint doesn't need to use the language of the editorial standards or the Code).

3.6. Complaints made by petitions, comment, reply, direct message or other user generated content posted to social media platforms, websites or other interactive services will not be considered as content complaints under this procedure.

3.7. If a complaint does not meet the definition of a content complaint, it will be sent to ABC Audience Support to be recorded and dealt with as a [general complaint](#) or, the Ombudsman's Office will respond to the audience member with general information.

How will the content complaint be dealt with in the first instance?

3.8. If it is a content complaint, the Ombudsman's Office will then decide what is proportionate and appropriate handling in the first instance considering the criteria at clause 1.2.

3.9. The Ombudsman's Office may consult with ABC divisions about this decision.

3.10. The Ombudsman's Office will either:

- (a) send the complaint to the relevant ABC division for direct handling
- (b) retain the complaint and investigate the issues raised considering the editorial standards
- (c) respond to the audience member with general information, or
- (d) decide no response is warranted.

3.11. If the complaint is about content which raises legal concerns it will generally be referred to ABC Legal.

3.12. If the complaint is sent to the relevant ABC division for direct handling, it is the responsibility of the relevant ABC division to decide whether to respond to the audience member and, if so, how to address the issues raised in the complaint. See below clause 5.

3.13. It is unlikely that the Ombudsman's Office or the ABC division will respond to an audience member beyond an acknowledgement if:

- (a) the content that the complaint is about is no longer available
- (b) the content that the complaint is about was first made available more than 3 months ago
- (c) the issues raised in the complaint are insubstantial
- (d) the complaint is anonymous, or
- (e) the complaint is not made in good faith, is offensive, abusive or vexatious.

3.14. If a complaint is not initially investigated by the Ombudsman's Office or the audience member doesn't receive a response within 60 days, they may request that the Ombudsman's Office review their complaint. Refer below to clause 6.

4. Investigating content complaints

- 4.1. When a complaint is accepted for investigation under clause 3.10(b), the Ombudsman's Office will start investigating to establish the following:
 - (a) **a breach finding:** the content does not meet the editorial standards
 - (b) **a no breach finding:** the content meets the editorial standards
 - (c) **that suitable action has been taken:** an issue raised in the complaint has been suitably addressed and no further investigation is warranted
- 4.2. The Ombudsman's Office will determine the scope of the investigation within the parameters of the relevant content, considering proportionate and appropriate handling criteria at clause 1.2.
- 4.3. If the Ombudsman's Office identifies a concern in content that is outside the scope of the complaint, it will refer the matter to the ABC division and the relevant editorial policy adviser for consideration.
- 4.4. For some 'no breach' findings, the Ombudsman's Office may respond to the audience member without the involvement of the relevant ABC division. This may only occur if the Ombudsman's Office considers that the issues raised are not substantial enough to warrant involvement from the ABC division. The relevant editorial policy adviser will be forwarded a copy of the complaint and the response sent to the audience member.

Notifying the relevant ABC division and requesting information

- 4.5. Except for the circumstance above at clause 4.4, the Ombudsman's Office will notify the relevant ABC division of their decision to investigate a complaint as soon as practicable. This notification will usually include a copy of the complaint, identify the relevant editorial standards being considered, request comments, and indicate if there is a preference for it to be dealt with as a priority.
- 4.6. For most 'no breach' issues raised in complaints, the notification will usually be a preliminary finding in the form of a draft response or draft investigation report for the ABC division to provide comments.
- 4.7. The Ombudsman's Office may conduct independent research, request comments from ABC divisions, consult the complainant, participants and others as reasonably necessary throughout the investigation to enable it to reach a finding. Where this information is relied on to inform the investigation finding, it will be transparent in the Ombudsman's Office report and/or response.
- 4.8. The Ombudsman's Office may request transcripts, rough cuts, notes, background information, research and other material as reasonably necessary throughout the investigation to enable it to reach a finding.

Liaising with ABC divisions

- 4.9. The Ombudsman's Office may liaise with ABC divisions, relevant managers, editorial policy advisers, standards editors and cultural advisers. These communications may be verbal and in writing.
- 4.10. The Ombudsman may choose to bring an investigation to the attention of the Divisional Director or Managing Director.

Action taken

- 4.11. Wherever appropriate, the ABC division and the Ombudsman's Office should consider if there is any way of suitably addressing a reasonable issue raised in a complaint for the benefit of the audience. This could involve updating ABC content or taking corrective action such as publishing an editor's note or posting a correction or clarification.
- 4.12. The Ombudsman's Office may make suggestions to the ABC division about addressing an issue. However, the Ombudsman's Office cannot mandate any changes to editorial output. The decision about whether to change editorial output must be made by the ABC division. Any suggestion from the Ombudsman's Office will be in good faith with a basis in addressing a reasonable issue raised for continuous quality improvement or promoting the high standards of the ABC.
- 4.13. The Ombudsman's Office may decide that action taken by an ABC division suitably addresses an issue raised and that no further investigation of that issue is warranted. This will be published on the [Ombudsman's Office website](#) and reported as 'Action Taken'.
- 4.14. When deciding if suitable action was taken and no further investigation is warranted, the Ombudsman's Office considers:
- (a) the severity of the issue, taking into account:
 - the relevant editorial standard/s
 - the impact on the audience (or an individual audience member where relevant)
 - how closely related the issue is to the editorial focus of the content
 - (b) if the issue raised is capable of being addressed
 - (c) if the issue raised is addressed transparently
 - (d) if the issue raised is addressed promptly
 - (e) if it is not proportionate (considering clause 1.2) to continue the investigation.

Preliminary findings

- 4.15. As soon as practicable, the Ombudsman's Office will inform the ABC division and the editorial policy adviser of the preliminary finding of the investigation.
- 4.16. The relevant ABC division will have an opportunity to respond to all preliminary findings, except for the no breach findings as described at clause 4.4.
- 4.17. The ABC division should notify the Ombudsman's Office if it accepts the preliminary finding as soon as practicable.
- 4.18. If the ABC division disagrees with the preliminary finding, they may make a submission to the Ombudsman.
- 4.19. If the Ombudsman, having considered that submission made under clause 4.18, continues with the preliminary finding, the Divisional Director may make a submission to the Managing Director and the Ombudsman.
- 4.20. If clause 4.19 applies, the Ombudsman will finalise the investigation in consultation with the Managing Director and reasons for the finding will be given to the Divisional Director.
- 4.21. The Ombudsman's finding of the investigation is final.

Finalising investigations

- 4.22. The relevant ABC division is responsible for determining, implementing and recording any action taken arising from an issue raised in an investigation. This could include updating content, or publishing an editor's note, correction or clarification.
- 4.23. The Ombudsman's Office is responsible for finalising the response and/or investigation report.
- 4.24. The Ombudsman may make recommendations to the ABC division to address an issue raised which may be included in a response to the audience member or an investigation report.
- 4.25. The ABC division may include a response to any Ombudsman's Office finding in the response or investigation report.
- 4.26. The ABC division must include a formal response to any breach finding for publication in the investigation report. This response should include whether it accepts or rejects the finding and whether it has implemented any recommendations made by the Ombudsman or taken other action.
- 4.27. The Ombudsman's Office will respond to the audience member informing them of the finding of the investigation and any external complaint options available. If the complaints formed part of coordinated campaign, the

Ombudsman's Office may only respond by publishing the investigation report on its website.

5. ABC divisions responsibilities

- 5.1. ABC divisions will engage with the Ombudsman's Office about content complaints as required in this procedure.
- 5.2. Within the ABC divisions, those with editorial responsibility for dealing with complaints about their content must:
 - (a) be familiar with this procedure
 - (b) liaise with the Ombudsman's Office (providing comments and requested information or material, taking action, responses)
 - (c) internally escalate matters as necessary
 - (d) ensure that any staff member who may be affected by an outcome of an investigation is made aware of it and can respond during the investigation.
- 5.3. ABC divisions may respond to content complaints that they receive directly or that are referred to them in the first instance from the Ombudsman's Office.
- 5.4. Where an ABC division responds directly to a content complaint, the audience member must be informed that should they remain dissatisfied they have the option to refer the complaint to:
 - (a) the Ombudsman's Office to [request a review of the complaint](#) within two (2) weeks from the date of the response from the division, and
 - (b) the ACMA, if broadcast content.

6. Ombudsman's Office review

- 6.1. If an audience member is dissatisfied with a response from an ABC division, or they do not receive a response to their complaint at all, they may request the Ombudsman's Office review their complaint.
- 6.2. The audience member must make the request within 2 weeks from the date of the response from the ABC division.

How the Ombudsman's Office deals with reviews

- 6.3. Ombudsman's Office reviews are discretionary.
- 6.4. The Ombudsman's Office will assess each review request and either accept or decline to investigate it.
- 6.5. This assessment will include reviewing the response from the ABC division (if relevant), the nature of the audience member's ongoing concerns, matters set

out at clause 3.13 and the proportionate and appropriate handling criteria at clause 1.2.

6.6. If the review is declined, the Ombudsman's Office will respond to the audience member informing them of the decision and, if applicable, any external complaint options available. The relevant editorial policy adviser will be forwarded a copy of the response to the audience member.

6.7. If the review is accepted, the Ombudsman's Office will investigate following the procedure under section 4 **Investigating content complaints**.

7. Unable to satisfy an audience member despite reasonable efforts

7.1. The Ombudsman's Office or an ABC division may stop corresponding with an audience member where a response has clearly been unable to satisfy them, despite reasonable efforts having been made.

8. Recording and reporting requirements

8.1. The Ombudsman's Office must save relevant correspondence, the response and all relevant information and material about the investigation on the complaint database. The Ombudsman's Office will record the finding and close the content complaint.

8.2. Subject to privacy or harm considerations, the Ombudsman's Office will publish to the [Ombudsman's Office website](#) all:

- (a) reports outlining a breach finding
- (b) reports outlining action taken, and
- (c) reports outlining review findings

8.3. The Ombudsman's Office may also publish other noteworthy no breach finding reports as it considers proportionate and appropriate.

8.4. The ABC division will have the opportunity to respond to a finding before it is published.

8.5. Findings are reported to the ABC Board and ABC management and used for continuous quality improvement.

9. External review mechanisms

9.1. The Ombudsman's Office is the contact for external review organisations that the audience can refer content complaints to such as the [Australian Communications and Media Authority](#), the [Commonwealth Ombudsman](#), the [Australian Human Rights Commission](#) or the [eSafety Commissioner](#).

9.2. The Ombudsman's Office will liaise and consult with relevant ABC divisions

about these external complaint investigations. It may make a submission directly to the external review organisation or send the submission of the ABC division on their behalf.

Status

This procedure is made under the [ABC Ombudsman Charter](#) and is reviewed by the Ombudsman as required, or at least every 12 months.

Amendments to this procedure may be made within the parameters of the [ABC Ombudsman Charter](#) with the approval of the Ombudsman.