

UNITED STATES OFFICE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT



# Plain Writing Act Compliance Report

April 2012

*a New Day for Federal Service*

## I. Senior OPM Officials for Plain Writing

Our senior officials for plain writing are:

- Richard Lowe, Director of the Executive Secretariat and Ombudsman
- Rosemary Williams, Director of Communications and Public Liaison
- Matthew Perry, Chief Information Officer

The best way to contact them is through our [open government blog](#).

## II. Communications

We have made the following changes to our communications:

**Table 1: Changes in Communications**

Communication/Venue	Intended Audience	What Has Changed
Web site, <a href="#">opm.gov</a> relaunch scheduled for this fiscal year	All stakeholders, internal and external (more than 10 million users per year)	We are reducing the number of pages from more than 38,000 to fewer than 7,000, making it easier to find and use information on our site. Taking this step first will facilitate efforts to revise existing documents
<a href="#">Frequently asked questions</a> (FAQs) site	Primarily members of the public (more than 2 million users per year)	This tool provides answers to common questions in accessible language. We ask users, “did this answer your question?” and are using the results to refine our language
Documents cleared for posting to our website	All stakeholders, internal and external (more than 1 million users per year)	We now require vetting packages to include fact sheets and FAQs in plain language. We release these aids with the vetted documents
Open government, diversity and inclusion, and other new strategies and plans	All stakeholders, internal and external (40,000 users per year)	We have produced a number of new strategies, all with an eye to readability so the American people will better understand what we do and why we do it

Communication/Venue	Intended Audience	What Has Changed
Open government action plans	OPM employees implement the action plans to better serve all our stakeholders (number of users varies depending on the action plan)	These action plans provide specific instructions for implementing our open government strategies. Throughout these plans, we emphasize the importance of good communication. We also provide references to resources on oral and written communication skills

For the FAQs and new documents, we use a checklist we published as an appendix to our Plain Writing Plan as a writing aid.

As Table 1 makes clear, we have made plain language a priority for our internal and external communications. The following two sections address how we have reached out to and trained employees.

### III. How We've Informed Our Staff of the Plain Writing Act's Requirements

In July 2011, we released our [Plain Writing Plan](#). At that time, OPM's Director and the Director of the Executive Secretariat and Ombudsman sent messages to staff about our expectation that staff use plain language in their writing and about training opportunities. We have also:

- Posted an [announcement](#) on our open government blog for both staff and the public to see
- Used a town hall meeting as a platform to educate and encourage employees
- Sent a message reinforcing our commitment to plain writing to senior staff and briefed them
- Sent monthly writing tips to all staff
- Distributed articles on plain writing resources via two internal newsletters. These resources include training and books on writing in particular and clear communication more generally

We have pointed staff to our site, [Plain Language at OPM](#), rather than duplicate efforts through a separate intranet site dedicated to plain writing or the larger concept of plain language.

### IV. Training

We provided all staff with a link to [online training](#) provided by the National Institutes of Health (NIH). We encouraged all staff to take the training and required approximately 50 employees to take it.

Both our efforts to encourage plain writing and the changes to our website described in Table 1 share the larger concern of making pertinent information available in usable formats. That is, they are both

about effective communication, which includes but is not limited to plain writing. With that fact in mind, we have repeatedly encouraged employees to pursue further training through our internal training portal, which also provides access to books about effective communication. We have highlighted the following courses in communications to employees:

- Business Writing: Know Your Readers and Your Purpose
- Business Writing: How to Write Clearly and Concisely
- Business Writing: Editing and Proofreading
- Business Grammar: Parts of Speech
- Business Grammar: The Mechanics of Writing
- Business Grammar: Working with Words
- Using Email and Instant Messaging Effectively

Combined, these courses have had 186 enrolments as of April 11, 2012. To pass a course, an employee must enroll, take the course, and score between 70% and 100%. Of the 186 enrolments, 131 (70%) have already resulted in passed tests. For example, 26 employees enrolled in “Business Writing: How to Write Clearly and Concisely,” and 21 (81%) passed.

Retirement Services recently trained 25 employees in plain writing in 5 sessions. They conducted these sessions at our Washington, DC and Boyers, PA offices.

## **V. Ongoing Compliance and Sustaining Change**

OPM’s senior officials for plain writing are responsible for monitoring compliance.

We ensure compliance largely through our vetting process, which we use for almost all communications that we post to our website. Our Communications and Public Liaison office reviews those communications and requires fact sheets and FAQs, as noted in Table 1. Furthermore, staff are expected to demonstrate oral and written communication skills in the course of their work more generally.

To gauge our success in making our writing easy for our stakeholders to understand, we use the answers to, “did this answer your question?” from the frequently asked questions site. We call this our usefulness or helpfulness survey and make editing the FAQs that the public rates low a priority.

For sustainability, we will run quarterly internal and external challenges to identify poorly written documents and improve them. We will begin these challenges approximately one month after the web site relaunch, since we already plan to remove many of the poorly written documents. We have also linked employees’ performance measures to key groups, including citizens.

## **VI. OPM's Plain Language Website**

Our [plain language site](#) uses the term “plain language” rather than “plain writing” because oral communication is also important to us. The site provides tips, along with links to the Plain Writing Act, our Plain Writing Plan, our open government blog, the [Plain Language Action and Information Network](#), and the NIH training mentioned above. Users can contact us through the open government blog.

## **VII. Customer Satisfaction Evaluation after Experiencing Plain Writing Communications**

The answers to the FAQ usefulness survey are on a 5-point scale: 0%, 25%, 50%, 75%, and 100%. Program offices work to improve low scores. A low score can mean a number of things: (1) the algorithm<sup>1</sup> provided an FAQ that was not pertinent to the user's question, (2) the user is displeased with the answer, or, often, (3) the answer is appropriate but hard to understand. We have control over the first and third reasons. For the first, the FAQs are dynamic, meaning the algorithm is constantly improving. For the third, program offices use our plain writing checklist to make their questions and answers easier to understand. Keeping in mind that some low marks are unavoidable, we have set our target at 80%, which we plan to achieve in annual 10% increments at a minimum. Our fiscal year 2011 baseline is 28%.

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<sup>1</sup> An algorithm is a set of steps and calculations. Computers use algorithms to arrive at search results. Finding keywords in documents is one way to search a database, but algorithms can be much more complex. For example, Google's famously complex algorithm takes the popularity of sites and many other factors into account.



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