2016 PLAIN WRITING COMPLIANCE REPORT

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Social Security Administration
2016 Plain Writing Compliance Report

We are pleased to share our 2016 Plain Writing Compliance Report (Report.) The Report documents our efforts and successes in complying with the Plain Writing Act of 2010 (Act.) The Act requires federal agencies to apply Plain Writing principles to written communications in a way that the public can easily understand information about the services we provide.

Our Commitment

We recognize the importance of communicating in a way that is clear and concise. We strive to simplify the language we use in our written communications by applying Plain Writing principles.

Communicating and explaining our complex programs is a large part of our service delivery. We communicate daily with members of the public, local government agencies, advocacy groups, Congressional offices, and the White House. Clear and concise communications are vital to providing outstanding customer service.

We provided the following resources to assist our employees with applying Plain Writing principles to their notices, documents, letters, and other correspondence:

- Commissioner's Broadcast messages
- Headquarters television messages
- The Plain Writing website
- The Commissioner's Writing Center
- Good Morning Social Security episodes
- Signage-banners, posters, table tents, and Desk Aids

As part of our business processes, we continually train employees on Plain Writing standards and the Act. Many of our components initiate compliance and training efforts to ensure their employees maintain a commitment to Plain Writing.

Through the expanded use of editing software tools and training courses, we developed a unified approach to bringing clarity and consistency to our correspondence and documents. Finally, our dedicated staff assists and responds to Plain Writing inquiries from agency employees and the public.

Our Accomplishments

To comply with the Plain Writing Act of 2010, we met basic and advanced requirements. We developed and followed our *Plain Writing Implementation Plan,* to help us monitor how offices are applying Plain Writing guidelines to their written materials. In addition, we:

- Issued the 2015 Plain Writing Compliance Report;
- Conducted our annual marketing campaign to promote Plain Writing principles;
- Maintained a Plain Language page on our Intranet and Internet website home pages;
- Continued updating all high traffic agency webpages in compliance with Plain Writing principles;
- Promoted the use of editing tool software, such as StyleWriter, throughout the agency to enhance clear written communications;
- Completed a one-year pilot of the Acrolinx editing tool, and purchased licenses for FY 2017;
- Trained employees on Plain Writing, business writing and grammar, and effective writing techniques;
- Applied Plain Writing guidelines to our websites, documents, letters, notices, and other written materials; and
- Earned a "B+" for the Writing and Information Design grade on the Federal Plain Language Report Card.

Our Implementation

Our Plain Writing Compliance Board, met bi-monthly to plan, coordinate, and carry out Plain Writing activities for our agency.

In fiscal year 2016, approximately 500 employees piloted the use of Acrolinx. The purpose of the pilot was to see if Acrolinx would:

- Meet the objectives of the Plain Writing Act of 2010;
- Improve the readability of websites, notices, PDFs, and public-facing documents; and
- Provide a consistent and uniform approach to preparing notices, letters, policies, and webpages.

We will continue to examine how Acrolinx style rules perform against agency content and our Commissioner-approved correspondence guidelines.

Also in FY 2016, former Acting Commissioner Colvin encouraged employees to renew their commitment to Plain Writing and take advantage of our agency's Plain Writing

tools and resources. One resource, the Commissioner's Writing Center, offers writing tools, tips, and online learning opportunities. The *Quality Initiative for Commissioner's Correspondence Handbook*, referred to as the *QUICC Handbook*, is available at this site and outlines the Commissioner's preferences for our written communications.

During our marketing campaign, we created and distributed a QUICC Tips Desk Aid that highlights key points to effective writing. We strategically placed Plain Writing posters around our headquarters campus and published them on our Plain Writing website. We continue to use our internal television network, HQTV, to promote Plain Writing principles.

Please see the 2016 SSA Plain Writing Implementation Plan in Appendix B for an outline of our goals and activities.

Oversight

Steven Patrick, Ph.D., Associate Commissioner for Office of Public Inquiries in the Office of Communications, is our senior agency official for Plain Writing. Dr. Patrick and his staff, and representatives from the Office of the Commissioner and 12 Deputy Commissioner-level components, developed our *Plain Writing Implementation Plan*. The representatives of the Deputy Commissioner-level components make up our Plain Writing Compliance Board (Compliance Board). In addition, directors in our 10 regions serve as Plain Writing Contacts. Appendix B provides links to websites that list the Compliance Board members and Regional Directors.

Plain Writing Resources

We support our employees and the public by offering tools for Plain Writing guidelines. Our Plain Writing website provides techniques to prepare clear and concise written products. It also includes links to our previous Plain Writing Compliance Reports and other Plain Writing tools. We ask for comments and suggestions from employees and the public by means of email at PlainWriting@ssa.gov.

The Commissioner's Writing Center website and QUICC Handbook are internal online tools that are available to our employees. The Commissioner's Writing Center website provides links to courses in Plain Writing, writing and grammar, and other writing resources.

We are committed to offering classroom and online training opportunities and resources to our employees. We ensure that our online content is compliant with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. Section 508 requires all federal agencies to provide communications that are accessible to disabled individuals and compatible with assistive technologies.

Editing Tools

In 2016, we completed a one-year pilot to test the effectiveness of the editing tool Acrolinx. Acrolinx allows us to evaluate websites, PDF files, and Word documents. Close to 500 agency employees participated in this pilot. During the pilot, we provided onsite training and video conferences. We also produced training videos on demand, which are available on our Office of Learning website.

We determined that the software is a valuable tool in our continuing efforts to promote Plain Writing and improve our written communications. We purchased 350 licenses for distribution and use throughout the agency.

One significant benefit of Acrolinx is its ability to produce a wide range of analytics data. We intend to use this data to monitor the use of Acrolinx at our agency, identify problem areas as they relate to Plain Writing, and gauge our progress in applying Plain Writing principles to our written communication. Acrolinx will also be useful in helping us streamline our training efforts. The software not only allows individuals to evaluate their written products, but also allows managers to evaluate the quality of writing across their offices.

Supporting Activities

As mentioned earlier, we conducted a yearlong pilot of Acrolinx to gauge its effectiveness in helping us comply with the Act. In addition, we held a marketing campaign to promote Plain Writing principles throughout the agency. We placed Plain Writing posters and banners throughout our headquarters campus and made them available to offices nationwide from our website. We used internal publications, including webpages, to promote Plain Writing and provide guidance on how to put Plain Writing principles into practice.

We reached out to Regional Offices and the Regional Communication Directors (RCD) in these offices to discuss Plain Writing updates, activities, and training opportunities for employees in the regions. Earlier in the year, we held a national conference for the Public Affairs Specialists as well. The RCDs communicate information about the Plain Writing Compliance Report to employees and the public. They also encourage regional involvement in Plain Writing activities.

We routinely televise Plain Writing guidelines on HQTV, our internal headquarters television network. We electronically broadcast announcements on *Good Morning Social Security*, a weekly video news program for agency employees.

Mechanism for Public Feedback and Measurements of Performance

We strive to improve the way we communicate. We welcome comments and suggestions at PlainWriting@ssa.gov. The public and our employees can use this mailbox to contact us. We respond to all emails within one business day.

We use customer satisfaction reports such as the ForeSee Experience Index (FXI): E-Government (formerly called the ForeSee E-Government Satisfaction Index) to optimize our website and respond to the needs of our customers. The FXI reflects citizen experiences with federal government websites, mobile sites, and mobile applications. Navigation and search features drive customer satisfaction. Customers also look for functionality, content, and online transparency, in that order.

ForeSee measures satisfaction on a 0-100 scale and considers scores of 80 or above as the threshold of excellence. The 2016 report reflects feedback from over 230,000 citizens that used federal government websites, mobile sites, or applications. ForeSee highlighted our "stellar performance" and noted that we continued to be in the forefront of customer satisfaction. Also noted was our Social Security Online services as most improved.

In the fourth quarter of 2016, seven of our sites received scores of 80 or above. Four of the sites were *the* top scorers on the FXI. In priority order, the top sites are the:

- SSA Retirement Estimator [91]
- Extra Help with Medicare Prescription Drug Plan Costs [90];
- SSA iClaim [89];
- SSA - *my* Social Security [89];
- Social Security Business Services Online [87];
- SSA iAppeals – Disability Appeal [80]; and,
- SSA iClaim – Disability [80].

Our websites are highly rated because they are easy to navigate and information is easy to find. In addition, we employ acceptance testing, focus groups, and surveys to develop online content that will meet the needs of our users.

The overall FXI score for the Social Security Administration is 85.4. The aggregate score for the 101 federal websites measured by ForeSee is 75.3. The agency's score of 85.4 compares favorably with 2016 satisfaction scores for leading Fortune 500 companies such as: Amazon [85], Apple [81], and Best Buy [81].

Compliance Report

We issued the 2016 Plain Writing Compliance Report on March 31, 2017.

Table 1 – Examples of Notices and Publications Using Plain Writing Principles

The following are component specific examples of our notices and publications used in external communications. These entries show our efforts to improve our written communication products. Please see Appendix A for examples.

Office of the Chief Actuary

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Publication; 2016 Old Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance (OASDI) Board of Trustees Report	U.S. Congress, interested members of the public	We monitor and edit this annual publication to promote the use of Plain Writing wherever possible.	The modifications in the report improved clarity.

Office of Disability Adjudication and Review

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Notice; Notice of Denial of Travel Expenses Reimbursement	Claimants, Representatives	We applied Plain Writing principles to the document.	The Rochester New York Hearing Office uses this notice template for claimant-representative requests for travel expenses reimbursement.
Notice; Document Generations System-- Notice of Hearing—Child Supplemental Security Income	Public	We modified the Notice of Hearing for Supplemental Security Income--Children's Disability Review template to insert Plain Writing instructions and required regulatory language.	The new template provides the required language along with instructions.

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Notice; In FY 2016, the Oak Park Office of Disability Adjudication and Review (ODAR) drafted and mailed a letter to representatives explaining our judges' request for a legal brief that summarized the issues and what the brief should contain.	Oak Park Claimants' Representatives	We initially mailed this document in FY 2016.	The letter outlines, in plain terms, what judges need to see in a legal brief.
Publication; Representative Newsletter – March 2016 by ODAR Syracuse, New York Hearing Office	Representatives	Document in Plain Writing	The Syracuse Hearing Office produces this newsletter to keep third-party-representative clients informed about claim requirements and related issues, and what is going on at that office.

Office of the Inspector General

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Brochure; Cooperative Disability Investigations Program See Appendix A	Law Enforcement Organizations, Special Interest Groups, etc.	Updated with current program statistics and accomplishments.	We improved the layout and simplified the language.

Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Letter; Response to Public Inquiry See Appendix A	Members of Congress and Staff	This office maintains a "special" priority audience with the Congress. Information posted to the web is archival and legislation or regulation specific.	Used Plain Writing techniques and guidelines to eliminate passive voice. Improved overall readability of responses.
Publication; Request for the **Social Security Congressional Inquiries Guide**	Congressional staff	This is a comprehensive guide regarding Social Security programs. We update the guide every two years at the onset of each new Congress. For congressional staff use only.	The agency overview and program descriptions are clear and easy to understand.

Office of Operations

Philadelphia Region

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Press release for the office closing due to the Democratic National Convention.	Public	Modified language in the press release to be clear and concise.	We provided clear, concise information to the community to let them know we were temporarily closing one of our Field Offices due to the Democratic National Convention.

Chicago Region

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Publication;\n\nHighland Park, Michigan signs letting Field Office (FO) visitors know of unanticipated office closure and alternative service choices.	Public	We changed the language for greater clarity and conciseness.\n\nSSA told the public of the FO closure and offered service delivery choices.	SSA provided, clear, concise communication to our customers on a FO closure.\n\nWe told visitors of alternative service delivery choices.
Publication;\n\nMichigan Updates	State of Michigan and Third Party Partners	Monthly newsletter highlighting the Social Security Disability and Supplemental Security Income programs.	Clear information and tips on Social Security Disability and Supplemental Security Income, and Employment Support highlights.

Kansas City Region

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Collective Account Letter	Public	Removed excess information in parenthesis and reduced the letter's length.\n\nChanged wording for itemized bullets to simplify language.	Letters to payees are clear and concise with simplified messages and requests for information.

San Francisco Region

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Notice;\n\nAttorney Response–Before and After	Insurance Attorney	The "after" notice provides more clarity and minimizes the use of passive voice.	By making the response concise, it is easier for third parties to understand the notice and explain it to their constituents.

Seattle Region

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Publication; Area Director's Office News Item	Internal Use	We reduced sentence length and removed passive voice.	Presented information that adheres to Plain Writing standards to make it easier to read and understand.

Office of Retirement and Disability Policy

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Notice; Payee Review Contractor Call-In Letter	Beneficiaries and representative payees selected for Predictive Model Review	New notice	The new notices incorporate Plain Writing, which improves readability.
Notice; Payee Review Contractor Appointment Letter	Beneficiaries and representative payees selected for Predictive Model Review	New notice	The new notices incorporate Plain Writing, which improves readability.
Notice; Payee Review Contractor SSA Letter	Beneficiaries and recipients with representative payees	New notice	The new notices incorporate Plain Writing, which improves readability.
Notice; Payee Review Contractor Corrective Letter See Appendix A	Beneficiaries and representative payees selected for Predictive Model Review	New notice	The new notices incorporate Plain Writing, which improves readability.
Notice; Payee Review Contractor Closeout Letter See Appendix A	Beneficiaries and representative payees selected for Predictive Model Review	New notice	The new notices incorporate Plain Writing, which improves readability.

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Notice; Payee Review Contractor Closeout D Letter	Beneficiaries and representative payees selected for Predictive Model Review	New notice	The new notices incorporate Plain Writing, which improves readability.
Notice; Same-Sex Marriage-Title II Notice of Overpayment	Title II beneficiaries overpaid due to recognition of a same-sex marriage	New notice (awaiting approval)	The new notices incorporate Plain Writing, which improves readability.
Notice; Same-Sex Marriage Title II Waiver Approval	Title II beneficiaries overpaid due to recognition of a same-sex marriage	New notice (awaiting approval)	The new notices incorporate Plain Writing, which improves readability.
Notice; Waiver Notice for Requesting Permission	Title II beneficiaries requesting a waiver of an overpayment and SSA needs to verify their bank account balances	New notice	The new notices incorporate Plain Writing, which improves readability.
Notice; Waiver Denial Notice	Title II beneficiaries requesting a waiver of an overpayment and SSA needs to verify their bank account balances	New paragraph	The new notices incorporate Plain Writing, which improves readability.
Notice; Personal Conference Notice	Title II beneficiaries requesting a waiver of an overpayment and SSA needs to verify their bank account balances	New paragraph;	The new notices incorporate Plain Writing, which improves readability.
Notices; Fugitive Felon Closed Period Suspension Notice (Title XVI)	Title XVI recipients who are fugitive felons	Eight new notice paragraphs that comply with the Martinez Court Settlement and Clark Court Order	The new notices incorporate Plain Writing, which improves readability.

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Publication; A Program Explainer on the Government Pension Offset See Appendix A	Policymakers, Congressional staff, SSA staff, students, the public	The new publication decreases workload by providing frequently requested information online in a self-explanatory format.	There have been 435 unique page views since it posted in July 2016.
Publication; Actuarial Status of the Social Security Trust Funds, June 2016 See Appendix A	Policymakers, researchers, Congressional staff, SSA staff, students, the public	We condensed information to shrink the document from 272 to two pages.	The document is easier to understand and navigate. There have been 1,769 unique page views since it posted June 2016.
Publication; Your Payments While You are Outside the United States	Title II beneficiaries who are leaving or have left the United States	We reorganized this publication to conform to Plain Writing standards. We removed repetition i.e., if we mentioned a country in different sections of the document, we made a separate section for the list and referred the reader to that list in the pamphlet.	Document conforms to Plain Writing standards. The number of views from January 2016-October 2016 was 52,795.
Form; Supplement to Claim of Person Outside the United States	SSA Field Offices, Headquarters offices, Operations offices, Processing Centers, Regional Offices, and the Railroad Retirement Board.	We made changes for active voice, readability, and flow. We deleted repetition and made areas, such as the date format, consistent.	The document is consistent and easier to read and understand. The number of downloads for this form since January 2016 was 8,966.

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Publication; Building an Occupational Information brochure	Provided to employers selected to participate in the Occupational Requirements Survey that evaluates the requirements of specific work titles in their organization.	New brochure The previous outreach and marketing tool given to employers was a formal letter signed by the Commissioner. The new brochure gives a positive impression of the SSA disability program.	The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) uses this brochure to ask public and private employers throughout the United States to take the survey. The BLS field economists increased survey participation to approximately 10,000 brochures to employers in the last fiscal year (2016). BLS employees find that this brochure is a better marketing tool because it is easier to read.
Publication; What Same Sex Couples Need to Know	Social Security and Supplemental Security Income applicants and the public	The 2015 U.S. Supreme Court decision in Obergefell v. Hodges resulted in us adding Social Security and Supplemental Security Income benefits information for same-sex couples to our webpage.	We provided clear and accurate information to the public and to claimants for Social Security and Supplemental Security Income benefits. We promoted awareness about benefits to those in same-sex relationships. The number of views from June 2016-October 2016 was 2,786.

Table 2 – Examples of Webpages Using Plain Writing Principles

The following examples show improvements to webpages used by the public and stakeholders.

Office of Communications

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Hispanics and Social Security See Appendix A	The public, third parties, government agencies, businesses, Congress, and the press	We added new banner graphics that depict the target audience. We rewrote content using Plain Writing principles. We removed legal jargon. We added a narrative that describes our agency's role and impact in the lives of beneficiaries. We added elements of the agency's new brand.	Information on the site is easier to understand. The site complies with the agency's new brand and it is visually appealing.
my Social Security See Appendix A	The public, third parties, government agencies, businesses, Congress, the press	We added information to the website based on public feedback. We moved 'Activation Code' to the top of the page, making it easier to locate. We separated sections on the page for easier identification. We added color to separate sections and topics. We added elements of the agency's new brand.	Visitors to the site can easily identify each section and access their account.

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Same-sex Couples See Appendix A	The public, third parties, government agencies, businesses, Congress, the press	We added new banner graphics that depict the target audience. We edited content using Plain Writing principles. We removed legal jargon. We added a narrative that describes our agency's role and impact in the lives of beneficiaries. We added elements of the agency's new brand.	Information on the site is easier to understand. The site complies with the agency's new brand and it is visually appealing.
Sign In To Your Account See Appendix A	The public, third parties, government agencies, businesses, Congress	We created a page that contains log in information for three popular accounts and services: *my* Social Security, Business Services Online, and Government Services online. We provided service descriptions on the webpage.	Users can easily access and identify each account.

Office of the Chief Strategic Officer

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Social Security Administration's Open Government Plan 4.0 Message from the Acting Commissioner See Appendix A	Public	We used Plain Writing principles when updating content.	The message is clear and concise.

Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs website See Appendix A	Members of Congress and Staff	We maintain a "special" priority audience with Congress. Information posted to the website is archival and legislation or regulation specific.	We improved the readability of our web page.

Office of Operations

New York Region

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
SSA New York Region Homepage See Appendix A	Public	We regularly reviewed and updated the site as needed.	We provide up-to-date information about Social Security's programs and policies.

Office of Central Operations

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Office of Central Operations, Center for Human Resources Intranet Site: Virtual Career Life Resource Center Page	Employees	We improved the layout and flow to conform to agency standards	Employees can easily navigate the site.

Office of Retirement and Disability Policy

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
The Payments Abroad Screening Tool See Appendix A	Public (mostly beneficiaries living or planning to go outside the United States)	We made updates for accuracy and changes for Plain Writing and readability to both screening tools.	The result is clearer instructions. The number of views from January 2016-October 2016 was 95,209.
The Nonresident Alien Tax Screening Tool See Appendix A	Public (mostly beneficiaries living or planning to go outside the United States)	We made updates for accuracy and changes for Plain Writing and readability to both screening tools.	The result is clearer instructions. The number of views from January 2016-October 2016 was 95,209.
Social Security Website FAQ #3843 Can non-citizens living outside the United States receive Social Security benefits? See Appendix A	Public	We made minor changes for Plain Writing and clarity (specified "calendar" months and replaced unnecessary details with "certain conditions."	The result is clearer instructions. The number of views from January 2016-October 2016 was 5,564.

Table 3 – Examples of Policy Documents Using Plain Writing Principles

The following are examples of policy documents. These entries show our efforts to improve clarity.

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Policy; Processing Cases Under Sections 205(u) and 1631(e)(7) of the Social Security Act (Fraud or Similar Fault Redeterminations)	SSA employees, representatives, the public	We amended webpage content to clarify language and provide details on how we adjudicate reconsiderations under sections 205(u) and 1631 € (7) of the Act.	The detailed document is clear and easy to read.

Office of Operations

Office of Central Operations

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Policy; Reconciliation Correspondence Operations-Table of Contents	Internal Use	We updated the introductory sentences and the body of the Program Operations Manual to comply with changes in procedures and Plain Writing principles.	Clear and current language in procedures.
Policy; Office of Disability Operations (ODO) ODO Procedures for Determining Participation in Vocational Rehabilitation or Similar Program	All ODO Employees	We clarified Section 301 processing instructions.	ODO employees improved how they processed Section 301 determinations.

Dallas Region

Type and Method of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Return to Work See Appendix A	Public	We listed cities in each area to provide clarity.	Provided information in a clear and organized manner for ease of use.

Seattle Region

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Tittle II Overpayment Plain Language Handbook Title XVI Overpayment Plain Language Handbook	Internal Use	Our 2015 Leadership and Management Development Program Associates used the training they received to create Plain Language Handbooks for Overpayment Notices. We edited the handbooks to make them easier to read and understand.	Handbooks are easier to read and understand.

Office of Retirement and Disability Policy

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Policy; Significance of Form SSA-21 (Supplement to Claim of Person Outside the United States)	SSA Field Offices and Processing Centers.	We made changes to comply with our agency's initiative to use Plain Writing and active voice in public correspondence.	The number of views from May 2016-October 2016 was 1,248.

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Policy; Credit Reporting for New Fee-for-Service (FFS) Applicants	SSA Field Offices	We made policy and chart revisions in the Program Operations Manual Systems to improve clarity and meet our Plain Writing standards. We provided more guidance on the steps staff should take for new FFS representative payees whose credit reports identify risk factors that may affect their ability to be a suitable payee.	An improved credit risk review for non-governmental FFS representative payees. From February 2016-October 2016, the number of views of the Credit Reporting for New Fee-for-Service Applicants was 461. From February 2016-October 2016, the number of views for the Fee Amounts was 1,341,
Policy; Field Office Procedures for Cases Involving Participation in Vocational Rehabilitation or Similar Program	SSA Field Offices and Processing Centers, and employees in the State Disability Determination Services	We edited several sections to provide up-to-date, clear instructions in processing cases. We made revisions throughout to improve clarity and compliance with Plain Writing guidelines.	The number of views from January 2016-Ocotber 2016 was 8,345.
Policy Message; Nonresident Alien Tax Reminders	SSA Field Offices and Processing Centers.	We published this policy message to provide reminders and guidance for correct nonresident alien tax coding. We used Plain Language to make the instructions easy to follow.	The number of views from January 2016-October 2016 was 2,509.

Table 4 – Examples of Congressional and Public Inquiries Using Plain Writing Principles

Office of the Chief Actuary

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Analysis of Proposals Affecting Trust Fund Solvency	Individual Members of Congress, Congressional Committees, and related organizations who have requested the Office of the Chief Actuary to "score" legislative proposals	We are mindful that a significant part of our duty is to explain actuarial concepts and analytic results in terms understandable to non-actuaries. We promote the as much as possible in all such memoranda.	We used Plain Writing principles and improved readability, clarity, tone, and format.
Individual Changes Modifying Social Security	Public	For each factor, we show a summary statement of the actuarial effect from a specific change, as well as the detailed data behind the result. Our aim is to help the public understand how different pieces of policy can work, alone or together, to address the financial solvency of the Social Security program. We are trying to create summary statements on these pages with Plain Writing in mind.	We frequently update these pages. We continuously try to improve our outreach by using Plain Writing wherever possible.

Office of Disability Adjudication and Review

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Document; Generation System Notices and Manual Notices	Congressional Staff, Claimants	Provided clear, concise status updates	We improved readability, clarity, tone, and format.

Office of the General Counsel

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Response to Civil Rights Complaints	Public	We applied Plain Writing principles to provide clear and concise responses to Civil Rights Complaints.	Our use of Plain Writing principles ensure that we provide clear and concise information to our congressional partners and the public we serve. We improved responses by fully developing the facts, removing legalese, and improving clarity. We used our quality review process to improve responses by removing passive voice.

Office of Legislative & Congressional Affairs

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Written responses to White House and congressional inquiries	The White House and members of Congress	We improved the overall readability of responses.	We received positive feedback from the White House Executive Secretariat, the Office of Presidential Correspondence, members of Congress, and key Committee staff confirming the effectiveness of Plain Language in our communications. According to the White House Executive Secretariat, we are among the top performing agencies in responsiveness to inquiries. Acrolinx, StyleWriter, and our internal quality review process showed improved clarity and readability.
Congressional inquiries	Congressional staffers	We provide support to client components with drafting responses to Congressional and other inquiries. We applied Plain Writing principles to provide clear and concise responses.	We provide clear and concise responses to inquiries.

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Mailed or emailed inquiries; The Office of Labor Management and Employee Relations handles congressional inquiries sent to the Acting Commissioner and the Deputy Commissioner for Human Resources.	Congressional delegations from the regions and the public	We applied Plain Writing principles when replying to congressional inquiries.	We improved clarity, responsiveness, and understanding.

Office of Operations

Dallas Region

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Congressional Letter	United States Congressman	We applied Plain Writing principles to simplify documents and make them grammatically correct.	We improved our written responses by removing passive voice and improving clarity.

New York Region

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Letters; Responses to congressional inquiries	Congressional delegations in New York and New Jersey; Congressional Staffers	The Regional Public Affairs Office (RPAO) used Plain Writing principles while reviewing and editing nearly 1,000 congressional replies.	RPAO prepared responses that clarified information about our programs and policies.

Philadelphia Region

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Congressional Inquiry response	Congressman Rigell	We provided clear information about cafeteria plans.	Our use of Plain Writing principles ensures we provide clear and concise information to our congressional partners and, through them, to the public we serve.
Congressional Inquiry response	Congressman Harris	We provided information on how to verify a person's identity in establishing a *my* Social Security account	
Congressional Inquiry response	Congressman Fattah	We provided information about attorney fees withheld from a constituent's retroactive benefits.	

San Francisco Region

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
San Francisco Region congressional inquiries delivered by mail.	White House officials, Congressional delegations from the region, and the public	We used Plain Language and Plain Writing principles from the Commissioner's Writing Center for our written inquiries.	We improved our written responses by removing passive voice and improving clarity.

Training

In 2016, 581 employees in our headquarters and regional offices received Plain Writing training. We also provided training on Information Design. Table 5 provides detailed data on the training courses offered, the number of employees trained per course, and the course length.

The subject matter of these courses included Plain Language principles, infographics and business writing. Writing courses focused on grammar and style. Some of our most popular courses focused on Plain Language and business writing. The course length varied from a half-hour to two days. We provided training on the use of Acrolinx as well. Working with our Office of Learning, we provided a blended learning approach. We held courses in classroom settings, via Video on Demand (VOD), and online through our Learning Management System. Online and VOD training classes offer greater flexibility because they allow employees to review material at a pace and setting that works best for them.

Recognizing the importance of clear written communications, we remain committed to training employees on Plain Writing now and in the future.

Table 5 – Training on Plain Writing Principles

Office of Human Resources/Office of Learning: Agency-wide Training

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Focus on Your Business Writing - Basic	209	22 days/class (self-paced)
Focus on Your Business Writing – Intermediate	134	22 days/class (self-paced)

Classroom Training

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Advanced Business Writing	281	2 days/class
Business Writing and Grammar	213	2 days/class

Headquarters Component Training

(Any classroom training not sponsored by the Office of Learning)

Office of Budget, Finance, Quality, and Management

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Office Management	2	3 day
2016 Administrative Professionals Day	1	1 day
Eliciting and Writing Effective Requirements	1	3 days
Communications Skills: Speaking to an Audience	1	2 days

Office of Communications

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Acrolinx	386	1 hour
Infographics Training	63	2 days

Office of the General Counsel

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Advanced Business Writing	2	8 hours
Business Writing and Grammar	2	8 hours
Effective Writing for Lawyers	2	8 hours
Advanced Regulation Drafting Course	4	16 hours
Email Management for Lawyers	2	1.5 hours
National "Let's Talk" training/persuasive writing	20	1 hour

Office of the Inspector General

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Editor's Guide to Writing	1	1 hour

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Survival Tips for Speechwriter's	1	30 minutes
10 Tips to Become a Better Corporate Writer	1	90 minutes
Brilliance on Demand	1	1 hour
Everyone Edits: A Guide to Writing and Editing	1	30 minutes

Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Acrolinx	9	1 hour

Office of Operations

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Business Writing and Grammar	132	2 days
Advance Business Writing	8	2 days

Office of Operations/Office of Central Operations

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Business Writing Editing and Proofreading	4	1 hour
Intermediate Focus on Your Business Writing	9	1 day
The Plain Writing Act	8	1 day
Business Writing: Know Your Readers and Purpose	3	1 hour

Office of Retirement and Disability Policy

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Recorded Webinar – Take the Pain out of Performance Reviews-how to better communicate with employees during performance reviews	100	1 hour

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Recorded Webinar – Building Better Team Communication- November 2016 sessions	100	1 hour
Office of Income Security Programs' New Analyst Training (September 2016) –included a training segment on plain language	8	1.5 hours

Regional Training

(Any classroom training not sponsored by the Office of Learning)

Atlanta

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
South Florida Haitian Creole Bilingual Limited English Pro ciency (LEP) Training	15	2 days
Business Writing and Plain Language Workshop	1	3 days

Boston

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
The Writer's Block	51	1 hour
Plain Writing Series	6	3 hours

Chicago

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
QUICC Writing Center Overview	200	1 hour
Management and Operations Support Correspondence Guide Training	60	0.5 days
Advanced Business Writing & Grammar	48	16 hours
Business Writing & Grammar	36	16 hours
Online Writing (Intermediate)	25	2 hours

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Online Writing (Basic)	24	2 hours
Creative Written Communication	3	1 hour
Communicating with Diplomacy & Professionalism	1	8 hours

Dallas

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Refresher on verb tense, audience, tone and grammatical person point of view to encourage Plain Writing	18	2 hours
Communication and Writing Tips	4	1 hour
The Writer's Block	4,400	continuous

Denver

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Written Communication Skills	9	2 hours

Kansas City

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Advanced Business Writing	23	14 hours
Business Writing and Grammar	21	14 hours
Briefing Techniques	14	21 hours

New York

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Business Writing and Grammar	20	2 days
Advanced Business Writing	25	2 days

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Focus on Your Business Writing: Basic	15	2 hours
Focus on Your Business Writing: Intermediate	15	2 hours

Philadelphia

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Focus on Your Business Writing	20	3 hours
Intermediate Focus on Your Business Writing	20	3 hours

San Francisco

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Correspondence Guide/String Message Workshop	21	2.5 hours
Focus on Your Business Writing	50	3 hours
Intermediate Focus on Your Business Writing	60	3 hours
Advanced Business Writing	40	3 hours
Business Writing Workshop	1	6 hours

Seattle

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Fundamentals of Staff Work: Writing Like A Staffer	12	4 hours
Professional Development Curriculum: Business Writing and Grammar	25	24 hours
Business Writing: Seattle Federal Executive Board Seminar	1	8 hours
Leadership and Management Development Program Orientation and Training: Writing Boot Camp	8	1 hour

Agency Activities and Accomplishments

We continue to pursue techniques to improve Plain Writing. By adding the editing software Acrolinx to our collection of tools, we hope to offer a uniform approach to evaluating our written communications across the agency. As mentioned earlier, we offer training on a variety of subjects to educate our employees about Plain Writing.

Our offices provided training via:

- Writing and Communications Workshops;
  Online and Classroom Training;
  Written Products Reviews;
  Weekly Writing Tips; and
- Plain Writing Resources.

Agency Activities and Accomplishments by Component

Office of Budget, Finance, Quality, and Management

The following resources from our 2015 Office of Budget, Finance, Quality, and Management (BFQM) Writing Month are still available to employees:

- **Quality Initiative for the Commissioner's Correspondence (QUICC) Video on Demand (VOD):** We collaborated with the Office of Public Inquiries (OPI) and the Office of Learning (OL) to create a VOD on QUICC guidelines.
- **Online Resources:** We created a Writers' Toolkit on our website that serves as an additional writing resource for employees. The Writers' Toolkit includes the BFQM Communications Guide; links to the QUICC handbook, QUICC Training VODs, Plain Language VODs, and links to the Commissioner's Writing Center, which provides information on formatting letters and memoranda, the Commissioner's Priority Correspondence process, and online training courses.
- We continued to review component documents to ensure Plain Writing compliance, technical accuracy, and appropriate tone. We also set up group reviews of critical documents.

  - In 2016, our FY 2015 Agency Financial Report received the Association of Government Accountant's (AGA) Certificate of Excellence in Accountability Reporting (CEAR) award for the 18th consecutive year. The CEAR recognizes outstanding accountability reporting and is the highest form of recognition in Federal Government financial management reporting. The AFR provides financial management and high-level performance information. This information enables the President, Congress, and public to assess how well the agency accomplished its mission, achieved its goals, and managed its financial resources. Upon

the Commissioner's approval, BFQM sends the report to the President, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and Congress.

- For our quality review reports, we continued to provide email transmittal notes that accompany the reports to include subtitles that state why we completed the study, the findings, the frequency of the report, etc.
- At the direction of the Social Security's Web Governance Steering Committee, we completed the annual review and certification of our public-facing web content for currency and accuracy as well as plain language.
- We used Acrolinx to review webpages, Microsoft Word documents, and PDF files for spelling, grammar, style, and readability, and to identify areas that do not conform to the agency's Plain Writing standards.
- Our components sent emails to employees to encourage them to apply Plain Writing principles when preparing documents.
- In April 2016, BFQM held a series of workshops that provided an overview of basic writing guidelines, grammar, editing tips, and BFQM-specific style preferences, as well as formatting Administrative Instructions Manual System guides, writing talking points, and background papers. For those who could not attend, or who want a refresher, we posted information online.

Office of the Chief Strategic Officer

- Held a component-wide "Plain Writing Initiative Overview" session to familiarize employees with Plain Writing principles and available resources
- Distributed Plain Writing reference material to all staff that included the:

    o QUICC Handbook
    o QUICC Training VOD
    o QUICC Tips Desk Guide
    o "Plain Writing Initiative Overview" Slides

Office of Communications

- Prepared and distributed Plain Writing Desk Aids
- Provided training on Acrolinx and StyleWriter software
- Promoted Plain Writing via our intra-office headquarters television
- Updated and promoted our Plain Writing videos and training opportunities
- Collaborated with the Office of Learning to sponsor Infographics training classes
- Posted information on our Plain Writing website for our employees and the public
- Requested and prepared component submissions for consideration of a ClearMark Award
- Worked on a proposed internal awards pilot to recognize best Plain Writing efforts
- Promoted Plain Writing through our internal communication program called *Good*

- Morning Social Security
- Distributed information on Plain Writing through our marketing efforts to headquarters and field office employees
- Prepared broadcast messages for the Acting Commissioner that focused on the importance of Plain Writing and our accomplishments
- Conducted a one-year pilot to test Acrolinx for Plain Writing and it's analytic capabilities on our policies, web pages, letters, and documents

Office of Disability Adjudication and Review

- Regions ensured that communication with the public, particularly claimants, is clear and easy to understand.

Office of the General Counsel

- We continued to provide staff with training to improve their Plain Writing skills. The Effective Writing for Lawyers training helped enhance our attorney's research and complex analysis skills. This training provided our attorneys with tools to recognize and correct writing problems, write in Plain Language, simplify inflated diction, write in an active voice versus a passive voice. It also provided instruction on how to prepare for briefings. In addition, training included tips for turning ordinary writing into crisp, sharp and convincing prose, and it helped attorneys communicate effectively with their clients and others in the legal process.
- We reviewed outgoing correspondence to ensure compliance with the Plain Writing principles.
- We reminded staff of principles outlined in the QUICC handbook and provided Plain Writing feedback to staff as part of our review and clearance process.
- We provided comments and suggested revisions consistent with the Plain Writing principles to other components as part of our review of various documents – for example, Program Operations Manual Systems, data exchange agreements, and correspondence with other agencies
- We provided new hires with one-on-one writing guidance through our mentor program and supervisor oversight.
- We developed an electronic repository with model documents for all writers to reference when responding to inquiries.
- Our supervisors, mentors, jurisdictional coordinators, appellate reviewers, and peer reviewers edited and made comments and suggestions to improve the readability of briefs, memoranda, and letters, and to comply with clear writing principals (including removing passive voice and minimize medical jargon.)
- We sent reminders to staff about specific writing tips to consider based on the Commissioner's writing tips to staff.
- We also sent staff the link to the Commissioner's Writing Center.

- We reviewed all outgoing documents to ensure compliance with the Plain Writing goals of the agency.
- We trained new attorneys to use Plain Writing principles when preparing documents.
- Supervisors and senior attorneys review outgoing documents prepared by new hires to ensure compliance with these principles. Management also works closely with our internal and external clients, including the U.S. Attorney offices within our jurisdictions, to ensure that all documents, including those filed with the court, meet the agency's Plain Writing goals and objectives.
- We reviewed outgoing legal memoranda, appellate briefs, general law writings, and district court briefs for compliance with Plain Writing principles.
- Throughout calendar year 2016, our Seattle office provided and will continue to provide individual writing mechanics instruction through our appellate brief and legal opinion review process. That review and feedback provides instruction in: (1) using simpler words; (2) refraining from use of passive voice; (3) proper and judicious use of "that"; (4) avoiding lengthy quotations and overuse of parentheticals; and (5) clear statements of argument.

Office of Human Resources

- Participated in the Acrolinx pilot
- Provided training for employees on writing in the workplace
- Used Acrolinx to review documents and webpages

Office of the Inspector General

- Drafted several blog posts and fraud advisories for the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) website to communicate complex issues to the public and provide answers to commonly asked questions:

    - SSA Rolls Back Multifactor Authentication on *my* Social Security
      https://oig.ssa.gov/newsroom/blog/aug23-online-security
    - SSA Cybersecurity a Priority for the OIG, Congress
      https://oig.ssa.gov/newsroom/blog/june9-ssa-cybersecurity
    - OIG Auditors Find SSA Underpaid Widow(er)s by Estimated $224 Million
      https://oig.ssa.gov/newsroom/blog/may3-widow-underpayments
    - Inspector General Warns Public About "Disability Services" Phone Calls
      https://oig.ssa.gov/newsroom/news-releases/march29-advisory

Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs

- Continued to revise staff correspondence procedures
- Reviewed all correspondence for accuracy, responsiveness, and Plain Writing compliance before releasing them

- Developed and continues to maintain an electronic repository and handbook for all writers to reference when responding to inquiries
- Provided instructions to staff on identifying and handling new correspondences concerns
- Established and updated a protocol for developing and storing new agency approved language that complies with the Plain Writing Act
- Included Plain Writing feedback to staff as part of the quality control efforts
- Used StyleWriter and Acrolinx to prepare responses to White House and congressional inquiries

Office of Operations

- The Office of Disability Determinations continues to provide internal, informed refresher training on writing skills that emphasize Plain Language techniques for all staff.
- The Office of Disability Determination continues to use and promote the Plain Writing website and the QUICC Desk Aid.
- During each Transition to Leadership 301-Nuts and Bolts course, the New York Regional Public Affairs Office presents a session on clear and effective Writing, Communication, and Email. In 2016, the New York Region held three "Nuts and Bolts" classes.
- The New York Region revised its regional development program handbooks for 2016's program participants. We revised the handbooks to improve organization, clarity, and conciseness and to decrease the use of jargon.
- At the Kansas City Regional-Flash mentoring events, 60 participants provided information and links for improving writing skills.
- New regional analysts and professional employees take Plain Writing training and have access to resources such as Correspondence Guidelines and links to the Commissioner's Writing Center and the Plain Writing website.
- In FY16, the Seattle Region's 2015 LMDP class published two Overpayment Plain Language handbooks. These handbooks provide guidance to technicians on how to document overpayment determinations using plain language principles.
- Seattle Region analysts participated in the Acrolinx pilot in FY16.

Office of Retirement and Disability Policy

- The Office of Income Security Programs has six employees who use Acrolinx software and seven employees who use StyleWriter software to ensure Plain Writing compliance in all written communications
- We hope to increase the number of employees who use this software in the future

Moving Forward

In 2017, we will continue to train staff on the value and correct application of Plain Writing principles. We will use editing tools, such as StyleWriter and Acrolinx software, to support the improvement of notices, websites, written policies, letters, and other documents. Through the expanded use of software tools, we will continue bringing clarity and consistency to our correspondence, documents, and websites.

To evaluate the effectiveness of our communications, we will continue to participate in the ClearMark awards process. We will also set up a process to recognize and award our best-written communications across all agency components. We will work with our Plain Writing Compliance Board to ensure distribution of our Plain Writing Awards criteria to employees. We will increase the use of the ForeSee E-Governments Satisfaction Index and other metrics to gauge customer satisfaction with our letters, notices, documents, and websites.

Summary

We are proud of our Plain Writing accomplishments over the years. Each year we move closer to ensuring that our messages are clear and concise. Social Security's website, www.socialsecurity.gov, includes 20 online services, information in 18 languages, and a presence on social media sites including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn.

To cater to different audiences, we develop persona research to understand the needs of certain populations. One of these personas is the Hispanic community, which we serve with an array of Spanish services. Our research showed that Hispanics who communicate only in Spanish do not respond well to translated messages. Therefore, one of the main shifts in direction when communicating to Hispanics is to create original content in Spanish rather than translate our English messages. Please see Appendix A for an example of an original Spanish document, *Together Through Life's Journey*. The original Spanish document is just one of the many examples of our efforts to develop and deliver products that are diverse, concise, easy to understand, and easy to use.

Our 2016 Plain Writing Compliance Report documents this year's agency-wide compliance activities and accomplishments. One significant action was to pilot the Acrolinx software. Nearly 500 employees took part in this pilot. Acrolinx has become a valuable tool in our efforts to promote Plain Writing and uniformity when complying with the Act throughout the agency.

Appendix A: Plain Writing Examples

Before and After

Office	Sample	Before	After
Office of Communications	Disability Insurance Facts	Disability Insurance Facts-Before	Disability Insurance Facts-After
Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs	Congressional Letter	Congressional Letter-Before	Congressional Letter-After

New or Revised Documents

Office	Sample Document
Budget, Facilities, Quality, and Management	Anniversary of the Oklahoma City Bombing
	FY 2016 Message from Acting Commissioner Carolyn W. Colvin
Office of the Chief Strategic Officer	Open Government Plan
Office of Communications	With You Through Life's Journey
	With You Through Life's Journey-Spanish
	What the FICA?
Office of General Counsel	Civil Rights Letter
Office of the Inspector General	Cooperative Disability Investigations Booklet
Office of Operations	Application for a Social Security Card
Office of Retirement and Disability Policy	Contractor Closeout Letter
	Correction Letter

New or Revised Websites

Link
Actuarial Status of the Social Security Trust Funds, June 2016
A Program Explainer on the Government Pension Offset
FAQ - Can non-citizens living outside the United States receive Social Security benefits?
my Social Security
New York Region Homepage
Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs
Return to Work
Sign In To Your Account
The Nonresident Alien Tax Screening Tool
The Payments Abroad Screening Tool
www.socialsecurity.gov/people/hispanics/
www.socialsecurity.gov/people/same-sexcouples/

Appendix B: Plain Writing Links

This Appendix shows links to webpages and documents that support our compliance with the Plain Writing Act.

Site	Link
Social Security Administration	www.socialsecurity.gov
Plain Writing	www.socialsecurity.gov/plain-language/
Plain Writing Compliance Board	www.socialsecurity.gov/agency/plain-language/complianceboard.html
Plain Writing Contacts	www.socialsecurity.gov/plain-language/contacts.html
Plain Writing Feedback	www.socialsecurity.gov/plain-language/
Plain Writing Initial Implementation Plan	www.socialsecurity.gov/agency/plain-language/pdf/PWImplementationPlan-2014.pdf
Plain Writing Implementation Plan – 2016	2016 SSA Plain Writing Implementation Plan