Social Security Administration

2012 Plain Writing Act Compliance Report

April 12, 2013

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We are pleased to share our 2012 compliance report. The Plain Writing Act of 2010 (Act) requires Federal agencies to write clearly to ensure the public understands government information and services. As we fulfill our mission, we are committed to communicating clearly. We hold executives responsible for complying with the Act within their components. Our executives serve as "plain writing ambassadors" promoting the importance of plain writing. We also encourage all employees to find areas for improvement and growth in their writing, and to share their feedback regarding our notices and other correspondence.

Our Commitment

We recognize that communication is a large part of our service delivery, and we understand the importance of communicating in a way that is clear and concise. Therefore, we affirm our commitment and dedication to the ongoing improvement of written materials using plain writing standards. We are also committed to developing and enhancing our written communications, training our employees, and including plain writing standards in our overall business processes.

Oversight for Plain Writing

Senior Agency Official

Our Senior Agency Official for plain writing compliance is Phil Gambino, Assistant Deputy Commissioner for the Office of Communications. The public may send their inquiries and feedback regarding plain writing to: PlainWriting@ssa.gov.

Plain Writing Compliance Board and Coordinators

At our headquarters level, a Plain Writing Compliance Board supports Mr. Gambino in oversight and monitoring of agency plain writing activities. This Board is comprised of representatives from the 12 deputy-level components. These individuals established our implementation plan and serve as points of contact for plain writing in their respective components. At the local level, our 10 Regional Communications Directors serve as Plain Writing Coordinators.

External Communications

As a public service agency, our audience consists of members of the public, community organizations, advocacy groups, Federal agencies, and state/local government officials. Our communication methods are broad and include notices, publications, forms, policy documents, responses to congressional and public inquiries, and web pages. In all written communication, we make every effort to comply with plain writing standards. During the past year, all components worked on plain writing-related enhancement activities.

Reflected below are examples of some of our external communications and our efforts to improve them. Please also see the appendix for "before and after" samples and other examples.

Type & Method of Communication	Audience	Improvements
Notices		
Mailed via automated notice generation system	Beneficiaries and applicants – 240 million	Enhanced format, readability, clarity, and tone of new and revised notices.
Result: Clear and accurate information about benefits and the application process.		

Type & Method of Communication	Audience	Improvements
Publications and Forms		
Agency Website Publications: http://www.socialsecurity.gov/pubs/ Forms: http://www.socialsecurity.gov/online/ Our most requested items in 2012: • Application for a Security Card – 774,223 • Application for Medicare Extra Help – 243,060 • Working While Disabled . . . How We Can Help – 80,583 • Retirement Benefits – 68,933 • Identity Theft and Your Social Security Number – 43,898	• Beneficiaries • Applicants • Employers • Claimant representatives • Government agencies	• Revised forms and publications for readability and clarity. • Converted printed forms to fillable web-based forms for easier access and usability.
Result: Clear and accurate information about our programs and services.		

Type & Method of Communication	Audience	Improvements
Policy Documents		
Federal Register Notices, Social Security Rulings, and Legislative Proposals	• Office of Management and Budget, which reviews and approves regulations • General public	• Simplified format and improved readability and clarity in new and revised agency regulations, Social Security Rulings, Federal Register Notices, and other policy documents. • Created clear and concise legislative proposals.
Result: Clear policy documents for White House and congressional staff, researchers, and the general public.		

Type & Method of Communication	Audience	Improvements
Responses to Congressional and Public Inquiries		
Generated manually and mailed	• Members of Congress • Congressional staff • White House officials • General public	• Applied plain writing principles to respond more clearly and concisely to written inquiries about our programs and policies. • Updated the Congressional Inquiries Guide.
Result: Clear responses to inquiries regarding our programs and policies.		

Type & Method of Communication	Audience	Improvements
Agency Internet Web Pages		
Agency Internet Website: www.socialsecurity.gov	General public	Revised the look and function of our internal and external websites to improve navigation, readability, and appearance.
Result: Improved access to information on our public homepage and other sites frequently visited by the public.		

Internal Activities

Inform Agency Staff of Plain Writing Act Requirements
We continued to ensure compliance with the Act and educate our employees by:

- Incorporating plain writing principles in our Agency Strategic Plan;
- Marketing the *Quality Initiative for Commissioner's Correspondence* website, which reinforces the elements of plain writing communication (See Appendix – Writing Guides);
- Maintaining and routinely reminding employees of our plain writing website;
- Providing access to plain writing videos-on-demand for all employees;
- Incorporating plain writing principles in official agency writing guides;
- Including reminders and training in office-level meetings and in employee performance discussions, where appropriate; and
- Using posters and digital signage (SS TV) throughout the agency to promote plain writing awareness.

Agency Staff Training
In 2012, we continued our employee training efforts, promoting the value of plain writing. In addition to mandatory plain writing training for all employees, many components developed training to fit their specific needs. Our Office of Learning serves as our main resource for training employees on a variety of topics related to plain writing. We provided training courses through a number of mediums, e.g., video-on-demand, online, and classroom. Employees were able to access web-based training from their workstations or participate in classroom training.

The table below reflects the plain writing-related courses completed in 2012.

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Office of Learning: Agency-wide Training		
Video-on-Demand		
Principles of Plain Language	140	30 minutes
Principles of Plain Language – Part 1	100	20 minutes
Principles of Plain Language – Part 2	50	30 minutes
Principles of Plain Language – Part 3	25	20 minutes
Online Courses		
Focus on Your Business Writing	330	3 hours
Focus on Your Business Writing Intermediate	286	3 hours
Classroom Training		
Business Writing and Grammar	600	2-3 days
Advanced Business Writing	360	2-3 days
Plain Writing	40	2 days
Plain Writing and Commissioner Preferences	160	1 day
Headquarters Component Training		
Office of the General Counsel		
Writing Tips - Classroom and IVT	93	1 day
Office of Retirement and Disability and Policy		
Plain Language for Policy Writers	34	1 day
Office of Disability Adjudication and Review		
Advanced Business Writing	108	2 days
Business Writing	134	1 day
Business Writing and Grammar Skills	19	2 days
Business Writing for Results	1	1 day
Business Writing Solutions	38	1 day

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Email and Business Writing Workshop	5	1 day
Effective Business Writing	2	3 days
Grammar and Writing Skills	1	1 day
Technical Writing	19	2 hours
Tips on Effective Questioning and Persuasive Writing	2,476	1 hour
Writing	117	2 hours
Writing and Correspondence Training	48	1 hour
Writing and Grammar	14	2 days
Training Course	**Number of Employees Trained**	**Training Duration**
Component Level – Regional Training (Classroom training unless noted otherwise.)		
Office of Quality Performance		
Baltimore		
Refresher Training – Written Communication for SSA-1774	30	1 hour
Boston		
Business Writing and Grammar	22	2 days
Refresher Training for SSA-1774	33	2 hours
Refresher Training for SSA-448	33	2 hours
Denver		
Effective Writing and Communication Strategies via the SSA-448	20	1 hour
Communicating with State Agencies via the SSA-1774	20	1 hour
Kansas City		
Intermediate-Focus on Your Business Writing Course – (Online)	2	3 hours
DQB Training on Completion of SSA-448	21	1 hour

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
New York		
Business Writing Basics for Professionals	3	1 day
Business Writing and Grammar	2	2 days
Business and Report Writing	1	3 days
Advanced Business Writing	2	2 days
Training on the SSA-1774	42	1.5 hours
Philadelphia		
Effective Business Writing	2	1 day
San Francisco		
Advanced Business Writing	7	2 days
Business Writing and Grammar	4	2 days
Office of Operations		
Atlanta		
Style and Format Guidelines	110	10 minutes
Style and Format Guidelines	30	20 minutes
Plain Writing Tips – (Teleconference)	150	15 minutes
Chicago		
Business Writing Made Easy and Fun	51	1 day
Business Writing for Professionals	1	1 day
Clear and Concise eMail & Business Writing	29	1 day
Business Writing	41	1 day
Essentials of Business Writing	46	1 day
Dallas		
Techniques to Improve Presentations and Staff Work – (Online)	150	30 minutes
Plain Language Tips	162	1.5 hours
New York		
Advanced Writing Tips	20	2.5 days

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Writing and Communication	34	1 hour
San Francisco		
Business Writing Grammar – (Webinar)	21	1 hour
Business Writing Essentials – (Webinar)	21	1 hour
Writing with Diplomacy – (Webinar)	13	1 hour
Public Affairs Training for Managers	86	1 hour
Seattle		
Correspondence Guidance	12	1 hour

Ongoing Compliance

We recognize that plain writing is an ongoing initiative. Our Senior Agency Official, Plain Writing Compliance Board, and Plain Writing Coordinators collaborate and lead an annual quality assurance review.

We have implemented ongoing monitoring activities to ensure compliance with the Act. Reflected below are examples of our 2012 monitoring efforts.

Notices

- Notice Clearance Process: Our most prominent plain writing compliance effort focused on our notices. We send approximately 240 million notices to the public each year, making notice correspondence the agency's most common form of service delivery. We administered a Notice Clearance Process to approve new or revised notices. Using a team approach, we involved all applicable components in developing notices. We designed the notice clearance process to ensure agency notices meet established standards and address any issues that affect the readability, content, appearance, and tone.

- Notice Standards Guide: Our Notice Improvement Branch developed a *Notice Standards and Clear Writing Guide* for staff who create and revise notices. The guide covers legal sufficiency, readability, plain writing, organization, and notice style.

- Personalized Disability Notice (PDN) Menu: In January 2012, we implemented a PDN Menu tool to improve the quality, clarity, and consistency of notices generated by our Disability Quality Branch reviewers. The tool allows reviewers to create policy-compliant notices quicker and with better explanations. Our field sites also reviewed PDNs daily to monitor notice quality.

Publications

In addition to our notices, the public receives a significant amount of information about our programs and services through our publications. When we update or create a new publication, we routinely apply the principles of plain writing. In 2012, we updated 50 English-language and 37 Spanish-language publications, and created 4 new publications to which we applied plain writing standards.

Other Compliance Efforts

Many of our components also initiated compliance efforts to ensure their employees maintain a commitment to plain writing.

The table below reflects examples of specific compliance activities initiated by our components.

Office	Activities
Office of Budget, Finance and Management	• Organized a team that edits, revises, and clears all communications, including memoranda, letters, background papers, and reports to comply with plain writing guidelines. • Applied plain writing principles to new communications. • Provided guidance to staff on writing tips, including plain writing guidelines. • Encouraged staff to participate in plain writing training opportunities.
Office of the Chief Actuary	• Continued a global review of all communications, including memoranda, letters, actuarial notes, studies, and formal reports. • Monitored effectiveness of documents informally, using feedback from the public and from other stakeholders. • Worked with the Social Security Board of Trustees and staff to simplify the language in the 2012 Annual Trustees Report.
Office of Communications	• Established the standard for all agency web pages and routinely reviewed all websites. • Revised the internal website by applying plain writing standards. (See Appendix – Internal Web Pages) • Reviewed all new and revised publications for compliance with the Act. (See Appendix – Publications) • Revised notice language to ensure the public is able to understand our programs and rules.

Office	Activities
Office of Human Resources, Office of Learning	• Created an internal plain writing website (See Appendix – Internal Web Pages) with multiple external references to the Act including Office of Management and Budget guidance, the Center for Plain Language resources, and targeted plain writing training courses.
Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs	• Developed an electronic repository and handbook for all writers to reference when responding to inquiries. • Provided instructions to staff on identifying and handling new correspondence issues. • Established a protocol for developing and storing new agency-approved language. • Reviewed all correspondence prior to release for accuracy, completeness, and plain-writing compliance. • Routinely reviewed and revised staff procedures related to correspondence.
Office of Quality Performance	• Established a SharePoint site that includes plain writing reminders and materials for staff reference. • Established a review protocol to ensure that all reports are compliant with the Plain Writing Act standards prior to publication. • Issued two writing guides for employee use. (See Appendix – Writing Guides) • Held several informal meetings with management and staff to improve our reports and ensure plain writing compliance.
Office of Retirement and Disability Policy	• Established a plain writing compliance staff position that: o Reviewed and approved all notices and forms before issuance or publication of notices and forms. o Reviewed all new or revised policy and procedural instructions. • Improved official online policy and procedural instructions for agency staff – total usage exceeded 1.5 million hits in 2012.
Office of Systems	• Continued to use the Act as one of the standards for our Project Resource Guide (PRIDE). Our systems developers and project managers used PRIDE in the planning and execution of system development lifecycle activities.

Agency Plain Writing Website

Over the last year, we enhanced our plain writing website. We also added a dedicated plain writing icon on our homepage to improve access to our plain writing information. The plain writing website includes links to:

- Agency Plain Writing Contacts;
- Agency Plain Writing Implementation Plan;
- Annual Compliance Reports;
- Samples of Agency Plain Writing documents;
- Office of Management and Budget Guidance; and
- Center for Plain Writing website.

Measuring Customer Satisfaction

We gauged our progress through the feedback we received from our various audiences. Using this information, we were able to focus on specific areas for improvement.

Reflected below are examples of feedback we received in 2012.

Web Pages
- *American Customer Service Index (ACSI):* Other than our personal contact with the public, our primary external communication method is our Internet site. This is often one of the first points of contact for those seeking information about our programs and services. The primary tool we use to measure the effectiveness of our web pages is ACSI, which measures online satisfaction at hundreds of government websites and helps agencies interpret citizen feedback. Our website received high satisfaction scores from ACSI. The average satisfaction for all Federal websites included in the Index is 75.2 on a 100-point scale. Six of the nine SSA websites ranked higher than the ACSI E-Government Satisfaction Index average. Of 100 Federal website measures, we ranked third in the last quarter of 2012 and sixth among e-Commerce/Transactional Federal websites overall.

- *Foresee Results, Inc.:* On May 9, 2012, Larry Freed, President/CEO of Foresee Results, Inc., a company that measures the customer experience for organizations in the public and private sector, testified before the House Ways and Means sub-committee on Social Security. In Mr. Freed's testimony, he stated that our website scored high with the public, and he referred to the work we are doing to make our website clear and user-friendly.

Notices
Office of Quality Performance (OQP) Notice Quality Review: As part of our efforts to ensure customer satisfaction, OQP reviewed the effectiveness of some of our notices. Their findings helped us improve the quality of our notices. In 2012, OQP conducted a Notice Quality review. This longitudinal review of our Title II and Title XVI notices resulted in several specific notice language changes. We will release a summary report of findings by August 2013.

Congressional and White House Correspondence
Using feedback received from Congressional and the White House staff, we also assessed the effectiveness of our correspondence (See Appendix – Congressional and Public Inquiries).

- Congressional Inquiries Guide: We received positive feedback on our *Congressional Inquiries Guide* used for caseworker training conducted by the Congressional Research Service of the Library of Congress and the Senate Office of Education and Training. Approximately 75-100 participants participate in these sessions hosted every 4-5 weeks. Our Regional Communications Directors also utilize the Guide for outreach and district-level congressional caseworker training.

- White House Inquiries: We received feedback from the White House Executive Secretariat who shared that we had the largest number of positive reports from the general public compared to other agencies. This positive feedback suggests that our written correspondence effectively communicates our programs and policies.

Strategic Planning Documents
Utilizing plain writing principles, we continued to improve our strategic planning documents, which report our goals and performance to Congress. We received the Association of Government Accountant's (AGA) Certification of Excellence in Accountability Reporting (CEAR) award for the 15th consecutive year for our FY 2012 Performance and Accountability Report (PAR). The CEAR recognizes outstanding accountability reporting. It is the highest form of recognition in Federal government management reporting. The AGA felt that our PAR was comprehensive and informative yet easy to read and understand. Our PAR also received a 'Best in Class' award from the AGA for the "Best Presentation of Matters of Importance to All Americans" and recognition for commendable practices in the following areas:

- Four best practices for our Management's Discussion and Analysis section;
- Eight best practices for our Performance Section;
- Four best practices for Accessibility, Readability, and Other Features; and
- Three best practices for Summary of Performance and Financial Information document.

Moving Forward

We will continue to make plain writing a priority. Although we have made significant progress since the implementation of the Act, we remain committed to identifying ways to improve our communication and correspondence. Over the next year, we will focus on the following areas:

- Enhance processes for measuring our plain writing performance;
- Seek new ways to measure customer satisfaction with our written correspondence;
- Develop and implement a plain writing checklist to assist staff;
- Strengthen the role of the Plain Writing Compliance Board;
- Enhance collaboration on plain writing activities among agency components; and
- Consult with other Federal agencies and external organizations to identify additional plain writing quality assurance best practices.

Appendix
[Plain Writing Samples and References](#)

Sample Type	Before	After
Congressional and Public Inquiries		
Congressional Response	[Response Before](#)	[Response After](#)
Certificate of Appreciation	[Certificate](#)	
Forms		
Work Activity Report: Self-Employed	[SSA-820 Before](#)	[SSA-820 After](#)
Work Activity Report: Employee	[SSA-821 After](#)	[SSA-821 After](#)
Notices		
Disability Determination Denial Notice	[Notice Before](#)	[Notice After](#)
DQB Medial Denial Notice	[Notice Before](#)	[Notice After](#)
Ticket-to-Work Termination Notice	[Notice Before](#)	[Notice After](#)
Cessation Notice	[Notice Before](#)	[Notice After](#)
Publications		
Understanding the Benefits	[Publication Before](#)	[Publication After](#)
*my*Social Security	[*mySocialSecurity*](#)	
Policy Documents		
The Centenarian Project	[Policy Before](#)	[Policy After](#)
External Web Pages		
Reporting Fraud – OIG Web Page	[Web Page Before](#)	[Web Page After](#)
iClaim Web Application	[Web Page](#)	
Vacancy Announcement Crosswalk	[Web Page](#)	
AAPI Web Page	[Web Page](#)	
Internal Web Pages (Staff Use Only)		
Internal Homepage	[Web Page Before](#)	[Web Page After](#)
Plain Writing Web Page	[Web Page](#)	
Writing Guides		
Commissioners QUICC Guide	[QUICC Guide](#)	
Report Reminders	[Report Reminders Guide](#)	
Authoring Policy	[Authoring Policy Guide](#)	