

# Social Security Administration



2014 Plain Writing Compliance Report

March 31, 2015

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# Social Security Administration

## 2014 Plain Writing Compliance Report

We are pleased to share our 2014 Plain Writing Compliance Report. The Plain Writing Act of 2010 requires federal agencies to write clearly to ensure the public understands government information and services. We are committed to communicating clearly. We encourage our employees to look for ways to improve their own writing, and we ask all our executives and senior managers to promote plain writing.

### **Our Commitment**

Communication plays a large role in our day-to-day operations and we understand clear and concise communication is important. Therefore, we affirm our commitment and dedication to improving written materials by using plain writing standards, training our employees, and supporting plain writing standards in our overall business processes.

### **Our Accomplishments**

To comply with the Plain Writing Act of 2010, we met several basic requirements.

We followed our [Plain Writing Implementation Plan](#), which helps us monitor how offices are applying plain writing guidelines to their written materials. In addition, we:

- Issued the 2013 Plain Writing Compliance Report;
- Maintained a Plain Language page on our website home page;
- Distributed StyleWriter, an editing tool, throughout the agency to ensure we have a uniform approach to preparing written communications. StyleWriter identifies complex words, jargon, wordy phrases, passive verbs, and long sentences, and provides suggestions on how to edit those items to improve documents;
- Trained employees on plain writing, business writing and grammar, and effective writing techniques;
- Enacted a marketing campaign to promote plain writing principles;
- Applied plain writing guidelines to our documents, letters, notices, and other written materials; and
- Established the criteria for the Plain Writing Awards to recognize best writing practices within our agency.

### ***Oversight***

Steven Patrick, Ph.D., Associate Commissioner for Office of Public Inquiries in the Office of Communications (OCOMM) is our Senior Agency Official for Plain Writing. Dr. Patrick and his staff, along with 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. In addition, directors in our 10 regions serve as plain writing coordinators. [Appendix B provides links to websites listing the compliance board members and regional directors.](#)

## ***Implementation Plan***

Our plain writing compliance board meets bi-monthly to plan, coordinate, and execute the *Plain Writing Implementation Plan* and related activities. Please see the [Plain Writing Implementation Plan](#) in Appendix B for an outline of our goals and activities.

## ***Compliance Report***

We issued the 2014 Plain Writing Compliance Report on March 31, 2015.

## ***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](mailto:PlainWriting@ssa.gov). The public and our employees can use this mailbox to contact us, and we respond to all emails within one business day.

To optimize our website and address the needs of our customers, we use tools such as ForeSee E-Government Satisfaction Index (formerly the American Customer Satisfaction Index) and Google Analytics. These tools allow us to gauge how satisfied customers are with our websites.

ForeSee tracks the online experiences of more than 100 federal government websites by measuring key elements of the sites, which include search, navigation, functionality, online transparency, content, site information, plain language, site performance, look and feel, and more.

The ForeSee E-Government Satisfaction Index grades 105 federal websites on the success and performance of their online initiatives. The Index uses a scale of 0 to 100, and a score of 80 or higher is excellent.

In the third quarter of 2014, six websites from our agency received scores above 80. In priority order, these websites are:

1. [Extra Help With Medicare Prescription Drug Plan Costs](#) [Score: 90]
2. [SSA Retirement Estimator](#) [Score: 89]
3. [my Social Security](#) [Score: 88]
4. [Apply for Social Security Benefits](#) [Score: 88]
5. [Business Services Online](#) [Score: 88]
6. [Apply Online for Disability Benefits](#) [Score: 82]

The average score for federal websites was 75. Our average score was 83, which equals or exceeds the 2014 scores of leading Fortune 500 companies, such as Amazon (83), LL Bean (82), Apple (80), Nordstrom (77), and Barnes & Noble (78).

Our websites are rated highly 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 applications and web pages that will meet the expectations of users.

## ***Website Access***

To encourage our employees to apply plain writing principles; we constantly look for ways to make tools and resources easily accessible to them. Our plain writing website is accessible from both the Intranet and Internet and provides information to the public and our employees about the steps we are taking to improve our written communications.

On our plain writing website, we provide links to our plain writing compliance reports and other plain writing resources. The website also includes contact information for members of the Compliance Board and other individuals who can provide guidance on plain writing. As mentioned earlier, we solicit public and employee feedback via a dedicated mailbox -- [PlainWriting@ssa.gov](mailto:PlainWriting@ssa.gov).

The Commissioner's Writing Center website is an important resource for our employees. This site, known as the Quality Initiative for Commissioner's Correspondence (QUICC), identifies plain writing guidelines and links to the Acting Commissioner's writing preferences. We include links to training courses on plain writing and other tools that employees can use to improve their writing. Information on other writing and grammar courses is also available.

We are dedicated to making our websites and online services accessible to our employees and those we serve. We ensure that our online content meets Section 508 guidelines, which require all federal agencies to provide content that is both accessible to those with disabilities and compatible with assistive technologies.

## ***Training Tools***

In 2014, we increased distribution of StyleWriter throughout our agency and provided additional training on its use. We also developed a desk aid, which identifies plain writing guidelines and provides tips on grammar and sentence structure.

## ***Supporting Activities***

We launched a marketing campaign to promote plain writing principles. We set up tables in our Headquarters cafeterias to distribute information on plain writing and answer questions, and we distributed approximately 500 desk aids during the initial launch of our marketing campaign. We also placed plain writing posters and banners throughout our Headquarters campus.

As part of our marketing campaign, Acting Commissioner Carolyn W. Colvin publicly renewed the agency's commitment to plain writing. She directed employees to the Commissioner's Writing Center website and the many other resources available to improve our communication products. The Writing Center website is an invaluable source of writing tools, tips, and learning opportunities. Also available on this site is the QUICC Handbook, which outlines the Acting Commissioner's preferences for written communication. We discussed plain writing updates, activities, and training opportunities for employees in the regions with our regional communication directors (RCD). The RCDs also communicate information about the Plain Writing Compliance Report and encourage regional involvement in plain writing activities.

We continue to televise plain writing guidelines on HQTV, our internal Headquarters television network, and electronically broadcast announcements on *Good Morning Social Security*, a weekly video news program for agency employees.

### ***Using Plain Language in Our Documents***

We encourage our employees to use the QUICC writing center and various checklists, desk aids, and other resources when writing notices, documents, letters, and other correspondence.

Table 1 provides examples of notices used in external communications and our efforts to improve these notices. Please [see Appendix A](#) for “before and after” samples.

<b>Table 1 - Examples of Notices Using Plain Writing Principles</b>		
<b>Type and Method of Communication</b>	<b>Audience</b>	<b>Improvements</b>
<b>Office of Budget, Finance, Quality, and Management</b>		
Form SSA-L9790-SM (form to determine the non-work months of Social Security retirement beneficiaries) <a href="#">See Form SSA-L9790-SM in Appendix A.</a>	Beneficiaries	We revised the wording and layout of the cover letter and questions on the form.
<b>Result:</b> This modification made the form easier to read and complete.		
<b>Office of Operations</b>		
Press release about changes in Social Security office hours over the Thanksgiving holiday	External customers (e.g., general public, congressional offices)	We notified the public of the change in service hours for the day after Thanksgiving.
Notification to an organizational representative payee <a href="#">See payment services termination in Appendix A.</a>	Organizational representative payee	Representative payees received termination notices.
Poster <a href="#">See Chicago region: Visitor Sign in Appendix A.</a>	General public	The public was notified of limited service hours due to construction.
<b>Result:</b> We provided clear and concise communication with the public and community partners.		
Standard notice sent to beneficiaries when we change their payment amounts	Retirement beneficiaries and their representative payees	The reading grade level of the notice was lowered.
<b>Result:</b> Our revised document made it easier for recipients to understand changes in benefit amounts.		

Type and Method of Communication	Audience	Improvements
Brochure	General public	We provided clear information and a map to our new Social Security office.
Letter to stakeholders regarding office move <a href="#">See Philadelphia region: Georgetown letter in Appendix A.</a>	Stakeholders	We notified our stakeholders of a change in the location of a Social Security office.
<b>Result:</b> We provided clear, concise information to the community 30 days in advance of the office move.		
<b>Office of Retirement and Disability Policy</b>		
Ticket To Work Progress Review Decision Notice <a href="#">See Ticket to Work in Appendix A.</a>	Disability beneficiaries	We reorganized the information for better flow, bolded the captions, and made the text easier to read.
20-Day closeout letter to attorneys <a href="#">See 20-day closeout letter in Appendix A.</a>	Attorneys	We reworded the letter and added captions to improve readability and clarity.
Notice to a member of the public who requested verification that he or she never received benefits from Social Security <a href="#">See enhanced benefit verification letter in Appendix A.</a>	General public	We used plain language principles and agency standards to create this new notice.
Change of Address Confirmation Notice <a href="#">See change of address notice in Appendix A.</a>	Beneficiaries	We created this notice to reduce fraud whenever an address changed in <i>my Social Security</i> . We used plain language principles and agency standards to create this notice.
Failure to Withhold Past Due Benefits for Direct Payment <a href="#">See failure to withhold notice in Appendix A.</a>	Social Security beneficiaries and attorneys	We combined two separate notices (beneficiary and attorney) into one to send to the beneficiary with a copy to the attorney, incorporated plain language, and revised language to accommodate situations at any appeal level.
Notice paragraph explaining railroad work	Social Security beneficiaries	We reorganized text, reworded text using plain language, removed long sentences, and added bullets for improved readability.

Type and Method of Communication	Audience	Improvements
Notice paragraph explaining possible eligibility for other Social Security benefits	Social Security claimants	We removed passive verbs and shortened sentences.
Notice paragraph explaining eligibility for Social Security benefits	Social Security claimants	We removed passive verbs and shortened sentences.
Alien tax paragraphs for notices	General public	We updated the language in the generated alien tax paragraphs for the Title II redesign project by using situation-specific information that was both accurate and clear. The Title II system maintains the basic information we collect to determine individuals' entitlement to benefits under Social Security and Medicare programs.
<b>Result:</b> We improved readability, clarity, and tone using StyleWriter.		
<b>Office of the General Counsel</b>		
Paragraph used in a Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program notice	SSI recipients	We removed a concept that was unnecessary and decreased the document's word count.
<b>Result:</b> We suggested the use of an attachment that would reduce wordiness.		
<b>Office of Disability Adjudication and Review</b>		
Notices (including denial and dismissal notices)	General public, claimants, and employees	The Office of Appellate Operations (OAO) in the Office of Disability Adjudication and Review (ODAR) revised notices to make them more readable and understandable.
Templates used in our Document Generation System (DGS) to comply with regulation changes during the year.	Claimants, representatives	The Office of the Chief Administrative Law Judge (OCALJ) made revisions to address regulation changes while following plain writing principles.
<b>Result:</b> OAO and OCALJ improved clarity, conciseness, and organization in all revised notices. StyleWriter confirmed these improvements.		



Table 2 provides examples of improvements to publications and forms used by the public and other external stakeholders.

Table 2 - Examples of Publications and Forms Using Plain Writing Principles		
Type and Method of Communication	Audience	Improvements
<b>Office of the Inspector General</b>		
Brochure (Explanation of how the Office of the Inspector General enforces Section 1140 of the Social Security Act)	General public	We created this brochure to make the public aware of potential fraud. We replaced complex legalese with plain language.
<b>Result:</b> By making these brochures easier to understand, we are increasing public awareness of potential fraud issues.		
<b>Office of Communications</b>		
Factsheet (Instructions for creating a <b>my Social Security</b> account)	General public, third parties	Provides easy to understand information and instructions to the public on setting up an account
<b>Result:</b> We receive fewer questions on how to create <b>my Social Security</b> accounts.		
<b>Office of Retirement and Disability Policy</b>		
Foreign Enforcement Questionnaires (Forms SSA-7161 and SSA-7162)	General public (beneficiaries outside the United States)	We updated the foreign language versions to provide the same degree of clarity as the updated English version. We took into account nuances of English and the specific foreign language.
<b>Result:</b> We worked with OCOMM to provide clear language and specific instructions. We revised instructions to clarify what the questionnaire was asking.		

Table 3 provides examples of improvements made to policy documents based on plain writing principles.

Table 3 - Examples of Policy Documents Using Plain Writing Principles		
Type and Method of Communication	Audience	Improvements
<b>Office of Human Resources</b>		
An employee memorandum (The Policy on the Prevention and Elimination of Harassment in the Workplace)	Employees	We revised the existing policy to improve clarity and ensure legal accuracy.
<b>Result:</b> The revised policy provides a clearer description of harassment and responsibilities of managers, as well as employees.		
<b>Office of Disability Adjudication and Review</b>		
The Social Security Administration’s Hearings, Appeals and Litigation Law (HALLEX) Manual	Employees and general public	OAO and the OCALJ rewrote and reorganized instructions in HALLEX to improve readability and make it easier to understand.
<b>Result:</b> Per StyleWriter, we improved readability, clarity, tone, and format of HALLEX.		
<b>Office of the Chief Actuary</b>		
Report (The Annual Federal Old-Age and Survivors Insurance and Federal Disability Insurance Trust Funds Trustees Report)	Congress, the Administration, the policy community, researchers, academics, press, and the public	We made the report clearer and easier to understand.
Report (The Annual Report of the SSI Program)	The Administration, Congress, the policy community, researchers, academics	We made the report clearer and easier to understand.
<b>Result:</b> Per StyleWriter, we improved the clarity and conciseness of the reports.		
<b>Office of Retirement and Disability Policy</b>		
Policy Manual (section on identity of claimants)	General public and employees	We implemented a new tool to streamline identification information maintained by the agency
<b>Result:</b> Our technicians now have clear rules on when to update records while taking a claim.		

Type and Method of Communication	Audience	Improvements
Policy Manual (Section on determining eligible months to receive benefits )	General public and employees	We revised and simplified the complex area of month of election for our employees, as well as clarified instructions for our payment centers.
<b>Result:</b> Updating the language and streamlining procedures for our technicians helps them understand how electing benefits in a particular month affects overall benefits received.		
Policy Manual (Section on international agreement with Switzerland)	General public and employees	We made the document clearer and easier to understand.
Policy Manual (Section on completing form for claim of person outside of the United States) Policy Manual (Section on payments to beneficiaries in Cambodia) Policy Manual (Section on signature proxy on forms from foreign beneficiaries)	All technical audiences and the general public	We revised the sections of the manual to reflect changes in policy and to provide accurate instructions.
Office of International Programs website (Alien tax and payments abroad screening tools)	General public	We revised the website to comply with our internal web committee requirements.
<b>Result:</b> We tailored all documents for their intended audiences and provided accurate and simple instructions in the documents.		
Online factsheet ("Marriage Trends and Women's Benefits: Differences by Race-Ethnicity and Nativity)	Employees and the general public	We transformed lengthy research papers into accessible one-page documents.
<b>Result:</b> By streamlining the research papers and summarizing key findings, both internal and external customers can more easily access our research.		
<b>Office of Budget, Finance, Quality, and Management</b>		
Internal Administrative Instructions Manual System	Employees	We reviewed office guides and determined if any information was out-of-date or incorrect. Our components are currently revising existing instructions as needed.

Type and Method of Communication	Audience	Improvements
<p><b>Result:</b> We enhanced the quality of instructions available for employees' reference and ensured that instructions are current and easy to understand. We consolidated instructions and reduced duplication to provide a single, consistent source of information on policies and procedures. We created a schedule to track future quarterly updates on a quarterly basis.</p>		

Table 4 provides examples of responses to congressional and public inquiries that we revised to reflect plain writing principles.

Table 4 - Examples of Congressional and Public Inquiries Using Plain Writing Principles		
Type and Method of Communication	Audience	Improvements
<b>Office of Operations</b>		
Responses to congressional inquiries (Specific response to a congressional inquiry regarding the special monthly rule) <a href="#">See Special Monthly Rule notice in Appendix A.</a>	Congressional delegations in New York and New Jersey Congressional staffers	We reviewed nearly 1,000 congressional replies for passive voice and other substandard writing techniques and adjusted them, as necessary.
<p><b>Result:</b> We increased awareness of Social Security's programs and policies.</p>		
<b>Office of Retirement and Disability Policy</b>		
Responses to public inquires (Including technical questions on alien tax issues and Alien Nonpayment Provision and International Agreements)	General public	We provided clear and accurate explanations tailored to the requestor's situation.
<p><b>Result:</b> In responses to inquiries, we clearly explained technical policy issues by using plain language and addressing the specific needs of each audience.</p>		
<b>Office of Communications</b>		
Written response to explain the Social Security retirement application process <a href="#">See Retirement Application Process letter in Appendix A.</a>	General public	We used plain language to clarify the application process.
Written response to explain the Medicare enrollment period <a href="#">See Medicare Enrollment Period letter in Appendix A.</a>	General public	We used plain language to clarify the enrollment period.
<p><b>Result:</b> We simplified language to help the audience understand complicated program issues.</p>		

Type and Method of Communication	Audience	Improvements
<b>Office of Legislative and Congressional Affairs</b>		
Written responses to White House and congressional inquiries	White House and members of Congress	We improved the overall readability of responses.
<p><b>Result:</b> We received positive feedback from the White House Executive Secretariat, the Office of Presidential Correspondence, members of Congress, and key Committee staff validating the effectiveness of plain language in our communications. The White House Executive Secretariat prepares a monthly casework report that it sends to all agencies. According to the White House Executive Secretariat, we are among the top performing agencies in responsiveness to inquiries. The monthly reports show how well we communicate our programs and policies when responding to letters sent to the White House. StyleWriter and our quality review process showed improved clarity and readability.</p>		
<b>Office of the Inspector General</b>		
Response to a congressional inquiry (It can be found on our website and titled, “The Social Security Administration’s Ability to Prevent and Detect Disability Fraud”)	Congress and the general public	We made the report easier to read.
Semiannual Report	Congress, other agencies, and the general public	We made the report easier to read.
<p><b>Result:</b> We made the reports easier to read.</p>		
<b>Office of the General Counsel</b>		
Response to civil rights complaints	General public	We provided clear and concise responses to civil rights complaints.
Requests for information and disclosure	General public	We provided clear and concise responses to requests.
Congressional inquiries	Congressional staffers	We helped components draft responses to congressional and other inquiries. We provided clear and concise information in the responses.
<p><b>Result:</b> We improved responses by fully developing the facts, removing passive voice, removing legalese, and enhancing clarity.</p>		

Type and Method of Communication	Audience	Improvements
<b>Office of Human Resources</b>		
Congressional inquiries (delivered by mail or email to the Office of Civil Rights and Equal Opportunity)	Congressional delegations from the regions and the general public	We applied plain writing principles to the eight congressional replies we prepared.
<b>Result:</b> 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.		
<b>Office of Disability Adjudication and Review</b>		
Written response (addressed to Senator Heinrich)	Senator Heinrich	We addressed implementing a systems change that will begin identifying the presiding administrative law judge on the Notice of Hearing.
<b>Result:</b> We responded to a congressional inquiry about not providing the name of the presiding administrative law judge on pre-hearing notices.		

## Training

In 2014, 14,261 employees in our Headquarter 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, business writing, critical thinking, and legal writing. Courses focused on grammar and style. Some of our most popular courses were on plain language and business writing. The course length varied from a half-hour to two days.

Working with our Office of Learning, we provided a blended learning approach and offered both classroom training and online classes. We held courses not only in classroom settings, but also via Video on Demand (VOD) and through courses in our Learning Management System.

We found that VOD training and online classes offered greater flexibility and allowed employees to review material at a pace that worked best for them.

Recognizing the importance of clear written communication, we remain committed to training employees on plain writing now and in the future.

**Table 5 - Training on Plain Writing Principles**

<b>Training Course</b>	<b>Number of Employees Trained</b>	<b>Training Duration</b>
<b>Office of Human Resources/Office of Learning: <u>Agency-wide Training</u></b>		
<b>Video on Demand</b>		
Plain Language 2014	140	20 minutes
Plain Language Principles (Operations Only)	684	30 minutes
Plain Language Principles Part 1	633	20 minutes
Plain Language Principles Part 2	481	30 minutes
Plain Language Principles Part 3	104	20 minutes
<b>Online Courses – Writing and General Knowledge</b>		
Business Grammar: Common Usage Errors	35	1 hour
Business Grammar: Parts of Speech	89	1 hour
Business Grammar: Punctuation	22	1 hour
Business Grammar: Sentence Construction	24	1 hour
Business Grammar: The Mechanics of Writing	81	1 hour
Business Grammar: Working with Words	48	1 hour
Business Writing: Editing and Proofreading	52	1 hour
Business Writing: How to Write Clearly and Concisely	101	1 hour
Business Writing: Know Your Readers and Your Purpose	43	1 hour
The Plain Writing Act	9	1 hour
Writing for Business	13	6 minutes practice
Writing for Technical Professionals: Effective Writing Techniques	4	2 hours
Writing for Technical Professionals: Preparation and Plan	1	1 hour
Writing Under Pressure: Preparing for Success	9	1 hour
Writing Under Pressure: The Writing Process	14	1 hour
<b>Classroom Training</b>		
Plain Writing	17	2 days
Plain Writing (primarily for OCOMM)	24	2 days
Business Writing and Grammar	396	2 days
Advanced Business Writing	289	2 days

<b>Training Course</b>	<b>Number of Employees Trained</b>	<b>Training Duration</b>
Writing Boot Camp	20	2 days
Email Essentials	44	1 day
Simply Grammar	46	2 days
7 Steps to Effective Writing	22	2 days
Focus on Your Business Writing Primarily online with instructor feedback	420	3 hour online lesson
Intermediate Focus on Your Business Writing Primarily online with instructor feedback	420	3 hour online lesson
<b><u>Headquarters Component Training</u></b> <b>(Any classroom training not sponsored by the Office of Learning)</b>		
<b>Office of Budget, Finance, Quality, and Management</b>		
Business Writing and Grammar	3	2 days
Critical Thinking for Business Communication and Technical Writing (one session in June and another session in August)	49	3 days per session
<b>Office of Communications</b>		
StyleWriter	150	1 hour
Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN) Sponsored Writing Class	7	2 classes, 1 day each
508 Compliance (half day)	4	4 hours
508 Compliance (full day)	2	8 hours
Infographics Training	20	2 days
<b>Office of the General Counsel</b>		
Advanced Legal Writing and Editing	3	8 hours
Region II (New York) – Drafting Program Law Opinions for New Attorneys	5	1 hour
Region IX (San Francisco) - Commissioner’s Writing Tips & Plain Language (via videoconference and Live Meeting)	25	1 hour
<b>Office of Operations</b>		
<a href="#">See Regional Training Information</a>		
<b>Office of Retirement and Disability Policy</b>		
Critical Thinking For Business Communication and Technical Writing	55	1 week



Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
<b>Office of Disability Adjudication and Review</b>		
Writing	73	8 hours
Management Analyst Advanced Business Writing	1	8 hours
ODAR Continuing Education Program - Tips On Effective Questioning and Persuasive Writing	1	8 hours
Managing the Decision Writing Workload	10	8 hours
Pre-training Certification for Decision Writing Class	5	24 hour
Writing Better Complaints, Contracts	3	8 hours
Writing Reports and Other Workplace Documents	15	8 hours
Writing Legally Sufficient Decisions at Step 3 of the Sequential Evaluation Process	17	8 hours
Writing for Lawyers	1	8 hours
Report Writing	1	8 hours
Writing for Clarity	18	4 hours
Writing and Grammar	1	8 hours
Technical Writing	27	8 hours
Effective Decision Writing	20	8 hours
E-mail and Business Writing Workshop	16	8 hours
Decision Writing Templates	1	4 hours
Decision Writing Case Tracking	2	4 hours
Business Writing for Results	41	8 hours
Business Writing and Grammar Skills	2	16 hours
Business Writing	3	8 hours
Advanced Business Writing	1	16 hours
Business Grammar Crash Course	6	8 hours
Business Writing and Grammar Skills	2	16 hours
Get It Write: Grammar and Editing	1	8 hours
Grammar	49	8 hours
<b>Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs</b>		
Plain Writing Clinic	4	16 hours
508 Compliance (half day)	12	4 hours
508 Compliance (full day)	1	8 hours

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Style Writer	6	1 hour
Business Writing for the Professional Level 1	2	8 hours
<b>Regional Training</b> (Any classroom training not sponsored by the Office of Learning)		
<i><b>Boston</b></i>		
Personalized Disability Notices Training	32	2 Hours
Plain Language Training	14	1 Hour
<i><b>Chicago</b></i>		
Business Writing and Grammar	109	2 days
Advance Business Writing	33	2 days
Business Writing Essentials	10	1 hour
High Impact Communications	1	1 hour
Communicating with Tact, Diplomacy, and Professionalism	1	2 days
<i><b>Dallas</b></i>		
The Writer's Block – Grammar and Punctuation module (released January 2014)	4,400	30 minutes
The Writer's Block – Editing module (released June 2014)	4,400	30 minutes
Communication and Writing Tips	100	2 hours
Staff Work and Writing	10	2 hours
<i><b>Denver</b></i>		
Effective Writing	26 – Denver Achievement Program Participants	1 hour
Writing Regional Communications Responses	8 – Denver Management Development Program Orientation	15 minutes
Advanced Writing 2 Boot Camp	19 – Regional Office Staff and Area Managers	2 days
Seven Steps to Fast Writing	19 – Regional Office Staff and Area Managers	2 days

<b>Training Course</b>	<b>Number of Employees Trained</b>	<b>Training Duration</b>
<i><b>Philadelphia</b></i>		
Effective Writing for Leaders	47	1.25 hours
Writing for English as a Second Language (ESL)	1	24 hours
Grammar for ESL	1	24 hours
Avoiding the Top Ten Most Common Writing Blunders	1	1 hour
<i><b>San Francisco</b></i>		
(How to Write) Effective Performance Reviews	4	6 hours
Correspondence Guide Workshop	20	1.5 hours
Professional and Fast Emails Business Writing with Outlook	16	6 hours
Public Affairs Training for New Supervisors/Managers (Effective Presentations, Written and Oral Communications)	48	1 hour
52 Ways to Powerful E-mail	1	1 hour
Avoiding the Top Ten Most Common Writing Blunders	6	1 hour
Business Grammar Tips, Tricks, and Techniques	1	1 hour
Business Proofing and Editing Made Easy	1	1 hour
Business Writing and Grammar Techniques	1	6 hours
Communicating Through E-mail: Top Ten Dos and Don'ts	1	1 hour
Focus on Your Business Writing (Region IX-Sponsored)	50	3 hours
Intermediate Focus on Your Business Writing (Region IX-Sponsored)	60	3 hours
Critical Congressional Unit: Virtual Detailees Training	6	2 hours
<i><b>Seattle</b></i>		
Advanced Business Writing Course	10	16 hours

## Component Activities and Accomplishments

In 2014, we received the ClearMark Award of Distinction from the Center for Plain Language recognizing our website redesign. OCOMM led the effort to redesign the agency’s website. The Compliance Board and component representatives attended training on 508 compliance and viewed a webinar by the Center for Plain Language that outlined how to prepare ClearMark Award nominations for 2015. Several components submitted entries for the 2015 ClearMark Awards.

For the 16th consecutive year, the Office of Budget, Finance, Quality, and Management received the Association of Government Accountant’s (AGA) Certificate of Excellence in Accounting Reporting (CEAR) award for the agency’s fiscal year (FY) 2013 Agency Financial Report (AFR). The CEAR recognizes outstanding accountability reporting and is the highest form of recognition for federal agencies.

Table 6 identifies additional component activities and accomplishments.

<b>Table 6 - Component Activities and Accomplishments for Plain Writing</b>	
<b>Office</b>	<b>Activities</b>
<b>Office of the Actuary</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continued its global review of communications, including memos, letters, actuarial notes and studies, and formal reports</li> <li>Monitored effectiveness on an informal basis, using feedback from the public and from other stakeholders</li> <li>Continued our work with internal and external parties to simplify the language in the Old-Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance Trustees Report and the SSI Annual Report</li> </ul>
<b>Office of Disability Adjudication and Review</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reviewed its online Document Generation System, which is the online storage system for notices</li> <li>Reviewed and edited notices for compliance with the Plain Writing Act, including denial and dismissal notices</li> <li>Formed a DGS Review Group to review court notices</li> <li>Dedicated the October 2014 employee development newsletter to Hearings, Appeals, and Litigation Law Manual revisions that included sections on plain writing practices and instructions</li> <li>Addressed expanded service delivery options for persons with Limited English Proficiency and clarified provisions for interpreter services in a congressional response</li> <li>Provided 37 writing classes for 331 participants, using both external vendors and internal educators</li> <li>Published twice-yearly newsletter editions guiding employees to plain writing resources and encouraging plain writing principles</li> </ul>

Office	Activities
<b>Office of Systems</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continued to include the Plain Writing Act of 2010 as one of our standards and guidelines in our Project Resource Guide, which is a web-based guide for project managers and project teams.</li> <li>• Emphasized the importance of plain writing in the Guide</li> </ul>
<b>Office of Budget, Finance, Quality, and Management</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continued to improve our strategic planning documents, which report our goals and performance to Congress, using plain writing principles</li> <li>• Received the AGA CEAR award for the sixteenth consecutive year for the FY 2013 AFR (AGA noted that the AFR was candid, comprehensive, succinct, and informative.)</li> <li>• Received recognition for commendable practices in the following areas of our AFR: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Two best practices for the Agency Head Letter;</li> <li>○ Two best practices for the Management’s Discussion and Analysis section;</li> <li>○ Eight best practices for the Performance Section;</li> <li>○ Two best practices for the Other Accompanying Information; and</li> <li>○ Four best practices for Accessibility, Readability, and Other Features.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Received a Best in Class Award for Best Improper Payments Elimination and Recovery Act reporting</li> <li>• Provided writing tips, guidance, procedures, examples, and reference resources throughout the year to help employees prepare documents using plain writing principles We share this information via: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Email</li> <li>○ SharePoint sites</li> <li>○ Websites</li> <li>○ Informal meetings</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Established a business process and proofreader checklist for use when writing and reviewing our quality review reports</li> <li>• Continued to review documents to ensure plain writing compliance, technical accuracy, and appropriate tone</li> <li>• Reviewed critical documents for plain language</li> <li>• Obtained 61 StyleWriter software licenses for employees</li> <li>• Encouraged staff to attend training courses to improve writing skills</li> <li>• Shared announcements from the Office of Learning with employees about plain writing courses</li> <li>• Addressed plain writing expectations during employee performance discussions, as needed</li> </ul>

Office	Activities
<b>Office of Operations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducted a 10-15 minute presentation (“Plain Writing Tips”) on eight Mentors for Managers Program conference calls in 2014</li> <li>• Reviewed numerous notice clearance packages for clear and concise communication</li> <li>• Surveyed employees to identify sections in Program Operations Manual System that need plain language improvement</li> <li>• Trained area staff to utilize the following framework: (a) Four Cs: Clear, Concise, Correct and Complete Business Writing;</li> <li>• (b) Common Errors and Tips for Avoiding Them; and (c) A Framework For Your Writing Process: Find out, Organize, Create, U-turn, and Strengthen</li> <li>• Participated in a 14-day trial of StyleWriter</li> <li>• Emphasized plain writing principles during field office staff meetings</li> <li>• Updated the Dallas Regional Office Communications Guide</li> <li>• Used four train modules for ongoing developmental training (The Writer’s Block website)</li> <li>• Provided plain writing feedback in the Plain Language Program Operations Manual System survey (October 31 – November 14)</li> <li>• Implemented additional notice improvements during the February, May, and August releases in FY15 during bi-weekly meetings with representatives from other offices</li> <li>• Attended StyleWriter demonstrations in April and June 2014</li> <li>• Provided internal refresher training on writing that emphasized plain language techniques for all staff in October and November 2014</li> <li>• Offered six two-hour sessions to allow for small group participation and hands-on practice of plain language techniques</li> <li>• Posted a link to the QUICC on our CareerQuest Intranet website (The CareerQuest site is a one-stop source for identifying career development resources and tools that assists employees in developing essential competencies.)</li> <li>• Provided public affairs training for managers (Effective Presentations, Written and Oral Communications)</li> <li>• Established a writing skills portal with links to online courses and resources in the Seattle region</li> <li>• Received StyleWriter software licenses</li> <li>• Created a Notice Enhancement Workgroup in the Office of Disability Operations to gather suggestions from technicians on how to make notices clearer and more understandable. We encouraged employees to provide examples of language, including propagated agency language known by a Universal Text Identifier that would make notices easier to read and understand.</li> <li>• Worked with the Office of Systems to create new language in the existing Identifier</li> <li>• Developed a process in the Office of International Operations to electronically control benefit authorizer and claims authorizer overpayment notices. The process includes reviewing notices for content and proper language usage.</li> <li>• Provided assistance and training, as needed</li> </ul>

Office	Activities
<b>Office of the Chief Strategic Officer</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In coordination with the Office of the Executive Operations, developed a Style Guide for Reports (June 2014), which is an extension of the QUICC Handbook, to increase report readability and plain writing.</li> <li>• Encouraged employees to familiarize themselves with the QUICC Handbook</li> <li>• Installed StyleWriter to ensure documents meet appropriate reading level and style requirements</li> <li>• Provided numerous StyleWriter licenses to writers on our staff</li> </ul>
<b>Office of the General Counsel</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reviewed outgoing memoranda, appellate briefs, and general law writings for compliance with plain writing principles</li> <li>• Reviewed briefs before filing in district court. (Appellate briefs undergo supervisory review, and formal opinions undergo several layers of supervisory review. We conduct all reviews with an eye towards clarity.)</li> <li>• Edited and shared comments and suggestions made by supervisors, mentors, jurisdictional coordinators, appellate reviewers, and peer reviewers with writers to improve the readability of briefs, memoranda, and letters and to comply with clear writing principals, including removing passive voice, legalese, medical jargon, and nominalizations.</li> <li>• Provided new hires with one-on-one writing guidance through our mentor program and supervisor oversight</li> <li>• Reminded staff of specific writing tips based on the Acting Commissioner’s writing preferences</li> <li>• Provided extensive, individualized training to improve clarity, remove unnecessary jargon, and improve the readability and accuracy of our work products</li> <li>• Provided a regional SharePoint site with model documents that exhibits economy of words, minimizes agency jargon, and maintains legal clarity</li> </ul>
<b>Office of Human Resources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Used a plain writing expert to prepare, review, and provide feedback on formal materials (e.g., executive correspondence, policies, standard operating procedures, training)</li> </ul>
<b>Office of the Inspector General</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Received and distributed licenses for StyleWriter software</li> </ul>

Office	Activities
<b>Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reviewed all correspondence for accuracy, responsiveness, and plain writing compliance prior to release</li> <li>• Developed an electronic repository and handbook for all writers to reference when responding to inquiries</li> <li>• Provided instructions to staff on identifying and handling new correspondence issues</li> <li>• Established a protocol for developing and storing new agency-approved language that complies with the Plain Writing Act</li> <li>• Reviewed and revised staff correspondence procedures on an ongoing basis</li> <li>• Included plain writing feedback to staff as part of our quality control efforts</li> <li>• Used StyleWriter to prepare responses to White House and congressional inquiries</li> </ul>
<b>Office of Retirement and Disability Policy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acquired StyleWriter licenses for staff members</li> <li>• Participated in the Plain Language Workgroup to improve Program Operations Manual System</li> <li>• Updated the Office of Foreign Program Policy’s internal publication entitled, “Communication &amp; Filing Guide,” which helps ensure our written communications are clear and in compliance with the standards of plain language</li> <li>• Produced numerous administrative messages and emergency messages</li> <li>• Revised the Program Operations Manual System, as needed</li> <li>• Provided comments on the Ticket to Work email and social media campaign messages</li> <li>• Provided comments on OCOMM’s video scripts about family benefits, paying taxes on Social Security benefits, and how work affects benefits</li> <li>• Worked with OCOMM on revisions to the Retirement Toolkit to improve information on cost-of-living adjustments</li> </ul>



Office	Activities
<b>Office of Communications</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promoted plain writing through our internal communication program called <i>Good Morning Social Security</i></li> <li>• Distributed information on plain writing in Headquarters’ cafeterias</li> <li>• Posted signs throughout Headquarters to publicizing our plain writing website and the QUICC Handbook</li> <li>• Distributed plain writing desk aids</li> <li>• Promoted plain writing via our intra-office Headquarters televisions</li> <li>• Updated and promoted our plain writing videos and training</li> <li>• Supported a Headquarters’ broadcast by the Acting Commissioner regarding the importance of plain writing</li> <li>• Worked on an internal awards pilot to recognize plain writing efforts</li> <li>• Provided training on StyleWriter software</li> <li>• Promoted submissions for ClearMark awards</li> <li>• Tested Acrolinx</li> <li>• Sponsored plain writing training classes with an instructor from the Plain Language Action and Information Network</li> <li>• Sponsored a two-day plain writing clinic with an independent contractor for employees agency-wide</li> <li>• Sponsored a two-day infographics class with an independent contractor to support plain writing on the internet</li> </ul>

## **Moving Forward**

In 2015, we will continue to train staff on the value and correct application of plain writing principles. We will expand the use of editing tools, such as StyleWriter and Acrolinx software, to support the improvement of notices, policies, letters, and other documents. Through the expanded use of software tools, we will develop a common approach to 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. We will also institutionalize a process to recognize our best writing. We will establish internal awards to recognize the best-written communication 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-Government Satisfaction Index and other metrics to gauge customer satisfaction with our letters, notices, documents, and websites.

## **Summary**

Our 2014 Plain Writing Compliance Report documents our compliance and accomplishments under the Plain Writing Act. We achieved all of the requirements of the Plain Writing Act. For two consecutive years, we have received an “A” in the compliance category of the Center for Plain Language’s Report Card for Federal Agencies.

Our plain writing efforts and supporting activities occurred at all levels of the agency. Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 highlight the improvements in writing undertaken by components across our agency. Training on plain writing principles is highly valued and has received considerable support in the agency.

For 2014, we received a citizen satisfaction score of 90 out of 100 in three website areas, according to ForeSee E-Government Satisfaction Index. We will continue to improve our communication products and incorporate the principles of plain writing in every aspect of our daily business.

Acting Commissioner, Carolyn W. Colvin, says, “When we communicate in a way that people understand, we can better serve the public.” We are committed to developing and enhancing our written communications, training our employees to use clear and concise language, and including plain writing standards in our business processes.

## Appendix A: Plain Writing Samples

### “Before and After”

Sample Type	Before	After
<b>Office of Communications</b>		
Disability Campaign	Disability Campaign - before	Disability Campaign - after
<b>Office of Retirement and Disability Policy</b>		
Failure to Withhold	Failure to Withhold - before	Failure to Withhold - after

### “New Document”

Sample Type	New Document
<b>Office of the Chief Strategic Officer</b>	
Report Style Guide	OCSO-Reports Style Guide
<b>Office of Communications</b>	
Medicare Enrollment Period Letter	Medicare Enrollment Period Letter
Retirement Application Process Letter	Retirement Application Process
Improved Website Letter	Improved Website Letter
<i>my</i> Social Security	my Social Security
Personal Disability Story	Personal Disability Story

Sample Type	New Document
<b>Office of Operations</b>	
Chicago Region: Visitor Sign	Chicago Region: Visitor Sign
Philadelphia Region: Georgetown Letter	Philadelphia Region: Georgetown Letter
Special Monthly Rule Notice	Special Monthly Rule Notice
Payment Services Termination Notice	Payment Services Termination Notice
San Francisco Region: Congressional Response	San Francisco Region: Congressional Response
<b>Office of Retirement and Disability Policy</b>	
Enhanced Benefit Verification Letter	Enhanced Benefit Verification Letter
Change of Address	Change of Address
Ticket To Work	Ticket To Work
20-Day Close-Out Letter	20-Day Close-Out Letter
<b>Office of Budget Finance Quality Management</b>	
Form SSA-L9790 Non-Work Month Form	Form SSA-L9790 Non-Work Month Form

## Appendix B: Plain Writing Links

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

Name	Link
Social Security Administration	<a href="http://www.ssa.gov">www.ssa.gov</a>
Plain Writing	<a href="http://ssa.gov/agency/plain-language">ssa.gov/agency/plain-language</a>
Plain Writing Compliance Board	<a href="http://ssa.gov/agency/plain-language/complianceboard.html">ssa.gov/agency/plain-language/complianceboard.html</a>
Plain Writing Contacts	<a href="http://ssa.gov/agency/plain-language/contacts.html">ssa.gov/agency/plain-language/contacts.html</a>
Plain Writing Feedback	<a href="http://ssa.gov/agency/plain-language">ssa.gov/agency/plain-language</a>
Plain Writing Initial Implementation Report	<a href="http://ssa.gov/agency/plain-language/pdf/PlainWritingActImplementationPlan.pdf">ssa.gov/agency/plain-language/pdf/PlainWritingActImplementationPlan.pdf</a>
Plain Writing Compliance Report / July 2011 – December 2011	<a href="http://ssa.gov/agency/plain-language/pdf/PlainWrtngRpt2011.pdf">ssa.gov/agency/plain-language/pdf/PlainWrtngRpt2011.pdf</a>
2012 Plain Writing Compliance Report	<a href="http://ssa.gov/agency/plain-language/pdf/PlainWrtngRpt2012.pdf">ssa.gov/agency/plain-language/pdf/PlainWrtngRpt2012.pdf</a>
2013 Plain Writing Compliance Report	<a href="http://ssa.gov/agency/plain-language/pdf/PlainWrtngRpt2013.pdf">ssa.gov/agency/plain-language/pdf/PlainWrtngRpt2013.pdf</a>
2014 Social Security Administration Plain Writing Implementation Plan	<a href="http://ssa.gov/agency/plain-language/pdf/PWImplementationPlan-2014.pdf">ssa.gov/agency/plain-language/pdf/PWImplementationPlan-2014.pdf</a>