

Social Security Administration



2015 Plain Writing Compliance Report

March 31, 2016

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Social Security Administration 2015 Plain Writing Compliance Report

We are pleased to share our 2015 Plain Writing Compliance Report. This report details our efforts and successes in complying with the Plain Writing Act of 2010, which requires federal agencies to write clearly to ensure that the public understands government information and services.

Our Commitment

We are committed to communicating clearly. Communication plays a large role in our day-to-day operations. We understand that clear and concise communication is important to providing outstanding customer service. Therefore, we continue to affirm our commitment and dedication to improving written materials by using plain writing standards, training our employees, and supporting plain writing principles in our overall business processes. We encourage our employees to look for ways to improve their own writing, and we ask all of our executives and senior managers to promote plain writing. We assist our employees with plain writing via our online writing center, various checklists, desk aids, and other resources when writing notices, documents, letters, and other correspondence. Finally, we have dedicated staff to assist and respond to plain writing inquiries from staff and the public.

Our Accomplishments

To comply with the Plain Writing Act of 2010, we met several basic and advanced 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:

- Earned the highest Plain Language Report Card grades of federal agencies, including an A+ in compliance and an A in Writing and Information Design;
- Issued the 2014 Plain Writing Compliance Report;
- Maintained a Plain Language page on our Intranet and Internet website home pages;
- Updated our “About Us” webpage in compliance with plain writing principles;
- Endorsed StyleWriter, an editing tool, throughout the agency to promote clear written communications;
- Implemented a one-year pilot of the Acrolinx editing tool that expands clear writing editing capabilities to 500 employees across the agency;
- Trained employees on plain writing, business writing and grammar, and effective writing techniques;
- Enacted a marketing campaign to promote plain writing principles; and
- Applied plain writing guidelines to our websites, documents, letters, notices, and other written materials.

Our Implementation

Our Plain Writing Compliance Board meets bi-monthly to plan, coordinate, and execute the *Plain Writing Implementation Plan* and related activities. Please see the link to our *Plain Writing Implementation Plan* in Appendix B. This plan provides an outline of our goals and activities.

Oversight

Steven Patrick, Ph.D., Associate Commissioner for the Office of Public Inquiries in the Office of Communications, 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 (Compliance Board). In addition, directors in our 10 regions serve as Plain Writing Contacts. Appendix B provides links to websites listing the Compliance Board members and regional directors.

Plain Writing Resources

To assist our employees in applying plain writing principles, we continually update resources on our Plain Writing website. This website is also accessible by the public and details 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. We solicit public and employee feedback and inquiries via our dedicated mailbox at PlainWriting@ssa.gov.

The Commissioner's Writing Center website is another 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 the people we serve. We ensure that our online content meets the guidelines of Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, which requires all federal agencies to provide communications that are both accessible to people with disabilities and compatible with assistive technologies.

Editing Tools

In 2014, we increased distribution of StyleWriter throughout our agency and provided more training on its use in 2015.

Also in 2015, we expanded our use of editing tools to include Acrolinx. Acrolinx allows us to run evaluation reports on websites, PDF files, and Word documents. Approximately 500 agency employees are piloting the nationwide use of Acrolinx for one year. We expect the results of the pilot to provide data we can use to determine if Acrolinx is a viable tool to improve our written communications.

Another potential benefit of the Acrolinx software is the capability to produce a wide range of analytics. We intend to use the data from Acrolinx reports to measure our level of success and progress in plain writing. Further, the software offers not only the ability for individual users to ensure the quality of their written products, but also the ability for improved quality control.

Supporting Activities

We are continuing our marketing campaign to promote plain writing principles. We placed plain writing posters and banners throughout our Headquarters campus and made them available to offices nationwide from our website. 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.

We discussed plain writing updates, activities, and training opportunities for employees in the regions with our Regional Communication Directors (RCD) and Public Affairs Specialists at a national conference. 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 continue to televise plain writing guidelines on HQTV, our internal Headquarters television network. In addition, 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, and we respond to all emails within one business day.

We use customer satisfaction reports from measurement tools such as the ForeSee E-Government Satisfaction Index and Google Analytics to optimize our website and respond to the needs of our customers.

The ForeSee E-Government Satisfaction Index benchmarks the visitor online experiences of more than 100 federal government websites by measuring key satisfaction elements, such as Search, Navigation, Functionality, Online Transparency, Content, Site Information, Plain Language, Site Performance, Look and Feel, and other key elements. Each year, more than one million web visitors complete the ForeSee online survey. The ForeSee online survey

demonstrates how customers are willing to share their voices to help agencies and departments improve their services.

The ForeSee E-Government Satisfaction Index reflects visitor online experiences with 101 federal government websites. The Index measures satisfaction on a scale of 0 to 100, and considers scores of 80 or above as the threshold of excellence.

In the third quarter of 2015, six of our sites received scores above 80. Five of those sites were in the top ten on the ForeSee E-Government Satisfaction Index. In priority order, these websites are:

1. [Extra Help with Medicare Prescription Drug Plan Costs](#) [90];
2. [SSA Retirement Estimator](#) [90];
3. [SSA iClaim](#) [90];
4. [SSA - mySocialSecurity](#) [89];
5. [Social Security Business Services Online](#) [85]; and
6. [Social Security Internet Disability Claim](#) [83].

The scores above show how we either improved or maintained our threshold of excellence in customer satisfaction. The overall FY 2015 ForeSee Customer Satisfaction score for our agency is 84. This score is an improvement from our overall 2014 ForeSee Customer Satisfaction score of 83. The aggregate score for the 101 federal government websites measured by ForeSee is 74.5. Our score of 84 compares favorably with 2014 satisfaction scores for leading Fortune 500 companies, such as Amazon (86), Apple (84), Nordstrom (86), and Barnes & Noble (84).

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 applications and web pages that will meet the expectations of users.

Compliance Report

We issued the 2015 Plain Writing Compliance Report on March 31, 2016.

Table 1 provides examples of notices and a publication used in external communications. It also shows our efforts to improve these documents. Please see Appendix A for “Before and After” examples.

Table 1 - Examples of Notices and Publications Using Plain Writing Principles		
Type and Method of Communication	Audience	Improvements
Office of Operations		
Office of Electronic Services & Technology (OEST) Supplemental Security Income (SSI) Notice of Planned Action SSI Important Information Notice	SSI recipients, appointed representatives, and representative payees	We made several revisions in the SSI Restructured Notices. We: Reordered language to place the most important information at the beginning of the notice; Revised the introductory language to explain why we sent the notice; Revised the introductory language to give the payment amount and reason for the change in payment; Revised the payment charts to eliminate the use of more than one chart to explain changes; and Reordered and revised the language that explains installment payments and back payments.
Result: The documents have been widely used and well received by the public.		
Office of Central Operations		
Replacement Notice	Payment Service Center technicians	We revised notice language.
Result: We improved efficiency by enabling technicians to send a replacement notice without creating a dictated notice solely for that purpose.		

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

Type and Method of Communication	Audience	Improvements
Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) Notice Template for Special Notice Options Notices	Payment Service Center analysts	We created a special notice to notify visually impaired claimants about the new ABLE Act effective December 19, 2015.
<p>Result: We began using the notices on December 19, 2015 to notify recipients of Special Notice Options of possible changes to their benefits resulting from the new ABLE Act.</p>		
<p>Explanation of Difference in Schedule SE Amounts Notice</p> <p>(See the “Before and After” in Appendix A)</p>	Claimants	<p>We made several revisions:</p> <p>Added check boxes for easier readability and better understanding of the letter’s purpose;</p> <p>Lowered reading grade level;</p> <p>Eliminated word redundancy;</p> <p>Changed language to use the simplest form or verbs; and</p> <p>Added the servicing field office address, as required by the Social Security Act.</p>
<p>Result: We improved readability and compliance with requirements.</p>		
<p>Philadelphia Region</p> <p>Press release for the Winchester Field Office relocation</p>	The public	We notified the public of the Field Office relocation.
<p>Result: We provided clear, concise information to the community before the date of the office move.</p>		
<p>Chicago Region</p> <p>Press release for the Escanaba Field Office service delivery</p>	The public	We notified the public of a Field Office move and short-term limited service delivery.
<p>Result: We provided clear, concise communication with external stakeholders.</p>		

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

Type and Method of Communication	Audience	Improvements
<p>San Francisco Region</p> <p>Letter in response to a constituent's overpayment</p>	<p>United States Senate</p>	<p>We provided a clear and detailed explanation of the policy and issues in the case.</p>
<p>Result: By providing a clearer explanation in our notices, we made our policy easier for third parties to understand and, in turn, explain to their constituents.</p>		
<p>Office of Retirement and Disability Policy</p>		
<p>Combined Notice for Age 18 Medical and Non-Medical Redetermination Appointment (English and Spanish versions)</p>	<p>Social Security beneficiaries</p>	<p>We improved readability, provided clarity, and made information more concise.</p>
<p>Result: We provided clear and accurate information to families with child or young adult Supplemental Security Income beneficiaries, before the age 18 redetermination, about our important work incentive provision and the Section 301 benefit protection.</p>		
<p>Automatic Earnings Reappraisal Operation (AERO) Notice for Responsibility to Report Work Activity</p> <p>SSA Work Incentives Programs</p>	<p>Social Security beneficiaries</p>	<p>We improved readability, provided clarity, and made information more concise.</p>
<p>Result: We provided clear and accurate information to disability beneficiaries. We promoted awareness about our work incentive programs and reminded beneficiaries of their responsibility to report work activity.</p>		
<p>SSI Post-Entitlement Restructured Notice</p>	<p>SSI beneficiaries</p>	<p>We added language to explain when the beneficiary would receive his or her payments and reorganized language to group related information.</p>
<p>Title 2, Title 16, Income Related Monthly Adjustment Amount, Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA), and no Cost of Living Adjustment (UNCOLA)</p>	<p>Social Security and SSI beneficiaries</p>	<p>We prepared sixteen notices for the 2016 Cost of Living Adjustment; and</p> <p>Based on the Consumer Price Index, we implemented the UNCOLA versions of the notices.</p>
<p>Fraud Language in Notices</p>	<p>Social Security and SSI beneficiaries</p>	<p>Prepared and cleared language revisions in a business process description. These revisions added standalone fraud</p>

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

Type and Method of Communication	Audience	Improvements
		language for notices and fraud reporting responsibility language to AERO notices for Disability Insurance Benefit beneficiaries.
Result: We provided clear, concise communication with external stakeholders.		
Office of Disability Adjudication and Review		
Office of Appellate Operations Request For Transcript and other notices	Claimants and representatives	We reviewed, edited, and modified notices to provide clearer instructions.
Result: We modified the language in notices to improve clarity.		
Office of the Chief Administrative Law Judge External communication form	Claimants and representatives	We added an external communication form in the Document Generation System to provide clearer instructions.
Result: We made it easier for claimants to respond.		
Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs		
Response to inquiry to President Obama	Claimant	We provided a clear response to a claimant’s inquiry.
Result: We used editing tools to prepare a clear, well-written response to the claimant.		
Request for the Social Security Congressional Inquiries Guide	Congressional staff	We prepared a comprehensive guide containing an overview of Social Security programs.
Result: The agency overview and program descriptions are clear and easy to understand.		

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

Table 2 - Examples of Webpages Using Plain Writing Principles		
Type and Method of Communication	Audience	Improvements
Office of Budget, Finance, Quality, and Management		
Office of Acquisition and Grants Unsolicited Proposals	The public and contractors	We made grammar and content changes.
Office of Acquisition and Grants About Grants	The public and grant applicants	We made grammar and content changes.
Result: Improved the information available and ease of reading.		
Office of Communications		
About Us (See “Before and After” in Appendix A)	The public, third parties, government agencies, businesses, Congress, and the press	We added graphics, content, reorganized information, redesigned layout, used plain language, and included a mailbox for comments.
Social Security Website (See “Before and After” in Appendix A)	The public, third parties, government agencies, businesses, Congress, and the press	We made several improvements: Replaced the rotating banners with “Hero” blocks at the top of the page; Combined the news and blog into one section and added a section to highlight our current campaigns; and Combined the items of interest with the icon row at the bottom on the page.
Faces and Facts of Disability (See “Before and After” in Appendix A)	The public, third parties, government agencies, businesses, Congress, press, disability advocates, and the health care community	We made several improvements: Updated the page using a “Hero” design, which included graphics and action buttons that facilitate navigation;

Table 2 - Examples of Webpages Using Plain Writing Principles

Type and Method of Communication	Audience	Improvements
		<p>Enabled users to see videos about disability beneficiaries and read their personal stories; and</p> <p>Provided downloadable public information materials so disability advocates can help spread the message.</p>
<p>Result: Our web pages are more visually appealing and easier to read. The new designs help users locate the desired information quickly.</p>		
<p>Office of the Chief Strategic Officer</p>		
<p>Open Data Customer Feedback – Themes webpage</p>	<p>The public and data analysts</p>	<p>We created a webpage to summarize feedback received from the public through our online collaboration engagement, the Open Data Project; and</p> <p>We used plain language principles and agency standards to summarize feedback.</p>
<p>Annual Performance Plans and Reports</p>	<p>The Office of Management and Budget and the public</p>	<p>We used plain language and improved the design and layout.</p>
<p>Result: The webpage allowed us to present feedback in concise language and organized categories. In addition, the agency increased the use of the Annual Performance Report as a reference guide for planned agency performance because of the improvement.</p>		
<p>Office of Operations</p>		
<p>New York Region</p>		
<p>SSA New York Region Homepage</p>	<p>The public</p>	<p>We conducted regular reviews to stay current and relevant.</p>
<p>Result: Up-to-date information about Social Security’s programs and policies.</p>		
<p>Atlanta Region</p>		

Table 2 - Examples of Webpages Using Plain Writing Principles

Type and Method of Communication	Audience	Improvements
Southern Florida SharePoint site	Primary audience: Southern Florida employees Secondary audience: Other interested Atlanta Region employees	We reorganized the existing site to improve readability and navigation.
Result: The changes make it easier to locate resources.		
Office of Central Operations		
The Official Intranet Website for the Office of Central Operations (OCO)	All OCO employees	We improved the overall look and navigation of the website for all OCO components.
Result: Improvements resulted in ease of navigation and better search capabilities for OCO employees.		
Philadelphia Region		
Events and Services in Your Community	The public	We updated the page to format references to <i>my Social Security</i> so that they comply with the QUICC guide.
Careers with Social Security	The public	We removed subpages that duplicated content found on the national recruitment site.
Result: Improved the readability of regional webpages. Removed duplicate content to create a more streamlined, user-friendly site.		
San Francisco Region		
San Francisco Region Presidential Management Fellows Program	The public	We improved the online content to provide clear and concise information about the Presidential Management Fellows Program and the point of contact.
Result: We increased public awareness of potential job opportunities.		
Office of the Inspector General		

Table 2 - Examples of Webpages Using Plain Writing Principles

Type and Method of Communication	Audience	Improvements
Blog post: “New Medicare Cards Will Not Display Social Security Numbers”	The public	We simplified the language and made headlines succinct and explanatory.
Press release: “New Investigative Units Established Across The Country To Prevent Disability Fraud”	The public	We simplified the language and made headlines succinct and explanatory.
Result: More people visited the pages and read the information.		
Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs		
Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs website	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.
Result: We improved the readability of our web page.		
Office of Retirement and Disability Policy		
Nonresident Alien Tax Screening Tool:	The public	We changed the language on the disclaimer page from passive to active voice.
Result: The disclaimer page is easier to understand.		
Retirement Earnings Test	The public	We created a one-page Program Explainer with an explanation and example.
Result: Easy to read and understand explanation of the retirement earnings test.		
Summary of the Annual Trustees Report	The public	We created a two-page summary that provides key measures of the financial status of the Trust Funds.
Result: Easy to read and understand information related to the Trust Funds.		

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
Office of Human Resources – Office of Civil Rights and Equal Opportunity		
Policy Guidance on the Use of Equal Employment Opportunity Official Time for Equal Employment Opportunity Complaints	The Office of Civil Rights and Equal Opportunity managers and staff	We expanded the policy to ensure legal accuracy.
Standard Operating Procedures for Complaints Processing	Managers and staff in the Office of Civil Rights and Equal Opportunity	We separated the Standard Operating Procedures into sections and simplified the language.
Administrative Instructions Manual System Guide for Harassment Allegations	SSA employees	We developed Standard Operating Procedures to provide specific policy guidance on handling harassment allegations. We focused on clarity and conciseness.
<p>Results: The revised policy provides greater clarity about Equal Employment Opportunity and ensures legal accuracy to help managers address issues effectively. We used simpler language in our Standard Operating Procedures to process Equal Employment Opportunity cases more efficiently. The revised policy guide provides a clearer description of harassment and responsibilities of managers and employees.</p>		
Office of Disability Adjudication and Review		
The Social Security Administration’s Hearings, Appeals and Litigation Law Manual	SSA employees and the public	We rewrote and improved the format of instructions in the Hearings, Appeals and Litigation Law Manual to improve readability.
<p>Result: We improved readability, clarity, tone, and format.</p>		
Office of Retirement and Disability Policy		
Policy Guidelines on Processing the Foreign Enforcement Questionnaire	SSA employees and the public	We simplified language and made instructions easier to understand.

Table 3 - Examples of Policy Documents Using Plain Writing Principles		
Type and Method of Communication	Audience	Improvements
Result: We improved readability and ease of use.		
Policy Guidance Regarding: Against Equity and Good Conscience	SSA employees	We reorganized text and improved clarity and conciseness.
Result: We made instructions easier to understand so employees could resolve issues more efficiently.		
Office of Operations		
Office of Central Operations Replacement Notice	SSA employees	We revised the notice language for improved readability.
Result: The new language eliminates the need for an employee to customize and prepare separate notices.		

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

Table 4 - Examples of Congressional and Public Inquiries Using Plain Writing Principles		
Type and Method of Communication	Audience	Improvements
Office of Budget, Facilities, Quality, and Management		
FY 2015 Agency Financial Report – Acting Commissioner’s Message	The President, Congress, and the public	We incorporated plain language requirements.
Result: We provided an improved overview of the detailed financial and budget documents.		
FY 2016 Budget Overview – Commissioner’s Message	Congress	We incorporated plain language requirements.
Result: We provided an improved overview of the detailed financial and budget documents.		
Office of Operations		
New York Region		
Regional Public Affairs Office Responses to congressional inquiries	Congressional delegations in New York and New Jersey and congressional	We reviewed nearly 1,000 congressional replies for passive voice and

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

Type and Method of Communication	Audience	Improvements
	staffers	readability.
Result: We clarified and provided information about Social Security’s programs and policies.		
Philadelphia Region		
Congressional inquiry response	Congressman Griffith	We provided clearer information regarding the constituent concerns.
Congressional inquiry response	Congressman Harris	We provided clear, concise information regarding enrollment periods as they applied to a specific situation.
Result: Our use of plain writing principles ensured that we provided clear and concise information to our congressional partners and, through them, to the public we serve.		
San Francisco Region		
San Francisco Region Congressional inquiries delivered by mail	Congressional delegations from the region, White House officials, and the public	We used plain language and plain writing principles from the Commissioner’s Writing Center for our written inquiries.
Result: We improved our written responses by removing passive voice and improving clarity.		
Office of Legislative and Congressional Affairs		
Written responses to White House and Congressional inquiries	The White House and members of Congress	We improved the overall readability of responses.
Result: 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 report shows how well we communicate our programs and policies when responding to letters sent to the White House. Acrolinx, StyleWriter, and our internal quality review process helped to improve the clarity and readability of responses.		
Office of the Inspector General		
<i>Analysis of Bipartisan Budget Act of 2015</i>	SSA Inspector General	We improved layout and simplified the language.

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

Type and Method of Communication	Audience	Improvements
Result: We improved the readability of the reports.		
Office of the General Counsel		
Response to civil rights complaints	The public	We provided clear and concise responses to civil rights complaints.
Requests for information and disclosure	The public	We provided clear and concise responses to requests.
Congressional inquiries	Congressional staffers	We helped components draft responses to congressional inquiries. We applied plain writing principles to provide clear and concise responses.
Result: We improved responses by fully developing the facts, removing passive voice, removing legalese, and improving clarity.		
Office of Human Resources		
Congressional inquiries and inquiries from employees sent to the Acting Commissioner and the Deputy Commissioner for Human Resources -- handled by the Office of Civil Rights and Equal Opportunity	Congressional delegations from the regions and employees nationwide	We applied plain writing principles to provide clear and concise responses to the congressional replies and employee inquiries.
Congressional inquiries delivered by mail or email sent to the Acting Commissioner and the Deputy Commissioner for Human Resources-- handled by to the Office of Labor Management and Employee Relations	Congressional delegations from the regions and the public	We applied plain writing principles when replying to the multiple congressional inquiries.
Result: Our use of plain writing principles ensured we provided clear and concise information to our employees and to our congressional partners, and through our congressional partners, to the public we serve.		
Office of Disability Adjudication and Review		
The Social Security Administration’s Hearings, Appeals and Litigation Law Manual	Employees and general public	We rewrote and reorganized instructions in the Hearings, Appeals and Litigation Law Manual to

Table 4 - Examples of Congressional and Public Inquiries Using Plain Writing Principles		
Type and Method of Communication	Audience	Improvements
		improve readability.
Result: Improved readability, clarity, tone, and format.		

Training

In 2015, 8,876 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, 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.

We provided training on the use of the editing software tools, StyleWriter and Acrolinx. Both tools offer suggestions on how to apply plain writing principles and improve our written products. The tools also evaluate readability, style, and grammar.

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 online through our Learning Management System. Online and VOD training classes offer greater flexibility as they allow employees to review material at a pace and setting that works 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 provides details on our agency’s training activities.

Table 5 - Training on Plain Writing Principles		
Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Office of Human Resources/Office of Learning: <u>Agency-wide Training</u>		
Video on Demand		
Plain Language 2015	22	20 minutes

Table 5 - Training on Plain Writing Principles

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Plain Language Principles (Operations Only)	202	30 minutes
Plain Language Principles Part 1	346	20 minutes
Plain Language Principles Part 2	200	30 minutes
Plain Language Principles Part 3	59	20 minutes
QUICC training	1,848	12 minutes
Online Courses – Writing and General Knowledge		
Business Grammar: Common Usage Errors	30	1 hour
Business Grammar: Parts of Speech	65	1 hour
Business Grammar: Punctuation	13	1 hour
Business Grammar: Sentence Construction	10	1 hour
Business Grammar: The Mechanics of Writing	60	1 hour
Business Grammar: Working with Words	37	1 hour
Business Writing: Editing and Proofreading	39	1 hour
Business Writing: How to Write Clearly and Concisely	238	1 hour
Business Writing: Know Your Readers and Your Purpose	33	1 hour
The Plain Writing Act	4	1 hour
Writing for Business	57	6 minutes
Writing for Technical Professionals: Effective Writing Techniques	2	practice 2 hours
Writing for Technical Professionals: Preparation and Plan	5	1 hour
Writing Under Pressure: Preparing for Success	8	1 hour
Writing Under Pressure: The Writing Process	4	1 hour
Business Grammar Basics: Final Exam	1	1 hour
Classroom Training		
Advanced Business Writing	170	2 days
Business Writing and Grammar	36	1 day
Business Writing and Grammar	163	2 days
Plain Language	125	2 days
Mastering the Art of Technical Writing	16	1 day

Table 5 - Training on Plain Writing Principles

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Decision Writers St. Louis NCAC Class 6	29	2 weeks
Decision Writers BNCAC Class 3	32	2 weeks
Decision Writers Course Hybrid Class	8	3 weeks
Decision Writers Course DW 1	16	2 weeks
Decision Writers Course DW 3	28	2 weeks
Decision Writers Course DW 5	17	3 weeks
Decision Writers Course DW 2	15	2 weeks
Decision Writers Course DW 4	11	2 weeks
Writing Effective Performance Plans	24	1 day
Federal Writing Boot Camp	49	3 days
Writing Essentials Workshop	21	2 days
Focus On Your Business Writing	357	3 weeks
Intermediate Focus On Your Business Writing	305	3 weeks
Writing Statements of Work	46	2 days
<u>Headquarters Component Training</u> (Any classroom training not sponsored by the Office of Learning)		
Office of Budget, Finance, Quality, and Management		
Business Writing for the Digital World	41	1 day
Writing Effective Reports	40	1 day
Plain Writing	35	2 days
Advanced Business Writing and Grammar	24	2 days
Office of the Chief Strategic Officer		
Infographics Essentials – Overview of highlights from training	19	4 hours
Office of Communications		
StyleWriter	62	1 hour
Acrolinx	324	1 hour
Infographics Training	40	2 days
Office of the General Counsel		
Advanced Legal Writing and Editing	16	1 day

Table 5 - Training on Plain Writing Principles		
Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Plain Writing Tips	5	4 hours
Legal Writing & Editing	12	1 day
Office of Central Operations		
Aurora Roadshow	1671	2 hours
Direct Contact by Telephone Training	100	2 hours
Advanced Business Writing	53	2 days
Completed Staff Work	99	3 days
Office of Operations		
Effective Writing	202	2 hours
Office of Retirement and Disability Policy		
Critical Thinking For Business Communication and Technical Writing	100	5 days
Customer Service Training (communication)	100	2 days
Executive Writing and Correspondence	2	1 day
Accent Reduction (communication)	1	1 day
Office of Disability Adjudication and Review		
Advanced Business Writing	33	2 days
Federal Writing Boot Camp	12	3 days
Effective Writing Workshop	21	2 days
Federal Writing Boot Camp 1	15	4 days
Federal Writing Boot Camp 2	17	3 days
Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs		
Acrolinx	12	1 hour
Business Writing & Grammar	2	16 hours
Regional Training (Any classroom training not sponsored by the Office of Learning)		
<i>Atlanta (OGC)</i>		
Advanced Legal Writing	42	6 hours
<i>Atlanta</i>		

Table 5 - Training on Plain Writing Principles

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Focus on Your Business Writing	81	3 hours
Intermediate Focus on Your Business Writing	81	3 hours
Advanced Business Writing	75	2 days
<i>Boston</i>		
OGC Region I (Boston), <i>Point Made: How to Write Like the Nation's Top Advocates</i>	27	6.5 hours
Job Enrichment Training – Writing Workshop	13	1 hour
<i>Chicago</i>		
Business Writing and Grammar	45	2 days
Advance Business Writing	9	2 days
Advanced Writing Strategies	8	4 hours
Plain Writing	61	2 days
Correspondence Guide Training	46	0.5 hours
SSA Speaks	37	10 hours
ORC Correspondence Training	13	1 hour
Documentation Translation training	12	1.5 hours
ETDS Correspondence Training	3	1 hour
Communicating with Diplomacy and Professionalism	2	16 hours
Business Writing Skills Made Easy and Fun	1	16 hours
E-mail and Business Writing Course	1	8 hours
How to Communicate Like a Pro	1	1.5 hours
<i>Dallas</i>		
Communication and Writing Tips	6	1.5 hours
Advanced Writing Strategies Training – OGC	45	6.5 hours
<i>New York (OGC)</i>		
Writing Strategies for OGC Attorneys	33	3 hours
Editing Strategies for Reviewers	8	3 hours
Efficient and Effective Brief Writing	32	3 hours
Drafting Program Law Opinions for New Attorneys	7	1.5 hours

Table 5 - Training on Plain Writing Principles		
Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
<i>Philadelphia</i>		
Advanced Writing Strategies for SSA - OGC	45	8 hours
Business Writing and Grammar	24	16 hours
Focus on Your Business Writing	54	3 hours
Intermediate Focus on Your Business	54	3 hours
<i>San Francisco</i>		
How to Write Effective Performance Reviews	17	6 hours
Correspondence Guide Workshop	14	1.5 hours
Public Affairs Training for New Supervisors (Effective Presentations, Written and Oral Communication)	60	1 hour
Focus on Your Business Writing	50	3 hours
Intermediate Focus on Your Business Writing	60	3 hours

Agency Activities and Accomplishments

For the third consecutive year, we received the highest scores on the Federal Plain Language report card. In addition, the Center for Plain Language presented us with a ClearMark Award of Distinction for the following entries:

- Disability Campaign Social Media Instructions
- Best of Public Sector and Government Before & After Award

We used plain writing principles to improve and present our strategic planning documents in a comprehensive, informative, yet easy to understand manner. For the 17th consecutive year, our Agency Financial Report (AFR) received the Association of Government Accountant’s Certificate of Excellence in Accountability Reporting (CEAR) award. The CEAR recognizes outstanding accountability reporting and it is the highest form of recognition in Federal Government financial management reporting.

We continued our search for ways to help in our plain language efforts. We launched an agency-wide pilot to assess the editing tool, Acrolinx. We provided training, support, and set up an evaluation process to determine its effectiveness.

Management of individual offices within our agency continued to stress the importance and value of plain language to their staff by providing:

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

Table 6 provides details on our activities and accomplishments.

Table 6 - Agency Activities and Accomplishments	
Office	Activities
Office of Disability Adjudication and Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedicated the September 2015 “Office of Appellate Operations Executive Director’s Broadcast” to resources that included the Commissioner’s Writing Center and the Quality Initiative for Commissioner’s Correspondence Handbook • Edited templates in the Document Generation System to make them more readable and understandable • Distributed the Division of Training and Human Resources March and September issues of <i>2015 Career GPS</i>, that is dedicated to Plain Writing, to our employees
Office of Systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasized the importance of plain writing in the Information Security Policy, which sets forth information security policies for the protection of the agency's information technology resources and data • Reviewed Information Security Advisories and Bulletins for clear and concise communication • Reviewed breach notifications for accuracy, responsiveness, and plain writing compliance, prior to release • Continued to review documents to ensure plain writing compliance, technical accuracy, and appropriate tone • Reminded staff of specific writing tips based on the Acting Commissioner’s writing preferences • Encouraged staff to attend training courses to improve writing skills

Table 6 - Agency Activities and Accomplishments

Office	Activities
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraged employees to take advantage of plain writing courses offered by the Office of Learning • Selected employees to test Acrolinx, an editing tool that reviews spelling, grammar, style, readability, and flags areas that may not conform to the agency’s Plain Writing objectives
<p>Office of Budget, Finance, Quality, and Management</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnered with the Office of Public Inquires and the Office of Learning to initiate the creation of a Video-On-Demand (VOD), with Closed-Captioning, entitled “Quality Initiative for Commissioner’s Correspondence” (QUICC) • Shared the QUICC VOD with our employees • Hosted vendor-led writing courses in April 2015 with over 150 employees participating in the training. These courses included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business Writing in the Digital World (two offerings) • Writing Effective Reports (two offerings) • Plain Writing (two offerings) • Advanced Business Writing and Grammar • Conducted eight in-house communication workshops with 120 employees in attendance. These 2-hour workshops provided: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An overview of Plain Language • General and agency-specific standards • Specific writing guidelines and procedures • Issued writing tips on a weekly basis for five weeks throughout the month of April to all our employees. The tips included topics such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using Assure vs. Ensure vs. Insure • Affect vs. Effect • The difference between “i.e. vs. e.g.” and “it’s vs. its” • Grammar quizzes to test our employees’ grammar knowledge • Information on weekly writing tips • Created a Writers’ Toolkit on our internal website that serves as an extra writing resource for our authors. The Writers’ Toolkit

Table 6 - Agency Activities and Accomplishments

Office	Activities
	<p>includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our Communications Guide • Links to the Quality Initiative for Commissioner’s Correspondence Handbook, Quality Initiative for Commissioner’s Correspondence Training VODs, and Plain Language VODs • Links to the Commissioner’s Writing Center, which provides information on formatting letters and memoranda and online training courses • Provided over 20 Plain Language Clinics and online courses, including “Focus on Your Business Writing” and “Intermediate Focus on Your Business Writing” • Conducted multiple reviews of documents to ensure plain writing compliance, technical accuracy, and appropriate tone • Received the Association of Government Accountant’s Certificate of Excellence in Accountability Reporting (CEAR) award for the 17th consecutive year for our Agency Financial Report • Revised the email transmittal notes that accompany the reports to include subtitles that state why we completed the study, the findings, and the frequency of the report • Completed the annual review and certification of our public-facing web content for currency and accuracy, as well as plain language • Participated in the Acrolinx software pilot • Installed Acrolinx software licenses for over 80 employees
<p>Office of Operations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided a session on clear and effective Writing/Communication/Email during the <i>Transition to Leadership 301</i> course • Provided Virtual Training for the Critical Congressional Unit • Reviewed nearly 1,000 congressional replies for passive voice and other substandard writing techniques

Table 6 - Agency Activities and Accomplishments

Office	Activities
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided Weekly Writing Tips Reminders, including topics such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acronyms and Abbreviations • Capitalization • Commas • Editing and Proof Reading • Formatting, Hyphen • Punctuation, Sentence Structure, and Word Choice • Provided guidance to improve plain language utilization by employees conducting continuous quality reviews through the workgroup coordinator • Developed a 4-hour ‘Writing Boot Camp’ workshop for regional office analysts and specialists who develop written work products for regional and national distribution • Worked on plain language guides for use in overpayment determinations • Provided internal refresher training on writing skills that emphasize plain language techniques for all staff • Utilized and promoted the Plain Writing website, including the Acting Commissioner’s QUICC Tips Desk Aid
<p>Office of the Chief Strategic Officer</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided training to the Office of Performance Improvement and the Office of Open Government employees on Plain Writing best practices • Developed a Style Guide to compliment the Quality Initiative for Commissioner’s Correspondence Handbook for use as our standard writing style for our agency performance plans and reports • Contracted with an outside vendor to provide plain language training to our staff to improve the quality of our performance plans and reports

Table 6 - Agency Activities and Accomplishments

Office	Activities
<p>Office of the General Counsel</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Edited and made comments and suggestions to improve the readability of briefs, memoranda, and letters to comply with clear writing principals (including removing passive voice, legalize, medical jargon, and nominalizations) • Provided new employees with one-on-one writing guidance through our mentor program with supervisory oversight • Sent plain writing reminders to our staff with specific writing tips to consider based on the Quality Initiative for Commissioner’s Correspondence (QUICC) handbook • Reviewed all outgoing documents to ensure compliance with the agency’s plain writing goals • Trained new attorneys to write in compliance with the agency’s plain writing principles. • Reviewed outgoing documents prepared by new employees to ensure compliance with plain writing principles • Worked closely with our internal and external clients, including the U.S. Attorney offices within our jurisdictions, to ensure that all documents, including documents filed with the court, meet the agency’s plain writing goals • Provided, and will continue to provide, individual writing mechanics instruction through our appellate brief review process. That review and feedback provide instruction in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using simpler words • Refraining from use of passive voice • Proper and judicious use of “that” • Avoiding lengthy quotations and overuse of parenthetical phrases • Drafting clear statements of argument • Sent an email reminder to our staff in December 2015 regarding the importance of plain language that contained links to both the 2010 Plain Language Act and the QUICC handbook • Reviewed outgoing correspondence to ensure compliance with

Table 6 - Agency Activities and Accomplishments

Office	Activities
	<p>plain writing principles</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reminded staff of principles outlined in the Quality Initiative for Commissioner’s Correspondence Handbook and provided plain writing feedback to staff as part of our review and clearance processes • Provided comments and suggested revisions consistent with the plain writing principles to other components as part of our review of various documents • Continued to provide our staff with training to improve their plain writing skills
<p>Office of Human Resources</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Used multiple plain writing experts to prepare, review, and provide feedback on formal materials including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Executive correspondence • Policies • Training • Continued to review the following to improve efficiencies and ease of accessibility: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal documents • Websites • SharePoint sites
<p>Office of the Inspector General</p>	<p>Re-organized our Office of External Relations and renamed it the Division of Communications. The focus of the Division of Communications is to review all communication products with a particular emphasis on plain writing</p>
<p>Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Received positive feedback validating the effectiveness of plain language in our communications from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The White House Executive Secretariat • The Office of Presidential Correspondence • Members of Congress • Key Committee staff

Table 6 - Agency Activities and Accomplishments

Office	Activities
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reviewed all correspondence for accuracy, responsiveness, and plain writing compliance before release • Developed and maintain an electronic repository and handbook for all writers to reference when responding to inquiries • Provided instructions to staff on identifying and handling new correspondence concerns • Established and updated a protocol for developing and storing new agency approved language that complies with the Plain Writing Act • Reviewed and revised staff correspondence procedures on an ongoing basis • Included plain writing feedback to staff as part of our quality control efforts • Used StyleWriter and Acrolinx to prepare responses to White House and Congressional inquiries
<p>Office of Retirement and Disability Policy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implemented a three-level review process for our published products, research, and policy papers. The review process includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A peer review addressing the content of each paper to assess the technical quality of the research according to accepted professional standards and practices • A sensitivity review, done by other Social Security offices, ensuring that the paper is objective, judgment neutral, and that any policy implications are evidence-based • An editorial review, done by professional editors in the Office of Information Resources, providing a copy-edit and proof of the paper before publication • Provided professional management oversight by the respective Associate Commissioners and office directors in components as the authors write the papers and they progress through the three-tier review process

Table 6 - Agency Activities and Accomplishments

Office	Activities
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acquired Acrolinx licenses for approximately 70 staff members • Participated in the Plain Language Workgroup to improve the Program Operations Manual System
<p>Office of Communications</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoted plain writing through our internal communication program “<i>Good Morning Social Security</i>” • Distributed information on plain writing through our marketing efforts to Headquarters and Field Office employees • Posted information on our Plain Writing website regarding plain writing resources for the employees and the public • Distributed plain writing desk aids • Promoted plain writing via our intra-office Headquarters televisions • Updated and promoted our plain writing videos and training opportunities • Supported a Headquarters’ broadcast by the Acting Commissioner regarding the importance of plain writing • Worked on an internal awards pilot to recognize best plain writing efforts • Provided training on StyleWriter software • Promoted submissions for ClearMark awards • Began pilot testing Acrolinx for Plain Writing analytics on our policies, web pages, letters, and documents • Sponsored Infographics training classes

Moving Forward

In 2016, 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 persist in 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 establish 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









Our 2015 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 three consecutive years, we have received the highest grades of Federal agencies. Most recently, in 2015, we earned the highest grades with an A+ in compliance and an A in writing and Information Design on the Center for Plain Language's Report Card for Federal Agencies. Congressman Loeb sack publicly recognized our achievement for consecutive years at the 2015 Center for Plain Language Press Conference.

Our plain writing efforts and supporting activities occurred at all levels across our agency. Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 highlight our successes. We continue to improve our written communication through a wide variety of outreach forums. These include notices, publications, websites, policy documents, and responses to congressional and public inquiries. We are facilitating plain writing by piloting Acrolinx, an editing tool. In 2016, we trained almost 500 Acrolinx pilot participants. We will measure the tool's success in 2016.


Acting Commissioner Carolyn W. Colvin, said, "When we communicate in a way that people understand, we can better serve the public." In support of her statement, Acting Commissioner Colvin developed the Critical 8 Priority program that includes providing superior customer service. Vital pieces of her customer service vision include making essential services easily available online and educating the public about our programs. We rely on easily understandable written communication to achieve the established goals. Every day, we demonstrate our commitment to service by ensuring that our methods of communication are clear, concise, and easy to understand.

Appendix A: Plain Writing Examples

“Before and After”

Sample Type	Before	After
Office of Communications		
About Us	 About Us (Before)	 About Us (After)
Social Security Homepage	 SSA Homepage (Before)	 SSA Homepage (After)
Faces and Facts of Disability	 Facts and Faces of Disability (Before)	 Facts and Faces of Disability (After)
Office of Retirement and Disability Policy		
Notice of Disapproved Claim	 Notice of Disapproved Claim- Before.pdf	 Notice of Disapproved Claim- After.pdf

“New Document”

Sample Type	New Document
Office of the Chief Strategic Officer	
Open Data Customer Feedback- Themes webpage	https://www.socialsecurity.gov/open/customer-feedback.html
Budget, Facilities, Quality, and Management	
FY 2015 Agency Financial Report- Acting Commissioner’s Message	 A Message From The Acting Commissioner.docx

Appendix A: Plain Writing Examples

Office of Operations

Chicago Region: Press release office move



Press Release for Escanaba move.doc

San Francisco Region: Senator response



ResponseToAnInquiry FromASenator.doc

Office of Electronic Services and Technology :
SSI Important Information Notice



SSI Important Information Notice.pdf

Office of Retirement and Disability Policy

Medical and Non-Medical Redetermination
Notice for Age 18 (English and Spanish
versions)



Medical and Non-Medical Redetermination
Notice for Age 18-English.pdf



Medical and Non-Medical Redetermination
Notice for Age 18-Spanish.pdf

Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs

Response to inquiry to President Obama



ResponseToWhiteHouseInquiry.docx

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	www.ssa.gov
Plain Writing	http://ssa.gov/plain-language/
Plain Writing Compliance Board	http://ssa.gov/agency/plain-language/complianceboard.html
Plain Writing Contacts	http://ssa.gov/plain-language/contacts.html
Plain Writing Feedback	http://ssa.gov/plain-language/
Plain Writing Initial Implementation Plan	http://ssa.gov/plain-language/PlainWritingActImplementationPlan.pdf
Plain Writing Implementation Plan - 2015	http://ssa.gov/plain-language2015ImplementationPlan.pdf