



Plain Writing Act Initial Implementation Report

July 13, 2011

On October 13, 2010, President Obama signed into law the Plain Writing Act of 2010 (Act). The Act requires agencies to communicate in a manner “that the public can understand and use.” Plain writing is concise, simple, meaningful, well organized, and easy to understand. It avoids jargon, redundancy, ambiguity, and obscurity, and does not contain unnecessary complexity.

Each Government agency must implement a plan that complies with conditions in the Act requiring agency wide “plain writing” communication training for all employees, in addition to other requirements such as establishing a plain writing webpage and reporting on compliance with the Act.

We have long recognized the need for “plain writing” in our communications and have promoted and implemented numerous initiatives consistent with the requirements in the Act

Current Ongoing Plain Writing Initiatives

Notice Improvement Staff: We send almost 400 million notices and other correspondence to the public each year. Each notice is an opportunity to effectively communicate with the public and deliver clear, understandable, and accurate information about our programs and services. Due to the high volume of correspondence and our need to convey information about our programs and benefits, we have created an Office of Notice Improvement (ONI) to strategically assess, review, improve, and manage agency correspondence.

ONI has developed clear writing guidelines to ensure that we write notices in plain, easy-to-understand language. ONI also developed a notice clearance process comprised of agency offices involved in policy, legal sufficiency, operations, communications, and systems. The clearance process requires each component sign off on new or revised notice language before we publish it. This team approach ensures all agency offices involved in developing notice language consistently apply plain writing guidelines and meet our plain writing standards.

Quality Initiative for Commissioner’s Correspondence (QUICC): Commissioner Michael J. Astrue has directed agency personnel to provide clear and accurate written correspondence. To support that effort, we created a “QUICC” Intranet website, which provides staff throughout the agency with plain writing tips, exercises, videos, and examples of letters and memoranda.

Program Instructions: Since 2008, the Office of Retirement and Disability Policy (ORDP) has been using plain writing techniques when drafting program instructions in the Program Operating Manual System (POMS). To date, we have revised approximately 36 percent of our POMS to meet plain writing standards.

ORDP also conducts monthly training for POMS authors, managers, and reviewers. Our training is consistent with the QUICC to ensure that all agency instructions are clear and well organized. We also work on a one-on-one basis with policy authors to develop instructions using plain language. Since 2008, ORDP has trained more than 500 staff members, including policy authors and reviewers.

Plain Writing Act of 2010

Agency Official: Robin Kaplan, Executive Counselor to the Commissioner, is our Senior Agency Official for Plain Writing.

Communicating the Act's Requirements to Agency Staff: We have communicated the Act's requirements to our employees. Video monitors throughout the agency display information on plain writing. The monitors display messages reminding employees to visit and use the plain writing tools on the QUICC Center website. We have also placed posters about the QUICC website throughout our buildings. In addition, we are promoting writing contests for agency employees to encourage staff to write better letters and other correspondence.

Agency Website: Our Plain Writing website is accessible to the public from our homepage at www.socialsecurity.gov in the section titled *About Our Agency*.

Receiving and Responding to Comments from the Public: Our Office of Public Inquiries (OPI) is the point of contact for public input. OPI has set up an email address, OPI.Net.Post@ssa.gov, which provides a means for the public to contact us if they have trouble understanding a form, notice, pamphlet, or any of our web pages. The public can access the email address through our Plain Writing website.

Plain Writing Training: Our Office of Learning (OL) has developed a plain writing training program for agency employees, which consists of two video presentations and one set of related exercises. These three videos are available "on demand" via employees' desktop computers. The training program includes information on the Act and provides training on the "Principles of Plain Language." Our training program requires:

- All employees to view the plain writing training videos by July 13, 2011;
- Managers to provide time for the training;
- Each office to determine how to ensure that all employees receive the training; and
- Additional training, as needed, to address specific areas of focus, such as writing agency policy and procedures, writing regulations, writing for the web, and writing notices for the public.

Ongoing Process for Compliance: Each agency office is responsible for ensuring that communications issued by component writers comply with plain language guidelines. Each component will appoint a senior manager to review a selection of external communications and to certify by April 13, 2012 and annually thereafter, that the communications reviewed comply with the guidelines. The senior manager will also report on actions the component took to improve the quality of its communications during the course of the year.