2022
Plain Writing Compliance Report
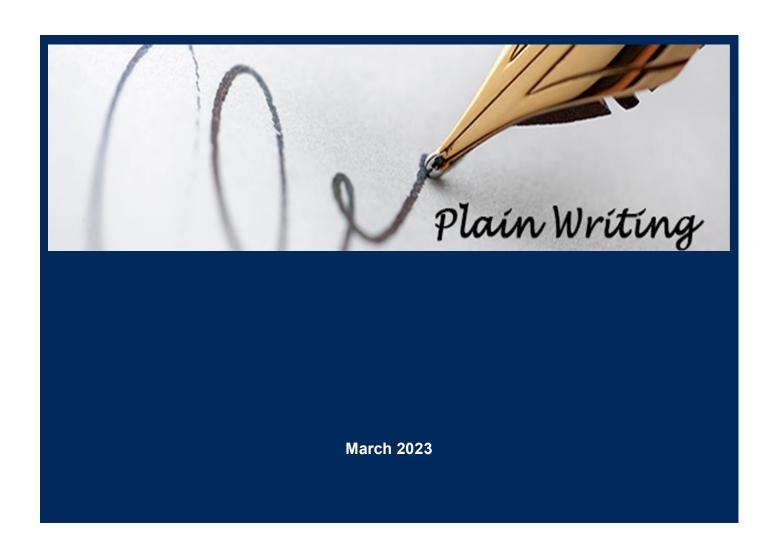
March 2023

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Social Security Administration

The 2022 Plain Writing Compliance Report

Introduction

Social Security communicates with plain language that is clear, concise, and easy to understand. We are leaders in the federal government when it comes to effective use of plain language—though don't take our word for it; the results speak for themselves.

Since 2013, we have consistently received high marks on the Center for Plain Language Federal Report Card, often the highest-scoring agency. In 2022, we received an "A+" for organizational compliance and an "A" for writing quality. In addition to high grades, we made the Center for Plain Language's announcement: "An excellent model to follow is the Social Security Administration's "Contact Us" page, the only one to earn an A+." The Center went on to write, "The web page is clear in its intended purpose to provide information readers seek. The page has clear and concise language and the reader is addressed directly." The center also noted "excellent use of links, colors, fonts, sizing, bolding, bullets, and imagery to highlight important information."

Plain language is easy to read, but it can be a challenge to write, especially for an agency with the complex subject matters that Social Security faces. Why do we work so hard on easy-to-understand writing? Not only is it the law, it's also good customer service. Our goal is to provide the people who depend on us with useful and easy-to-understand writing.

Plain language breaks down systemic barriers for people who have a difficult time understanding complicated language and formatting. Plain and simple, plain language is good customer service.

The Plain Writing Act of 2010 (the Act) requires federal agencies to apply plain writing principles to written communication. The Act states that all government agencies should write in a way the public can easily understand and use.

We are pleased to present our *2022 Plain Writing Compliance Report*, which highlights our accomplishments in compliance with the Act. The report also includes specific details about our efforts along with some samples of effective plain language.

Our Commitment

We take our responsibility seriously to provide clear and concise messages in our written communication to current and future recipients. In 2022, about 67 million Americans received Social Security benefits, and about 183 million workers were covered under Social Security. We strive to explain our complex programs in easy-to-understand language.

When we apply plain writing principles, we successfully deliver information to the public that is useful, easy for anyone to access, and simple to comprehend. We do this in letters, notices, publications, emails, policy documents, and web pages.

In addition to the public, we communicate daily with state and local government agencies, third-party groups and organizations, Congressional offices, and White House staff members. Clear and concise communication is vital to providing outstanding customer service to these offices and organizations.

We provide the following plain writing resources to all employees:

- Plain Writing website

- Commissioner's Writing Center

- Quality Initiative for Commissioner's Correspondence (QUICC) Handbook

Additionally, we:

- Use editing software tools to evaluate our written products.

- Train employees about the Act, plain writing best practices, and the use of available tools.

- Keep our employees informed and trained, encouraging a commitment to plain writing.

- Review written materials from other components across the agency to make sure they adhere to plain language principles.

- Maintain a plain writing mailbox, monitored by staff who respond to emails from our employees and the public.

Our content is compliant with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. Section 508 requires all federal agencies to provide communication methods that people with disabilities can access using assistive technologies.

Our daily dedication to plain writing principles means we are committed to providing clear, concise, and easily understandable messages to everyone who interacts with us.

We encourage employees and the public to submit feedback about our plain writing efforts to PlainWriting@ssa.gov.

Our Accomplishments

We strive to comply with the Plain Writing Act. To accomplish this, we met basic and advanced requirements.

We developed and followed our *Plain Writing Implementation Plan for 2022* to help us monitor how offices throughout the agency apply plain writing guidelines to their written materials.

In addition, we:

- Earned an "A+" for Compliance on the *Federal Plain Writing Report Card*.

- Received an "A" for Writing Quality for our Coronavirus and the Freedom of Information Act webpages.

- Won a ClearMark Award of Distinction for our Disability Blog Post, "Disagree with Your Disability Decision? We Will Take Another Look."

- Issued the *2021 Plain Writing Compliance Report*.

- Issued the *2022 Plain Writing Implementation Plan*.

- Promoted and trained employees on plain language best practices.

- Promoted and trained employees to use editing software tools.

- Responded to hundreds of plain writing email inquiries.

- Applied plain writing guidelines to our website, documents, letters, notices, and other communication materials.

- Maintained Plain Language intranet and internet webpages.

- Participated in the Plain Language Community of Practice.

- Met with representatives from other agencies to discuss plain language procedures and best practices.

- Developed a Plain Language Matrix to document related tasks and steps to begin operationalizing our plain language program.

- Briefed agency executives on the importance of plain language.

- Issued internal and external messages to build awareness of plain language, including a blog post from our agency's Plain Language Senior Agency Official, an Internal Broadcast from our Deputy Commissioner for Communications, and a Commissioner Broadcast from the head of our agency.

- Continued updating high-traffic agency webpages and publications in accordance with plain writing principles.

How We Carry Out Our Implementation Plan

Our **Plain Writing Implementation Team** (Team) provides oversight and implementation of the Plain Writing Act to ensure written communications are clear, easy to understand, and useful to the audience.

The Team meets every two weeks to discuss plain language matters. Members of the team meet more often to manage daily plain language tasks. Our team of volunteers have skills in writing, editing, leadership, organization, administration, and management.

Our **Plain Writing Compliance Board** meets to plan, coordinate, and carry out the *Plain Writing Implementation Plan* and related activities.

The Board members represent each component within the agency. These board members prepare reports, monitor usage of software editing tools, and promote plain writing principles within their components. We rotate board members to encourage new ideas and input.

Oversight

Social Security's **Senior Agency Official for Plain Language** is Dr. Susan Camarena, Associate Commissioner for the Office of Public Inquiries and Communications Support in the Office of Communications. The Plain Writing Compliance Board consists of the senior agency official, members of the Plain Language Implementation Team, and representatives from the Office of the Commissioner and 12 deputy commissioner-level components. In addition,

directors in our 10 regions serve as plain writing contacts and are a resource to the public for plain writing information. (**See** Appendix B**, for a list of plain writing links, including a list of Compliance Board members and plain writing contacts.**)

Plain Writing Resources

The Commissioner's Writing Center promotes techniques to improve grammar and writing style preferences to ensure agency correspondence is clear to the public. It also provides a link to the *Quality Initiative for Commissioner's Correspondence Handbook (Handbook)*. The *Handbook* includes guidelines to prepare, review, and submit correspondence for signatures of the Commissioner and other executives, with examples of proper formatting for letters and memorandums.

The Office of Strategy, Learning, and Workforce Development website is available to all employees. The site offers plain writing training opportunities, such as Video on Demand (VOD), online lessons, instructor-led courses, books, and additional plain language resource materials.

The Plain Language Implementation Team provides trainings, briefings, resources, and review services across the agency on plain language.

Our websites and online services are accessible to our employees and the public.

Editing Tools

In 2022, we continued to use Acrolinx editing software to evaluate websites, PDF files, and Word documents. About 250 agency employees are trained to use Acrolinx, and we have worked to expand the software's use throughout Headquarters and Regional offices across the country. We provide reference guides and training, including Acrolinx training VODs for employees on our intranet and one-on-one training upon request.

In addition to Acrolinx, we measure our plain writing success using the Flesch-Kincaid Readability Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level. We have piloted other editing tools and continue to research alternative editing software and tools to enhance our plain writing efforts.

Supporting Activities

In 2022, we continued to promote the application of plain writing principles in our communication methods. We used internal publications and websites to promote plain writing and provide guidance on how to apply plain writing.

We share plain writing guidelines and tips to employees on our website, through our Compliance Board members, in emails and other electronic delivery methods, and through training.

How We Measure Performance and Get Public Feedback

Our goal is to communicate with the public in a clear, organized way. We encourage members of the public and employees to make comments and suggestions by emailing us at PlainWriting@ssa.gov. We normally respond to emails within one business day.

We benchmark our plain language practices against those of other agencies. We look at the plain language practices of both the private and public sector. We seek the expertise of plain language academia and experts and the Community of Practice.

The Federal Plain Language Report Card is an excellent measurement of success, and we strive to make sure our written materials rise to the high standards required to earn high marks. We also consider awards and honorable mentions in the annual ClearMark awards to be a measure of success.

Perhaps the best measure of success is seeing more requests from components throughout the agency for the Plain Language Team to review through the plain language lens. The result is more of our written communications rendered in language that is easy to read, understand, and use. We are seeing plain language awareness become part of Social Security's culture; the result is more of our written products—internal and external—complying with plain language best practices.

Compliance Report

Each year, we publish an annual *Compliance Report*. You are reading our *2022 Compliance Report*, published in March 2023.

The following are component-specific examples of communications we created using plain writing principles. Although released by the specific components, many of these documents reflect cooperation across teams and departments. Each of these examples reflects plain writing efforts across the agency. These entries show our efforts to improve our written communication products. Please see Appendix A for examples.

Examples of Policy and Legal Documents Using Plain Writing Principles

Office of Analytics, Review & Oversight (OARO)

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Policy Document: The Social Security Administration's Hearings, Appeals, and Litigation Law (HALLEX) Manual	All SSA Employees; Members of the Public	We continue to re-write and re-organize our policies and instructions in HALLEX to improve readability and understanding.	Improved readability, clarity, tone, and formatting of policy guidance.
Policy Document: The Social Security Administration's Programs Operations Manual System (POMS)	All SSA Employees; Members of the Public	We continue to re-write and re-organize our policies and instructions in POMS to improve readability and understanding.	Improved readability, clarity, tone, and formatting of policy guidance.

Office of Budget, Finance and Management (OBFM)

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Policy Document: Long-Term Detail Express Guide	Regional and component travel coordinators and SSA travelers	Since long-term travel is more complicated than the more common types of travel, it was beneficial to put the policy and rules into a single document that would be easy to read and reference. Instead of having to go to multiple AIMS Guides, travel coordinators now have a one-stop shop with the most asked questions and answers.	This guide has helped educate travel coordinators on those rules and policies that differ because a detail is long term. For example, it has reduced the number of issues such as a traveler's surprise that Meals & Incidental Expenses are reduced after 30 days. The guide has also helped with the organization of trips prior to the detail to take into account expenses that will be incurred throughout the trip. This guide played a role in a favorable Congressional comment about agency long-term detail practices after an audit.

Office of Hearing Operations (OHO)

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Policy Document: OHO Systems Bulletin #83 – Internet Streaming and ZoomGov Access	Office of Hearing Operations' Employees	Published March 17, 2022, using plain writing standards	Used plain language principles to improve readability and understanding.
Policy Document: OHO Systems Bulletin #85 – Telephone Systems Replacement Project Inbound/Outbound Call Disruptions	Office of Hearing Operations' Field Managers	Published April 15, 2022, using plain writing standards	Used plain language principles to improve readability and understanding.

Office of Human Resources (OHR)

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Policy Document: Personnel Policy Manual (PPM) S430_1, Performance Assessment and Communication System (PACS)	All SSA Employees	Clarifying language and content updates using plain writing standards	Employees can easily understand the content of the updated PPM
Policy Document: Personnel Policy Manual (PPM) S630_20, Parental Bereavement Leave (PBL)	All SSA Employees	Published June 10, 2022, using plain writing standards	Employees can easily understand and apply the regulatory and statutory rules of parental bereavement leave.

Office of Operations

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Policy Document: Teleservice Center Operating Guide on the Online *Social Security Statement*	SSA Employees	Published December 17, 2022, using plain writing standards	This document provides background and details on the Online *Social Security Statement.*
Policy Document: Modern Development Worksheets	SSA Employees	Published September 10, 2022, using plain writing standards	This document provides guidelines and instructions on handling Modernized Development Worksheets (MDWs).
Policy Document: Emergency Message (EM) on Initial and Pending Claims Processing for the Windfall Elimination Provision and Japan's National Pension	SSA Employees	Published June 30, 2022, using plain writing standards	This EM provides SSA employees instructions on handling Windfall Elimination Provision cases with Japan's National Pension.
Policy Document: EM on Ely District Court Decision: Processing Claims, Appeals, and Reopening Requests – One-Time Instructions	SSA Employees; Members of the Public	Published February 24, 2022, using plain writing standards	This EM provides instruction for processing claims, appeals, and requests for reopening based on the *Ely* District Court decision.

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Policy Document: EM on Thornton District Court Decision: Claims, Appeals, and Reopening Requests – One-Time Instructions	SSA Employees; Members of the Public	Published February 24, 2022, using plain writing standards	This EM provides instructions for handling claims, appeals, and reopening requests based on the *Thornton* District Court decision.
Policy Document: Administrative Message (AM) Government Pension Offset Louisiana State Employees' Retirement System (LASERS) "13th Check"	SSA Employees	Published September 2, 2022, using plain writing standards	This AM provides GPO instructions to SSA employees pursuant to a Louisiana Senate Bill.

Office of Retirement and Disability Policy (ORDP)

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Policy Document: Incorporating Inclusive Language in Internal and External-Facing Documents and Resources	SSA Employees	Published September 22, 2022, using plain writing standards	Used plain language principles to improve readability and understanding.
Policy Document: Instructions for Processing Expedited Reinstatements in the Electronic Disability Collect System	All SSA Employees	Published March 1, 2022, using plain writing standards to instruct technicians on a new business process.	Technicians are using the new business process effectively.
Legal Document: Federal Register Notice – Finding Regarding Foreign Social Insurance or Pension System of Estonia	Members of the Public	Published May 16, 2022, using plain writing standards	Used plain language principles to improve readability and understanding.

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Legal Document: Federal Register Notice – Finding Regarding Foreign Social Insurance or Pension System of Mongolia	Members of the Public	Published July 1, 2022, using plain writing standards	Used plain language principles to improve readability and understanding.

Examples of Mailed Materials Using Plain Writing Principles

Office of Analytics, Review & Oversight (OARO)

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Notice of Appeals Council Action (Denial Notice)	All SSA Employees; Members of the Public	We introduced new language at the end of all of our notices of Appeals Council actions to provide recipients with an easier to read, numbered list of ways to inquire further about the content of the notice and to provide the agency with feedback.	Improved readability, clarity, tone, and formatting of Appeals Council notices, orders, and decisions.

Office of Hearing Operations (OHO)

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Using My Social Security Account for Your Pending Hearing Request	Members of the Public	This notice encourages claimants to sign up for a my Social Security account, or to enable notifications if they already have one.	Claimants and their representatives receive information on how to see details regarding their claim.

Example of a Form or Publication Using Plain Writing Principles

Office of Communications (OCOMM)

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Publication: *Supplemental Security Income and Other Benefits*	Members of the Public	The fact sheet was launched in April 2022 and accompanies *Social Security Statements* for people with low income. The *Statement* is a document that provides personalized earnings records and benefit estimates along with important information about future benefits. It is distributed both online, using a personalized my Social Security account, and by mail to people age 60 and older or upon request.	In fiscal year 2023, we intend to do cognitive testing to measure readers' understanding of the material presented on the f0act sheet (as we previously did for the redesigned *Statement* and the other nine fact sheets).

Examples of Short Brochures Using Plain Writing Principles

Office of Analysis, Review & Oversight

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
800-Number Caller Survey	Agency Wide	We followed QUICC and Plain writing guidelines.	Easy to read, clear, and concise report.

Office of Operations

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Content Style Guide	SSA Employees	Published November 2022 using plain writing standards	This style guide aims to provide SSA employees with guidance regarding using plain and consistent language and grammar when speaking to the public in writing.

Examples of Newsletters & Reports Using Plain Writing Principles

Office of Analytics, Review & Oversight

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Newsletter: Executive Director's Broadcast (Office of Appellate Operations (OAO) Newsletter)	Office of Appellate Operations Employees	We continue to use plain writing principles in our monthly component newsletter, which remind employees about policy updates, provides information and summaries about training, and share best practices in drafting Appeals Council documents for the public.	Improved readability, clarity, tone, and formatting of Appeals Council notices, orders, decisions, and internal deliberative documents.

Office of Budget, Finance and Management

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Report: Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Overview	U.S. Congress; Members of the Public	We updated graphics and added more language in plain writing explaining our budget request.	The document is in plain language.
Report: Fiscal Years 2021-2023 Annual Performance Plan and Report	U.S. Congress; Members of the Public	We updated graphics and added more language in plain writing explaining our performance plan.	The document is in plain language.
Report: Acting Commissioner Message for Fiscal Year 2022 Agency Financial Report	Administration; U.S. Congress; SSA Employees; Members of the Public	Each year, we work to ensure that this message follows the QUICC Handbook, adheres to Plain Language principles, and presents a candid and well-rounded message.	This message was included in our FY 2022 AFR. Our AFRs have received the Certificate of Excellence in Accountability Reporting from the Association of Government Accountants for the 24th consecutive year, which is an unprecedented accomplishment in government accountability reporting.

Office of Hearing Operations

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Newsletter: What is Phishing?	Office of Hearing Operations' Employees	Published October 2022 using plain writing standards	Used plain language principles to improve readability and understanding.
Newsletter: Equipment for Re-Entry – Information	Office of Hearing Operations' Office Managers	Applied plain language principles.	Used plain language principles to improve readability and understanding.
Newsletter: Hearings and Appeals Case Processing System (HACPS) Release - Information	Office of Hearing Operations' Employees	Applied plain language principles.	Used plain language principles to improve readability and understanding.

Office of Legislative & Congressional Affairs

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Newsletter: *Congressional Update* September 2022	U.S. Congress; OLCA Staff and caseworkers	Applied plain language principles.	Used plain language principles to improve readability and understanding.

Examples of Blog Posts & Summaries Using Plain Writing Principles

Office of Communications

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Blog Post: There's Still Time! Claim Your 2021 Child Tax Credit	Members of the Public	Educational materials for the public.	Used plain language principles to improve readability and understanding.
Blog Post: Ten Years of my Social Security means you can do more	Members of the Public	Educational materials for the public.	Used plain language principles to improve readability and understanding.

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Blog Post: Expand Your Social Security Knowledge with These Four Terms	Members of the Public	Educational materials for the public.	Used plain language principles to improve readability and understanding.
Summary: FAQ— Can I split the direct deposit of my Social Security benefit between two bank accounts?	Members of the Public	Educational materials for the public.	Used plain language principles to improve readability and understanding.
Summary: FAQ—If I get married, will it affect my benefits?	Members of the Public	Educational materials for the public.	Used plain language principles to improve readability and understanding.
Summary: FAQ— How do I report a missing payment?	Members of the Public	Educational materials for the public.	Used plain language principles to improve readability and understanding.
Summary: Plan for your future during Financial Literacy Month	Members of the Public	Educational materials for the public.	Used plain language principles to improve readability and understanding.
Summary: Top Five Fraud and Scam prevention tools	Members of the Public	Educational materials for the public.	Used plain language principles to improve readability and understanding.
Summary: Women's History Month and Social Security	Members of the Public	Educational materials for the public.	Used plain language principles to improve readability and understanding.

Office of Retirement & Disability Policy

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Blog Post: 5 Tips on How to Stick to Your Budget	Social Security and Supplemental Security Income recipients; Employment Networks; Stakeholders	Highlighted program resources, program benefits and steps to follow.	Provides relevant information in plain language.
Blog Post: Start Where You Are: On a New Career Path	Social Security and Supplemental Security Income recipients; Employment Networks; Stakeholders	Highlighted program resources, program benefits and steps to follow.	Provides relevant information in plain language.
Blog Post: Honoring African Americans with Disabilities	Social Security and Supplemental Security Income recipients; Employment Networks; Stakeholders	Highlighted program resources, program benefits and steps to follow.	Provides relevant information in plain language.
Summary: FAQ— Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Frequently Asked Questions: Do I need to travel to the United States for my benefits to continue if I am not a U.S. citizen, and if so, when?	Members of the Public (Non-U.S. citizens)	Published September 20, 2022, using plain writing standards	Posting this Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) on the website allows our customers to access this information quickly and conveniently; it also helps our technicians to provide consistent and accurate responses
Summary: FAQs— Can noncitizens living outside the United States receive Social Security benefits?	Members of the Public (Non-U.S. citizens)	We revised this webpage to include two questions and answers that used to be on the general FAQ page of SSA's website where there is additional information related to the topic of these questions.	Used plain language principles to improve readability and understanding.

Example of a Public Inquiry Reply Using Plain Writing Principles

Office of General Counsel

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Privacy Act Request Response Template – First Party SS-5 Request	Members of the Public	Updated the standard fee amount and fee effective date of October 1, 2022.	Members of the public receive accurate information in plain language to assist in submitting requests for their records.

Examples of Webpages Using Plain Writing Principles

The following examples demonstrate improvements to webpages used mostly by the public and other external stakeholders. Please see Appendix A for examples.

Office of the Chief Actuary

Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Solvency Provisions	U.S. Congress; Members of the Public	We strive to present this information clearly and understandably, to a possibly non-technical audience, using plain language.	We update these pages regularly using plain language whenever possible.
The 2022 OASDI Trustees Report	U.S. Congress; Members of the Public	We use plain language in the text wherever possible.	We improved our use of plain writing concepts within the Trustees Report.
Proposal to Change the Social Security Program or the Supplemental Security Income Program	U.S. Congress; Congressional Committees; Organizations that request legislative proposals affecting Social Security	This site provides actuarial analysis of legislative proposals to affect Social Security, brought by Congressional or related entities. While analytical results are necessarily technical, we are mindful that part of our duty is to explain actuarial concepts and analytical results in terms understandable to non-actuaries. Thus, we strive to use plain language in our write-up of the results as much as possible.	We strive to improve clarity and outreach using plain language concepts in our response to requests from non-actuaries.

Office of General Counsel

Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Privacy Program Webpage	Members of the Public	Updated links to Disability Analysis File and Master Files of Social Security Number Holders System of Record Notices (SORN); updated link to Computer Matching Agreement (CMA) # 1015; updated link to regulations and POMS regarding disclosure for law enforcement purposes	Members of the public may view the most up to date versions of the applicable SORNs and CMA, members of the public can quickly refer to policy and regulations regarding disclosure for law enforcement purposes
Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)	Members of the Public	"Guide to the FOIA"	Improved readability and clarity, members of the public receive accurate information to assist them in submitting FOIA requests and viewing information that is available to the public

Office of Human Resources

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Human Resources Internal Communication (HRIC) for Employees: Preparing for a Safe Return to Official Duty Stations	All SSA Employees	Updated Employee FAQs with consolidated information on COVID-19 safety protocols in effect for return to official duty stations.	Employees can easily apply safety protocols for returning to official duty stations, including reverting to telework policies and National Labor Agreements
2022 National Work and Family Month	All SSA Employees	Content and plain language updates	Employees can easily understand the information and resources that are available within SSA to assist employees with work-life balance

Office of Hearing Operations

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Hearings and Appeals	Members of the Public	This website was established to assist claimants who will visit an OHO Hearing Office to participate in their in-person hearing. The latest updates provide information regarding required health screening protocols and in-office requirements will visiting an OHO Hearing office, using plain language.	The public is better prepared for what to expect at their in-person hearing. OHO employees can more quickly process visitors entering OHO space.

Office of Operations

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Notice of Class Action Order: Ely v. Saul	Members of the Public	Used plain language principles in drafting of this Notice of Class Action Order.	Notice to the public regarding surviving spouse benefits of a same-sex marriage that were previously denied because the marriage was less than 9 months.

Office of Retirement & Disability Policy

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Social Security Payments Outside the United States	Members of the Public	We revised this webpage to include two questions and answers that used to be on the general FAQ page of SSA's website where there is additional information related to the topic of these questions.	Published on SSA's website using plain language to make it easy to read and understand.

Training on Plain Writing Principles

Office of Human Resources/Office of Strategy, Learning, and Workforce Development:

Agency-wide Training (Online Courses & Classroom Training – Writing and General Knowledge)

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Advanced Business Writing	101	16 hours
Business Writing and Grammar	115	16 hours
Leadership Competency Series: Written Communication	96	26 min
Communicating & Interviewing – Part II – Oral and Written Communication	135	1 hour 30 min
Principles of Plain Language (Operations)	119	27 min
Principles of Plain Language Part 1	211	19 min
Principles of Plain Language Part 2	113	32 min
Principles of Plain Language Part 3 Workshop	94	12 min
Audience And Purpose in Business Writing	106	29 min
Acrolinx Training for Quality Control Users	24	10 min
Acrolinx Training for Quality Assurance Users	225	20 min

Headquarters Component Training

(Any classroom training not sponsored by the Office of Strategy, Learning, and Workforce Development)

Office of Analytics, Review, and Oversight

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Writing Analysis	27	30 min
Drafting Action Documents (Effective Writing Skills)	27	1 hour 30 min
Denial Notice Writing	27	2 hours 45 min
Remand Writing	27	1 hour 30 min
AC Decision Drafting	27	1 hour
Analytical Thinking	27	1 hour 30 min

Office of Budget, Finance, and Management

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Comprehensive Analyst Development Series Program: Budget Message/Writing	10	1 hour
Comprehensive Analyst Development Series Program: BFM Writing Best Practices	10	1 hour

Office of Communications

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
2022 Federal Plain Language Summit	6	5 hours 15 min
Critical Thinking for Clear Writing: An Introduction	2	14 hours
Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please	10	6 hours
Writing for Government Employees	1	8 hours
Strategies for Instituting a Culture of Plain Language in Public Organization and Government Agencies	3	1 hour
Acrolinx: Terminology Demonstration	10	6 hours

Agency Activities and Accomplishments

To help our employees communicate with the public as clearly and effectively as possible, we offer plain writing training throughout the year. We offer online resources about plain writing to both employees and the public. In addition, many components use Acrolinx and spelling checks in Microsoft software to check their internal and external documents and webpages for compliance with plain writing guidelines.

Our agency's plain writing activities include:

- Online training, classroom training, and workshops.
- Ongoing review of webpages and documents.
- Access to online resources, desk guides, and VODs.

Our components are committed to communicating with the public clearly and concisely, and we strive to create webpages and documents that are easy to understand. We continue to be recognized by other agencies and organizations, including the Center for Plain Language, for the clarity of our webpages and documents, and high marks on the annual Federal Plain Writing Report Card.

Agency Activities and Accomplishments

The Team oversees agency's Plain Language Program, including plain language compliance efforts at the agency. The Team encourages plain writing for communications so that language we use is useful and easily understood.

To this end, the team:

- Worked with website content owners to ensure pages being evaluated by the Center for Plain Language for the Federal Plain Language Report Card adhered to the best plain language practices.

- Received the highest grades in federal government on the most recent Federal Plain Language Report Card:
  - A+ for Organizational Compliance
  - A for Writing Quality

- Won a *Clear Mark Award of Distinction* for our Disability Blog Post submission, "Disagree with Your Disability Decision? We Will Take Another Look."

- Developed and solicited new ideas for engaging writers throughout the agency.

- Created and maintain a Plain Language Project Plan and Work Matrix to be proactive with plain writing efforts.

- Engaged with other plain language entities (such as the Center for Plain Language, Plain Language Action & Information Network, Plain Language Community of Practice, other government agency plain language employees, and Acrolinx) to discuss best practices and ways to engage with writers in the agency and the broader plain language community.

- Scheduled and participated in benchmarking sessions with the plain language staff of other government agencies, such as the U.S. Geological Survey Forest and Rangeland Ecosystem Science Center and Department of Education's Office of Inspector General, to compare and discuss plain language best practices.

- Read and discussed plain language literature, including the plain language book, *Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please: The case for plain language in business, government, and law*, by Professor Joseph Kimble.

- Initiated an educational discussion with Professor Joseph Kimble about plain language best practices.

- Attended outside plain language activities, such as the
  o 2022 Federal Plain Language Summit.
  o 2022 Federal Plain Language Report Card Announcement.
  o PLAIN and Center for Plain Language webinars, virtual meetings, and plain language huddles.

- Presented plain language trainings and discussions across the agency, such as:
  o A Lunch and Learn session with our Office of Analytics, Review, and Oversight.
  o Presentations to staff in the Office of Communications.
  o Briefings to the agency's executive leadership (Deputy Commissioners and Assistant Deputy Commissioners).
  o Renewed emphasis on the participation of the Compliance Board and their contributions to spreading plain language throughout each component's culture.

- Maintained internal and external Plain Language webpages.

- Published two internal broadcasts to all employees about plain language, including:
  o An Internal Broadcast from the Deputy Commissioner of Communications.
  o A Commissioner Broadcast from the Acting Commissioner of Social Security.

- Reviewed and revised written communication products (such as the *Statement*, agency webpages, publications, and correspondence) to ensure the language is compliant with the Act.

- Requested that the plain language team be invited to review new and revised documents, webpages, and written communications to ensure they follow plain language best practices.

- Maintained Acrolinx licenses (editing software) for plain language writers throughout all components of the agency.

- Reviewed and responded to inquiries from the ^PlainWriting@ssa.gov mailbox.

Moving Forward

Our agency has made big strides over the past year operationalizing our plain language activities. We see even bigger steps ahead as we strive to make plain language a part of our agency's culture—and a part of a wider range of communications that are distributed by Social Security.

As we move forward, we will continue to make plain language a top priority to comply with the law and provide the best service we can in a way that the public can easily understand. We will continue the use of editing software tools, such as Acrolinx, to prepare and edit notices, websites, policies, letters, and other communications. Using editing software tools brings clarity and a consistent approach to creating and reviewing our written products.

To evaluate the effectiveness of our communications, we will continue to participate in the Federal Plain Language Report Card and ClearMark awards processes as presented by the Center for Plain Language. We will work with our Plain Writing Compliance Board to ensure the distribution of our plain writing awards criteria to employees.

As we continue to use editing tools and software such as Acrolinx, we will investigate other editing tools as well.

In support of a well-trained workforce, we will provide training resources on plain writing that include online classes, the Commissioner's Writing Center, and targeted classroom training.

We will continue to engage our employees and executives to put plain language principles into practice throughout our agency's culture and promote the use of plain writing in all our communications, internally and externally. We will continue to engage with plain language experts outside Social Security as we adopt best practices and aim to establish our own Plain Language Program as the benchmark other agencies and organizations strive to emulate.

Summary

This 2022 *Plain Writing Compliance Report* documents our compliance activities and accomplishments across the agency. We achieved all the requirements of the Act. We received an "A+" in the compliance category of the Center for Plain Language's Report Card for federal agencies. We received an "A" for Writing Quality based on our FOIA and Contact Us webpages. These two grades make us the highest-scoring agency in the federal government this year. We also received a ClearMark Award of Distinction for our disability blog post.

This report includes information on our plain writing resources, our editing tools, and supporting activities. We provide examples of notices, webpages, policy documents, and report the agency's plain writing training activities.

We receive high ratings on our websites because they are easy to read, understand, and navigate and information is easy to find.

We are proud of our plain writing accomplishments throughout the years, and we know that it means better service to the public. We recognize that improvements in plain writing are not a destination, but a journey. We look forward to the next leg of that journey to provide information in a clear, concise, and understandable way.

Appendix A: Plain Writing Examples

1. **New – Fact Sheet:** *Supplemental Security Income and Other Benefits:* [Supplemental Security Income and Other Benefits (ssa.gov)](#)

2. **New – Blog Post:** Ten Years of my Social Security Means You Can Do More: [Ten Years of my Social Security Means You Can Do More Social Security Matters (ssa.gov)](#)

3. **New – Blog Post:** There's Still Time! Claim Your 2021 Child Tax Credit: [There's Still Time! Claim Your 2021 Child Tax Credit Social Security Matters (ssa.gov)](#)

4. **Revised – FAQ:** If I get married, will it affect my benefits? [KA-02172 · FAQ | SSA](#)

5. **Revised – FAQ:** How do I report a missing payment? [KA-02423 · FAQ | SSA](#)

6. **Revised – Website:** SSA In-Office Hearing Office Service: [SSA Hearing Options -In-Person Hearings](#)

7. **Revised – Report:** 2022 *OASDI Trustees Report:* [The 2022 OASDI Trustees Report (ssa.gov)](#)

8. **Revised – Website:** SSA In-Office Hearing Office Service: [SSA Hearing Options -In-Person Hearings](#)

9. **New – Newsletter**: *Congressional Update:* [Social Security Congressional Update Newsletter - September 2022 #011 (ssa.gov)](#)

10. **Revised – Report:** *Fiscal Year 2023 President's Budget*: [Fiscal Year 2023 President's Budget (ssa.gov)](#)

11. **New – Blog Post:** Tips on How to Stick to Your Budget: [5 Tips on How to Stick to Your Budget - Ticket to Work - Social Security (ssa.gov)](#)

12. **New** – Notice: *Notice of Class Action Order: Ely V. Saul:* [Notice of Class Action Order: Ely v. Saul](#)

Appendix B: Plain Writing Links

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

1. Social Security Administration
   https://www.ssa.gov

2. Plain Writing
   https://www.ssa.gov/plain-language

3. Plain Writing Compliance Board
   https://www.ssa.gov/agency/plain-language/complianceboard.html

4. Plain Writing Contacts
   https://www.ssa.gov/agency/plain-language/contacts.html

5. Plain Writing Feedback
   PlainWriting@ssa.gov

6. 2022 Plain Writing Implementation Plan
   https://www.ssa.gov/agency/plain-language/pdf/PlainWritingImplementationPlan-2022.pdf