2019
Plain Writing Compliance Report

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

February 2020

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Social Security Administration

The 2019 Plain Writing Compliance Report

Introduction

The Social Security Administration leads the federal government in communicating to the public with writing that is clear, concise, and easy to understand. But don't take our word for it—the results speak for themselves. Since 2013, Social Security has consistently received high marks, with four A+s, seven As, one B+, and 2 Bs. We have not received one grade below a B. No other government agency can boast such a claim.

Why do we work so hard on easy-to-understand writing? Not only is it the law, it's good customer service. Our goal is to provide the people who depend on us with writing that they can understand and use.

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

We are pleased to present our 2019 Plain Writing Compliance Report, which highlights our accomplishments to comply with the Act. The Report also includes specific details about our efforts.

Our Commitment

We take seriously our responsibility to provide clear and concise messages in our written communication to current and future recipients. In 2019, about 64 million Americans received Social Security benefits and about 178 million workers were covered under Social Security. We strive to explain our complex programs in language that is easy to understand. When we apply the principles of Plain Writing, we successfully deliver information to the public that is useful, easy for anyone to access, and simple to understand. We do this in a variety of ways: in letters, notices, publications, emails, and webpages.

In addition to the public, we communicate daily with state and local government agencies, third party groups, 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:

- The Plain Writing website;
- Commissioner's Writing Center; and
- Quality Initiative for Commissioner's Correspondence (QUICC) Handbook.

Also, we have expanded the use of Acrolinx, our editing software tool, and have upgraded to a new and improved version of the software. We train employees about the Act, Plain Writing standards, and the use of Acrolinx. As an agency and as individual components, we keep our employees informed and trained, encouraging a commitment to Plain Writing. We also maintain a Plain Writing mailbox monitored, by staff who respond to emails from agency employees and members of the public.

We encourage employees and the public to submit their concerns and suggestions about our Plain Writing efforts to PlainWriting@ssa.gov. We ensure that 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 provide clear, concise, and easily understandable messages to everyone who interacts with our agency.

Our Accomplishments

As in years past, we strive to comply with the Plain Writing Act of 2010. To accomplish this, we met basic and advanced requirements.

We developed and followed our *Plain Writing Implementation Plan for 2019*, 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 the Frequently Asked Questions and *my* Social Security webpages;
- Issued the *2018 Plain Writing Compliance Report*;
- Promoted the use of the Acrolinx editing software tool and renewed licenses;
- Increased the number of employees trained to use Acrolinx and expanded usage among Headquarters, Operations and Regional staff;
- Trained employee on Plain Writing, business writing and grammar, and effective writing techniques;
- Applied Plain Writing guidelines to our website, documents, letters, notices, and other written materials;
- Maintained a Plain Language page on our intranet and internet websites; and
- Continued updating all high traffic agency webpages in compliance with Plain Writing principles.

How We Carry Out Our Plan

Our Plain Writing Compliance Board meets on a regular basis, to plan, coordinate and carry out the *Plain Writing Implementation Plan* and related activities. This plan provides an outline of our Plain Writing goals and activities.

The Board members represent each component within the agency. Each member represents a component of the agency. These board members prepare reports and monitor Acrolinx usage

for their staff members and relay any revisions to assigned licenses. We regularly rotate members on the Board to encourage new ideas and input.

Oversight

Dr. Steven Patrick, the Associate Commissioner for the Office of Public Inquiries and Communications Support in the Office of Communications, is our senior agency official for Plain Writing. Dr. Patrick, his staff and representatives from the Office of the Commissioner, and 12 deputy commissioner-level components make up our Plain Writing Compliance Board. 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 listing of Board members and regional directors**).

Plain Writing Resources

We offer communication tools on our Plain Writing website to help both employees and the public. Our website provides techniques to deliver clear and concise information. The contacts provided on our website are members of the Compliance Board and employees who provide guidance on Plain Writing. This website also has useful links for Plain Writing tips and related resources. We encourage comments and suggestions from employees and the public at PlainWriting@ssa.gov.

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 (QUICC) 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 Learning website** is available to all employees and offers various plain language training opportunities such as, Videos on Demand (VODs), online lessons, instructor-led courses, books, and additional Plain Language resource materials.

The **Plain Writing Implementation Team** (Team) is responsible for oversight and application of the Plain Writing Act of 2010. The Team provides agency-wide support and training to improve clarity of their documents and webpages.

We have committed to create websites and online services accessible to our employees and the public. We confirm that our online content meets Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. Section 508 requires all federal agencies to provide communications that are both accessible to people with disabilities and compatible with assistive technologies.

Editing Tools

In 2019, our use of the Acrolinx editing tool has increased throughout the agency. This software allows us to evaluate websites, PDF files, and Word documents in large batches. Acrolinx also checks individual documents. We have approximately 350 agency employees trained to use

Acrolinx, and we have worked to expand the software's use throughout Headquarters, Operations, and Regional Offices across the country. We strive to provide updated training materials as the software is upgraded. We also provide additional video conference training as requested. Acrolinx training videos on demand are currently available on our intranet for employees.

Acrolinx can produce a wide range of analytics data. We use this data to monitor Acrolinx usage at our agency, identify problem areas as they relate to Plain Writing, and gauge our progress in applying Plain Writing principles in our written communication. Acrolinx also helps us streamline our training efforts. The software not only allows individuals to evaluate their written products, but also allows managers to evaluate the quality of writing across their offices and identify training needs.

In 2019, we moved forward with plans to upgrade to a new version of Acrolinx. The newer version will increase our ability to test all of our written communications for Plain Language. In 2020, we are making efforts to redistribute our 350 Acrolinx licenses to the writers, editors, leadership, and employees who need it most. These license holders will have the new version of Acrolinx installed on their computers so they can take advantage of Acrolinx's full suite of services.

Supporting Activities

Back in 2016, we obtained 350 Acrolinx licenses for continued use throughout the agency. We provide training and support for our users of the Acrolinx editing software. We monitor the allocation of Acrolinx licenses to maximize their effectiveness as a tool to help us comply with the Act.

In 2019, we continued to promote the application of Plain Writing principles in all of our communication methods. We used internal publications and websites to promote Plain Writing and provide guidance on how to put Plain Writing principles into practice.

We routinely televise Plain Writing guidelines on HQTV, our internal Headquarters television network. We electronically broadcast announcements on *SSA Update*, a monthly video news program for agency employees. We also worked with Compliance Board members to encourage the use of Acrolinx across the agency, and sent emails to license holders reminding them to use this valuable tool to support Plain Writing efforts.

How We Measure Performance and Get Public Feedback

Our goal is to improve the way we communicate with the public in a clear, organized way. We encourage members of the public and employees to make comments and suggestions at PlainWriting@ssa.gov. We make every effort to respond to all emails within one business day.

We use customer satisfaction reports such as the ForeSee Experience Index (FXI): E-Government (formerly called the ForeSee E-Government Satisfaction Index) to enhance our website and respond to the needs of our customers. ForeSee measures customer satisfaction on a 0-100 scale and considers scores of 80 or above as the threshold of excellence.

The 2019 report reflects feedback from approximately 1.5 million citizens that used federal government websites, mobile sites, or applications. Top drivers of satisfaction for digital government experiences are Site Information and Information Browsing. Site Information measures how thorough information is and whether it provides answers to questions. Information Browsing focuses on the ability to sort information, narrow choices, and have useful site features. Clear and easy-to-understand content goes a long way to doing well in these measurements.

In 2019, ForeSee also conducted surveys of more than 310,817 users to measure the clarity and conciseness of our written products. We received a Plain Language score of 86.

Compliance Report

Each year, we publish an annual Compliance Report. We will issue the 2019 Compliance on Friday, March 20, 2020.

Examples of Notices and Publications Using Plain Writing Principles

The following are component-specific examples of notices and publications used in external communications. Note that many of these documents, although released by a specific component, reflect cooperation across teams, departments, and the agency. Each of these examples reflect Plain Writing efforts across the agency. These entries show our efforts to improve our written communication products. Please see Appendix A for examples.

Office of Communications

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Publication: *Social Security Update* (electronic newsletter)	Elected officials, advocates, stakeholders, general public	We applied plain writing principles to each *Update* article to bring awareness to key agency initiatives.	Our application of plain writing principles ensures that we provide clear and concise information to the people we serve and their advocates, representatives, and stakeholders.
Publication: Monthly Information Package (MIP)	News Media, Public	We applied plain writing principles to each MIP article to bring awareness to key agency initiatives.	Our application of plain writing principles ensures that we provide clear and concise information to the news media and the public we serve.

Office of Budget, Finance and Management

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Publication: FY 2019 Agency Financial Report	Congress, Public	Integrated new functions, such as agency strategic planning and organizational performance reporting, into the BFM mission; coordinated the review of documents to ensure consistent messaging.	The Report took complicated and complex issues and presented them in an easily understood way. In 2019, the agency's 2018 report received the Association of Government Accountant's Certificate of Excellence in Accountability Reporting award for an unprecedented 21st year.

Office of Human Resources

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Email Notice: National Financial Literacy Month	All SSA Employees	Makes use of bullets, white space, and pain writing principles to create a concise and informative email	Provided useful information to all employees in an easily understood way.

Office of Operations

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Email Notice: Webinar Invite	Members of the general public with an interest in our disability programs and the medical decision process	Makes use of short and concise information, a call-to-action button, and plain writing principles to solicit interest in a webinar for the public.	Made use of Plain Writing principles to effectively communicate to the public about a webinar event.

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 Communications

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Webpage: *Social Security Matters* Blog	General public	We applied plain writing principles to each blog post to bring awareness to key agency initiatives.	Our application of plain writing principles ensures that we provide clear and concise information to our subscribers and blog readers.
Webpage: How to Apply Online for Just Medicare	General public	We applied plain writing principles to this website to help members of the public understand how to apply for Medicare online—even if not applying for other benefits.	Our application of plain writing principles ensures that we provide clear and concise information to people on how to apply for Medicare.
Webpage: *Social Security Matters* Blog	General public	We applied plain writing principles to each blog post to bring awareness to key agency initiatives.	Our application of plain writing principles ensures that we provide clear and concise information to our subscribers and blog readers.

Office of Hearings Operations

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Website: iBulletin	Employees with an interest in Hearings Operations	The website serves as a bulletin board for employees interested in hearings operations. Incorporates short and concise language, images, and accordion-style material for improved use.	Presents information to employees about Hearings Operations in a way that is not overwhelming, using images and accordion-style material.

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Website: Ethics Matters	Employees	Uses simple language, attractive headings and informative links to provide information about ethics, the ethics team, and how they can help.	Uses Plain Writing practices to provide important ethics information to employees in a way that is easy to understand.

Office of the General Counsel

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Website: Freedom of Information Act (FIOA)	General public	Uses simple language, and accordion-style headings to present FIOA information in a clear and easily understood way.	Uses Plain Writing practices to provide important information to the public about the Freedom of Information Act.

Examples of Policy Documents Using Plain Writing Principles

The following are examples of policy documents. These entries show our efforts to improve clarity.

Office of Analytics, Review and Oversight

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
The Social Security Administration's Programs Operations Manual System (POMS)	Employees and the general public	Rewrote and reorganized instructions in POMS to improve readability and understanding.	Improved readability and understanding.

Examples of Congressional and Public Inquiries Using Plain Writing Principles

Office of General Counsel

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Written responses to incoming Privacy Act requests and Freedom of Information Act requests	General Public, Congress, Media	We provided clear and concise responses to the incoming requests. Written responses were also consistent with the principles outlined in the Quality Initiative for Commissioner's Correspondence Handbook.	Use of the plain writing principles ensures that we provide clear and concise responses to the various requestors.

Office of Operations

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Responses to congressional inquiries	Congressional delegations in New York and New Jersey Congressional staffers	The Regional Public Affairs Office (RPAO) reviewed nearly 1,000 congressional replies for passive voice and other substandard writing techniques and adjusted them, as necessary.	Clarified and provided information about Social Security's programs and policies.

Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Social Security Congressional Inquiries Guide	Congressional staff	The Congressional Inquiries Guide (Guide) is a comprehensive booklet concerning the programs the Social Security Administration oversees. We update the guide every two years at the onset of each new Congress.	The agency overview and program descriptions are clear and easy to understand. Congressional staffers may request copy of Guide at any time.

Training on Plain Writing Principles

Office of Human Resources/Office of Learning: Agency-wide Training

Online Courses & Classroom Training – Writing and General Knowledge

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Using the Parts of Speech-X13669	2	31 Minutes
Getting the Details Right: Spelling Basics-X13670	1	29 Minutes
Abbreviating, Capitalizing, and Using Numbers-X13842	28	33 Minutes
Using Punctuation Marks-X13676	10	30 Minutes
Troublesome Words and Phrases: Common Usage Mistakes in Writing-X13679	21	29 Minutes
Creating Well-Constructed Sentences-X13843	10	36 Minutes
Audience and Purpose in Business Writing-X13897	47	28 Minutes
Clarity and Conciseness in Business Writing-X13607	122	31 Minutes
Editing and Proofreading Business Documents-X13836	28	30 Minutes
Taking Effective and Professional Notes-X16773	3	20 Minutes
Improving Your Technical Writing Skills-X13527	10	22 Minutes
Developing an Effective Business Case-X14006	4	30 Minutes
Writing Effective E-mails and Instant Messages-X13666	71	28 Minutes
Sending E-mails to the Right People-X13667	4	29 Minutes
Organizing Your E-mail-X13668	10	28 Minutes
The Plain Writing Act-X10137	11	1 Hour
Hearing Operations Management Specialist (HOMS)	47	5 weeks
Hearings Customer Service Representative (formally known as Legal Assistant)	100	3 weeks
Advance ALJ	125	3 days
Supplemental ALJ	101	2 days
Accessible Principles of Plain Language (Operations)	88	1 Hour
Accessible Principles of Plain Language Part 1	197	1 Hour

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Accessible Principles of Plain Language Part 2	167	1 Hour
EWD Principles of Plain Language Workshop	32	1 Hour
Principles of Plain Language (Operations)	94	1 Hour
Principles of Plain Language Part 1	257	1 Hour
Principles of Plain Language Part 2	169	1 Hour
Principles of Plain Language Workshop	72	1 Hour

Headquarters Component Training

(Any classroom training not sponsored by the Office of Learning)

Office of Budget, Finance, & Management

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
New Employee Orientation	35	4 hours
BFM Leaders Summit	82	6 hours
Career Enrichment on the Move	30	2 hours
Brand You	30	2 hours

Office of the General Counsel

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
New Employee Orientation	35	4 hours
Business Writing & Grammar Skills	1	2 days

Office of Hearings Operations

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
ALJ Supplemental Training (Plain writing is taught as part of Supplemental ALJ training)	226 virtual and in-person	Entire course is 20 hours. 2-3 hours are spent on writing instruction

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Decision Writer Training (Plain writing is taught as part of DW training)	178	Entire course is 3 weeks. Approximately 1 week is spent on writing instruction
Legal Assistant (SCT) Training (Plain writing is taught as part of SCT training)	100	Entire course is 80 hours. Approximately 2 hours are spent on writing instruction.

Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Advanced Business Writing	3	8 hours
Business Writing and Grammar	4	8 hours

Office of Operations/Office of Central Operations

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Office of Disability Determinations (ODD) New Employee Training	8	4-6 hours
Advanced Business Writing (CDPS Staff)	1	16 hours
Communicating with Tact, Diplomacy, and Professionalism (CDPS Staff)	1	8 hours

Office of Retirement and Disability Policy

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
PolicyNet Publication System: XML Editor VOD	Approximately 100 HQ and regional authors	25 minutes
PPS and Plain Language Classroom Training	Approximately 100 HQ and regional authors	1-2 hour sessions
PolicyNet Publication System: Authors Training VOD	Approximately 100 HQ and regional authors	25 minutes

Regional Training

(Any classroom training not sponsored by the Office of Learning)

Office of Central Operations (OCO)

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Business Writing for Staffers (Baltimore)	149	8 hours
Business Writing for Staffers (WBDOC)	59	8 hours
Business Writing for Managers "Writing with Purpose" (Baltimore)	177	16 hours
Business Writing for Managers, "Writing with Purpose" (WBDOC)	49	16 hours
Business Writing for Managers, "Writing with Purpose" Train the Trainer (Virtual/face-to-face)	12	16 hours
Executive Writing by Graduate School USA	21	16 hours
Operations Support Branch (OSB) New Hire Staff Orientation Disability Examiner (DE) Document Processing System (DPS) Training	12	14 hours

Atlanta

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Atlanta's regional SEPSC conducted multiple refresher training courses throughout calendar year 2019. Each of these courses emphasized the use of standardized notice language, minimization of dictated language while utilizing the PC notice applications of AURORA, PC Notices, and the Document Processing System. The SEPSC conducted monthly counterpart meetings with technical team leads, providing notice reminders specifically addressing Uniform Text Identifiers (UTI), approved Agency language, and the minimization of dictated language. Also noted is the use of proper punctuation. During formal classroom instruction for Claims Specialists, Benefit Authorizers and Customer Service Representatives, the following notice lessons are incorporated:	Approximately 50-500 depending on the course.	One day-week, depending on the class

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Claims Specialist – CA-03 Evidence, Documentation, Development and Notices – 12 total hours of formal instruction and practical application during case break Benefit Authorizer – BA-09 Notices 24 total hours of formal instruction and practical application during case break. In the lesson, trainees have objectives that outline the fundamentals of preparing concise, detailed and understandable notice language. Tools, such as the macro script player available in MACADE system, act as a means of reducing typing errors and ensuring that sentences are grammatically correct. Trainees are given handouts/guides during classroom instruction to aid the students in providing our customers with effective communication. Customer Service Representative – CSR-04 PCACS, Direct Contact, and Notices. Trainees have exposure to the AURORA notice system during formal classroom instruction. AURORA serves as the foundational platform for creation of notices in the Program Service Center. AURORA is equipped with spell check and a review functionality for use by the technician prior to releasing an official Agency notice. Customer Service Inquiry / Fact Sheet Training for New Supervisors		

Denver

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Fundamentals of Staff Work	9 (Training held in July 2019)	16 hours

Kansas City

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Kansas City hosted two professional development courses that included plain writing instructions:		
• Business Writing and Grammar	25	16 hours
• Briefing Techniques	25	16 hours
We also hosted a Completed Staff Work Course and an Advanced Correspondence Guidelines course that includes plain writing guidance:		
• Completed Staff Work	20	4 hours
• Advanced Correspondence Guidelines	20	4 hours

New York

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
During each *Transition to Leadership 301 –"Nuts and Bolts"* course, the Regional Public Affairs Office (RPAO) presents a session on clear and effective communication, including writing. The purpose is to provide new supervisors with an understanding of Public Affairs responsibilities and the importance of clear writing. The intended outcome is to bring the participants up-to-date on effective media relations and factors to formulate and compose a well-written response. In FY 19, the New York Region held one "*Nuts and Bolts"* class in August 2019 with 38 participants.	38	The RPAO session is one hour.

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
In FY 19, the New York Region held a *Cogs and Wheels New Analyst Training* for New York Regional Office and Area Office staff from March 5-7, 2019. The *Cogs and Wheels* course is for analysts who have assignments or receive promotional opportunities to the New York Regional Office, the Northeastern Program Service Center, or an Area Director's Office staff position within the last two years to ensure that they have the tools, knowledge, and resources to succeed in analyst positions. Two of the focus areas are *Analyst Basic Roles and Responsibilities,* and *Written Communication*. Staff Assistants from the Office of the ARC MOS cover email etiquette/ communication and Commissioner's Talking Points. In *Analyst Basic Roles and Responsibilities*, participants gain an understanding of the analyst's basic role and how to present staff work in a professional manner, including the written product. The presenters use *Before and After* samples as examples during the *Cogs and Wheels Written Communication* training. These examples demonstrate the appropriate way to edit and disseminate an email for regional distribution.	18	2 hours for the *Written Communication* session 3 hours for the *Analyst Basic Roles and Responsibilities* session
Instructor Angela Walton provided *Business Writing and Grammar* training to New York Regional Office staff from June 10-June 11, 2019.	21	2 days
Instructor Angela Walton provided *Advanced Business Writing* training to New York Regional Office staff from June 24-25, 2019.	23	2 days
Written Communication is a competency for both of the New York Region's development programs and is included on each participant's Individual Development Plan (IDP). On October 30, 2018, program participants attended a conference call on the competency of Written Communication hosted by the Regional Public Affairs Director. In addition, the Regional Office assigned an LMS writing course and writing activities to the participants before the conference call.	28	1 hour

Philadelphia

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Business Writing Essentials Online, Interactive Training course	45	10 hr.
Effective Email Management Training, includes content on improving writing quality	47	5 hr.

San Francisco

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Public Affairs Training for New Supervisors/Managers – Nuts & Bolts (Effective Presentations, Written, and Oral Communications)	35	2 Hours
Focus on Your Business Writing (SF-Sponsored)	60	3 Hours
Intermediate Focus on Your Business Writing (SF-Sponsored)	30	3 Hours
Critical Congressional Unit: Virtual Detailees Training	7	2 Hours
Advanced Business Writing	12	3 Hours
OSLWD Analyst Courses	150	14 Hours

Seattle

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Fundamentals of Staff Work	15	16 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 or StyleWriter 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 videos-on-demand; and
- Software editing tools such as Acrolinx and StyleWriter.

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 by Component

Office of Analytics, Review, & Oversight

- Newsletter that publishes reminders about Plain Writing at various times.
- Revising policy publications to clarify policy using plain language.
- Editing templates in the Document Generation System to make notices more readable and understandable.

Office of Budget, Finance, and Management

- Our agency received an unprecedented 21st consecutive Certificate of Excellence in **resources provided to the agency.** The CEAR recognizes outstanding accountability reporting and is the highest form of recognition in Federal Government financial management reporting. The AFR provides financial management and high-level performance information. This information enables the President, Congress, and public to assess how well the agency accomplished its mission, achieved its goals, and managed its financial resources. With the Acting Commissioner's approval, we send the report to the President, OMB, and Congress.
- We held meetings with components to provide plain language guidance for our agency's budget and performance documents Accountability Reporting (CEAR) award for our FY 2018 Agency Financial Report (AFR). **The AFR submitted November 2018 complied with all Office of Management and Budget (OMB) requirements and demonstrated for our stakeholders our stewardship and accountability for the financial.**

- We continued to conduct multiple reviews of our component's documents to ensure plain writing compliance, technical accuracy, and appropriate tone. We also set up group reviews of major reports.
- We continued to use the Acrolinx software to assist in our reviews of webpages, Microsoft Word documents, and PDF files for spelling, grammar, style, and readability, and to flag areas that may not conform to the agency's plain writing objectives.
- At the direction of our agency's Web Governance Steering Committee (WESCO), we completed the annual review and certification of our public-facing web content for currency and accuracy as well as plain language.
- The following resources from our 2015 BFM Writing Month continue to be available as resources for employees:
    - **Quality Initiative For The Commissioner's Correspondence (QUICC) Video On Demand (VOD)**: We partnered with the Office of Public Inquires (OPI) and the Office of Learning (OL) to provide a QUICC VOD (QUICC Guide VOD and QUICC Guide VOD for EWDs).
    - **Online Resources**: We provided a Writers' Toolkit on our intranet site that serves as an additional writing resource for our authors. The Writers' Toolkit includes the BFM Communications Guide; links to the QUICC Handbook, QUICC Training VODs, Plain Language VODs, and links to the Commissioner's Writing Center, which provides information on formatting letters and memoranda, the Commissioner's Priority Correspondence process, and online training courses.

Office of Communications

- We provide oversight and leadership for the Plain Writing Compliance Board and manage the Plain Writing Implementation Team, both of which ensure the application of Plain Writing principles in the agency's written communications.
- We continue to provide training, tips, and help with Acrolinx and Plain Writing principles across the agency and maintain 350 Acrolinx licenses.
- We promote Plain Writing principles through our internal communications, including emails, our Plain Writing website, and other internal communication vehicles.
- We initiated a redistribution of the Acrolinx licenses to make sure it is being used by those who need it most.
- We continue to make all of our written communications communications adhere to the best Plain Writing practices, resulting in continued high scores on the Center for Plain Language Federal Report Card
- We provide information to the media, third parties, the general public, and employees that is easy to read, simple to understand, and useful to know.
- We strive to promote clear, concise, and useful information in everything we produce.

Office of Hearings Operations

- We strive to use plain writing in all communication, and emphasize plain writing in all training efforts.

Office of Human Resources

- We conducted reviews of our component's documents to ensure compliance with the Plain Writing Act, technical accuracy, and use of appropriate tone.
- We used the Acrolinx editing software to assist in our reviews of Microsoft Word and PDF documents. Acrolinx checks and makes recommendations to correct spelling, grammar, style, readability, and it flags areas that may not conform to the agency's Plain Writing objectives.
- At the direction of the agency's Web Governance Steering Committee (WESCO), we completed the annual review and certification of our public-facing web content for relevance, accuracy, Plain Language, and 508 compliance.
- Posted Plain Writing information and resources on our Office of Information Technology for Human Resources website for our employees.
- Redesigning HR intranet websites. The redesign includes a review of all documents and web content for clear and concise communication, technical accuracy, appropriate tone and plain writing compliance. It also focuses on up-to-date/current information, improved layout, flow and content organization.

Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs

- Reviewed congressional correspondence responses from agency components for accuracy, responsiveness, and plain writing compliance prior to release.
- Developed and maintained an electronic repository for all writers to reference.
- Provided instructions to staff on identifying and handling new correspondences concerns.
- Established and updated 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.
- Include plain writing feedback to staff as part of our quality control efforts.
- Used the Commissioner's Writing Center, the Quality Initiative for Commissioner's Correspondence (QUICC), the Correspondence Guide Language (CGL), and Acrolinx to review responses to congressional inquiries.

Office of Operations

- June 2019 - Policy in Focus (PIF) for the Strengthening Protections for Social Security Beneficiaries Act of 2018
- Protection & Advocacy (P&A) Grantee Onboarding Overview
- P&A Laptop Support User Guide
- P&A Printer Guide
- P&A Informational Onboard Email Template
- P&A Suitability & Credentialing User Guide
- National Disability Rights Network (NDRN) & P&A Grantee Separation Checklist
- Writing courses such as Write 2 the Point & Plain Writing Clinic.

- Even prior to the Plain Writing Act of 2010, the Office of Disability Determinations was committed to equipping new hires, detailees, leadership program participants, and transferees with the tools needed to successfully draft clear, concise, well-written internal and external communications. Incoming staff participate in four to six hours of classroom training.
- Teaching on organizing thoughts and data in a meaningful way.
- Grammar usage, Proper sentence structure, and punctuation.
- Trainees receive hands-on experience preparing controls and other correspondence for DCO, AC, or management level release.
- Fact Sheets for Executive level briefings are taught.
- Lessons also include guidance for Regional Commissioner Notes and DDS Administrators' Letters, Center Director Notes; and Staff level correspondence.

Office of Central Operations

- OSB staff will provide training on preparing overpayment notices and payment worksheets for BAs and PETEs in FY 20. This training will address the Commissioner's Writing tips to include fundamental grammar, spelling, and sentence structure.
- OSB staff will provide Benefit Earnings Technicians (BETs) and Claims Specialists (CSs) with training on the Document Processing System (DPS).
- DIO is building plain writing principles into the automation programs it is building.
- TECH Notice-uses preselected dictated text authorized and reviewed by Technical Expert and analysts' staff for the notice categories created by the program. This limits opportunities for the technician to create errors and violate the principles of Plain Writing. This also provides clear examples to the technicians of the goal each of them should strive for when writing to the claimant
- AID-this program uses the notion of preselected
    - dictated text within the guidelines of Plain Writing for
    - all Inter-Agency communications, which like Tech
    - Notice, promotes the Plain Writing Style for the
    - Technician to copy.
- DIO also emphasizes the need for informative and plainly written notices in our Learning Centers for new technicians. Notices are reviewed and can me marked incorrect if not within the boundaries set by Plain Writing and Policy
- Established an online Operations Analyst toolkit that provides guidance and examples on proposals, fact sheets, option papers, and talking points using plain language.

Atlanta Region

- Atlanta's regional SEPSC performs regular quality reviews on completed cases that includes review of any notice prepared. For noted errors, we shat information directly with the technician as a learning tool for future case processing and notice preparation.
- In 2019, SEPSC utilized eQAP, PQR and PQR-PC to capture quality data including feedback on notice preparation

Kansas City Region

New Kansas City regional analysts and professional employees participate in Completed Staff Work training and have access to resources on KCNet including Correspondence Guidelines and links to the Commissioner's Writing Center and Plain Language website.

Moving Forward

As we move forward, we will continue to make plain language a top priority, not only to comply with the law, but also to provide the best service we can in a way that the public can easily understand. We will continue the use of editing tools, such as Acrolinx, to prepare and edit notices, websites, policies, letters, and other documents. Our practice of 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 ClearMark awards process as presented by the Center for Plain Language. We will work with our Plain Writing Compliance Board to ensure distribution of our Plain Writing Awards criteria to employees.

We will also use metrics such as the ForeSee Feedback Surveys to gauge customer satisfaction with the clarity and readability of our letters, notices, documents, and websites. We realize that people turn to the government for accurate information in an understandable format. With that in mind, we rely on measurement tools like the ForeSee Plain Language Survey to provide the best customer service product possible.

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

We will continue to engage our employees to promote the use of plain writing in all of our communications both internally and externally.

Summary

Our 2019 Plain Writing Compliance Report documents this year's agency-wide compliance activities and accomplishments. We achieved all of the requirements of the Plain Writing Act and received an "A+" in the compliance category of the Center for Plain Language's Report Card for Federal Agencies. Our Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) and *my* Social Security webpages also earned an "A" on the Federal Plain Language Report Card. These two grades cumulate to make us the highest-scoring agency in the federal government.

Included in this report is information on our plain writing resources, our editing tools, and support activities. We provide examples of notices, webpages, policy documents, and report on the agency's plain writing training activities.

We receive high ratings on our websites because they are easy to navigate and information is easy to find. In addition, we employ acceptance testing, focus groups, and surveys to develop

content that will meet the needs of our users. We use customer satisfaction surveys such as the ForeSee Plain Language Survey to improve the clarity in our correspondence and on our websites to respond to the needs of our customers.

We are proud of our Plain Writing accomplishments over the years, and we know that it means better service to the public. We are committed to providing clear and concise communications 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 the people who depend on us with information they need and can use in a clear, concise, and understandable way.

Appendix A: Plain Writing Examples

New or Revised Documents

1. Office of Hearings Operations iBulletin – http://oho.ba.ssa.gov/hq-components/oeohr/about-us/oho-ibulletin/
2. 2019 Agency Financial Report – https://www.ssa.gov/finance/
3. Monthly Information Package: 3 Reasons Why Social Security is Important for Women –

Monthly Information Package (MIP)

3 Reasons Why Social Security is Important for Women

More women work, pay Social Security taxes, and earn credit toward monthly retirement income than at any other time in our nation's history. Yet, on average, women face greater economic challenges than men in retirement.

Nearly 55 percent of the people receiving Social Security benefits are women. Women generally live longer than men while often having lower lifetime earnings. And women usually reach retirement with smaller pensions and other assets compared to men. Social Security is vitally important to women for these three key reasons.

You could be eligible for your own benefits if you:

- worked and paid taxes into the Social Security system for at least 10 years and
- have earned a minimum of 40 work credits.

Once you reach age 62, you could be eligible for your own Social Security benefit. Whether you're married or not and whether your spouse collects Social Security or not, you could be eligible. If you're eligible and apply for benefits on more than one work record, you generally receive the higher benefit amount.

The sooner you start planning for retirement, the better off you'll be. We have specific information for women at www.socialsecurity.gov/people/women. Email or post this link to friends and family you love.

4. Monthly Information Package: Seasonal Work While Getting Social Security –

Monthly Information Package (MIP)

Seasonal Work While Getting Social Security

Many people pick up side jobs when the holiday shopping season comes around. It's a good way for you to make some extra income during the busy season. Or you can ease back into work if you have been out of the labor force for a while. We're here to help you navigate seasonal employment if you get Social Security.

You can get Social Security retirement or survivors benefits and work at the same time. But if you're younger than full retirement age and earn more than certain amounts, your benefits will be reduced, although not dollar for dollar. Your benefits could increase when you reach full retirement age. You can read more about employment while retired at www.socialsecurity.gov/planners/retire/whileworking.html.

Special rules make it possible for people that receive Social Security disability benefits to work and still receive benefits. The same goes for or Supplemental Security Income (SSI). If you want to try working again, seasonal work could help you ease back into the work force. Read *Working While Disabled* at www.socialsecurity.gov/pubs/EN-05-10095.pdf or visit our Ticket to Work website at https://choosework.ssa.gov for more information.

We also have an easy-to-share video introducing people to Ticket to Work at choosework.ssa.gov/library/meet-ben-an-introduction-to-ticket-to-work.

Keep in mind that you must report all earnings, including your seasonal earnings, to Social Security. Your earnings also count toward your future benefits. You earn Social Security credits when you work in a job and pay Social Security taxes. We use your total yearly earnings to figure your Social Security credits. You can learn more at www.socialsecurity.gov/pubs/EN-05-10072.pdf.

Employment can bring positive change to your life in many ways, providing independence and community involvement. Social Security is here to help. Please share this information with friends and family.

New or Revised Webpages

1. Social Security Update (electronic newsletter) – https://www.ssa.gov/news/newsletter/
2. Social Security Matters blog post: You Can Help Social Security Make a Difference – https://blog.ssa.gov/you-can-help-social-security-make-a-difference/
3. Social Security Matters blog post: Beware of Social Security Scams – https://blog.ssa.gov/beware-of-social-security-scams
4. Social Security Matters blog post: Social Security Benefits Increase in 2020 – https://blog.ssa.gov/social-security-benefits-increase-in-2020/

Appendix B: Plain Writing Links

This Appendix shows links to webpages and documents that support our compliance with the Plain Writing 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
   https://www.ssa.gov/agency/plain-language/
6. Plain Writing Implementation Plan – 2020
   https://www.ssa.gov/agency/plain-language/materials/pdfs/2020PWIP.pdf