



2020

Plain Writing Compliance Report



SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

March 2021

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Social Security Administration

The 2020 Plain Writing Compliance Report

Introduction

The Social Security Administration communicates with plain language that is clear, concise, and easy to understand. We lead in the federal government in plain writing. But don't take our word for it—the results speak for themselves. Since 2013, Social Security has consistently received high marks on the Center for Plain Language Federal Report Card, with five A+s, seven As, one B+, and 3 Bs. We have not received any grade below a B on the Federal Report Card. No other government agency can make this 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 is useful and easy to understand.

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 2020 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 2020, about 65 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 comprehend. We do this in a variety of ways: in letters, notices, publications, emails, policy documents, and webpages.

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:

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

We use Acrolinx, an editing software tool, to evaluate our written products. 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.

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.

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 of 2010. To accomplish this, we met basic and advanced requirements.

We developed and followed our *Plain Writing Implementation Plan for 2020*, 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 a “B” for Writing Quality based on our Coronavirus Webpage and the FAQ page on how to get a new Social Security Card;
- Issued the *2019 Plain Writing Compliance Report*;
- Issued the *2020 Plain Writing Implementation Plan*;
- Promoted the use of the Acrolinx editing software tool and continued the process of upgrading to a new version of the software to ensure compliance;
- Trained employees on Plain Writing, business writing, grammar, and effective writing techniques;
- Responded to over 500 email inquiries related to plain writing;
- 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 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. These board members prepare reports, monitor Acrolinx usage, assign Acrolinx licenses and promote plain writing principles within their components. We rotate board members to encourage new ideas and input.

Oversight

For seven years and throughout most of 2020, Dr. Steven Patrick, Associate Commissioner for the Office of Public Inquiries and Communications Support in the Office of Communications, has been our senior agency official for Plain Writing. After Dr. Patrick's retirement, Acting Associate Commissioner Maria Artista-Cuchna assumed this role. The Plain Writing Compliance Board consists of the senior agency official and staff as well as 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 member's and plain writing contacts.**)

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 include the Compliance Board members and our regional Plain Writing Contacts, who provide guidance on Plain Writing. This website 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 Strategy, Learning, and Workforce Development website** is available to all employees and offers Plain Writing 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 written documents and webpages.

Our websites and online services are 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 make communications both accessible to people with disabilities and compatible with assistive technologies.

Editing Tools

In 2020, we continued to use Acrolinx editing software to evaluate websites, PDF files, and Word documents. About 350 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 strive to provide updated training materials as the software is upgraded. We also provide Acrolinx training videos on demand for employees on our intranet and one-on-one training upon request.

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 helps identify training needs.

In 2020, we continued with plans to upgrade to a new version of Acrolinx. The newer version increases our ability to test all of our written communications for Plain Language. In 2021, we plan to assess and 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.

In addition to Acrolinx, we also measure our plain writing success using the Flesch-Kincaid Readability Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level.

Supporting Activities

We obtained 350 Acrolinx licenses back in 2016 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 2020, 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 share Plain Writing guidelines on HQTV, our internal Headquarters television network, and in 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 2020 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, Navigation and Information Browsing. Site Information measures how thorough information is and whether it provides answers to questions. Navigation measures how well the site is organized and helps the user to find what they need. Information Browsing focuses on the ability to sort information, narrow choices, and have useful site features. In the H1 2020 Report (Jan-June 2020) Social Security secured the top three customer satisfaction scores (CSAT) for Desktop websites, SSA Extra Help either Medicare Prescription Drug Plan Costs (92%), SSA Retirement Estimator (91%) and my Social Security (90%). Clear and easy-to-understand content goes a long way to doing well in these measurements.

In 2020, ForeSee also conducted surveys of more than 335,241 users to measure the clarity and conciseness of our written products. In 2020, we received a Plain Language score of 78.

Compliance Report

Each year, we publish an annual Compliance Report. You are reading our 2020 Compliance Report, published in March 2021.

Examples of Notices and Publications Using Plain Writing Principles

The following are component-specific examples of notices and publications. 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: <i>Social Security Update</i> (electronic newsletter)	External: general public, elected officials, advocates, stakeholders	We applied plain writing principles to each <i>Update</i> article to bring awareness to key agency initiatives.	Clear and concise news and information that is useful for readers and easy to understand.
Publication: Monthly Information Package (MIP)	External: news media, general public	We applied plain writing principles to each MIP article to bring awareness to key agency initiatives.	Clear and concise delivery of agency news and information for the media to share with the public.

Office of the Chief Actuary

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Publication: 2020 Board of Trustees Report	U.S. Congress and interested members of the public	We update and edit this publication each year and promote the use of plain language wherever possible.	The Actuary's most requested publication explains complex information in plain language.

Office of Budget, Finance and Management

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Publication: FY 2020 Agency Financial Report	OMB, Congress, Public	We improve the documents with each annual or quarterly release. We examine all feedback received.	The Report took complicated and complex issues and presented them in an easily understood way.

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Publication: FY 2020 Annual Performance Report	OMB, Congress, Public	Solicited and examined feedback from across the agency to complete a comprehensive document in plain language.	The Report took complicated and complex issues and presented them in an easily understood way.

Office of Human Resources

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Publication: Personnel Policy Manual	All SSA Employees	Changed language to active voice and increased reading ease.	Easier for readers to find and understand needed personnel information.
Publication: Work-Life Services	All SSA Employees	A new collection of six Informational Releases to help support employees during COVID-19.	Short, plain-language advice that was easy for employees to read and understand.

Office of Operations

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Notices: Special Notice Option (SNO) Busy Signal Letter SNO Request for Telephone Number Letter Address Information Request to Post Office SSA-L2001	General public	We have partially automated these notices, reducing errors and ensuring use of plain language.	These notices, once prepared by individual technicians, are now largely automated for consistent use of plain language.

Office of Retirement and Disability Policy

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Notices: Ticket To Work notices	Disability beneficiaries eligible for Ticket	Use of bolded language and charts to draw attention to important information; used plain writing principles.	Improved readability and understanding. We are conducting a study to evaluate the effectiveness of these improvements.
Medicare-related notices	Individuals eligible for Medicare prescription drug subsidy.		

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: <i>Social Security Matters</i> Blog	General public	We applied plain writing principles to each blog post to bring awareness to key agency initiatives.	Clear and concise language in a conversational style to draw in the reader and provide useful, understandable information.
Webpage: Retirement Benefits Portal	General public	We launched a new Retirement Benefits Portal, consolidating 79 retirement pages to 60 with a modern, customer-centric design and experience.	Improved, customer-centric language, organization, and design. More than 5 million people have used the new portal since it launched in June 2020.
Webpage: Learn About Retirement Benefits	General public	This new customer-focused webpage helps readers learn about retirement benefits.	Clear, concise, customer-centric language and design.

Office of Hearings Operations

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Webpage: Hearings Options Available During COVID-19	People awaiting a hearing	The website provides useful information to people who are awaiting a hearing during the pandemic.	Clearly written in plain language, short and to the point, this new website informs claimants of their hearings options.
Webpage: Video Hearings During COVID-19	People awaiting a hearing	Uses plain language, graphics, and a video about video hearings available during the COVID-19 pandemic.	Plainly explains what people need to know about the video hearing process.

Office of the General Counsel

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Webpage: Freedom of Information Act (FIOA)	General public	We made updates, such as enhanced headings and clarified instructions, and applied plain language 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.

Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Webpage: Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs webpage	General public with an interest in agency testimony, reports, and documents.	Improved organization of agency reports, testimony, budget information, historic documents, regulations, and frequently used brochures.	Easier to navigate, direct links to related materials at Library of Congress, GAO, GPO, and SSA Office of the Inspector General.

Office of Disability and Retirement Policy

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Webpage: <i>Choose Work</i> Blog	General public and beneficiaries interested in working.	Clean landing page, inclusion of FAQs, and regular blog posts to help people understand work incentives.	Increase in readers and readability.

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 guidance to the Office of Government and Information Services (OGIS)	OGIS	We provided guidance to OGIS in response to requesters' dispute resolutions.	Plain writing principals were used when providing written guidance to OGIS.
Written responses to incoming Privacy Act requests and Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) 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 public inquiries	Specific members of the general public	Direct responses to beneficiaries in plain language.	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.

Office of the Chief Actuary

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Analysis of Proposals Affecting Trust Fund Solvency	Individual Members of Congress, Congressional Committees, and related organizations who request OCACT to "score" legislative proposals	We must explain actuarial concepts and analytic results in terms understandable to non-actuaries.	Provide useful and complex information in a way that is easy to understand.

Office of Communications

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Social Security Correspondence Guide Language (CGL)	General public	The Correspondence Guide Language (CGL) is a comprehensive website that acts as the central point for locating agency-approved language about a full range of Social Security programs, used in responding to written correspondence to the public.	Ongoing effort to review and update language to ensure responses to the public are clear and concise, which results in fewer follow-ups.

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
Leadership Competency Series: Written Communication	174	26 min
Communication & Interviewing - Part II - Oral and Written Communication	432	1hr 30min
Principles of Plain Language (Operations)	152	27min
Principles of Plain Language Part 1	188	19min
Principles of Plain Language Part 2	90	32min
Principles of Plain Language Workshop	52	12 min
Using the Parts of Speech-X13669	15	31 Minutes
Getting the Details Right: Spelling Basics-X13670	14	29 Minutes
Abbreviating, Capitalizing, and Using Numbers- X13842	120	30 Minutes
Using Punctuation Marks-X13676	16	33 Minutes
Troublesome Words and Phrases: Common Usage Mistakes in Writing-X13679	32	30 Minutes
Creating Well-Constructed Sentences-X13843	21	29 Minutes
Audience and Purpose in Business Writing-X13897	10	36 Minutes
Clarity and Conciseness in Business Writing-X13607	104	28 Minutes
Editing and Proofreading Business Documents-X13836	64	30 Minutes
Taking Effective and Professional Notes-X16773	21	20 Minutes
Improving Your Technical Writing Skills-X13527	68	22 Minutes
Developing an Effective Business Case-X14006	3	30 Minutes
Writing Effective E-mails and Instant Messages-X13666	587	28 Minutes
Sending E-mails to the Right People-X13667	82	29 Minutes
Organizing Your E-mail-X13668	0	57 Minutes
The Plain Writing Act-X10137	33	1 Hour

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Business Writing and Grammar	136	16 Hours
Advance Business Writing	133	16 Hours

Headquarters Component Training

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

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
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
Acrolinx Training	2	Ongoing

Office of Operations/Office of Central Operations

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Benefit Earnings Technician (BET) Document Processing System (DPS) Training – DPS partially automates the processing of several BET notices. Automation reduces the likelihood of plain writing errors	91	2 hours
Claims Specialist (CS) Change in Primary Insurance Amount (PIA) (CIP) Training – Training included using a notice template to reduce the likelihood of plain writing errors if the technician manually prepared them	294	2 hour

Office of Retirement and Disability Policy

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Preparing Effective Writing (virtual classroom training)	16	3 hour

Office of Analytics, Review, and Oversight

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Analyst Detail Training: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actions Appeals Council Can Take • Logic, Analytical Thinking, and Effective Writing 	84	30 minutes 30 minutes
DGS Tool and Step-by-Step Approach to Using DGS to Draft Remand Orders	84	45 minutes
Appeals Council Decisions	84	1 hour
Temporary Appeals Officer Training <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actions Appeals Council Can Take • Remands • AC Decisions • Adjudicator Feedback 	20	45 minutes 45 minutes 45 minutes 30 minutes
Temporary Administrative Appeals Judge Training <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actions Appeals Council Can Take • AC Decisions • Adjudicator Feedback 	17	45 minutes 1 hour 30 minutes
Division of Quality Bureau Protest Training	22	30 minutes
Division of Quality Reopening Training	37	30 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
Business Writing and Grammar	22	16 hours
Benefit Authorizer – Notice Lesson: Creating deleting, and managing notices.	57	24 hours
Benefit Authorizer Notice Training –Trainees are taught to utilize the Decision Tree Automation Tool when creating notices, helping with creation of notices to the public.	57	16 hours
Customer Service Representative Training, with instruction and exercises on generating notices.	15	24 hours

Dallas

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Advanced Business Writing – training covered Plain Writing, QUICC guide, and proper grammar, format, structure, etc. for external and internal communications	15	2 days

Kansas City

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Communicating with Tact, Professionalism and Diplomacy	25	8 hours
Briefing Techniques	16	16 hours

New York

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Transition to Leadership 301 – Nuts and Bolts Regional Supplement course	37	1 hour
Transition to Leadership 501K – Mid-Level Manager class	14	1 hour
Advanced Business Writing training.	25	2 days
Business Writing and Grammar training	25	2 days
Communicating with Tact, Diplomacy and Professionalism	29	1 day

Philadelphia

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Business Writing Essentials course (online)	32	14 hours
Regional Correspondence and Controls Guide	18	1 hour
Advanced Business Writing	25	3 Hours
Focus on Your Business Writing (SF-Sponsored)	60	3 Hours
Intermediate Focus on Your Business Writing (SF-Sponsored)	40	3 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, StyleWriter, or grammar and spelling checks in MS 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 videos-on-demand; and
- Software editing tools such as Acrolinx.

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

- Published reminders about Plain Writing in internal newsletter.
- Developed a new report to determine if the agency's current service meets the expectations of our future customers. This report compares customer service expectations and preferences with select customer satisfaction survey results. Additionally, where available, we included management information to determine if the agency's current service meets the expectations of our future customers.
- Regularly revise policy publications to clarify use of Plain Language.
- Routinely evaluate templates in the Document Generation System and make necessary revisions to make external notices more readable and understandable.

Office of the Chief Actuary

- Strived to make its numerous publications, which are generally technical in nature, understandable to readers of both technical and non-technical background.

Office of Budget, Finance, and Management

- 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.
- Used Acrolinx to assist in our reviews of webpages, 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.
- Reviewed all correspondence in accordance with the current agency guidelines on Plain Writing, the QUICC Handbook, and GPO Style Manual.
- Encouraged employees to complete Agency’s training courses related to writing and communications.

Office of Communications

- Continued to provide oversight and leadership for the Plain Writing Compliance Board and manage the Plain Writing Implementation Team. Both ensure the application of Plain Writing principles in the agency’s written communications.
- Continued to provide training, tips, and help with Acrolinx and Plain Writing principles across the agency and maintaining the 350 Acrolinx licenses.
- Continued to promote Plain Writing principles through our internal communications, including emails, our Plain Writing website, and other internal communication vehicles.
- Initiated a redistribution of the Acrolinx licenses to maximize its use by those who need it most.
- Continued to make all of our written communications adhere to the best Plain Writing practices, resulting in continued high scores on the Center for Plain Language Federal Report Card
- Continued to provide information to the media, third parties, the general public, and employees that is easy to read, simple to understand, and useful to know.
- Continued to strive to promote clear, concise, and useful information in everything we produce.
- Continued to reconsider, rewrite, and redesign our web pages, publications, and documents to make sure they are customer-focused and easy to read and understand.
- Continued to explore and develop new web pages, documents, and publications to provide information that is useful to customers and easy to understand.

Office of Hearings Operations

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

Office of Human Resources

- Utilized the Commissioner's Writing Center and Quality Initiative for Commissioner's Correspondence (QUICC) to conduct reviews of our component's internal and external website content, documents, internal correspondence and emails to ensure clear and concise communication, use of appropriate tone, technical accuracy and compliance with the Plain Writing Act.
- Developed and maintain an electronic repository for team members and content writers to reference and posted Plain Writing information with updated resources on our Office of Information Technology for Human Resources website for employees.
- Completed the annual review and certification of our public-facing web content for relevance, accuracy, Plain Language, and 508 compliance, at the direction of the agency's Web Governance Steering Committee (WESCO).
- 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.

Office of Systems

- Emphasized the importance of plain writing in the Information Security Policy, which sets forth information security standards for the protection of the agency's information technology resources and data.
- Reviewed Information Security Advisories and Bulletins for clear and concise communication.
- Continued to review documents to ensure plain writing compliance, technical accuracy, and appropriate tone.
- Reminded staff of specific writing tips based on the Commissioner's writing preferences
- Encouraged staff to attend training courses to improve writing skills.
- Shared announcements from the Office of Strategy, Learning & Workforce Development with employees about plain writing courses.
- Submitted material for Inside Systems blog using plain writing.
- Reviewed Intranet pages for clear and concise training guidance and incorporating 508 efforts into the webpages.
- Released 508 guidance to employees.

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.
- Included 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 Retirement and Disability Policy

- Continued to review and improve of POMS instructions for writing and clearing notice language (NL 00610.000).

Office of Operations

- Continued to use Tech Notice Template Creation and Training. Tech Notice uses templates and previously prepared dictated text to create beneficiary notices. Using prepared dictated text reduces the likelihood that a technician will make a plain writing error.
- Prepared additional Tech Notices templates for the Benefit Authorizer (BA), Claims Specialist (CS) and Disability Examiner (DE) job families. In FY 21, we will release these additional Tech Notice templates and provide technician training. Training will include a review of the Commissioner’s Writing Tips (such as appropriate grammar, spelling, and sentence structure) when preparing overpayment notices
- Encouraged adherence to the standards established for Plain Writing via Resource Page on Division of International Operations (DIO) Website.

Office of Central Operations

- Provided 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.

- The AID 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 are 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 South East Payment Service Center performs regular quality reviews on completed cases that includes review of any notice prepared. For noted errors, we share information directly with the technician as a learning tool for future case processing and 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.

We will continue our efforts to roll out the new version of Acrolinx to all employee license holders and will provide training to those users on the software.

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 2020 Plain Writing Compliance Report documents this year’s compliance activities and accomplishments across the agency. 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. We received a “B” for Writing Quality based on our Coronavirus Webpage and the FAQ page on how to get a new Social Security Card. These two grades make Social Security one of the highest-scoring agencies in the federal government yet again.

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 usability 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 Notices and Publications

1. Monthly Information Package Column: Learn Online with Social Security

Monthly Information Package (MIP) Column

LEARN ONLINE WITH SOCIAL SECURITY



With more people learning online, we would like to highlight some of the digital resources we have for educators. Chances are a student will know someone who receives retirement or disability benefits. Our resources could be a way to relate our many programs to a new audience. Showing young people that our programs help wounded warriors and children with disabilities can help them develop greater empathy and provide a path to inspired learning.

We offer an educator's toolkit teachers can use to engage students and educate them on our programs. The toolkit includes:

- Lesson plans with objectives;
- Infographics and handouts for each lesson plan;
- Links to Social Security web pages;
- Talking points; and
- Quiz questions and answers.

You can access the toolkit at www.ssa.gov/thirdparty/educators.html.

Parents are a child's first educators. You can use our toolkit to introduce your child or grandchild to the importance of social safety nets for hardworking Americans.

We value and welcome the efforts all teachers make to educate America's young people. We also want to help spark discussions with students about the benefits Social Security provides to millions of people. Please share our toolkit with your favorite educators today.

2. Work-Life Services Informational Release (for employees)

Work-Life Services Information Release Article

7 Habits to Help You Stay Healthy During COVID-19



Incorporating these seven habits into your new daily routine may help you stay healthy, both physically and mentally.

Sleep Well. Research shows that getting enough sleep improves overall wellness. Adequate sleep can clear brain fog, improve mood, and help your body function better.

Hydrate. The body is composed of about 60% water. Water assists the body in many of its functions: digestion, absorption, circulation, creation of saliva, transportation of nutrients, and maintenance of body temperature. The benefits of drinking water include increased energy, improved digestion, better skin health, and much more.

Get Outside. Sunlight is a natural source of Vitamin D and is a great mood booster, as long as you are adhering to [CDC guidance on COVID-19](#).

Move. You may wish to dedicate a few minutes in the morning to stretching. Daily factors can cause your muscles to tense up, so you may want to take a few moments to loosen up.

Stay Connected. Studies have shown that those who stay connected to others have lower rates of anxiety and depression and improved social, emotional, and physical wellbeing.

Relax. You may wish to balance out production with some rest and relaxation.

Maintain a Routine. You might set a schedule to give yourself some structure and sense of accomplishment.

For more information on healthy habits, visit [Stress Busters](#) and [SSA's Fitness Program](#) website.

3. *Social Security Update* (electronic newsletter): www.ssa.gov/news/newsletter/
4. Annual Performance Report FY 2019 – 2021:
www.ssa.gov/budget/FY21Files/2021APR.pdf
5. 2020 Board of Trustees Report: <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/TR/2020/index.html>
6. Social Security Administration's Agency Financial Report (AFR) for FY 2020:
<https://www.ssa.gov/finance/>

New or Revised Webpages

1. New - Retirement Benefits Portal: www.ssa.gov/benefits/retirement/
2. *Revised* - *Social Security Matters* blog: <https://blog.ssa.gov>
3. *Revised* - Learn About Retirement: www.ssa.gov/benefits/retirement/learn.html
4. *New* - Hearings Options Available During COVID-19:
www.ssa.gov/appeals/hearing_options.html
5. *Revised* - Freedom of Information Act page: www.ssa.gov/foia
6. *Revised* - Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs webpage:
www.ssa.gov/legislation
7. *Revised* - Choose Work Blog: <https://choosework.ssa.gov/blog/2020-02-11-4-tips-to-avoid-job-search-groundhog-day>
8. *New* - SSA Hearing Options Available During Covid-19:
https://www.ssa.gov/appeals/hearing_options.html
9. *New* - SSA Online Video Hearings during Covid-19:
https://www.ssa.gov/appeals/hearing_video.html

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
PlainWriting@ssa.gov
6. 2021 Plain Writing Implementation Plan
<https://www.ssa.gov/agency/plain-language/pdf/2021PlainWritingImplementationPlan.pdf>