



Plain Writing Act Compliance Report July 2011 – December 2011

April 13, 2012

The Plain Writing Act of 2010 (Act) requires Federal agencies to communicate clearly, in a way “that the public can understand and use.” In addition, each Government agency must provide plain writing training for all employees and maintain a plain writing webpage. Annually, agencies must report that their communications comply with the requirements of the Act.

We have long recognized the need for clear and concise communications. Accordingly, we have implemented numerous initiatives consistent with the requirements in the Act. Since our July 13, 2011 [Plain Writing Act Initial Implementation Report](#), we have continued our progress to ensure plain writing in our communications. This report, our first annual compliance report, highlights some of our efforts.

I. Senior Agency Official for Plain Writing

Tiffany Flick, our Acting Executive Secretary, is our Senior Agency Official for Plain Writing.

II. Communicating in Plain Language

We communicate in writing with members of the public, other Federal agencies, State and local government officials, and community organizations. Every communication – a letter, a notice, a publication, or a report – is an important opportunity to deliver a clear, concise, easy-to-understand, and meaningful message.

- **Notice Improvement Initiative:** We send millions of notices to the public each year. We are systematically revising our notices to incorporate the principles of plain language. For example, we revised the notices we send to acknowledge claimants’ requests for hearings and to provide due process rights for work-related continuing disability reviews.
- **Publications:** We incorporate plain writing principles when we develop new publications and update existing ones. For example, we updated several publications related to getting [Extra Help with Medicare Prescription Drug Costs](#) and [Medicare Premiums](#), which explain provisions of these special programs.

- **Program Instructions:** The Program Operations Manual System (POMS) is our official repository for program instructions and policy information. You may access our POMS at <https://secure.ssa.gov/poms.nsf/home!readform>. In 2008, we began using new clear writing guidelines in our POMS. We continue to provide plain writing training for our POMS authors and reviewers, and we continue to improve our policy instructions to avoid unnecessary complexity, ambiguity, and redundancy. To date, we have revised approximately 48 percent of our POMS sections to meet plain writing standards, an increase from 36 percent in July 2011.
- **Regulations:** Our Office of Regulations applies the plain language guidelines when writing regulations to explain how we interpret and implement Federal laws pertaining to the programs we administer. We write the preamble to any regulation, which is an introduction that explains its purpose, in a way that is easy for the public to understand.

III. Informing Employees on the Requirements of the Act

We provide information on the Act to our employees by:

- Including plain language principles in our [Strategic Plan](#);
- Maintaining our Office of Learning's Plain Language intranet site, which serves as an employee portal to plain writing training and resources;
- Making our plain language training videos available on demand for all employees;
- Including reminders and training in office-level meetings; and
- Using posters and signs to promote plain writing awareness.

IV. Training our Employees

All employees completed plain language training in July 2011, and we continue to provide plain writing training to our employees. Our plain language training videos are accessible to all employees on their desktop computers. As necessary, an office may direct its employees to review the training videos. In addition, our Office of Learning offers a variety of business skills training courses that include helpful information on plain writing principles.

Each office targets plain writing training to its specific needs. Examples of office-specific training since our initial report include:

- In October 2011, our Office of the Counsel to the Inspector General trained its attorneys and other staff members on plain writing;
- In July, September, and December 2011, our Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs conducted training on using plain writing principles to write clear testimony; and
- Our Office of Disability Adjudication and Review conducted training with an emphasis on plain writing.

V. Ongoing Compliance

We require a senior manager in each Deputy Commissioner-level office to review a selection of its external communications and certify annually that the communications reviewed comply with the requirements of the Act.

Examples of our efforts to ensure ongoing compliance include:

- Updating the Quality Initiative for Commissioner’s Correspondence (QUICC) Handbook, our internal resource for formal correspondence;
- Responding to plain language questions, suggestions, and comments we receive through our QUICC “Contact Us” link;
- Conducting management reviews of updates to the Teleservice Center Operating Guide;
- Conducting quarterly quality reviews of the Office of Public Inquiries correspondence;
- Revising 900 paragraphs in our Correspondence Guide Language document, which contains agency-approved language for use in responding to high priority correspondence;
- Providing continual feedback to employees who prepare correspondence;
- Responding to plain language questions, suggestions, and comments we receive from the public; and
- Providing training to our offices on specific plain language issues.

VI. Plain Writing Website

You may access our Plain Language website from our homepage at www.socialsecurity.gov, in the section titled *About Our Agency*. The website includes our Plain Writing Initial Implementation Plan and annual compliance report.

VII. Evaluating Customer Satisfaction

As part of our efforts to ensure customer satisfaction, our Office of Quality Performance reviews the effectiveness of our correspondence. The findings and feedback from its surveys and reviews help us improve our correspondence.

We recently conducted:

- **The Notice Probe:** The purpose of this probe was to determine if our notices comply with our writing guidelines and to identify areas of focus for future quality reviews. We found that, overall, the sampled notices complied with our plain language standards.
- **Special Notice Option Survey:** This survey measured the satisfaction of our special notice formats chosen by people who are blind or visually impaired. Survey results showed that, overall, the special formats met customers’ needs.

VIII. Contact Us

We welcome your input. Our agency point of contact for public feedback is our Office of Public Inquiries. You may reach us at:

Social Security Administration
Office of Public Inquiries
Windsor Park Building
6401 Security Blvd.
Baltimore, MD 21235

Email: OPI.Net.Post@ssa.gov