



2017

Plain Writing Compliance Report



SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

February 28, 2018

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Social Security Administration

2017 Plain Writing Compliance Report

We are pleased to share our 2017 Plain Writing Compliance Report. The Report shows our efforts and successes in complying with the Plain Writing Act of 2010, which requires federal agencies to write clearly to ensure that the public understands government information and services.

Our Commitment

We know how much our programs matter to the public. Explaining our complex programs in a way that is clear and concise is a vital part of the service that we provide. Our goal is to provide information that is appropriate, readily accessible, and easy to understand. Therefore, we strive to apply the principles of Plain Writing in all our written communications - including letters, emails, webpages, and publications.

Throughout our agency, we communicate daily with members of the public, state and local governments, advocacy groups, congressional office staff members, and White House staff members. To ensure that our employees apply Plain Writing principles, we continually look for opportunities to train employees on the standards stated in the Plain Writing Act.

Agencywide, we use signage, posters, desk aids, and various video messages, to alert and remind employees of the importance of Plain Writing. Resources that are available to all employees include the:

- Plain Writing website;
- Commissioner's Writing Center; and the
- Quality Initiative for Commissioner's Correspondence (QUICC) Tips Desk Aid.

In addition, we have expanded the use of editing software tools and training courses throughout the agency.

We ensure that our content is compliant with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. Section 508 requires all federal agencies to provide types of communication that are accessible to disabled individuals and compatible with assistive technologies.

Finally, we established a Plain Writing mailbox, where our dedicated staff responds to email inquiries from agency employees and members of the public. We encourage employees and the public to submit their comments and suggestions to PlainWriting@ssa.gov.

We are dedicated to clear communication because our programs matter to people, and that matters to us.

Our Accomplishments

To comply with the Plain Writing Act of 2010, we met basic and advanced requirements.

We developed and followed our *Plain Writing Implementation Plan*, to help us monitor how offices are applying Plain Writing guidelines to their written materials. In addition, we:

- Earned an “A+” for the Writing and Information Design grade on the Federal Plain Language Report Card;
- Received the 2017 Grand ClearMark award in collaboration with the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau;
- Issued the 2016 Plain Writing Compliance Report;
- Conducted our annual marketing campaign to promote Plain Writing principles;
- Promoted the use of the Acrolinx editing software tool, and renewed licenses for FY 2018;
- Increased the number of employees trained to use Acrolinx, expanding usage among Headquarters, Operations and Regional office staff;
- Continued the use of other editing tool software, such as StyleWriter, throughout the agency to enhance clear written communications;
- Trained employees on Plain Writing, business writing and grammar, and effective writing techniques;
- Applied Plain Writing guidelines to our websites, documents, letters, notices, and other written materials;
- Maintained a Plain Language page on our Intranet and Internet website home pages; and
- Continued updating all high traffic agency webpages in compliance with Plain Writing principles;

Our Implementation

Our Plain Writing Compliance Board met at a minimum, every other month, to plan, coordinate, and carry out the *Plain Writing Implementation Plan* and related activities. Please see the link to our [Plain Writing Implementation Plan](#) in Appendix B. This plan provides an outline of our Plain Writing goals and activities.

Oversight

Dr. Steven Patrick, the Associate Commissioner for Office of Public Inquiries 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. [Appendix B](#) provides links to websites listing the deputy commissioner-level Plain Writing Compliance Board members and regional directors.

Plain Writing Resources

Our continuing efforts to communicate clearly to the public have improved through the use of various Plain Writing resources. The Plain Writing website is available to employees and the public. It offers suggestions on how to provide clear and concise information. This website also has helpful links to Plain Writing tips.

The Commissioner's Writing Center is a ready Plain Writing resource for employees. The Commissioner's Writing Center delivers techniques to improve grammar and style preferences. It also includes online training and videos-on-demand highlighting ways to produce quality written products.

The QUICC Handbook is found at the Commissioner's Writing Center. This handbook provides writers with the following features:

- Agency's letterheads;
- Memorandum templates explaining proper formats; and
- Content protocols.

The Plain Writing Implementation Team (Team) is another agency resource for employees. In addition to other duties, the Team trains employees agencywide on how to effectively use editing software tools like Acrolinx and StyleWriter to prepare documents and communicate effectively with the public.

Editing Tools

In 2017, we expanded agency use of the editing tool Acrolinx. This software editing tool allows us to evaluate websites, PDF files, and Word documents in large batches as well as check individual documents. Approximately 350 agency employees currently use the Acrolinx editing tool. We have increased the number of agency employees trained to use the software, expanding its use throughout Headquarters, Operations and Regional offices. We continue to update the training materials as the software is upgraded. We also provide additional video conference training as requested. Training videos on demand are currently available on our Office of Learning website.

One significant benefit of Acrolinx is its ability to produce a wide range of analytics data. We use this data to monitor the use of Acrolinx at our agency, identify problem areas as they relate to Plain Writing, and gauge our progress in applying Plain Writing principles to our written communication. Acrolinx will also be useful in helping 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.

Supporting Activities

In fiscal year (FY) 2015, we conducted a yearlong agency-wide pilot of an editing software called Acrolinx with 470 participants. After the pilot ended in FY 2016, we acquired 350 Acrolinx licenses for continuing use throughout the agency. We continue to monitor the allocation of

Acrolinx licenses to maximize their efficacy as a tool that helps us comply with the Act.

Throughout the past year, we held various events to promote the application of Plain Writing principles in both internal and external documents, webpages, and other communication methods. We held a marketing campaign in which we placed Plain Writing posters and banners across our Headquarters campus and made these materials available to offices nationwide from our website. We also used internal publications, including webpages, 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 *Good Morning Social Security*, a weekly video news program for agency employees.

Mechanism for Public Feedback and Measurements of Performance

We strive to improve the way we communicate with the public in a clear, organized manner. We welcome comments and suggestions at PlainWriting@ssa.gov. The public and our employees can use this mailbox to contact us. Our goal is 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 optimize 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 2017 report reflects feedback from over 296,000 citizens that used federal government websites, mobile sites, or applications. ForeSee highlighted our “stellar performance” and noted that we continued to be in the forefront of customer satisfaction. Top drivers of satisfaction for digital government experiences are Site Information and Information Browsing. Site Information is the extent to which information is thorough and 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.

In the fourth quarter of 2017, six of our sites received scores of 80 or above. Five of the sites were the top scorers on the FXI. In priority order, the top sites are the:

- SSA Retirement Estimator: 91
- Extra Help with Medicare Prescription Drug Plan Costs: 91
- SSA iClaim: 89
- SSA iClaim – Disability: 89
- SSA - my Social Security: 88
- Social Security Business Services Online: 85

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

online content that will meet the needs of our users. The overall FXI score for the Social Security Administration is 85.5. The aggregate score for the 101 federal websites measured by ForeSee is 75.9. The agency's score of 85.5 compares favorably with 2017 satisfaction scores for leading Fortune 500 companies such as: Amazon (85) and Apple (81).

Compliance Report

We will issue the 2017 Plain Writing Compliance Report on February 28, 2018.

Table 1 - Examples of Notices and Publications Using Plain Writing Principles

The following are component-specific examples of notices and publications used in external communications. These entries show our efforts to improve our written communication products. Please see [Appendix A](#) for examples.

Office of the Chief Actuary

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
<p>Publication: 2017 OASDI Board of Trustees Report</p> <p>See Appendix A.</p>	U.S. Congress, Public	We update and edit this publication each year to improve our use of plain writing concepts and promote the use of plain language.	This annual report is our most requested publication. We typically receive dozens of formal requests from the public after its release each year and visits to its webpage number in the thousands.

Office of Communications

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
<p>Publication: 2017 Social Security Column</p> <p>Webpage: Jon's Story</p> <p>See Appendix A.</p>	Public	We applied plain writing principles to each blog to bring awareness to key agency initiatives.	Our application of plain writing principles ensures that we provide clear and concise information to the public we serve.
<p>Webpage: Skip the Trip! Retire Online</p> <p>See Appendix A.</p>	Public	We applied plain writing principles to each blog to bring awareness to key agency initiatives	Our application of plain writing principles ensures that we provide clear and concise information to the public we serve.

Office of the General Counsel

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Publication: Disclosure/Confidentiality of Information (GN 033 POMS)	Agency employees, Public	We applied plain writing principles to provide clear and concise policy pertaining to the disclosure of information.	The document provides clear and concise policy information pertaining to the disclosure of information.

Office of Hearings Operations

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Publication: Voluntary Standby Program, July 2017	Disability program applicants	We reviewed the document to improve its use of plain language.	The publication is easy to read and understand.

Office of the Inspector General

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Publication: Scam Warning Fact Sheet See Appendix A.	Media, Public	We streamlined information and grouped bulleted items under the three main headings (What?, What Can I Do?, and How To Report?).	In 2017, OIG increased the amount of public-friendly materials available to alert the public and media about current and new identity-theft schemes; these materials helped generate media coverage and increase awareness, thereby helping to protect people from falling victim to these scams.

Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
<p>Letter: Response to White House based on inquiry from the public</p> <p>Letter: Response to a member of Congress on behalf of a constituent</p> <p>Letter: Response to Public Inquiry (if we received an additional inquiry to a previous White House response)</p>	Congress, Staff	We used plain writing techniques to eliminate passive voice and improve grammar and style to improve the overall readability of responses.	The Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs (OLCA) maintains a special priority audience with Congress and information posted to the web is archival and legislation/regulation specific. Our modifications improved the overall readability of responses.
<p>Publication: Request for the Social Security Congressional Inquiries Guide</p>	Congressional staff	Used only by Congressional staff, the Congressional Inquiries Guide (Guide) is a comprehensive booklet concerning the programs our agency 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 can request a copy of the Guide at any time.

Office of Operations

Atlanta Region

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
<p>Publication: I Get SSI and Want to Work – What Happens to My Check?</p>	Public	This is a new document.	Our application of plain writing principles ensures that we provide clear and concise information to the public we serve.

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Publication: SSI Employment Supports – Exciting Work Incentives for Young People on SSI	Public	This is a new document.	We continually try to improve our outreach efforts by creating documents using plain language wherever possible.

Chicago Region

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Webinar: Social Security Disability Programs – The Medical Decision Process	Disability advocates	Not applicable	We invited disability advocates to participate in an educational webinar.

Office of Central Operations

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Publication: Office of Disability Operations (ODO) Program Service Center Training Guide for Aurora	ODO employees	We updated the training guide with notice shells and appropriate universal text identifies, and added vital information concerning grammar, spelling, and sentence structure for notice development from the Commissioner’s writing tips.	We improved the document’s clarity and readability

Office of Retirement and Disability Policy

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Notice: Supplemental Security Income (SSI) Youth Transition Notice	SSI beneficiaries, youth ages 14-17 and their parents and/or representative payee	We applied plain writing principles for greater clarity and conciseness.	The notice is clear, concise, and easy to understand.

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
<p>Notices: Section 1144 Outreach Notices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Form L-447; and • Form L-448 	Medicare beneficiaries	We revised the notices to incorporate plain writing techniques and better assist beneficiaries with determining eligibility for Extra Help or Medicare Savings Programs.	We streamlined language and created a clear notice that is easy to read.
<p>Notice: Authorization for the Social Security Administration to Obtain Wage and Employment Information from Payroll Data Providers</p>	Legal guardian, beneficiary, recipient	This is a new notice effective September 23, 2017.	The notice incorporates plain writing, which improves readability and clarifies instructions to the legal guardian, beneficiary, or recipient.
<p>Notice (Before and After): Payment of Benefits Notice of Award (BEV018)</p>	Public	We enhanced the language for universal text identifiers by removing passive voice and the last sentence, which was duplicative.	The revised language incorporates plain writing techniques, which improves readability, clarity, and tone
<p>Form: Application for Special Benefits for WWII Veterans (SSA 2000-F6) See Appendix A.</p>	Applicants for Title VIII – Special Veterans benefits	We changed the Privacy Act Notice, Paper Reduction Statement, and reporting address	We received 544 requests. The correct Privacy Act Notice and reporting address are now on the form.
<p>Publication: Your Payments While You Are Outside the United States</p>	Claimants and beneficiaries who are living or plan to live outside the United States	We updated country lists, revised payment restrictions to provide information about Treasury sanctions, and revised the publication for plain language.	These changes were effective July 2017. The changes resulted in clear messaging, increased the target audience accessing this online publication, and reduced telephone and in-person inquiries.
<p>Webpage: Can Noncitizens Living Outside the United States Receive Social Security Benefits? (FAQ #3843)</p>	Public	We added information and more comprehensive answers.	

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
<p>Publication: Research Summary - Income Taxes on Social Security Benefits</p>	<p>Policymakers, Congressional staff, Agency staff, Students, Media, Public</p>	<p>We added a new one- page summary of an in- depth Issue Paper.</p>	<p>The document is a condensed, timesaving summary of a longer research paper. There have been 2,104 unique page views since it was posted on December 22, 2016.</p>
<p>Publications: What You Need to Know About Your Supplemental Security Income (SSI) When You Turn 18 (English) What You Need to Know About Your Supplemental Security Income (SSI) When You Turn 18 (Spanish)</p>	<p>SSI beneficiaries, Youth ages 14-17 and their parents, Teachers, Healthcare providers, Caregivers, or Representatives, Agency employees</p>	<p>We provided more detailed information about Social Security employment supports as well as national and community supports and resources to assist youth with the transition to a successful adulthood. We also applied plain writing principles for greater clarity and conciseness.</p>	<p>The publication is clear, concise, and easy to understand. Estimated Audience: 371,497</p>
<p>Form: Plan to Achieve Self- Support (PASS) (Form SSA-545-BK) See Appendix A.</p>	<p>Beneficiaries, Agency staff, Third-parties (e.g. Work Incentives Planning and Assistance Program (WIPAs)), Employment network agencies, State vocational rehabilitation agencies</p>	<p>We condensed the previous 16-page form and two releases into a shorter 12-page form and modified language using plain writing principles for greater clarity and conciseness.</p>	<p>The revised form is clear, concise, and easy to understand. Estimated Quantity requests: 4,000</p>

Table 2 - Examples of Webpages Using Plain Writing Principles

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

Office of the Chief Actuary

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Individual Changes Modifying Social Security	Public	For each factor, we show a summary statement of the actuarial effect from a specific change in addition to the detailed data behind the result. Our aim is to help the public understand how different pieces of policy can work, alone or together, to address the financial solvency of the Social Security program. We are trying to create summary statements on these pages with Plain Writing concepts in mind.	These webpages have a wealth of information on the actuarial effects from varying different factors including retirement age and payroll taxes that govern the Social Security programs.

Office of the General Counsel

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Website	Agency employees, FOIA requesters and professionals	We applied plain writing principles to provide clear and concise policy pertaining to the disclosure of information.	Our use of plain writing principles ensure that we provide clear and concise information to our employees and the public we serve. We improved our website by updating it with information relating to our new FOIA request intake tool.

Office of Hearings Operations

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Best Practices For Claimants Representatives See Appendix A.	Claimant representatives	We provided updated best practices for representing disability claimants through the hearing process.	We improved communication between the agency and claimant’s representatives

Office of the Inspector General

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Office of the Inspector General (OIG) Homepage What is Fraud, Waste, Or Abuse? What Do We Investigate? Reporting Other Issues What Information Must I Provide? May I Remain Anonymous? What Will OIG Do With What I Report? Scam Warning Factsheet See Appendix A.	Public	To educate the public about what is considered Social Security fraud, what the OIG investigates, what the public should include in fraud allegations, and where to report other related issues, the OIG has on its public website (https://oig.ssa.gov) several FAQ pages. These pages are located near the main page with the OIG Fraud Hotline contact information. If a public citizen has a question about submitting an allegation, there are several resources nearby to assist them.	According to Google Analytics data, the fraud-hotline contact page is the most-visited page on the OIG website, followed by the fraud form itself; three of the FAQ pages above are the next most-visited pages on the site (Reporting Other Issues, What is Fraud Waste, or Abuse?, and What Do We Investigate?).

Office of Operations

New York Region

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
SSA New York Region Homepage	Public	We regularly review and update the webpage as needed	We provide up-to-date information about Social Security’s programs and policies

Table 3 - 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 the General Counsel

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Publication: Disclosure/Confidentiality of Information (GN 033 POMS)	Agency employees, public	We applied plain writing principles to provide clear and concise policy pertaining to the disclosure of information.	We provide clear and concise policy pertaining to the disclosure of information.

Office of Retirement and Disability Policy

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Government Pension Offset	Public	This was an addition to the 'Program Explainer' section of the website	In 2017, the Government Pension Offset Program Explainer received 1,207 unique page views educating the public about the affect of government pensions on Social Security benefits..
Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) Act – 2017 Edition	Public, third parties, government agencies, businesses, Congress, and the press	This is a new webpage for the ABLE policy.	Information on the site is easy to understand and visually appealing.
Information Regarding the Treatment of Certain Payments in Eugenics Compensation Act (EM-16044)	SSA Field Offices	The policy message provides guidance for handling payments related to the Eugenics Compensation Act.	The document is clear, detailed, and easy to read

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
<p>Capability Determination and Representative Payee Payment Overview (GN 00502.001)</p> <p>Legal Evidence of Capability (GN 00502.023)</p> <p>Making a Capability Determination (GN 00502.060)</p>	<p>SSA Field Offices</p>	<p>We revised policy instructions to improve our capability determination process, and addressed recommendations from a Quality Review Report and a National Academy of Medicine study. We used plain language to improve clarity and user understanding</p>	<p>We consolidated, streamlined, and clarified capability instructions to help ensure that field offices consistently develop and document capability determinations</p>

Table 4 - Examples of Congressional and Public Inquiries Using Plain Writing Principles

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Proposals Affecting Trust Fund Solvency Implications for Social Security of Reducing the Employee Portion of the Payroll Tax, requested by Senator Tom Cotton	U.S. Congress, interested members of the public	We monitor and edit this annual publication to promote the use of Plain Writing wherever possible.	The modifications in the report improved clarity.

Office of the Chief Actuary

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
	Individual Members of Congress, Congressional Committees, and related organizations who have requested our office to “score” legislative proposals	We promote the use of Plain Writing as much as possible in all such memoranda. We are mindful that a significant part of our duty is to explain actuarial concepts and analytic results in terms understandable to non-actuaries.	These pages are updated frequently. We continually try to improve our outreach by using plain language wherever possible.

Office of the General Counsel

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Letters	Congressional staff and constituents	We applied plain writing principles to provide clear and concise policy pertaining to the disclosure of information	We provide clear and concise documents.

Office of the Legislation and Congressional Affairs

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Written responses to White House and congressional inquiries	White House and Members of Congress	We improved overall readability of responses.	We received positive feedback from the White House Executive Secretariat, the Office of Presidential Correspondence, Members of Congress, and key Committee staff validating the effectiveness of plain language in our communications. The White House Executive Secretariat prepares a casework report each month and sends it to all agencies According to the White House Executive Secretariat, SSA is among the top performing agencies in responsiveness to inquiries. The monthly report shows how well we communicate our programs and policies when responding to letters sent to the White House. Acrolinx, and our internal quality review process showed improved clarity and readability.

Office of Retirement & Disability Policy

Type and Name of Communication	Audience	Improvements	Result
Response to Congressional Inquiry	Congress	We provided information about the effect of settlement income on Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits.	We provided clear and concise information to the Congressman, which he will relay, as needed, to the public we serve as needed.

Training

Table 5 - Training on Plain Writing Principles

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

Online Courses – Writing and General Knowledge

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
The Plain Writing Act (Federal Government Audience)	4	1 hour
Business Grammar: Parts of Speech	94	1 hour
Business Grammar: Working with Words	36	1 hour
Business Grammar: Punctuation	24	1 hour
Business Grammar: Sentence Construction	15	1 hour
Business Grammar: The Mechanics of Writing	58	1 hour
Business Grammar: Common Usage Errors	60	1 hour
Final Exam: Business Grammar Basics	1	1.2 hours
Audience and Purpose in Business Writing	15	25 minutes
Clarity and Conciseness in Business Writing	9	30 minutes
Business Writing: Know Your Readers and Your Purpose	27	1 hour
Business Writing: How to Write Clearly and Concisely	84	1 hour
Business Writing: Editing and Proofreading	38	1 hour
Final Exam: Business Writing Basics	3	40 minutes
Writing Under Pressure: Preparing for Success	7	1 hour
Writing Under Pressure: The Writing Process	14	1 hour
Focus On Your Business Writing – Level 1 (June)	19	22 days

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Focus On Your Business Writing – Level 2 (September)	9	22 days
Focus On Your Business Writing – Level 1 (September)	30 registered – 15 estimated to complete	22 days

Video On Demand

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Principles of Plain Language Operations	140	26 minutes
Principles of Plain Language – Part 1	278	19 minutes
Principles of Plain Language – Part 2	199	32 minutes
Principles of Plain Language – Part 3 (workshop)	53	45 minutes

Headquarters Component Training

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

Office of Hearings Operations

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
How to Write Effective Policy & Procedures	24	2 days
New Administrative Law Judge (ALJ) Training	143	3-4 weeks; writing instruction is approximately one day
ALJ Supplemental Training	215	20 hours; writing instruction is two to three hours
Decision Writer Training	388	3 weeks
Legal Assistant (SCT) Training	115	80 hours
Refresher Decision Writer Training for Headquarters Staff	20	2 days; writing instruction is one day

Office of the Inspector General

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Audience and Purpose in Business Writing	1	1 hour
Mass Communication Theory and Practice	1	35 hours
Business Grammar – Parts of Speech	1	1 hour
Business Grammar – Common Usage Errors	1	1 hour
Fundamentals of English Grammar	1	3 hours
Acrolinx Editing Software Training	2	1 hour

Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Acrolinx Editing Software Training	10	1 hour
Business Writing & Grammar	4	4 hours
Basic Analyst Training	1	40 hours

Office of Operations/Office of Central Operations

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Aurora Roadshow	1600	1 day
Staff Work Tips and Tools	8	4 hours
Business Writing	125	1 day

Regional Training

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

Atlanta

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Georgia Area Performance Assessment & Communication System (PACS) Witting Training for Supervisors	28	2, 1.5 hour-sessions
Email Etiquette	7	1 hour
Updated Georgia Area District Office (ADO) Email Guide	18	1 hour
Notice Training Session	30	2, 2-hour sessions
Telework Essentials Training	156	1 hour
Briefing Techniques and Presentation Skills	11	24 hours
Basic Analyst Class	16	32 hours

Kansas City

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Briefing Techniques and Presentation Skills	29	21 hours
Make Your SSA-45 Come Alive!	211	1 hour
Staff Work Face-to-Face Refresher Training	51	1 hour

New York

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Transition to Leadership 301 – Nuts and Bolts	36	1 hour
Cogs and Wheels Regional Office Analyst Training	36	2 hours
Analyst Basic Roles and Responsibilities	36	3 hours

Training Course	Number of Employees Trained	Training Duration
Written Communication	22	1 hour

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)	60	2 hours
Correspondence Guide/String Message Workshop	26	2 hours
Lesson Plan Writing	13	45 minutes
Critical Congressional Unit: Virtual Detailees Training	6	2 hours

Agency Activities and Accomplishments

We provide various Plain Writing resources and training in an effort to clearly and effectively communicate with the public. Our website offers resources available to employees and the public. The editing software Acrolinx is an additional helpful tool that is widely used throughout the agency. Numerous opportunities to enhance Plain Writing are available.

Our Agency's Plain Writing activities include:

- Marketing to Promote Plain Writing
- Classroom, Online Training, and Workshops
- Redesign Webpages, Documents, and PDF Files
- Online Resources, Desk Guides, and Videos on Demand
- Reviews of Written Products

Our Plain Writing accomplishments are recognized within our agency's components and our agency as a whole. We received numerous awards for consecutive years from other agencies and companies including the Center for Plain Language.

Agency Activities and Accomplishments by Component

Office of Budget, Finance, and Management (formerly OBFQM)

- In 2017, our fiscal year (FY) [2016 Agency Financial Report](#) (AFR) received the Association of Government Accountants' (AGA) Certificate of Excellence in Accountability Reporting (CEAR) award for the 19th consecutive year. In addition, the agency received a "Best in Class" award for the clarity and quality of our "A Message from the Chief Financial Officer." 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 the public to assess how well the agency accomplished its mission, achieved its goals, and managed its financial resources. Upon the Commissioner's approval, we send the report to the President, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and Congress.
- We continued to conduct multiple reviews of our component's documents to ensure compliance with the Plain Writing Act, technical accuracy, and use of appropriate tone. We also set up group reviews of critical documents.
- We continued to use the Acrolinx editing software to assist in our reviews of webpages, Microsoft Word documents, and PDF files. Acrolinx checks and makes recommendations to correct spelling, grammar, style, and readability, and it also 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 are completing the annual review and certification of our public-facing web content for relevance, accuracy, and Plain Language.

The following resources from our 2015 Office of Budget, Finance, Quality, and Management (BFQM) Writing Month continue to be available as resources for employees in 2017:

- QUICC Video on Demand (VOD): We partnered with the Office of Public Inquires and the Office of Learning 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 BFQM Communications Guide, links to the QUICC Handbook, QUICC Training VODs, Plain Language VODs, and links to the Commissioner's Writing Center. The Commissioner's Writing Center provides information on formatting letters and memoranda, the Commissioner's Priority Correspondence process, and online training courses.

Office of Communications

- Prepared and distributed Plain Writing Desk Aids;
- Promoted Plain Writing via our intra-office headquarters television;
- Promoted our Plain Writing videos and training opportunities;
- Prepared agency documents and websites for consideration of a ClearMark Award;
- Posted Plain Writing information on our Plain Writing website for our employees and the public;
- Promoted Plain Writing through our internal communication program called *Good Morning Social Security*;
- Distributed information on Plain Writing through our marketing efforts to headquarters and field office employees;
- Prepared broadcast messages for the Acting Commissioner that focused on the importance of Plain Writing and our accomplishments;
- Distributed 337 Acrolinx licenses to employees for use throughout the agency; and
- Provided training on the editing software tool Acrolinx.

Office of Hearings Operations (formerly ODAR)

- We strive to use plain writing in all our communications
- February 2017 Career Global Positioning System (GPS) – described the agencies goals toward Plain Writing and encouraged employees to visit SSA's Commissioner's Writing Center

Office of Human Resources

Conducted five training courses on plain writing and trained 674 individuals; and

- Continued to use Acrolinx to review documents and webpages.

Office of the Inspector General

- Redesigning the Public Fraud Reporting Form to help guide public through the fraud-reporting process with easy-to-understand questions and step-by-step guide;
- Reviewing and revising public fact sheets and one-page documents on OIG Organization Overview, Career Opportunities, and Protecting Personal Information; and
- Reviewing and revising content in the *Semiannual Report to Congress*, to improve readability and content organization.

Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs

- Reviewed all correspondence for accuracy, responsiveness, and Plain Writing compliance prior to release;
- Developed and continue to maintain an electronic repository and handbook for all writers to reference when responding to inquiries;
- 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; and
- Used the Commissioner's Writing Center, the QUICC Handbook, and Acrolinx to prepare responses to White House and congressional inquiries.

Office of Operations

Office of Public Service and Operations Support

- We assigned 110 Acrolinx licenses to the Office of Operations employees in ten regions and five Central Office components.
- We assigned the licenses to policy writers, webmasters, writers, and staff analysts.
- Our employees use Acrolinx to improve the clarity and readability of our written products to various audiences such as Congress, other government agencies, contractors, employees, and the public.
- We included Plain Writing training in our Basic Analyst Course for new analysts.
- We also advocated the use of the QUICC Guide in order to meet Plain Writing standards.

Office of Central Operations

- Currently Operations Support Branch (OSB) Notice staff, in the Office of Disability Operations, are acting as Quality Control (QC) users for Acrolinx
- The Office of Earnings and International Operations, improved the layout and flow of the Division of International Operations' webpage within the intranet website to:
 - conform to agency standards;
 - provide up-to-date information; and
 - improve the readability of our web pages.

Atlanta Region

- To comply with the Plain Writing initiative, Center for Automation, Security and Integrity Atlanta routinely refers staff to the appropriate Learning Management System course(s) on Plain Writing.
- Additionally, we have installed a review process, whereby multiple staff and management review outgoing correspondences for grammar and clarity.
- Our South Eastern Payment Service Center Inquiries & Expediting staff consistently corresponds with congressional offices to provide congressional staffers with detailed information in response to public inquiries.

Kansas City Region

- New regional analysts and professional employees participate in online Completed Staff Work training and have access to resources including the Correspondence Guide Language and links to the Commissioner's Writing Center and Plain Writing website.
- Regional professional staff may also access the Career Resource Handout on the Regional Training webpage as a quick tips desk aid.

Office of Systems

The Office of Information Security within the 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 and edited Information Security Advisories and Bulletins for clear and concise communication;
- Reviewed breach notifications for accuracy, responsiveness, and plain writing compliance prior to release;
- Continued to review documents to ensure plain writing compliance, technical accuracy, and appropriate tone; Reminded staff of specific writing tips based on the Acting Commissioner's writing preferences;
- Encouraged staff to attend training courses to improve writing skills' and
- Shared announcements from the Office of Learning with employees about Plain Writing courses.

Moving Forward

As in the past, we will encourage 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 also use metrics such as the ForeSee Experience Index: E-Government (FXI) to gauge

customer satisfaction with our letters, notices, documents, and websites. The FXI is a reflection of the customer experience with Federal Government websites. We realize that people turn to the government for quality service and accurate information. With that in mind, we rely on FXI information to provide the best customer service product possible. For example, our "Extra Help with Medicare Prescription Drug Plan Costs" site took the top spot for the most satisfied, with a score of 91.

Summary

We are proud of our Plain Writing accomplishments over the years. We are committed to providing clear and concise communications with the public. Each year we move closer to ensuring that our messages are clear and concise. Social Security's website, www.socialsecurity.gov, includes online services, information in multiple languages, and a presence on social media sites.

We develop persona research to understand the needs of certain populations. One of these personas is the Hispanic community, which we serve with an array of Spanish services. Our research showed that Hispanics who communicate only in Spanish do not respond well to translated messages. Therefore, one of the main shifts in direction when communicating to Hispanics is to create original content in Spanish rather than translate our English messages.

Our 2017 Plain Writing Compliance Report documents this year's agency-wide compliance activities and accomplishments. One significant action was to move from piloting Acrolinx software to establishing it as a software tool used in the agency to create uniformity and standardize our letters, notices, documents, and webpages.

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 online content that will meet the needs of our users. We use customer satisfaction reports such as the ForeSee Experience Index (FXI): E-Government (formerly called the ForeSee E-Government Satisfaction Index) to optimize our website and respond to the needs of our customers. In the fourth quarter of 2017, five of our websites were recognized as the top scorers on the FXI for Federal agencies.

We earned an "A+" for the Writing and Information Design grade on the Federal Plain Language Report Card this year. The Report Card is an annual Report Card for Federal agencies evaluated by the Center for Plain Language. Also, we received the 2017 Grand ClearMark award in collaboration with the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau.

Appendix A: Plain Writing Examples

New or Revised Documents

Office	Sample Document
Office of the Chief Actuary	2017 OASDI Board of Trustees Report
Office of Hearing Operations	Best Practices For Claimants' Representatives
Office of Retirement & Disability Policy	Application for Special Benefits for WWII Veterans (SSA 2000-F6)
Office of Retirement & Disability Policy	Plan to Achieve Self-Support (PASS) (Form SSA-545-BK)

New or Revised Webpages

Office	Link
Office of Communications	Jon's Story
Office of Communications	Skip the Trip! Retire Online
Office of Communications	Frequently Asked Questions
Office of Inspector General	Scam Warning Fact Sheet

Appendix B: Plain Writing Links

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

Site	Link
Social Security Administration	www.socialsecurity.gov
Plain Writing	www.socialsecurity.gov/plain-language
Plain Writing Compliance Board	www.socialsecurity.gov/agency/plain-language/complianceboard.html
Plain Writing Contacts	www.socialsecurity.gov/plain-language/contacts.html
Plain Writing Feedback	www.socialsecurity.gov/plain-language
Plain Writing Initial Implementation Plan	www.socialsecurity.gov/agency/plain-language/pdf/PWImplementationPlan-2014.pdf
Plain Writing Implementation Plan – 2017	Plain Writing Implementation Plan – 2017

SSA Plain Writing Implementation Plan For 2017

GOAL 1. Establish Compliance with the Plain Writing Act of 2010

1. Identify Contacts

- Designate a senior official responsible for overseeing our implementation of the Plain Writing Act of 2010.
- Designate points of contact for Plain Writing.
- Designate Plain Writing Compliance Board members.
- Publish contact information to our Internet, Intranet, and plainlanguage.gov websites for public and employee feedback and questions.

2. Communicate

- Communicate requirements of the Plain Writing Act of 2010 to all components.
- Raise awareness of Plain Writing by using Commissioner Broadcasts, videos, posters, desk aids, the agency's internal television network, and various websites.
- Publish writing tools, such as desk aids on the Plain Writing website that employees can use to apply Plain Language principles to their own writing.
- Consult with the Plain Writing Compliance Board regularly to address concerns and seek feedback on component-specific efforts to encourage plain writing.
- Request examples of plain writing from components for inclusion in our 2017 Plain Writing Compliance Report and submissions for the 2018 ClearMark Award.

3. Create a Website

- Publish our commitment to Plain Writing on our Internet and Intranet sites.
- Add links to our Plain Writing website on existing Internet and Intranet sites.
- Create a direct link to the Plain Language Action & Information Network's (PLAIN) website - www.plainlanguage.gov - from our Intranet and Internet homepages.

4. Provide Training

- Provide Plain Writing, grammar, and Infographics training opportunities.
- Use Acrolinx software across the agency and train employees on how to use the software.
- Continue to identify training needs across the agency and provide training on Plain Writing in classroom and video-on-demand settings.

GOAL 2. Maintain Compliance with the Plain Writing Act of 2010 through Support Activities

1. Monitor and Measure Compliance

- Identify and develop a review process to ensure adherence to Plain Writing standards.
- Include information on our Internet website about Plain Writing initiatives and our commitment to Plain Writing.
- Maintain the Commissioner’s Writing Center webpage for easy access to the Commissioner’s writing preferences and Plain Writing principles.
- Measure online satisfaction with our Plain Writing websites via the ForeSee E-Government Satisfaction Index.
- Use editing software to provide consistent and uniform feedback on notices, letters, policies, and webpages.
- Track effectiveness of new and revised documents.
- Initiate annual agency-wide reviews and updates of the most frequently viewed public-facing documents and websites.
- Provide feedback to components on public-facing documents and websites.
- Monitor the agency’s use of the editing software tool Acrolinx.
- Monitor our Internet and Intranet email accounts to respond to inquiries from the public and employees about Plain Writing.

2. Publish the Plain Writing Compliance Report

- Publish the 2017 Plain Writing Compliance Report that describes our continuing compliance with the 2010 Plain Writing Act.