

Plain Writing Act Compliance Report: U.S. Census Bureau

Compliance at a Glance

Plain Language Officer: Tasha Boone, Assistant to the Associate Director for Communications

Coordinator: Neil Tillman, Center for New Media and Promotions

Web Site: http://www.census.gov/aboutus/plain_writing.html

Feedback: cnmp.plain.language@census.gov

Summary

Even before the Plain Writing Act, the Census Bureau had a special commitment to clear communication with the public. We ask people to fill out their census and survey forms. The forms undergo rigorous testing to ensure people understand the questions and answer them accurately.

For the 2000 Census and even more so for the 2010 Census, we developed an integrated communications campaign that sought to explain clearly how easy, important and safe it was to fill out a census questionnaire. Our tests indicate that the plan was successful: America responded despite trends over the past decade toward declining survey participation, a more diverse population, a difficult economic environment and a growing distrust of government.

More than 72 percent mailed back their census questionnaire and follow-up operations went smoothly so that [\\$1.6 billion in savings](#) was returned to the U.S. Treasury.

In the past year, we have built upon the lessons learned during census operations to modify survey questionnaire design, expand our use of social media, redesign our [home page](#), and launch a new, easier-to-read [economic census web site](#).

Central to these efforts was the goal of simplifying our web site so that the public could use it more efficiently. According to [Federal Computer News](#), a November 2011 study ranked the Census Bureau web site third among 30 agencies in readability, transparency and clarity.

To further promote the goal of clear communication and meet the requirements of the Plain Writing Act, we funded a [business case](#) that aimed at two key goals:

1. Enhancing online glossary resources through the development of a simple, easy-to-use glossary tool to help the public cope with technical terms used in our tables and reports.

2. Building a “dissemination culture” in which we further enhance our employees’ communication skills.

Compliance Activities: Intranet Site and Training

We have created an Intranet site to help our staff understand and meet the requirements of the Plain Writing Act. The site features –

- Links to the Plain Writing Act and Office of management and Budget Guidance, the Federal Plain Language Guidelines and the many resources on the plainlanguage.gov web site.
- Testimonial videos from employees on the importance of plain writing in their work and the benefits of the plain writing training.
- Helpful tips on writing clearly.
- Recommendations for managers on creating a plain writing environment in their office.

The Census Bureau has long offered training on writing. Courses vary greatly in scope; examples include writing for the web and an intensive multi-day course designed to build critical clear thinking and writing skills. In the past year, the Census Bureau offered 23 courses focused on helping employees write more clearly.

We are currently developing a half-day course for everyone who writes for the web, in which students would apply plain writing techniques to existing web content, resulting in a fresh take on the content at the end of the class. Our usability studies flag issues that become projects for the class to solve. We expect to launch this course in June 2012.

We have set up a team to oversee plain writing maintenance activities and plan ongoing testing to measure progress in achieving clearer communication with the public.

Compliance Activities: Customer Satisfaction

The Census Bureau uses usability and cognitive testing on an ongoing basis to measure customer satisfaction with our web site. We routinely consult our web logs to study how successful users are in searching our site.

Since 2007, we have used an ongoing pop-up survey to measure the customer satisfaction. This survey will eventually test for plain writing. We conduct more detailed studies of key sites such as the American Community Survey and the American FactFinder data tool and use the results to improve user access.

We developed special usability tests to establish a baseline for our efforts to simplify language on the site.

Feedback

All Census Bureau employees from top management on down have clear communication as a part of their performance plan. We take clear communication very seriously and we are working to make our information easier for the public to access and understand.

We value comments from you flagging problems and offering suggestions. Please contact us at <cnmp.plain.language@census.gov>.