Progress and Compliance with the Plain Writing Act

U.S. International Trade Commission (USITC)

May 31, 2012

Since its previous compliance report (July 2011), the USITC has made continued progress toward the goal of making its public communications clearer. The editing staff applies plain writing principles in its work, and about 27 members of the USITC staff who prepare research reports for the public underwent training in the principles of plain, effective writing in the fall of 2011.

In January 2012, the USITC Chairman designated James Kennedy, the head of the Office of Analysis and Research Services, to succeed Bill Cunningham as the USITC senior official for plain writing; Peg Hausman, Writer-Editor, continues as the USITC contact for plain writing. As part of Plain Writing Act (PWA) compliance activities, the Writer-Editor:

- Has worked with Office of Industries analysts, attorneys from the Office of Unfair Imports Investigation, and the Chairman's office to make the Commission's questionnaires (and some associated documents) easy to understand, since replying to many of the questionnaires is mandatory.
- Has worked with Office of Industries analysts and members of the security office to clarify documents for private firms supplying confidential business information and for Commission visitors wanting Web access.
- With the Commissioners' support, has deepened efforts to apply PWA principles even to pieces that are not considered "covered documents" under the Plain Writing Act. These include numerous analytic studies for the United States Trade Representative, the U.S. Senate Committee on Finance, and the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means (section 332 investigations). The Writer-Editor is finalizing a wordlist promoting many "plain" word choices for distribution to the analysts and economists who write these studies.
- Gave presentations on plain technical writing to USITC analysts in agriculture (about 12 attendees) in October 2011 and to new research assistants and others (about 15 attendees) in September 2011. She has also worked with many analysts and with a member of the library staff one on one to explain and apply plain writing principles.
- In fall and winter 2011, participated in training to teach plain writing for PWA compliance, given by the Washington, DC, Plain Language Action and Information Network.
- In May 2012, attended Clarity conference on plain legal language with two lawyers from the USITC Secretary's office (who work with the USITC's Administrative Law Judges) and discussed plans for PWA implementation in their work.
- Discussed problems with the interface for the Electronic Document Information System (EDIS) with a representative from an outside users' group.

- As part of an effort to update the design of USITC documents, has worked to help ensure that the new look supports the application of plain writing principles.
- Has begun designing questionnaires for feedback on document readability.

Particular focuses in the next several months will be:
- Resuming extensive training in plain language with analysts and economists and developing training for legal, procurement, and human resources staff.
- Making sure that the instructions to the public for working with EDIS and the USITC DataWeb are clear. EDIS offers the public a way to download and upload documents for USITC investigations. The DataWeb is a source of trade statistics that benefits many members of the public.
- Checking the readability of other online USITC documents, such as the USITC calendar, instructions for *Federal Register* notices, delivery instructions, general information, and documents connected with the Freedom of Information Act and the Privacy Act.
- Integrating plain language guidelines into USITC style preferences.