



U.S. Railroad Retirement Board Plain Writing Act of 2010 Annual Compliance Report April 2012

Background

President Obama signed the Plain Writing Act of 2010 into law on October 13, 2010. This law requires agencies to communicate in a manner “that the public can understand and use,” and applies to any application, form, informational material, letters or notices. It also defines plain writing as “clear, concise, well-organized, and follows other best practices appropriate to the subject or field or intended audience.”

The U.S. Railroad Retirement Board (RRB) has always tried to communicate with its customers and stakeholders in a clear, understandable manner. This took on added importance in the late 1990s when presidential guidance directed agencies to use plain language in external documents and regulations. The RRB developed an internal training program which it used for a number of years to train employees who generated most of the correspondence, forms and instructions for our customers.

Implementation

More recently, the RRB has relied on a training vendor affiliated with the Chicago Federal Executive Board to help our employees improve their writing skills. The vendor offers several different courses on various forms of written communication, and RRB employees typically attended such classes at a central offsite location. In response to enactment of the Plain Writing Act in October 2010, the RRB arranged for two onsite training sessions in November 2010. A total of 50 employees attended this course, “Business Writing Basics for Professionals.”

In July 2011, as required by the law, the agency created a page on its website dedicated to plain language, including a link to guidelines and best practices in this area, and notified all RRB employees of this initiative. The agency also posted its initial implementation plan on this page, as required by the law, and designated the RRB’s Public Affairs unit to monitor ongoing compliance. As part of this monitoring, the RRB provided visitors to the website with an e-mail address should they have questions, concerns or complaints about any agency documents or publications.

Results

Since that time, the RRB has received no inquiries from its customers or the public related to comprehension or readability of written material. However, we have continued to review documents and online postings to make them simpler and more understandable as suggested by the guidelines and best practices on plain language.

One example is the RRB booklet *Railroad Unemployment and Sickness Benefits* (UB-9). On page 7 of the previous version, it read: “To file your application online, you should go to the Board’s website and click on ‘Benefit Online Services’ for directions on establishing an RRB Internet Services account. Once you establish an online account, you will be able to file your application for unemployment benefits, as well as conduct other business with the Board, over the Internet.”

In the most recent revision of this publication (July 2011), the sentence was simplified as follows: “To file your application online, you must first establish an RRB Internet Services Account. Once you do this, you will be able to file your application for unemployment benefits, as well as conduct other business with the RRB, over the Internet.”

Similarly, the previous version of the booklet *Railroad Retirement and Survivor Benefits* (IB-2), read as follows on page 43: “Each year, employees in the industry receive a Certificate of Service Months and Compensation (Form BA-6) from the Board. This statement is important because it provides both a current and cumulative record of an employee’s railroad service and compensation.”

The current version of the IB-2 (February 2012) revised these sentences as follows: “Each year, employees receive a Certificate of Service Months and compensation (Form BA-6) from the RRB. This statement provides a current and cumulative record of railroad service and compensation.”

Plans/Goals

In the coming year, the RRB will investigate providing more detailed training on the use of plain language, as opposed to prior training classes that focused on the more general subject of effective business writing. After evaluating the options of onsite or online training, we will offer the selected training to all agency employees who have primary responsibility for composing and writing documents for our customers and the general public.

Much of the training available to federal agencies on this subject is free. Onsite training is available through the Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN). The half-day courses through PLAIN include one on writing in plain language, another geared to web-centric writing, and a third “managers’ briefing” that provides an overview of the law and its benefits. (If outside the Washington, D.C. area, like the RRB, the recipient agency covers the trainer’s travel expenses.)

There are also several online training modules that have been developed by other federal agencies, including the Department of the Army and the National Institutes of Health. The RRB’s Public Affairs staff will review these online offerings, with support from the agency’s Training Council, to determine if the agency would see the greatest benefit from onsite classes, online training, or a combination thereof.

Of course, one benefit of online training is that it can be offered on an ongoing basis, and thereby to a broader audience. If the RRB selects an online training module, we would likely expand it to those employees who write instructions and procedures that other staff members follow in their interactions with the public. In any event, the goal will be to have “core” individuals – those who write documents for our customers and the public – complete the more focused training within the next year.

Questions or requests for additional information can be directed to the following address.

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