

UNITED STATES OFFICE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT



OPM Plain Writing Plan

Version 1.0

July 2011

a New Day for Federal Service

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1 About This Document

The [Plain Writing Act of 2010](#) requires agencies to write documents for the public that are easy to understand and use: “The term ‘plain writing’ means writing that is clear, concise, well-organized, and follows other best practices appropriate to the subject or field and intended audience” (Section 3, paragraph 3).

This document details OPM’s efforts to comply with the letter of the law; the Plain Writing Act requires agencies to “publish on the plain writing section of the agency’s website a report that describes the agency plan for compliance with the requirements of” the Act.

But it is much more than that: [OPM has embraced Open Government](#) and, with it, transparency. We aren’t transparent if the public doesn’t understand what we say. We are therefore fully committed to complying not only with the letter of the law, but also with its spirit. This document briefly lays out how we will do so.

Our intended audience is the public, Congress, and OPM employees. The writing style is direct and designed to model the plain writing that will characterize almost all of OPM’s writing going forward. The Act does not require agencies to write regulations or internal documents plainly, but we encourage employees to always write as plainly as possible.

The sections below mirror the requirements of the Act to help you understand at a glance how we plan to comply with the Act. You may also wish to read the [guidance](#) released by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) or visit plainlanguage.gov to learn more about what is expected of us.

The changes you will see, particularly after mid-October 2011, will tell you how well we implement this plan. Feel free to drop us a note on our [Open Government blog](#) and tell us how we’re doing.

A note on terminology: the Act is titled “Plain Writing Act,” and the organization that is leading the way government-wide is the Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN). “Plain language” is broader than “plain writing” because it can include spoken language. We prefer the term “clear communication.” You will see all three terms, depending on whether we are referring to the Act (“plain writing”), resources from PLAIN or other agencies (“plain language”), or the kind of communication we ultimately want to achieve (“clear communication”).

2 Senior Officials

We are required to designate at least one senior official to oversee our implementation of the Plain Writing Act. Those individuals are: Richard Lowe, the Director of the Executive Secretariat and Ombudsman; Rosemary Williams, the Director of Communications and Public Liaison; and Matthew Perry, OPM’s Chief Information Officer (CIO). They are jointly responsible for ensuring that OPM stays on track regarding plain writing.

3 Communication with Employees

The Act also mandates us to “communicate the requirements of this Act to the employees of the Agency” on or before July 13, 2011.

Our Director, John Berry, has sent an e-mail message to all employees. We will also use an internal newsletter, the CIO’s internal blog, and word of mouth to inform employees of the Act’s requirements and engage them in conversation about how to make our communication clearer. More on that in the [section about our website](#).

We will go farther by reminding employees that not only should they write plainly, they should also avoid overly technical terms when they talk to members of the public – clear communication should not be limited to written language.

We will not stop with the first message to employees on July 13, 2011. Instead, we will periodically remind them of the importance of clear communication in all forms. We will also systematically let new employees know how we expect them to communicate with the public. As the next section explains, we will give employees the tools to succeed in communicating more clearly.

4 Training

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) offers an excellent [online training course](#) in plain language. It uses interesting examples from the history of medicine. We encourage you to take a look – you might learn something about, for example, the history of the stethoscope or the first African-American female physician in the United States.

We will use NIH’s training for OPM employees. Executives, managers, and supervisors have already begun to designate employees who regularly write or edit covered documents to take at least two of the eight modules – and encourage them to take more.

By using training from another agency instead of duplicating efforts, we are (1) saving taxpayers thousands of dollars, (2) introducing employees to different topics that will keep them engaged while they take the training, and (3) complying with the requirement to train employees.

The training will be available to all employees. Designated employees from offices across the agency are required to complete training by July 13, 2011, and Director Berry will include the link in his e-mail message to all employees on or before that date. When employee performance is evaluated, managers will recommend plain writing training if doing so would likely benefit the employee. We will also provide a link to our Plain Language site ([discussed below](#)) and recommend the training to new employees.

In the past, we have periodically trained groups of employees on plain writing. We will explore ways to leverage that experience and expand on training opportunities while keeping down the cost to taxpayers.

Finally, we will provide focused training through workshops, face-to-face sessions, Webinars, or other methods, as necessary and appropriate to the situation.

5 Ongoing Compliance

We will use the following process to ensure ongoing compliance with the Act, sustainability, and clearer communication with the public, as well as to identify performance goals by which to measure the progress and impact of plain writing:

1. Continuously train employees, as explained above;
2. OPM will create new forms, policies and procedures in plain language and will review existing documents to ensure that they are necessary and plainly written;
3. Clarify employees' performance standards to address plain writing expectations;
4. An Agency-wide metric has been established based on the clarity and usefulness of our Frequently Asked Questions website. We will continue to use this metric to evaluate our plain writing effort.
5. We will reach out to the public via the Open Blog on a quarterly basis with the question, "How are we doing with regard to plain writing?"

6 Website

By July 13, <http://www.opm.gov/plainlanguage/> will go live. The website will provide information on our compliance with the Plain Writing Act and efforts to improve communication with the public, some helpful hints on improving writing, links to this plan, the [training mentioned above](#), our [Open Government blog](#) (or OpenOPM blog), writing resources, and any future reports.

6.1 Informing and Engaging the Public

A link to the OpenOPM blog will be created from the plain language website. The blog has been successful for providing information and gathering comments from the public. The titles of recent blog entries appear on the OpenOPM homepage, and we will frequently highlight our plain language page on the blog. Between Plain Writing Act reports (due every 18 months), the blog will be our primary way of informing the public of our efforts to improve communication. In this way, we will use resources that are already in place to meet the requirement that we “provide a mechanism for the agency to receive and respond to public input on” how we implement the Act and our plain writing reports.

We will offer a challenge to OPM staff and the public to identify documents that need to be rewritten in simple, plain language. Every several months, we will repeat this challenge or offer similar ones.

For the public, we will post the challenge on the OpenOPM blog. We will ask them to identify the top 20 documents on our website that are not clear and need to be rewritten in plain language. The names of the top 10 winners will be posted on the OpenOPM blog. The responsible program offices will rewrite the top 10 documents.

6.2 Engaging Staff

For the staff, we will publicize the challenge through channels such as internal newsletters and the Web 2.0 tool IdeaFactory. We will ask participants to post to IdeaFactory links to covered documents they would like to see rewritten with details about how they would rewrite them. An Open Government panel will review the top-rated 20 documents. The top 5 winners will have lunch with the [three senior officials identified above](#) and receive recognition on OpenOPM. The responsible program offices will rewrite the top 5 documents.

7 Agency Points of Contact

The Act requires us to “designate 1 or more agency points-of-contact to receive and respond to public input on (i) agency implementation of this Act; and (ii) the agency reports required under section 5.” The three senior officials named in this plan will serve as the OPM point of contacts for the public and insure implementation of this plan.

8 Using Plain Writing in New Documents

By October 13, 2011, we will write all new or substantially revised covered documents in plain writing. As recommended by OMB, we will follow the [Federal Plain Language Guidelines](#). We will also use the checklist in the [Appendix](#), which we developed based work done previously by OPM, PLAIN, and NIH. We will strive to produce documents in plain writing including those documents not covered by the Act.

9 Reports

9.1 Initial Report

This plan constitutes the initial report required by the Act.

9.2 Annual Compliance Report

We must publish our first annual compliance report by April 13, 2012, and follow it with additional reports every 18 months. In those reports, we will show how we have written plainly, revised documents to make them easier to understand and use, trained employees, and otherwise complied with the Act. We will use data from the FAQs engine and comments on the OpenOPM blog, including quarterly feedback to the question, “How are we doing with regard to plain writing?” to gauge public opinion.

10 Conclusion

Improving communication between OPM and the American public is more important now than ever before. We have already made outstanding strides in including citizens in our decision-making, working with other federal agencies, and providing stakeholders with needed

information. The unprecedented challenges we face, however, require continuous improvement in our communication skills.

The Plain Writing Act calls for writing that is clear, concise, and well-organized. Plain language is not a new initiative at OPM. Still, learning to write clear, direct prose is hard work, and employees may need to acquire new skills and abandon writing habits ingrained over the years. In the name of efficiency, accountability, and openness, we are committed ensuring plainer writing and clearer communication with the public.

Appendix: Plain Writing Checklist

Use this checklist to verify you're following plain language guidelines when writing documents covered by the [Plain Writing Act of 2010](#).

Have you...	Check ✓	Comments
Written for the average reader within your intended audience?		
Organized the document to serve the reader's needs and answer the reader's questions?		
Included useful headings to guide the reader?		
Used active voice wherever appropriate?		
Clarified responsibilities?		
Written to one person at a time rather than a group?		
Used "you" and other pronouns to address the reader directly, and clearly identified who is being addressed in each case?		
Used "must" instead of "shall" or "will" to indicate requirements, policy, or law?		
Used the simplest tense possible?		
Eliminated unnecessary and obsolete words?		
Hyperlinked to rather than repeated text from other documents or resources?		
Avoided confusing words and phrases?		
Avoided technical jargon and bureaucratese?		
Defined and used terms consistently?		
Clarified ambiguities?		
Placed words carefully in each sentence?		
Avoided turning verbs into nouns?		
Used numbered lists, bulleted lists, or tables to present complex materials?		
Created short, concise sentences, paragraphs, and sections (covered only one topic in each sentence and paragraph)?		
Made your questions and response neither shorter nor longer than necessary?		