**U.S. Department of Education**

***Plain Writing Act of 2010***

**2014 Compliance Report**

This report explains how the U.S. Department of Education continues to meet the requirements of the Plain Writing Act of 2010. The Department aims to provide the public with information that is written concisely, clearly and well organized.

We strive to write in plain language for all of our various audiences including:

* teachers,
* students,
* parents,
* education organizations,
* researchers,
* policymakers, and
* the general public.

All principal offices conduct an extensive review of each document before it is published. The Executive Secretariat coordinates a process to circulate documents to all principal offices for comment and review. The review is for accuracy and clarity. Also, the Department’s Web Team and Editorial Policy Units, located in the Department’s Office of Communications and Outreach, edit documents for plain writing. We post these documents on our website at [www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov) and/or print hard copies which are available to the public free-of-charge at [www.edpubs.gov](http://www.edpubs.gov).

The Institute of Education Sciences (IES), which includes the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), publishes technical reports primarily for researchers and statisticians. All IES and NCES publications go through rigorous peer review and editing prior to release. IES and NCES write technical reports for technical audiences. Each IES and NCES publication has an abstract and an executive summary written in plain language. The abstracts and executive summaries outline the report findings to help make the reports easier to understand.

1. **Senior agency official for plain writing:** Cynthia Dorfman, director of Operations and Agency Services in the Office of Communications and Outreach, serves as the designated senior official. Jacquelyn Zimmermann, director of Editorial Policy, Print and Art Services, and Jill James, director of the Web Team, also of the Office of Communications and Outreach, assist her in leading the Department’s Plain Writing effort. The Department’s plain writing Web page gives their contact information (<http://www.ed.gov/plain-language>).
2. **Plain Writing section of the Department’s Website:** In June 2011, we launched the Plain Writing Web page (<http://www.ed.gov/plain-language>) and announced it on the Department’s blog. The Department’s Open government Web page links to the Plain Writing Web page. The Plain Writing Web page invites readers to comment on Department publications and these comments are used to help authors improve their writing.
3. **Communicating the Plain Writing Act’s requirements to agency employees:** We continue to train teams of staff in plain writing and provide customized tutorials to meet their needs. In 2014, we published articles on plain writing in the Department’s internal newsletter, Inside ED. This newsletter is available on our internal website. These articles reinforced the concept and reminded people of their obligation to write clearly and take advantage of the Editorial Policy unit’s services. We have posted links on our public website to the following: the Federal Plain Writing Guidelines as revised May 2011 (<http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/guidelines/bigdoc/TOC.cfm>); the Department’s Plain Writing Initiative Web Page (<http://www.ed.gov/plain-language>); and final guidance on implementing the Plain Writing Act of 2010, issued by OMB in April 2011 (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/memoranda/2011/m11-15.pdf>).
4. **Impact of training agency employees in plain writing:** In 2011 and 2012, the Department conducted and sponsored plain writing training classes. Most notably, the Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN) gave free, live training to key communications staff in the Department’s Federal Student Aid office. PLAIN is a group of federal employees who support the use of clear communication in government writing; the group maintains the [www.plainlanguage.gov](http://www.plainlanguage.gov) website of writing resources. Since then, the Office of Federal Student Aid released a simplified FAFSA form. Now college students and their families can more easily apply for federal grants and loans to help them pay for college. One person in IES has been formally trained in plain writing by the Center for Plain Language. Additionally, in the last two years, as mentioned in the 2013 report, ED has used social media more extensively. As a result, we trained communications specialists in plain writing for blogs and other writings for the Web, including executive summaries. We also provided training in how to talk to the media with a strong emphasis on short responses to questions. ED’s goal in providing this training was to help assure that our statements would be short and to the point so that newspapers and other media could quote ED officials accurately with a clear message. We created a Communication Tools page on our internal Website. Employees can read and use information from speeches, talking points and other documents written in plain language, which have been posted at this site. These tools make it easier for our employees to write and give consistent and clear in-person presentations. The Communication Tools page is an extension of the “bookshelf” of resources developed in 2013. The Editorial Policy team provides one-on-one consultation to ED writers both for content and how it fits with policy and for writing quality and style. For example, the team advises on flow, word choice, sentence structure, voice, tone, emphasis, and current grammar standards and practices.
5. **Specific examples of agency communications based on plain writing guidelines:**
* **How-To Information:** The public needs easy access to information on federal student aid. Federal student aid includes grants and loans that are available from the federal government to help students pay for college. It is important for student aid information and outreach to be clear and accurate. Potential aid applicants, guidance and career counselors, and families need to understand what students must have to qualify and apply for student aid. The Federal Student Aid office posts up-to-date information online at its website <https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/> . The site includes tools like checklists on how to prepare for college, information to help choose a school and a career, and a guide to understanding college costs. These materials are written to provide information clearly, often in an easy- to- follow question and answer format and bullets to list major ideas.
* **The Web:** The Department continues to improve the [www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov) website. In 2014 we refreshed the website with a cleaner, clearer design and a more targeted search function. The goal of the redesign was in the spirit of the Plain Writing Act to be “clear, concise, and well organized.”
* **Accessibility for Diverse Audiences:** The Department aims to produce more publications in plain writing so that they can be easily accessed both by those with disabilities and by those whose first language is other than English. All printed publications contain a statement on how customers can get the information in alternate formats. The Department also produces more publications that can be easily translated into the major languages of our customers. Since 2013/14, we offer translation services to customers in the seven most frequently used languages in the U.S., and we have the services to translate into 125 languages in all. For example, we translated an outline for a community and family engagement document and the Education Resources brochure into Spanish. Translators also converted a document about services for English learners into Spanish, Chinese Mandarin Simplified, Korean and Vietnamese.
* **Oral Communication:** We realize that the importance of plain writing includes messages in presentations and videos. The Department writes speeches for the Secretary of Education to present to diverse audiences. We also write scripts for the Secretary to record on video, as well as talking points to be delivered orally. We generally limit video scripts to about three minutes and write them in short, crisp sentences. Similar messages are often printed in recipients’ event programs or publications. Talking points are usually two to three pages and use bullets and other visual cues to focus on the main points. Speeches may be longer, but our writers’ goal is to make sentences short, clear, and direct. Significant speeches are posted on the Department’s website at <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches>.