**U.S. Department of Education**

***Plain Writing Act of 2010***

**FY 2017 Compliance Report**

This annual report is being published on the U.S. Department of Education’s (the Department) Plain Writing section of its website to report on how the Department is complying with the *Plain Writing Act of 2010* (Pub. L. 111-274). The act, among other things, requires all government agencies to designate agency officials to oversee the agency’s implementation of the act, communicate its requirements to all agency employees, train agency employees in plain writing, write documents in plain language with regard for readability in behalf of the agency’s diverse audiences, inform the public of its efforts toward plain writing, and provide a mechanism to receive and respond to public input on its implementation of the act. The overall purpose of the act is to help ensure that documents issued by the agency are clear, concise, and well-organized. The Department’s Plain Writing web page at <https://www.ed.gov/plain-language> contains compliance reports and information about the Department’s efforts to comply with the act, including an invitation to the public to submit input regarding the Department’s efforts.

**Senior Agency Official for Plain Writing**

Cynthia Dorfman, deputy assistant secretary for management in the Office of Communications and Outreach, served as the designated senior official for 2017 to oversee the Department’s compliance with the act. Jacquelyn Zimmermann and Edward “Jim” Mould assisted her in leading the Department’s Plain Writing effort. They also work in the Office of Communications and Outreach, where Zimmermann is the director of Editorial Policy, Print and Art Services, and Mould is the director of Media and Customer Relations and acting director of the web team. In addition, Linda Cuffey in the management section of the Office of Communications and Outreach reviews the comments to the Department from the public that are related to plain writing.

**Comments on Plain Writing**

The Department submitted two documents to the Center for Plain Language for its annual report card. The Department received an A- for its frequently asked questions (FAQ) fact sheet submission and a B for its infographics submission. The FAQ submission was “[9 Myths About the FSA ID](https://blog.ed.gov/2017/06/9-myths-about-the-fsa-id-2/)” (https://blog.ed.gov/2017/06/9-myths-about-the-fsa-id-2/) and the infographics entry was a [blog about student homelessness](https://nces.ed.gov/blogs/nces/post/student-homelessness-in-urban-suburban-town-and-rural-districts) (https://nces.ed.gov/blogs/nces/post/student-homelessness-in-urban-suburban-town-and-rural-districts). The Department received no comments from the public during the year regarding plain writing concerns.

**Examples of Compliance**

The Department continues to implement the *Plain Writing Act* in the following ways:

1. ED-Wide Communications Working Group

With new leadership under the administration of President Trump, the Office of Communications and Outreach formed the ED-Wide Communications Working Group, consisting of Department employees from across the Department to discuss issues related to effective communication with the public. The group discussed the Center for Plain Language’s report card and reviewed the criteria for judging agency entries as models of good writing practice. The group also developed and discussed document review processes in response to the early “rules of the road” processes developed at the beginning of the transition to the new administration.

1. Press Readouts

The incoming Trump administration began issuing readouts of the Secretary of Education’s significant meetings to the press and publishing them on the [www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov) website. Traditionally, the Department has issued press releases and media advisories prior to an event, as well as posted the secretary’s speeches and remarks on ed.gov after an event. The press readouts summarize in plain language the key topics covered in the secretary’s meetings so that the press and the public are informed of the substance of her policy-related work. An example of a readout is from the secretary’s [meeting with Florida education leaders](https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/readout-secretary-devos%E2%80%99-meeting-florida-education-leaders) (https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/readout-secretary-devos%E2%80%99-meeting-florida-education-leaders).

1. Revisions to the *Individuals with* *Disabilities Education Act* (*IDEA*) Website

In early 2017, the Department revised and revamped the [*IDEA* Website](https://sites.ed.gov/idea/?src=feature) (https://sites.ed.gov/idea/?src=feature) to be clear and easy to navigate and understand. The simple landing page has a three-sentence introduction followed by “*IDEA* Updates,” which are links to announcements about grants, events, and resources available to the public. Along the side of the page are buttons that link to various categories of contact information to create a concise portfolio of information.

1. Agency Financial Report (AFR) to Congress

Every year the Office of the Chief Financial Officer writes the [Agency Financial Report](https://www2.ed.gov/about/reports/annual/2017report/agency-financial-report.pdf) (https://www2.ed.gov/about/reports/annual/2017report/agency-financial-report.pdf), and the Department submits it to Congress. The purpose of the report is to inform the Congress, the president, external stakeholders, and the American people about the state of the Department’s financial systems in the context of the Department’s mission, strategic plan, and activities. The 2017 report was specifically written in plain language and posted on the Department’s website to be read by the public with as much ease as possible.

1. Newsletter for the Public

As part of its Educator Engagement Outreach initiative, the Department has developed an e-newsletter, [Teacher’s Edition](https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/USED/bulletins/19080f6) (https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/USED/bulletins/19080f6), to provide information about education policies and resources that teachers can use. The product was refined in 2017, and each issue contains 10 one-paragraph entries that link to longer pieces. This easy-to-read format attracts teachers to insightful “voices from the classroom” stories with practical advice from teachers based on their teaching experiences. Over 90,000 people subscribe to this free, emailed publication.

1. Work Smarter Intranet Site

As part of the Department’s goal of continuous improvement in the area of communication, the Internal Communications team in the Office of Communications and Outreach developed an intranet site for Department employees with tips and tools for better communication. This “Work Smarter” site has icons that lead to tips for

* blogging (use lists, subheads, charts, bullets, pull quotes, visuals);
* translating text into infographics (start by deconstructing what you’ve written to the essential points you want to make); and
* replacing phrases with one word.
1. Plain Writing Professional Development for National Center for Education Statistics Employees

The National Center for Education Statistics provided professional development for its staff to improve their writing through plain language. Cynthia Dorfman and Jacquelyn Zimmermann, leaders of the Department’s Plain Writing Initiative, spoke about clear writing along with experts in each of the following three topic areas:

1. Perspectives From the Press: Translating Data and Research for a Broader Audience
2. Knowing Your Audience: How to Write Clearly for Your Readers
3. Plain Language: Policies, Support, and Best Practices for Clear Writing
4. Professional Development: Office of Communications and Outreach

Jacquelyn Zimmermann participated in the Plain Language workshop “[What Do You Mean? Communicate Using Plain Language](https://fedcommnetwork.blogspot.com/2016/10/recording-slide-deck-posted-for-what-do.html)” (https://fedcommnetwork.blogspot.com/2016/10/recording-slide-deck-posted-for-what-do.html) at the Partnership for Public Service, which was organized by the Federal Communicators Network. It stood out as a reader-centered training, providing lessons in writing techniques that allow readers to quickly and easily understand what they are reading so that they actually read what the writer intended for them to read.

1. Blog to Support Plain Writing
2. The Office of Communications and Outreach published an *Inside ED News Blog* for employees, “[Ten Fundamentals of Good Business Writing](https://connected.ed.gov/InsideED/Lists/Posts/Post.aspx?List=0bc725f8%2De64e%2D400b%2D959c%2Dd92df5816094&ID=224&Web=e91f8ee4%2Ddd74%2D46ef%2Dbc13%2D8b6bf22f1978)” (https://connected.ed.gov/InsideED/Lists/Posts/Post.aspx?List=0bc725f8%2De64e%2D400b%2D959c%2Dd92df5816094&ID=224&Web=e91f8ee4%2Ddd74%2D46ef%2Dbc13%2D8b6bf22f1978). The article described the 10 “Cs” of plain writing:
3. Complete
4. Concise
5. Clear
6. Conversational
7. Correct
8. Coherent
9. Credible
10. Concrete
11. Courteous
12. Considerate
13. The National Center for Education Statistics published a blog on its website, “Data Visualization: Helping Education Agencies Communicate Data Meaning to Stakeholders” (https://nces.ed.gov/blogs/nces/post/data-visualization-helping-education-agencies-communicate-data-meaning-to-stakeholders). Written by the National Forum on Education Statistics’ Data Visualization Working Group, the article was based on the idea that “. . . someone needs to highlight the most relevant ‘take-home’ message in the data or no one will see it, understand it, or use it to make decisions.” The basic principles of effective data visualization, or infographics, that were featured include
* show the data;
* reduce the clutter;
* integrate text and images; and
* portray data meaning accurately and ethically.

**Follow-Up to 2016 Report**

When the Office of Communications and Outreach reorganized (with final approval received in August 2017), writing was identified as a core function. Employees in the Office of Communications and Outreach have “skill in written communication” in their position descriptions to emphasize the importance of clear, accurate, and concise writing for the public. Writing was also identified as a core function of the Office of Communications and Outreach in response to the President’s Executive Order on government reform.

**Future**

**Report on Rural Education:** In response to a congressional mandate in the *Elementary and Secondary Education Ac*t, as amended by the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, the Department prepared a draft report on support for education in rural areas. The draft (preliminary report) was posted at <https://blog.ed.gov/files/2017/12/Preliminary-Report-on-Rural-Education.pdf> for public comment through Feb. 20, 2018. The goal was to write the report in plain language so that the general public could more easily understand it. The Department will consider all the comments from the public and address them in the final document while preserving the plain language approach.

**Simplifying the *Free Application for Federal Student Aid* (FAFSA) Process:** [As announced by the secretary of education at a recent FSA conference](https://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/prepared-remarks-us-secretary-education-betsy-devos-federal-student-aids-training-conference-financial-aid-professionals) (https://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/prepared-remarks-us-secretary-education-betsy-devos-federal-student-aids-training-conference-financial-aid-professionals), the Department is focused on efforts to simplify applying for federal student aid. Plain writing will be at the heart of this process in order to serve the Department’s customers better.