

**U.S. Department of Education**

***Plain Writing Act of 2010***

**FY 2020 Compliance Report**

This annual report highlights the Department’s compliance with the Plain Writing Act of 2010 (Pub. L. 111-274). This act helps ensure that documents the Department issues are clear, concise, and well-organized. The act requires government agencies to:

* Designate officials to oversee implementation of the act,
* Communicate its requirements to all agency employees,
* Train agency employees in plain writing;
* Establish process for overseeing ongoing compliance;
* Create and maintain a plain writing section of agency’s website; and
* Designate points of contact to receive and respond to public input on its implementation of the act.

**Agency Officials for Plain Writing**

The Department’s Office of Communications and Outreach (OCO) oversees the agency’s Plain Writing activities. One of OCO’s seven divisions is the Writing Division, which is focused on providing services in written and verbal communication to other teams and other offices throughout the agency. Kate Devine, lead for the Editorial Team within the Writing Division, has served as the agency’s plain writing designated official since January 2019. Melissa Apostolides is director of the Writing Division. Daniel Miller, deputy assistant secretary of communications and outreach, has assisted in leading the Department’s Plain Writing effort.

**Communicating Requirements to Employees**

**OCO Writing Division**

OCO reorganized in September 2019, creating a Writing Division. This division brought together four groups focused on writing — speechwriting, editorial review, internal communications, and translations, combining those with similar skills to leverage expertise in the written word to communicate with a variety of internal and external audiences more effectively. This coalescence of skills in FY 20 increased staff prominence in offering services to others in OCO and other offices to promote clear, concise writing.

**Guide to Publishing**

In 2002, the Department (ED) produced the first edition of the Guide to Publishing at the Department of Education*.* This 50-page guidehas been revised throughout the years and resides on ED’s internal site as a resource for Department staff. Currently, it is under major revision as communication tools change and expand (e.g., less print, more digital). This guide includes information on the Plain Writing Act and highlights writing tips, such as writing for the intended audience, using active voice, choosing simple words, and using short sentences and bullets. Links to plainlanguage.gov resources are included. Another updated edition of the guide is expected by year’s end, with an internal formal rollout planned.

**Writing Mentorships and Collaboration of Divisions**

OCO has undertaken extended mentorships that pair relatively new Writing Division staff members with senior staff members who have decades of writing experience. The plain language officer has trained a new editor on the editorial process while a member of the Internal Communications Team of the Writing Division and the Writing Division director have worked to assist another Internal Communications staff person in improving writing skills for the Department’s Inside ED News Blog and other tasks.

Additionally, there is ongoing coordination between the Writing Division and the National Engagement Division (NED), which, in addition to several of its own outreach newsletters, facilitates the development of White House Initiative newsletters. There is continual two-way sharing of information between the divisions, creating a structured channel for regular discussions in effective communications and plain writing as a means of informal one-on-one development to ensure writers are cognizant of plain writing requirements

**Training Employees in Plain Writing: Formal Professional Development**

More formal employee development was also undertaken; professional development activities for FY 20 included:

* OCO staff, including editors and press team members, attended two Writing Improvement workshops in FY 19, with writer and blogger Eric Deckers, on topics that included identifying audiences, messaging, and storytelling. Slides from both trainings and notes were posted on OCO’s internal SharePoint site, and shared with all OCO staff in October 2019. OCO’s NED, which issues the majority of OCO newsletters, also had structured follow-up exercises in October and November, based on Deckers’ guidelines.
* Plain Language Officer Kate Devine, of the Writing Division, attended a two-hour Brand Storytelling webinar, of Ragan Communications, in December 2019.
* A speechwriter of the Writing Division attended two-day Speechwriting and Public Affairs Training, of Ragan Communications, in March 2020.
* An information specialist, of the agency’s call center, OCO’s Information Resource Center (IRC), took training in plain language, to help ensure response standards follow plain language guidelines.
* Kate Devine and another editor of the Writing Division attended a one-and-a-half-hour Advanced AP Style webinar, of Ragan Communications, in August 2020, to provide consistent content presentation among products.
* Many OCO staff, including writers and editors, attended a one-hour presentation on using stock photography with OCO’s Adobe Stock contracting officer representative, in December 2019.

**Compliance Oversight**

**Agency Report Review**

All principal offices conduct an extensive review of their documents before publishing. Additionally, the Executive Secretariat coordinates a process to circulate documents with policy ramifications to all principal offices to review for accuracy and clarity. Also, OCO’s Writing Division routinely reviews and edits documents for plain writing, with offices completing a Principal Office Coordination Form for officials’ signatures for particularly complex or cross-office documents. This editorial review is for hard copy as well as online publications, posting thereafter to our website.

For the Department’s [Institute of Education Sciences](https://ies.ed.gov/) (IES), which issues technical reports primarily for researchers and statisticians, all publications go through peer review and editing prior to release. Because IES reports are for technical audiences, these publications include abstracts and executive summaries written in plain language for nontechnical audiences.

**Program and Regulatory Document Review**

The Office of General Counsel’s routing of Notices Inviting Applications, Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, and other grant- and regulatory-related documents for agencywide review includes an OCO editorial review of select documents. These documents are typically those considered more complex or lengthy in nature, requiring a close read for fullest comprehension. The primary purpose of OCO inclusion is to minimize reader confusion on such documents as those slated for public consumption in the Federal Register; comments are routinely made by the directors for State/Local Public Engagement and National Engagement.

**Agency Newsletter Review**

In addition to OCO, other offices also issue newsletters on a routine basis that are intended for various public sector audiences. Several newsletters receive OCO editorial review prior to release. Additionally, to ensure a consistent message among newsletters issued from OCO, which has the largest number, a tiered review process of editorial staff and Administration officials via SharePoint is in place. This site allows for efficient internal communication among staff involved in newsletter review.

Table 1 lists agency newsletters routinely undergoing editorial review, that are then typically delivered via govDelivery and posted to offices’ webpages. This table gives an idea of the breadth of information disseminated from various offices throughout the agency that receives OCO editorial oversight.

**Table 1. Department Newsletters With OCO Editorial Review, Issuing Office, and Audience: FY 2020**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Newsletter  | Issuing Office  | Audience  |
|  |  |  |
| The Connector  | White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans  | African American students & families; stakeholders |
| The Center for Faith and Opportunity Initiatives’ Highlights | White House Faith & Opportunity Initiative  | Faith-based & community leaders |
| Early Learning  | Offices of Elementary & Secondary Education and Special Education Programs | Parents, teachers |
| ED Review  | Office of Communications & Outreach  | Intergovernmental & corporate communities |
| Family, School and Community Engagement  | Office of Communications & Outreach | Parents, teachers, administrators, & community leaders |
| IFLE Newsletter  | Office of Postsecondary Education | International & foreign language community |
| Green Strides  | Office of Communications & Outreach | School administrators (environmental focus)  |
| Nuestra Iniciativa  | White House Hispanic Prosperity Initiative  | Hispanic students & parents |
| OCTAE Connection | Office of Career, Technical & Adult Education | State officials & others in adult ed, career & technical ed, community colleges  |
| Office of State Grant and Program Support Newsletter | Office of Elementary & Secondary Education  | Elementary & secondary education grantees  |
| OSEP Update  | Office of Special Education Programs & Rehabilitative Services | Families of disabled children |
| Promise Neighborhoods  | Office of Elementary & Secondary Education | Community leaders, Promise Neighborhoods grant recipients, & other distressed areas |
| STEM Education Newsletter  | Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development | Science, technology, engineering, & math community |
| Touching Base  | Office of Communications & Outreach | Military members & families |
| Youth Voices  | Office of Communications & Outreach | Student youths |

**Social Media Content Review**

All outgoing tweets and Facebook posts are reviewed to ensure no postings include inaccurate or irrelevant information, and that the posts are easily readable. The deputy assistant secretary for communications reviews the secretary’s posts with the director of the Digital Media and Creative Services Division (DMCS) assisting in review of the agency’s main Twitter and Facebook accounts. As social media continues to gain in popularity as a communications tool, OCO is in the process of hiring several more staff to address this rise in use to ensure clear and informative messaging.

**Updating Center-Assessed Page**

Each year, the Center for Plain Language report card reviewers grade two webpages from various agencies, one for urgent help and one among the most viewed, with the Card’s writing quality an average of the two grades. Reviews are staggered with one page in first-year of review, while the other is reassessed in the second year to ascertain improvements based on the criteria of understanding audience needs; style or voice; structure and content; information design and navigation; and use of visuals. For FY20, reviewers reassessed the [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act](https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html) (FERPA) page; FERPA is under the purview of the [Student Privacy Policy Office](https://studentprivacy.ed.gov/?src=fpco) (SPPO). The director of SPPO has met with ED’s plain language officer and the director of DMCS to discuss presentation of FERPA information and relocating FERPA information to the SPPO page.

**Other Compliance**

***Stock image use*.** Givenimages enhance readability and reader engagement, OCO has a contract with Adobe Stock, providing 10 seat licenses to staff of the Writing Division and DMCS. Plain Language Officer Kate Devine holds one of these seat licenses, assisting with image requests, for use in OCO newsletters.

***508 compliance*.** Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 requires agencies to make information accessible to those with disabilities. In FY20, compliance work included translations and presentation activities. Six Frequently Asked Questions documents in response to COVID-19 were translated for the limited English proficient community and assessed for 508 compliance. The documents were initially reviewed for clarity in order for translation to proceed. A rotating slide presentation for an OCO all-staff was assessed for readability and screen reader use, with changes being made to text colors, background, and fonts.

***Website modernization*.** OCO continues its multiyear effort to increase staff awareness of communication competencies and how they can be utilized to ensure a contemporary approach to communications. These competencies are now being utilized in an OCO-wide modernization of ED.gov to improve the management, content, and effectiveness of the site. The Department has issued a directive establishing standards and procedures to ensure centralized web content governance, which is intended to provide a clear understanding of policy, authorization, applicability, roles, and responsibilities necessary for provision of organized and relevant information.

***Innovative projects initiated.*** As part of this modernization effort, OCO initiated five projects focusing on various aspects of the ED.gov website and the Department’s call/information center, with the ultimate goal of understanding agency audiences and transmitting messages to them using their preferred channel(s) so as to provide more efficient and effective customer service. These projects, staffed fully with OCO volunteers for the initial phases, are: redesigning ED.gov; modernizing call center response through artificial intelligence; developing an agency knowledge base (for use with AI); removal of less-trafficked ed.gov pages; and creating ED.gov personas.

The Redesign of ED.gov, initiated a [Challenge.gov](https://www.challenge.gov/) invitation for redesign ideas and will lead to a full revamp of the website design, thereby facilitating site use and information location and retrieval. The personas will allow an in-depth development of user profiles to best serve those seeking agency information.

The Knowledge Base project is focused on developing a process to collect, maintain, and manage principal office content that both internal and external users seek most often. While the ultimate goal is for this content to be the source for a chat bot, via AI, the content collection alone can be a tool that the call center can utilize to provide concise information at a faster response rate to callers.

The ed.gov content removal project will establish new standards for web content lifecycles. Pages receiving relatively little traffic account for the majority of agency Web content, adding unnecessarily to the complexity of the site. Agency content removal efforts include an agencywide inventory of all records, hard copy and digital, for a comprehensive content registry. This compilation will allow for building a new framework of policies, procedures, training, customer service, and tools for working in the digital age. OCO Records Liaison Officer Kate Devine is working with OCO divisions and the agency’s records officer to inventory OCO records.

***Federal Student Aid website modernization underway.*** The most user-heavy agency webpages are typically those on federal student aid. The office of Federal Student Aid (FSA) has been working since 2018 to improve customer service by modernizing to ensure that there is one place to input and organize responses to customers, with the goal to allow customers to learn about, apply for, and manage their federal student loans seamlessly on one platform. FSA is collecting and managing data and responses, with a chatbot being developed. The initial collection of information has been compiled from frequently asked questions received via the Web, social media, and the call center, with responses to about 1,000 questions in their knowledge base. The goal is to keep responses concise and to the point—280 characters with possibly a link to a webpage or social media response—thus providing clear, timely information to users.

**Plain Writing Webpage**

Our [plain writing webpage](https://www.ed.gov/plain-language) contains a brief overview of the Plain Writing Act and its ramifications for the Department and links to the annual fiscal year compliance reports, beginning with FY 2011, that contain information about the Department’s efforts to comply with the act. Reformatting this page to update the appearance and text for reader ease was underway in late FY 20.

**Responding to Public Input**

The plain writing webpage includes a plain writing email address and an invitation to the public to submit comments on Department output from a plain writing perspective with these comments being used to help authors improve. We have not received any such comments or questions this fiscal year. Additionally, ED’s call center reported late in FY that no calls or emails were received from the public regarding plain writing.

**Future Plans**

Focus on improving agency communication by use of plain writing will continue. For example, staffing needs for OCO will remain a priority in the coming fiscal year. The IT modernization projects will afford opportunity to create more efficient and effective avenues for provision of clear, concise information to all users, whether external or internal. And continuing updating or creating webpages with plain writing in mind will provide clear and concise information to all users and a variety of education stakeholders.