**U.S. Department of Education**

***Plain Writing Act of 2010***

**FY 2016 Compliance Report**

This report shows how the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) has built on the principles of the *Plain Writing Act of 2010*. The Act requires all government agencies to write documents in plain language so the general public can understand them. The purpose of the Act is to assure that documents are written to be clear, concise, and well-organized.

**Senior Agency Official for Plain Writing**: Cynthia Dorfman, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Management in the Office of Communications and Outreach, serves as the designated senior official. Jacquelyn Zimmermann and Edward “Jim” Mould assist her in leading the Department’s Plain Writing effort. They also work in the Office of Communications and Outreach. Jacquelyn Zimmermann is the Director of Editorial Policy, Print and Art Services. Edward “Jim” Mould is the Director of Media and Customer Relations and Acting Director of the Web Team. The Department’s Plain Writing webpage contains this information ([www.ed.gov/plain-language](http://www.ed.gov/plain-language)). In addition, Linda Cuffey in the Management section of the Office of Communications and Outreach reviews the comments from the public related to plain writing at the Department.

**Comments on Plain Writing:** The Department received one comment to the Plain Writing e-mailbox (plainwriting@ed.gov) in 2016. The writer wanted to know why grant-related documents “are written for an academic audience when so many nonacademic personnel have to interpret the materials, too?” The comment was referred to the appropriate office for consideration and improvement. The Department welcomes further comments to test whether we have been successful in our plain writing efforts.

The following descriptions are examples of how the Department has continued to implement the *Plain Writing Act*.

1. **Explanations of the reauthorized *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA):** The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), reauthorizing the ESEA, was signed by President Obama in December 2015. Soon afterward in January 2016, the Department issued a comprehensive [fact sheet](https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/giving-every-child-america-fair-shot-great-education) on ESSA that focused on how the law works to ensure equal education opportunity. This fact sheet gives a summary of key points of the law in simple terms and in easy-to-understand language.

Also, a comprehensive document was written to explain how states can move smoothly from *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) to the new law. The document, “[Transitioning to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA): Frequently Asked Questions](https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/faq/essa-faqs.pdf),”issued in February 2016,explains the most relevant sections of the law by answering questions the Department received from the public. The 17-page document clarifies nearly 400 pages of legal language in the law by stating how its provisions can work in practice. Each answer is one to five sentences, which are written succinctly and directly. Here is an example of one answer: “Each state with an approved ESEA flexibility request must continue to implement that request through the 2015-16 schoolyear. All ESEA flexibility requests are null and void as of August 1, 2016.” Many questions are answered simply by “Yes” or “No,” followed by a short explanation of the context of the response. Some answers are also given in numbered lists. For example, there is a list of seven areas in NCLB with which states no longer need to comply. It also lists four areas for which a state no longer needs to collect data.

1. **Explanations of rights of homeless youth under the *McKinney-Vento Act*:** Another concern of States and school districts is how to ensure that homeless students are receiving the quality education they deserve. The *McKinney-Vento Act* helps to address that concern. The *McKinney-Vento Act* was also amended by ESSA. So, the Department released a [fact sheet](https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/160315ehcyfactsheet072716.pdf)  to clarify the rights of homeless children under the amended act. It also has tips on how schools can help these most needy students. Again, the fact sheet is written in plain, reader-friendly language with bulleted statements, appropriate headlines in complete sentences, and statistics in bold, embedded in explanatory sentences and displayed in boxes for easy understanding.
2. **Information on reforms related to postsecondary education and Federal Student Aid:** 2016 was a busy year for the Department in clarifying policies and procedures related to postsecondary education and federal student aid. The following changes were made to improve communication:
* **Support for homeless students:** The Department wrote a [fact sheet](https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/sites/default/files/homeless-youth.pdf) in plain language, “Questions and Answers: Federal Student Aid and Homeless Youth.” This was designed to be a reader-friendly resource about how the homeless may apply for federal student aid and includes financial aid resources for homeless students**.** The Department also simplified the *Free Application for Federal Student* *Aid* (FAFSA) form and application process for homeless students and removed the definition of “youth” so that 22-and 23-year-old applicants can have a more streamlined process for determining their independent status to qualify for federal aid.
* **Support for foster youth:** The Department, along with other federal agencies, developed the [*Foster Care Transition Toolkit*](https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/foster-care/youth-transition-toolkit.pdf) to provide information on how to move into young adulthood. Every year 23,000 young people “age out” of the foster care system to become independent, and this can be a challenging time. The toolkit includes information for students and counsellors on how to apply for federal student aid and college. These students often do not have the adult support to help them know about or confidently apply for federal funding or a college education.
* **Support for students paying back student loans:** The Department wrote a [fact sheet](https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/fact-sheet-increasing-college-access-making-loans-easier-pay) to explain the different options for managing student loans, including:

Pay as You Earn and other income-driven repayment plans;

The Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program; and

Protecting Students from Debt Relief Scams

* **Support for students attending schools that have closed due to accrediting problems:** The Secretary wrote a [blog](https://blog.ed.gov/2016/09/message-secretary-education-itt-students/) that explained to students that they may be able to have their student loans discharged if they have been attending a school that has closed for fraudulent or other practices that were risks to academic integrity. [Note: the form that students use to file a request to have their loan discharged was submitted for plain writing review by the Center for Plain Language. Based on that form, the Department received a rating of B-].
1. **Application of 508 compliant guidelines to documents:** This year the Office of Communications and Outreach trained two people to prepare documents to be 508 compliant. After the training, the newly trained employees passed along the 508 compliant guidelines for document preparation to other communicators in the Department. These guidelines are similar to plain writing principles, as well. For example, 508 compliant documents use bullets, short sentences, and simple graphics and lay-outs. And, words on the page, for example, should flow without interruption from hard returns other than punctuation. These guidelines were included in the briefing document on procedures for the transition to the new administration.
2. **Best practices for presenting policy guidance online:** In 2016, the Department followed a GAO recommendation to develop and post “[Best Practices](https://www2.ed.gov/web-guidance/content/guidance-practices.html) for Presenting [non-regulatory] Policy Guidance Online.” This best practices document is written in plain language and is presented using plain writing principles. The document opens with the premise that, “Guidance is only useful if those who need it can find the correct information when they need it. These best practices are meant to help users find what they need and to make sure what they find is correct and current.” The four-and-a-half-page document is posted on the Department’s ed.gov website. In the Acting Assistant Secretary for the Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development’s testimony before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, she said, “The Department makes every effort to issue guidance that restates the regulation in plainer language, summarizes requirements, and suggests ways to comply with the new regulation and/or offers best practices.”

**Follow-Up to 2015 Report**

While the Department did not specifically write “What Is:” blogs, we wrote the fact sheets on ESSA and rights of homeless youth (see items #1 and #2 above) instead. These fact sheets explained to the public key points in the reauthorized *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*.

We examined the most popular online content and determined that listicle blogs, which list items rather than use dense text, work best. One example was a listicle about [getting ready to go to college](https://blog.ed.gov/2016/07/8-things-hs-grads-need-to-do-before-college/), and another had [financial tips for graduate students](https://blog.ed.gov/2016/07/financial-aid-tips-for-graduate-students/). Both were produced by the Office of Federal Student Aid and generated a number of positive comments. We produced a four-point guide for employees on writing blogs:

1. Concise (no more than 550 words) and focused;
2. Clear message of why the story is important;
3. Alignment with the Department’s mission and one or more of the main priorities;
4. Following a standard format:
* Lead-in: a personal story, human interest angle or compelling statistic.
* What: the action, or proposed action, the Department is taking to solve a problem or address an issue;
* Context: background about the problem/issue/event.
* Details: specifics to give clarity and interest but not to overwhelm the reader; link to complete reports or more details if necessary;
* Conclusion: Repeated message and/or reference to other social media, i.e., social media handles with a “let’s continue the conversation line."

We also saw that the succinctness of social media, e.g., Twitter, was most effective in alerting the public to the latest information from the Department.

In researching the e-book concept, we realized that with all of our documents on the web, we essentially had a type of “e-book” and we did not see a need to develop a separate platform for conveying the same information. We also noted that there has been a drop in popularity of e-books, with people continuing to like the look and feel of reading from a tangible page. We did not, therefore, pursue the e-book idea.

Training has been on an as-needed basis. The Office of Communications and Outreach held a training session for senior Department leaders on how to effectively write a speech. Plain writing principles were stressed, particularly, in 1) limiting the number of points you want to get across and 2) writing in short sentences for emphasis and also so the speaker (and, thus, the listener) does not get tangled up in the words.

**Future**

The Office of Communications and Outreach will require that employees be skilled in using plain language and will incorporate that requirement into position descriptions as part of implementing its reorganization. The Editorial Policy team also provides edits to, and guidance on, publications from all of the Department’s offices, based on the principles of plain writing, and offers classes upon request.