**U.S. Department of Education**

***Plain Writing Act of 2010***

**FY 2019 Compliance Report**

This annual report highlights the Department’s compliance with the *Plain Writing Act of 2010* (Pub. L. 111-274). The purpose of the act is to help 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, write documents in plain language for readability for 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.

**Senior Agency Official for Plain Writing**

The Office of Communications and Outreach (OCO) oversees the agency’s Plain Writing activities. OCO reorganized toward the end of the fiscal year. For FY 19, Kate Devine, lead for the Editorial Policy and Publishing Team (now part of the Writing Division), served as the designated senior official to oversee the Department’s compliance with the act. Jim Mould, director of media and customer relations, served as her supervisor, with Melissa Apostolides as the acting director of the new Writing Division. Dan Miller, deputy assistant secretary of communications and outreach, assisted in leading the Department’s Plain Writing effort. Linda Cuffey in the management section of OCO reviews the public comments submitted to the Department’s Plain Writing mailbox (plainwriting@ed.gov) that are related to plain writing.

**Comments on Plain Writing**

Due to staff turnover and reorganization efforts last year, the agency did not submit a FY 2018 compliance report to the Center for Plain Language, accounting for the lower grade in Organizational Compliance on the Federal Report Card. The Department, however, did receive an A- for the content assessed in FY 18. For FY 19, the ED Web Dashboard (<https://www2.ed.gov/analytics/index.html>),

indicates that federal student aid pages constitute almost all of the top pages viewed. Due to the current revamping of student aid sites, however, assessment focused instead on the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) page at <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html>. No public comments were submitted to the Plain Writing mailbox during FY 19.

**Examples of Agency Compliance**

**Plain Writing Webpage**

Our Plain Writing Web page at <http://www.ed.gov/plain-language> contains links to the annual fiscal year compliance reports, beginning with FY 2011, and information about the Department’s efforts to comply with the act. This information includes an invitation to the public to submit comments on Department output from a plain language perspective and these comments are used to help authors improve their writing. Preliminary contact with OCO’s Web Team regarding the process for submission of requests for updating the appearance and text for reader ease was made in the fall of 2019.

**Publications Review**

All principal offices conduct an extensive review of their document before publishing, completing a Principal Office Coordination Form for officials’ signatures for particularly complex or cross-office documents. 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. This review is for hard copy as well as online publications, posting thereafter to our website at [www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov).

For the Department’s Institute of Education Sciences (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.

**Federal Student Aid Web Updates**

The most user-heavy agency webpages are typically those on federal student aid. For the past year, the Office of Federal Student Aid (FSA) has been working on revamping its student aid sites to better organize content. For example, FSA blogs, currently accounting for over two-thirds of the agency’s blog pageviews, will post to a new FSA blog feature. Through a unified digital front door, a consolidated customer care platform, and a centralized communications and marketing platform, FSA has taken a user-centric approach to redefining the customer experience for FSA's 42 million customers.  All of FSA's different sites and collection agencies and customer assistance centers will consolidate into one system. StudentLoans.gov is one of the sites that will be included in phase 1, launching in November.

Another example of simplifying the student aid experience in FY 19 was when we succeeded in simplifying applying for federal student aid with the first-ever mobile application, for completion of the 2019**–**20 Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). As a testament to the simplicity and clarity of the electronic approach, the first mobile applications were filed minutes after a midnight launch.

**Website Content Overhaul**

In FY 19, we initiated a project to assess and archive pages receiving relatively little traffic on ED.gov. These pages, accounting for the majority of agency Web content, unnecessarily add to the complexity of the site. Initial steps have focused on removing links to *Federal Register* notices, as these would be records that the Office of the Federal Register maintains and that the public can access via the *Federal Register* website. Future work includes OCO’s Records Liaison Officer (Kate Devine) working with OCO’s newly created Digital Media and Creative Services Division and the agency’s Federal Records Officer.

**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 now includes an OCO editorial review. The primary purpose of OCO inclusion is to minimize reader confusion on complex documents slated for public consumption in the *Federal Register*.

**Agency Newsletter Review**

We issue several newsletters on a routine basis that are intended for various public sector audiences. Agency newsletters go through OCO editorial review prior to release. To ensure a consistent message among newsletters issued from OCO, which has the largest number, a SharePoint site was developed in FY 18 with a tiered review process of editorial staff and Administration officials. The process was refined in FY 19 for more efficient review. Following is a listing of select agency newsletters, typically delivered via govDelivery and posted to offices’ webpages, which gives an idea of the breadth of information disseminated from various offices throughout the agency.

**Select Department of Education Newsletters, Issuing Office, and Audience**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Newsletter (issuing office) | Audience  |
|  |  |
| *Early Learning* (Elementary & Secondary Education and Special Education Programs) | Parents, teachers |
| *ED Review* (OCO)\* | Intergovernmental & corporate communities |
| *Education Almanac* | Rural education stakeholders |
| *Family, School and Community Engagement* (OCO) | Parents, teachers, administrators, & community leaders |
| *IFLE Newsletter* (Postsecondary Education) | International & foreign language community |
| *Green Strides* (OCO) | School administrators (environmental focus)  |
| *Nuestra Iniciativa* (White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics; part of OCO) | Hispanic students & parents |
| *Promise Neighborhoods* (Elementary & Secondary Education and Special Education Programs) | Community leaders, Promise Neighborhoods grant recipients, & other distressed areas |
| *OCTAE Connection* (Career and Technical Education) | State officials & others in adult ed, career & technical ed, community colleges  |
| *OSEP Update* (Special Education Programs) | Families of disabled children |
| *Teacher’s Edition* (Elementary & Secondary Education) | K–12 Teachers  |
| *The Center for Faith and Opportunity Initiatives’ Highlights* (White House Faith & Opportunity Initiative; part of OCO) | Faith-based & community leaders |
| *Touching Base* (OCO) | Military members & families |
| *Youth Voices* (OCO) | Student youths |

\*OCO – Office of Communications and Outreach

**Social Media Review**

The Office of the Secretary (OS) reviews all outgoing tweets from throughout the agency to ensure no postings include inaccurate or irrelevant information, and that the posts are easily readable. For FY 19, OCO editors reviewed hundreds of social media posts from offices prior to OS review, routinely providing comment.

**Communications Competencies Initiative**

In November 2018, OCO began a multiyear effort to increase employee awareness of communication competencies, and how they relate to and can be utilized to ensure a contemporary approach to communications From the initial meetings, staff extracted core values they believe to be of most significance: service, integrity, and excellence. These values are the cornerstone of the agency’s work, which has as its public service base, the need for plain language.

**508 Compliance of Translated Documents**

The agency also must be aware of complying with section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which requires agencies to make technologies accessible to those with disabilities. In FY 19, 84 Dear Colleague letters and Frequently Asked Questions documents in different topical areas 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.

**OCO Writing Division Formed**

With the OCO reorganization complete in September 2019, for the first time since OCO’s inception over 15 years ago, a Writing Division was created. This division brings together speechwriters, writers, and editors together on the same team, meshing those with similar skills to leverage expertise in the written word to more effectively communicate with the public.

**Professional Development**

**Professional Development - Office of Communications and Outreach**

The competencies effort discussed above led to an increased focus on professional development. Some FY 19 training has focused specifically on writing, and some more on presentation aspects, for example, choosing images to optimize content. Routine email blasts are sent to all OCO staff highlighting select competencies and related training opportunities.

Kate Devine and OCO editor Nancy Paulu attended GSA’s “Plain Language Basics,” by Katherine Spivey, Plain Language Launcher, GSA, and co-chair and senior trainer for Plain Language action and Information Network (PLAIN). Attendees learned about how the Plain Writing Act of 2010 affects government agencies, plain writing principles, and strategies for making content plain. Also, in FY 19, Kate Devine attended “The Amazing Writing and Editing Virtual Summit” by Ragan Communications, which included information on how to edit one’s work more effectively to keep copy clear and concise. OCO staff, including editors and press team members also attended “Writing Improvement,” a two-part series with author and blogger Erik Deckers, on subjects that included identifying audiences, messaging, and storytelling.

The Department’s Translation Manager Edward Ohnemus, also in OCO, developed a training course on “Using Stock Photography,” to help staff best utilize images to enhance clarity of text and reader engagement. Also, training alerts during FY 19 for online sessions have included various editing elements of PowerPoint and understanding your audience by having the ability to connect and engage with stakeholders by understanding needs and motivations.

**Professional Development - All Offices**

In FY 19, OCO’s internal communications staff ran a series of posts on grammar and word use on the agency intranet site, ConnectED. Articles were posted routinely for months, providing all agency staff the opportunity to review basic punctuation rules (when to use a comma), origins of popular figures of speech, and common errors in word use (then vs. than, principal vs. principle).

**Future Plans**

With the reorganization of OCO final, staffing and other resource needs are being assessed to ensure that this office can adequately continue its work. For example, with the growing use of social media for information dissemination, new staff positions are anticipated to meet the increasing need. With growth of the office will come the need for all employees to be skilled in using plain writing. As part of this intent, the Writing Division plans to update the agency’s *Guide to Publishing*, which lays out the procedures for writing a document slated for publication whether online only or also hard copy.