**U.S. Department of Education**

**Plain Writing Act of 2010 Organizational Compliance Report**

**Fiscal Year 2021**

This annual report highlights the Department’s compliance with the Plain Writing Act of 2010 (Pub. L. 111-274), which is intended to 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 the Act’s requirements to all agency employees.
* Train agency employees to write documents for readability for the agency’s diverse audiences.
* Establish a process for overseeing ongoing compliance.
* Create and maintain a plain writing section of the agency’s website.
* Provide a mechanism to receive and respond to public input on the implementation of the Act.

**Agency Officials for Plain Writing**

The Department’s Office of Communications and Outreach (OCO) is the primary source for plain writing support in the agency. OCO has four main parts: Communications, Outreach, Management, and White House Initiatives. Communications consists of the Writing, Digital Media and Creative Services (DMCS), and Press and Customer Relations divisions. The Writing Division provides communications services to other divisions within OCO and to 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 the director of the Writing Division, and Tiffany Taber is OCO’s managing writer (political appointee); both contribute to ensuring that the Writing Division produces high-quality writing for Department leadership. Daniel J. Miller, deputy assistant secretary for management and planning, assists in leading the Department’s plain writing efforts.

**Communicating Requirements to Employees**

**OCO Writing Division**

OCO’s Writing Division consists of speechwriting, editorial review, internal communications, and translations, encompassing staff with similar skills to leverage expertise in the written word to communicate with a variety of internal and external audiences more effectively. This cadre of specialists offers services to others in OCO and all other agency offices to promote clear, concise written communications.

**Guide to Publishing**

In 2002, the Department produced the first edition of the Guide to Publishing at the Department of Education*.* This 50-page guidehas been revised twice to reflect changes in editorial policy and modernization of techniques as communication tools have changed and expanded (e.g., less print, more digital) and to account for the increasing focus on 508 accessibility factors. The most recent edition, published in April of this year on the Department’s internal website, is a resource for all Department staff. This guide includes information on the Plain Writing Act and highlights writing tips, such as writing for the intended audience, using active voice, choosing relatively simple words, and using short sentences and bullets. Links to [plainlanguage.gov](https://www.plainlanguage.gov/) resources are included. The posting of this updated edition was announced in the weekly internal communications bulletin, ED Notebook, that is sent to all agency staff.

**Collaboration of Divisions**

There is ongoing coordination between the Writing Division and the Outreach divisions. The National Engagement Division within the Outreach Division produces several newsletters and facilitates the development of White House Initiative newsletters. The State and Local Engagement Division, also within the Outreach Division, produces a biweekly newsletter on current education activities throughout the country. There is continual two-way sharing of information between the Writing Division and both of these divisions, creating a structured channel for regular discussions on effective communications and plain writing as a means of informal one-on-one development to ensure writers are cognizant of plain writing requirements.

**Department’s PLAIN co-chair**

The [Plain Language Action and Information Network](https://www.plainlanguage.gov/) (PLAIN) is a group of federal employees who promote plain language in all communications, understanding that use of plain language leads to less government expenditure on resources and, ultimately, leads to a more well-informed public. The [PLAIN Community of Practice](https://digital.gov/communities/plain-language/) provides a listserv as a means of communicating among members and the sharing of information on PLAIN activities and resources, including training. Katina Rae Stapleton, an education research analyst in the Department’s [Institute of Education Sciences](https://ies.ed.gov/) (IES), is the co-chair of PLAIN.

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

Department staff took several writing and communications-related courses this fiscal year. A selection of those courses, by attendee office, are listed in Table 1.

**Table 1: Selected Examples of Department Staff Writing and Communications-related Training in**

**FY 2021\***

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Attendees’ Office | Course | Date | Provider |
| OCO | Plain Language Summit 2020: Select Sessions | October 2020 | Digital.gov |
| OCO | Contract Writing course (full week) | December 2020 | USDA Graduate School |
| OCO | Word Training -- How to Do a Table of Contents, How to Structure a Document (on-demand) | February 2021 | Internal training site |
| OCO; OESE; OFO; OPE; OS | MS Word 508 Compliance Training | March 2021 | ITAP/OCIO |
| OCO; OCTAE; OFO | Most Common 508 Violations | April 2021 | ITAP/OCIO |
| FSA | PLAIN Language-at-a-Glance | April 2021 | PLAIN |
| OCO | Using Words To Build Better Digital Experiences | June 2021 | Digital.gov |
| OCO | Writing for Engagement: How to Keep It Short and Impactful | July 2021 | Ragan Communications |
| OCO | Choosing the Right Interpersonal Communication Method to Make Your Point | July 2021 | Internal training site |
| OCO | Webinar: The Updated AP Style Guide (on-demand) | August 2021 | Ragan Communications |

\* FSA – Federal Student Aid; ITAP - Information Technology Accessibility Program; OCIO – Office of the Chief Information Officer; OCO – Office of Communications and Outreach; OCTAE – Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education; OESE – Office of Elementary and Secondary Education; OFO – Office of Finance and Operations; OPE – Office of Postsecondary Education; OS – Office of the Secretary

**Process for Compliance Oversight**

**Agency Report Review**

All principal offices conduct an extensive review of their documents, whether they are contractor-generated or produced in-house, before publishing. For documents with policy ramifications, the Executive Secretariat coordinates a process to circulate these documents to principal offices to review for accuracy and clarity.

OCO’s Writing Division routinely reviews and edits reports, keeping plain writing factors in mind, with offices completing a Principal Office Coordination Form for officials’ signatures for particularly complex or cross-office documents.

IES issues technical reports primarily for researchers and statisticians. These publications, which are edited and peer-reviewed prior to release, include abstracts and executive summaries written in plain language for nontechnical audiences. An example of IES’s plain language-related work involves a [recent assessment](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?projectID=4632) of the effect of design changes on the usability of the District of Columbia’s online school report card on characteristics and performance of schools.

**Program and Regulatory Document Review**

The Office of the General Counsel’s routing of Notices Inviting Applications, Notices of Proposed Rulemaking, Notices of Proposed Priorities, Requests for Information, 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 and attention to detail. The primary purpose of OCO inclusion in the review is to minimize reader confusion on such documents slated for public consumption in the Federal Register. Directors of the State and Local Engagement and National Engagement divisions also routinely make comments on content.

**Agency Newsletter Review**

Several newsletters issued from various offices throughout the agency receive OCO editorial review prior to release. To ensure a consistent message among newsletters issued from OCO, which has the largest number published of principal offices, OCO staff created a tiered review process of editorial staff and Administration officials via a SharePoint site. This site allows for efficient internal communication among staff involved in newsletter review.

Table 2 lists agency newsletters routinely undergoing editorial review prior to distribution via a listserv. This table shows the breadth of information disseminated from various offices throughout the agency that receives OCO editorial oversight.

**Social Media Content Review**

With social media continuing to gain in popularity as a communications tool, OCO has hired several more staff this fiscal year to ensure clear and informative messaging. The Creative Services team within DMCS offers blog creation and editing for the agency’s blog page, as well as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram copy​ writing, editing, review, scheduling, and posting in real time. Credentials of new employees include writer-editor and content creator from previous federal government employment.

**Table 2: Department Newsletters With OCO Editorial Review, Issuing Office, and Audience: FY 2020\***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Newsletter | Issuing Office | Audience |
|  |  |  |
| The Connector | WHIEEAA | African American students & families, stakeholders |
| Center for Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships Highlights | CFBNP | Faith-based & community leaders |
| Early Learning | OESE & OSEP | Parents, teachers |
| ED Review | OCO | Intergovernmental & corporate communities |
| Family, School, and Community Engagement | OCO | Parents, teachers, administrators, & community leaders |
| Grantee Voices From the Field | OPE | Postsecondary grantees |
| IFLE Newsletter | OCO | International & foreign language community |
| Green Strides | OCO | School administrators (environmental focus) |
| Nuestra Iniciativa | WHHPI | Hispanic students & parents |
| OCTAE Connection | OCTAE | State officials & others in adult education, career & technical education, community colleges |
| Office of State Grant and Program Support Newsletter | OESE | Elementary & secondary education grantees |
| OSEP Update | OSERS | Families of disabled children |
| STEM Education Newsletter | OPEPD | Science, technology, engineering, & math community |
| Touching Base | OCO | Military members & families |
| Youth Voices | OCO | Student youths |

\* CFBNP - Center for Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships; OCO – Office of Communications and Outreach;

OCTAE - Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education; OESE - Office of Elementary and Secondary Education; OPEPD - Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development; OSEP - Office of Special Education Programs (part of OSERS); OSERS - Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services; WHHPI - White House Hispanic Prosperity Initiative; WHIEEAA - White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans

**Updating Center-Assessed Page**

Each year, the [Center for Plain Language’s Federal Report Card](https://centerforplainlanguage.org/2020-federal-plain-language-report-card/) reviewers grade two webpages from various agencies — one for urgent help and one among the most viewed, with the Report Card’s writing quality grade an average of the two reviews. The webpage reviews are staggered so that one page in any given year is in initial review while the other has been reviewed the previous year and is being reassessed to determine if improvements were made. For FY 2021, reviewers will reassess the main COVID-19 page and assess the agency’s FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) page.

**Other Compliance Oversight**

**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 as well as with sporadic requests from other offices throughout the Department.

**508 compliance.** Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 requires agencies to make information accessible to those with disabilities. The Information Technology Accessibility Program (ITAP), which is part of the Office of the Chief information Officer, can provide assessment of content prior to release. ITAP expanded its services in FY 2021, by establishing a Community of Action to help increase staff knowledge in system and electronic document compliance by offering trainings.

**Department website modernization.** As part of its effort to promote a contemporary approach to communications, there is a website redesign project underway to improve the management, content, and effectiveness of the site. A modernized ED.gov will meet tenets of the [21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act](https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/5759/text), such as being user-centered, designed around user needs, with data-driven analysis. Redesign efforts will require information on the site to be consistently organized, tagged, and searchable by users to find what they need.

**Knowledge Base for frequently sought content.** As part of this modernization effort, OCO is focusing on various aspects of the ED.gov website and the Department’s call center to better understand agency audiences in order to provide more efficient and effective customer service. The Department is developing a process to collect, maintain, and manage principal office content that both internal and external users seek most often. This content will comprise a Knowledge Base, intended ultimately as the source for a chat bot, via artificial intelligence (AI). The content collection alone, however, will be a tool that the call center can utilize to provide concise information at faster response rates to callers.

**Archiving website content.** Pages receiving relatively little traffic account for the majority of agency Web content, adding unnecessarily to the complexity of the site. An archiving project is underway for which new content lifecycle management standards on how content will be maintained on the web are being applied to ensure removal of content that is no longer relevant, up-to-date, or useful. Offices will then move on to revising website language that is more user friendly and accessible.

**Federal Student Aid website modernization.**The most user-heavy agency webpages are typically those on federal student aid. The Federal Student Aid office (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 now has an operable chatbot via AI with responses to at least 1,000 questions received via the web, social media, and the call center 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. In July 2021, the page was reformatted to update the appearance and text for reader ease.

**Responding to Public Input**

The plain writing webpage includes a [plain writing email address](mailto:plainwriting@ed.gov) and an invitation to the public to submit comments on Department output from a plain writing perspective to help authors improve. Questions received this fiscal year were limited to an inquiry on the availability of the Guide to Publishing and style guides our agency uses. Additionally, the Department’s call center reported toward the end of the fiscal year that no calls or emails were received from the public regarding plain writing.

**Future Compliance**

While efforts to increase the quality of written communications have grown in FY 2021, the Department will remain focused on improvement. The ongoing provision of editorial review will continue to promote content that is of most use. Additionally, the modernization efforts outlined above will afford the opportunity to create more efficient and effective avenues for the provision of clear, concise information to all users, whether external or internal, providing the most value to a variety of education stakeholders and the public in general.