**U.S. Department of Education**

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

**Fiscal Year 2022**

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. This report provides information on Department activities for fiscal year (FY) 2022 based on Act requirements for government agencies:

* 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 Overseeing Plain Writing**

The Department’s Office of Communications and Outreach (OCO) is the primary source for plain writing support in the agency. That is, according to the Department’s website, OCO “is responsible for overall leadership for the Department in its communications and outreach activities.” Activities include newsletters, blogs, media advisories and press releases, speeches, and videos and photos.

OCO has three main functions: Communications, Outreach, and Management. Communications consists of the Writing, Digital Media and Creative Services (DMCS), and Press and Customer Relations divisions. 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; both contribute to ensuring that the Writing Division produces high-quality writing for Department leadership. Phillip Juengst, OCO’s 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’s work consists of speechwriting and editorial review, encompassing staff with similar skills to leverage expertise in the written word to communicate with a variety of internal and external audiences more effectively. The Writing Division’s cadre of specialists offers communications services to other divisions within OCO and to other offices throughout the agency to promote clear, concise written communications.

**Guide to Publishing**

In 2002, OCO produced the first edition of the Guide to Publishing at the Department of Education. A resource for all Department staff, the guide is on the Department’s internal website*.* There have been two major revisions to this guide, with input from agency officials and OCO staff 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 of this 60-page resource, published in April 2021, 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 in the guide.

**Collaboration of Divisions**

In OCO, there is ongoing coordination between the Writing Division and the Outreach divisions. The National Engagement Division produces newsletters of interest to families, including military families, and communities. The State and Local Engagement Division produces a biweekly newsletter on current education activities throughout the country and a monthly newsletter on environmental education. 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 aware 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**

**Plain Language-related Courses**

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.

**Other Information Available**

Also, the Department offers several courses on its internal training site, FedTalent, including:

* Audience and purpose in Business Writing.
* Clarity and conciseness in Business Writing.
* Coaching Tips for Writing Self-Assessments.
* Improving Your Technical Writing Skills.
* The Plain Writing Act.
* Troublesome Words and Phrases: Common Usage Mistakes in Writing.
* Writing and Preparing an Effective Speech.
* [Writing Effective E-mails and Instant Messages](https://edfedtalent.ibc.doi.gov/course/view.php?id=7996).
* Writing Skills for Public Relations.

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

**FY 2022\***

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Attendees’ Affiliation | Course | Date | Provider |
| OCO | ED / Granicus govDelivery Design Workshop | October 2021 | OCO/govDelivery |
| OCO | Contract Writing (refresher; full week) | December 2021 | USDA Graduate School |
| OCO | Grammar Girl’s Beginning and Intermediate Guide to AP Style | March 2022 | Ragan Communications |
| ED; other internal/external  audiences | Podcast: How Bureaucratic Jargon Can Cost Lives | March 2022 | PLAIN / Throughline Group |
| IES; OCO; OCR; OCTAE; OESE; OFO; OPEPD; OS; OSERS | Using Web Metrics to Better Serve Our Customers | May 2022 | OCO |
| OCO | Professional Development Plan (panel discussion refresher training) | May 2022 | OCO |
| OCO | Speechwriting School | May/June 2022 | Professional Speechwriter’s Association |
| OCO | Increase Your Impact With Plain Language | July 2022 | PLAIN |
| OCO | Strategy Training to Develop Employee Communications, Internal and External | July 2022 | Harvard Business School |
| OCO | ITAP Resources | July 2022 | ED Diversity & Inclusion Council |
| FSA; OCO | Plain Language At-a-Glance | July 2022 | PLAIN |
| OCO | 2022 Federal Plain Language Summit | August 2022 | PLAIN |

\* ED – Department of Education; 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; PLAIN - Plain Language and Information Network

**Process for Compliance Oversight**

All principal offices conduct an extensive review of their content, whether contractor-generated or produced in-house, before publishing. Content includes reports, program and regulatory documents, newsletters, and press releases. For web-related content, there is review of social media posts, website and webpage modifications, and a focus on select pages for the Center for Plain Language’s annual assessment.

**Agency Report Review**

OCO’s Writing Division 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. For documents with policy ramifications, the Executive Secretariat coordinates a process to circulate these documents to principal offices to review for accuracy and clarity.

IES issues technical reports primarily for researchers and statisticians, which are edited and peer-reviewed prior to release and include abstracts and executive summaries written in plain language for nontechnical audiences. The IES Standards and Review Office oversees peer review of reports due to the Education Sciences Reform Act, requiring that “all research, statistics, and evaluation reports conducted by, or supported through, the Institute shall be subjected to rigorous peer review.”

**Program and Regulatory Document Review**

The Office of the General Counsel’s routing of Notices Inviting Applications, Notices of Proposed/Final Rulemaking, Notices of Proposed/Final Priorities, Requests for Information, and other grant- and regulatory-related documents for agencywide review includes an OCO editorial review of such documents. In FY 2022, more than 2,200 pages were reviewed. The primary purpose of OCO editorial inclusion is to minimize reader confusion on such documents slated for public consumption in the Federal Register and also to ensure alignment with GPO style.

**Agency Newsletter Review**

Several newsletters issued from various offices throughout the agency go through OCO editorial review prior to release. To ensure a consistent and timely message among newsletters issued from OS and OCO, two offices that work closely together, OCO 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 and agency official approval.

Table 2 lists agency newsletters distributed via a listserv, indicating the breadth of information disseminated from various offices throughout the agency. Most are sent to OCO for a final review.

**Press Release Review**

As part of the standard process of press release issuance, in order to promote maximum readability, the Department’s call center, located within OCO, reviews final content prior to posting. Recently, the call center created a separate page for all Spanish press releases and other news-related resources.

**Social Media Content Review**

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. The Writing Division has offered comment on select posts to increase readability.

The Social Media team, within DMCS, writes alt text that accurately captures images on all social media. Specifically for this purpose, an online publishing tool was acquired to support the efforts of the team to consistently ensure that alt text is included and staff provide quality assurance for clear, consistent, and plain language use.

**Web Content Review**

Prior to posting, offices submit content to the Web Team for publishing, with a final review to ensure content displays correctly and links are viable. This team also requests offices to attest to accessibility.

**Table 2: Department Newsletters, Issuing Office, and Audience: FY 2022\***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Newsletter | Issuing Office | Audience |
|  |  |  |
| The Connector | WHIEEAA/OS | African American students & families, stakeholders |
| Center for Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships Highlights | CFBNP/OS | 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 | OPE | International & foreign language community |
| Green Strides | OCO | School administrators (environmental focus) |
| Nuestra Iniciativa | WHHPI/OS | 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 |

Note: Most newsletters are sent to OCO for final review.

\* 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

**Center-assessed Webpages**

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 2022, reviewers will reassess the main Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) page and the [Contact Us](https://www2.ed.gov/about/contacts/gen/index.html?src=ft) page, as well. In June, the plain language officer met with a FOIA team representative to discuss consideration of OCO suggested modifications to the current home page. While receptive to the idea, it is unclear at the time of this report if the FOIA team will make modifications and in time for the reassessment. However, a revision of ED’s [COVID resources page](https://www.ed.gov/Coronavirus) for last year’s Center assessment, which enhanced user information retrieval, led to the page being exemplified in a recent Web Team webinar that included information on web metrics and content presentation.

**Other Compliance-related Actions**

**Stock image use.** Images can 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 for newsletters and reports. This complimentary service to other POCs ensures photo rights are upheld, while visually enhancing products.

**Section 508 compliance.** Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 requires agencies to make information accessible to those with disabilities. In addition to offices having 508-trained staff on board, the Information Technology Accessibility Program (ITAP), which is part of the Office of the Chief information Officer, has staff to **help all Department staff and their contractors who create and/or post accessible Web content**. ITAP expanded its services in FY 2021, by establishing a Community of Action to educate and provide support and training to system owners of websites, applications, and documents, in order to be successful with passing 508 testing. Additionally, those seeking information on Section 508 compliance are directed from the OCIO’s Information Management Branch page to GSA’s [Section508.gov](https://www.section508.gov/) with information on IT accessibility laws and policies.

**Department website modernization.** As part of its effort to promote a contemporary approach to communications, a website redesign project, initiated in 2020, is 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 and 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. Contracted work is set to start before the end of FY 2022.

**Improving FAQs content.** ED’s call center maintains the [FAQs: Frequently Asked Questions page](https://www.ed.gov/answers/), reviewing the page on a quarterly basis for information accuracy, decreasing the number of characters where feasible for improved use, and ensuring links are provided to the program page for more information.

As part of the ED.gov modernization effort, in 2020, the Department’s call center initiated an effort to better understand agency audiences in order to provide more efficient and effective customer service. The call center 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 that will be a tool to better serve users, as well as center staff, by providing concise information at faster response rates.

**Archiving website content.** Pages receiving relatively little traffic account for the majority of agency web content, adding unnecessarily to the complexity of the site. This year, DMCS closed out a two-year project in which new content lifecycle management standards were implemented for ED.gov. These standards reflect the length of time that specific types of content will remain on ED.gov for public view. The goal of this project has been to ensure that ED.gov offers only relevant and up-to-date information to users. Through this project, the Department reduced its web footprint from approximately 120,000 URLs to approximately 30,000 URLs.

**Branding templates.** This year, the Internal Communications Team in OCO created a “Supply Closet” webpage, with various templates using a palette of colors that are the same as those that will be in the redesigned ED.gov site. A means of bringing more uniformity to internal communications, templates include PowerPoint presentation, email header, Word document cover sheet, conference agenda, memo, and report cover.

**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, and slight modifications were incorporated in August 2022.

**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. Emails received this year were on activities initiated internally, including the PLAIN webinar and PLAIN co-chair Katina Stapleton’s podcast on the ramifications of bureaucratic jargon.

**Future Compliance**

While efforts to increase the quality of written communications have increased in FY 2022, the Department remains focused on improvement. The ongoing provision of editorial review of newsletters, reports, press releases, and speeches will continue to promote content that is of most use. Additionally, the continuing 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.