

Department of Homeland Security

2014 Plain Writing Act Compliance Report

On October 13, 2010, President Obama signed the Plain Writing Act into law. The purpose of the Act is *“to improve the effectiveness and accountability of Federal agencies to the public by promoting clear Government communication that the public can understand and use.”* This law changed how the Federal Government communicates with the public and all government agencies are expected to adhere to the Plain Writing Act guidance.

Our Commitment

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has a vast mission and a dedicated responsibility to secure the safety of the American people. In light of our responsibility to national priorities such as emergency preparedness, cyber security, immigration, travel, and international trade, it is paramount that DHS present information effectively and efficiently. Many aspects of the Department’s programs and operations have a direct effect on our stakeholders and the general public, and it is vital that we communicate with them clearly and reliably.

Our Accomplishments

DHS takes plain writing seriously and has complied with the following plain writing requirements:

- communicated the requirements of the Plain Writing Act to DHS Components and employees;
- designated a senior plain writing official and identified Component points of contact;
- instructed Components to take advantage of plain writing training offered online and in person (from sources internal and external to DHS);
- established a plain writing webpage with a link from the DHS.gov homepage;
- compiled an implementation plan and made it available to the general public by posting it on the DHS plain writing webpage;
- created an email address that allows the public to communicate ideas or concerns with regard to DHS’s plain writing efforts (DHSPlainWriting@hq.dhs.gov); and
- initiated outreach to the Center for Plain Language with updates on our progress and milestones.

Oversight

Our senior official for plain writing compliance is the DHS Executive Secretary within the Office of the Secretary. The following individuals have been designated as the DHS plain writing leadership:

Designated Senior Official for Plain Writing:
Dr. Kim O'Connor
Executive Secretary, Office of the Secretary

Designated Deputy Senior Official for Plain Writing:
Gail Kaufman
Deputy Chief of Staff, Office of Policy

Departmental Plain Writing Coordinator
Patrice Allen-Gifford
Associate Executive Secretary

All of these officials can be contacted through DHSPainWriting@hq.dhs.gov.

Working with representatives from DHS Components, the DHS Office of the Executive Secretary (ESEC) developed the 2014 Plain Writing Compliance Report.

Implementation Plan

The *DHS Plain Writing Implementation Plan* is available on our website, <http://www.dhs.gov/dhs-plan-implement-plain-writing-act-2010-requirements-summary>. A small group of agency representatives prepared this plan and submitted it to Department leadership as a proposal for DHS-wide action. This plan details the responsibilities of the plain writing officials and points of contact, as well as our training plan and additional resources.

Compliance Report

The completion and publication of this report satisfies the requirement for an annual compliance report.

Mechanism for Public Feedback

DHS plain writing officials created an email address that allows the public to communicate ideas or concerns with regard to DHS's plain writing efforts (DHSPainWriting@hq.dhs.gov). Communication submitted to this address is immediately reviewed and considered.

Website Access

DHS has encouraged its Components to use plain writing for all prepared materials. In support of this, DHS created a webpage devoted to "Plain Writing at DHS" (<http://www.dhs.gov/plain-writing-dhs>). This webpage lists links to the *DHS Plain Writing Implementation Plan*, DHS plain writing leadership, and the avenue in which the general public can "Provide Feedback on Plain Writing at DHS."

Our webpage also links to a site devoted to “Open Government,” outlining DHS’s commitment to transparency and clear, successful communication.

Training Tools

DHS Components have held plain writing training for staff in headquarters, and in the case of operational Components, in the field. This training is ongoing. DHS Components generally organize their own training with guidance from DHS Headquarters. However, most of this training is available Department-wide, giving employees a considerable selection of ways to learn how plain writing can benefit them and the general public. We have included a sampling of training that is offered to employees within DHS in Appendix A.

Using the resources available through the Plain Language Action and Information Network’s (PLAIN) website (plainlanguage.gov), DHS has promoted the benefits of plain writing to employees throughout the Department. Several DHS representatives have also attended PLAIN’s “Train the Trainer Bootcamp” and are available to train small groups upon request. DHS employees have also been encouraged to take advantage of free online training (e.g., the Federal Aviation Administration’s Basic Plain Writing course).

In addition to training, DHS promotes plain writing through the use of colorful posters throughout the offices and verbal reminders in regular meetings with representatives from all DHS Components. ESEC has also dedicated a section to plain writing in its Executive Correspondence Handbook. This Handbook is used Department-wide and ensures that everyone preparing materials does so in a consistent, clearly formatted, and plainly written manner.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services also posted several short videos on YouTube using humor and imagination to educate employees and the general public about plain writing.

Supporting Activities

In keeping with President Obama’s Open Government Initiative, plain writing will be included in the Department of Homeland Security’s 2014 Open Government Plan.

In 2014, ESEC reviewed the Plain Writing Act requirements and committed to achieving Department-wide compliance. Attention on DHS is often driven by current events, and a plain writing review is conducted regularly in the development of template letters, press releases, and other communication to the American public in response. This year, ESEC particularly focused on the materials produced by two of our most public-facing Components, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and the Transportation Security Administration. Both Components benefitted from this review and appropriate action was taken as needed. Notably, as a result of this review, CBP updated and re-launched

its website to offer clear and accessible online content (in concert with the Administration's Digital Government Strategy).

Moving Forward

In 2015, DHS intends to further its efforts to promote plain writing Department-wide. We hope to further evolve public-facing documents and prepare materials appropriately, matching the tone and style to the intended audience. Not only will DHS further its plain writing efforts in communications to the general public, we will also focus on addressing our younger audience. DHS is the lead on many important issues that directly affect children and teens, such as preparedness (in the event of an emergency or national disaster), travel standards and inspection processes, and cyber security.

DHS will continue to encourage all employees to take advantage of training offered and require annual training for all DHS employees. In addition, we will require each Component to identify at least one representative to attend PLAIN's "Train the Trainer Bootcamp" to ensure that plain writing training is readily available to every DHS Component.

DHS will also continue to foster a cooperative working relationship with outside organizations such as PLAIN and the Center for Plain Language to further DHS's plain writing efforts.

Appendix A

Every Component within DHS has made independent strides in their plain writing programs. Below is a sampling of the efforts DHS has put forth in support of this important initiative.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)

USCIS' plain writing initiatives demonstrate how legal complexity and clarity can coexist to create clear information for customers who do not speak English as a first language. USCIS trains over 1,000 employees each year and includes plain language review as part of its clearance process for public-facing documents. USCIS also offers monthly training classes and document editing services to DHS employees. In addition, USCIS offers educational videos highlighting plain language techniques that all federal employees can watch on demand. USCIS Division Chief Kathryn Catania is co-chair of the federal volunteer group, the Plain Language Action and Information Network.

As illustrated in the below chart, USCIS offers regular plain writing training, open to all DHS employees.

USCIS Course Title	Delivery	How Often
Plain Language Overview	Instructor Led/Classroom	Monthly
Writing for the Web	Instructor Led/Classroom or Video Conference upon request	Twice a year or as requested by the Field
Writing Workshops	Instructor Led/Classroom or video conference upon request	As requested by the Field; Currently running once a month

Science and Technology (S&T)

S&T is a huge advocate of plain writing and developed writing workshops to accompany their program management and leadership training. Eighty percent of their workshops are focused on professional writing. The list of workshops is below:

General Professional Communication

- Academic Writing versus Workplace Writing
- Before You Hit SEND: Effective Email, Memos, and Letters at S&T
- Elevator Speeches and 5-Minute Briefs 1: Principles and Preparation
- Elevator Speeches and 5-Minute Briefs 2: Delivery
- Grammar 1: A Whirlwind Review
- Grammar 2: Beyond the Basics
- Plain Language at S&T 1: Intro – What's Plain Language?
- Plain Language at S&T 2: Revising for Clarity
- Plain Language at S&T 3: Organization, Coherence, and Document Design
- Plain Language at S&T 4: Word Choice: Are We Using or Abusing?

- Plain Language at S&T 5: Writing for the Web
- PowerPoint: Friend or Foe?
- Telling the Story: Using Narrative to Support and Illustrate

Program Management and Executive Support

- Executive Summaries and Writing for the Boss
- Factsheets at S&T: Your Project and the Public
- Multi-author Documents: Revising, Editing, and Unifying
- Note-taking You Can Really Use
- Portfolio Review Documents and Quad Charts: Writing and Revising
- Quad Charts Introduction
- Responding to Congress
- “So What?” – Writing for Impact
- SOPs and SP2s at S&T
- Talking Points for the Boss

United States Secret Service (USSS)

The USSS hosted training for its employees and published policies outlining the Plain Writing Act's requirements. USSS also provides specific plain writing guidelines, which are applicable to signs and instructions for the general public. In addition, USSS developed a plain writing website accessible to the public at www.secretservice.gov. This site also offers an email address where the general public can contact them with any question or concerns with regard to plain writing.