



**Department Of State
2015 Compliance Report
Plain Writing Act of 2010
April 6, 2015**

Background:

On October 13, 2010, President Obama signed into law the Plain Writing Act of 2010 (the Act) which is designed to promote “clear government communication that the public can understand and use.” The Act calls for writing that is clear, concise and well-organized.

The Office of Management and Budget provided federal agencies with guidance on implementing the Act on April 13, 2011.

1) By July 13, 2011:

- a. Designate one or more Senior Officials for plain writing who will be responsible for overseeing the agency’s implementation of the Act;
- b. Create a plain writing section of the agency’s public website;
- c. Communicate the Act’s requirements to agency employees and train agency employees in plain writing;
- d. Establish a process by which the agency will oversee its ongoing compliance with the Act’s requirements; and
- e. Publish an initial report, on the plain writing section of the agency’s public website, which describes the agency’s plan for implementing the Act’s requirements.

2) By October 13, 2011:

- a. Agencies must write all new or substantially revised documents in plain writing. This requirement applies to “covered documents” which the Act defines as those documents that:
 - i. Are necessary for obtaining any Federal Government benefit or service or filing taxes;
 - ii. Provide information about any Federal Government benefit or service; or
 - iii. Explain to the public how to comply with a requirement that the Federal Government administers or enforces.
- b. The Act also requires agencies to use plain writing in every paper or electronic letter, publication, form, notice or instruction.

- 3) By April 13, 2012 and annually thereafter:
 - a. Each Agency must publish a report that describes its continuing compliance with the Act.

A State Department working group, made up of representatives from the Office of the Legal Adviser, the Bureau of Information Resources Management (IRM), the Office of Management Policy, Rightsizing and Innovation (M/PRI), and the Office of Directives Management (A/GIS/DIR) created an implementation plan for the Department which was approved by the Under Secretary of State for Management in July, 2011.

The Department's Implementation:

- The Assistant Secretary for Administration was designated as the senior official responsible for overseeing the Department's implementation of the Act;
- A plain writing web page was created and linked to the Department's Open Government site on state.gov.;
- A Department Notice was published to communicate the Act's requirements to the Department's employees; specific plain language training was given to Department rule and policy writers.
- On the Department's intranet, a link was created for all employees to www.plainlanguage.gov for information on plain writing and other resources. The Foreign Service Institute (FSI) was already offering Writing Skills courses to all employees, courses that introduced plain writing principles;
- Each Bureau designated a representative who was given the responsibility for on-going compliance with the plain writing initiative in that bureau. This provided the Assistant Secretary for Administration with a network of people with whom to communicate and ensure future compliance with the Act;
- An initial report was published on the public website - <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/168827.pdf>

- The Office of Directives Management was given program management responsibility for Plain Writing.

Plain Writing Progress in 2014 - 2015:

The State Department has been focusing most of its plain writing efforts on the internal employees and staff for the past two years.

- The Assistant Secretary for Administration is currently the senior official responsible for Plain Writing efforts at the Department.
- The Assistant Secretary will be meeting with chosen representatives from each Bureau to discuss the current status of the Plain Writing program and plans for 2015-2016.
- The 2 FAH-1 Handbook (Foreign Affairs Manual Handbook) <http://www.state.gov/m/a/dir/regs/fah/02fah01/index.htm> is being expanded to give writing principles its own subchapter and, in the process, re-introduce the concept of plain writing to the Department via a Department Notice and cable to the field.
- The Department's internal network web page on plain writing is being updated with a fresher look.
- A link to this internal web page has been given more prominence on the Office of Directives Management home page.
- The Office of Directives Management is reviewing the writing style of randomly selected "covered documents" and sharing the evaluations with the writers and the Assistant Secretary for Administration.

The Department is taking steps to revisit its activities with regard to its engagement with the public.

- It was difficult to find the plain writing web page on the Department's public Internet site. There was a prominent link to the web page from the Department's eGov website on state.gov. Thanks to feedback from the public it was discovered that the link had been inadvertently removed. It has now been restored: <http://www.state.gov/m/a/dir/plainwriting/>

- The plain writing web page was originally created in 2011 and it is now being redesigned and refreshed. New features will include:
 - A direct email address so the public can offer feedback, comments, and suggestions directly to the Office of Directives Management.
 - The web page will ask the public to “nominate” any Department document as a candidate for rewrite in plain language.
 - The Department will post before and after real-life examples of documents that have been rewritten.
 - There will a significant reduction in the text on the web page through the use of more links to pertinent resources.
 - The web page will feature a dashboard that gives real-time data on how many documents have been reviewed for plain language and how many documents have been re-written to date.

The Office of Directives Management is providing the Assistant Secretary for Administration a monthly report on the status of all planned activities.

Any questions or comments on this Report may be emailed to greenehg@state.gov