Department of Health and Human Services
2022 Plain Writing Act Compliance Report
Request for Information
Background

On October 13, 2010, the Plain Writing Act (Act) was signed into law. The Act requires federal agencies to use “clear Government communication that the public can understand and use.” Communications in plain language are especially important in the context of health care and human services. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) recognizes that using plain language can help address the needs of those with limited literacy skills, as well as those with limited health literacy skills. Plain language helps people understand health information because the writing style is clear, concise, organized, and jargon-free. Documents written in plain language are less complex and therefore easier for everyone to understand, including people who have limited literacy skills, limited health literacy skills, or both.

In ongoing application and implementation, the Act requires agencies to “[w]rite annual compliance reports and post these reports on its plain language web page.” You can find links to HHS’s previous ten compliance reports here: http://www.hhs.gov/open/plain-writing/

The Department’s Exec Sec is developing our 2022 compliance report to demonstrate our continued compliance with the requirements of the Act. The report includes sections on accomplishments, best practices, innovations, continuous improvements, equity, and HHS contacts overseeing implementation of plain writing requirements.

To help us develop the Report, please provide information from your division by responding to the questions on pages 2-5, below. Please submit your information to the Secretary’s Policy System (SPS) by COB on Friday, March 11, 2022.

If you have any questions, please contact Kathy Applewhite at Kathy.Applewhite@hhs.gov.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Accomplishments

HHS seeks to reach all Americans with useful health information they can easily understand. To accomplish this goal, HHS regularly reviews new and existing reports, documents, and web content for plain writing to ensure the largest impact on the public.

From February 2021 through February 2022, please describe:

a. The top three plain writing documents your agency published that had the largest impact on the public.

  ○ COVID-19 Stop the Spread of Germs Poster (July 2021) - For good choice of images
and text to help stop the spread of COVID-19 and other respiratory illnesses by following these steps. [https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/images/print-materials/Stop_the_spread_vaccinated_v2.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/images/print-materials/Stop_the_spread_vaccinated_v2.pdf)


- [What You Need to Know About Variants video -](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p1BMvCBrYs8&t=80s)

b. The types of documents, and how many of each (estimate is acceptable, please specify) that your agency wrote in plain writing. Please also specify how many of each were new and how many were substantially revised.

Our centers, institute, and offices (CIOs) reported 1,515 documents meeting plain language standards. Of those documents, 968 were new and 547 were substantially revised for plain language. Document types include:

- Articles
- Blogs
- Campaign messages
- Contract documents
- Correspondence
- Briefing documents
- Fact sheets
- Federal register notices
- Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)
- Funding Opportunity Announcements (FOAs)
- Gov. Delivery Messages
- Guidance documents
- Infographics
- Mobile apps
- Newsletters
- Posters
- PowerPoint presentations
- Press releases
- Reports
- Social media messages
- Training materials
- Web materials
- Webpages

c. Examples of documents your agency improved through plain writing.


d. **How your agency updated its website devoted to plain writing, if applicable.**

CDC’s agency website for Plain Writing was last updated in May 2021 ([http://www.cdc.gov/Other/PlainWriting.html](http://www.cdc.gov/Other/PlainWriting.html)). The website describes what we do to use plain writing and provides links to

- the [Plain Writing Act of 2010](https://www.cdc.gov/Other/PlainWriting.html)
- the [federal plain language guidelines](https://www.cdc.gov/Other/PlainWriting.html)
- the [federal plain language website](https://www.cdc.gov/Other/PlainWriting.html)
- the [plain writing plan from the Department of Health and Human Services](https://www.cdc.gov/Other/PlainWriting.html)
- CDC’s 2021 [Plain Writing Act Compliance Report](https://www.cdc.gov/Other/PlainWriting.html)
- [Everyday Words for Public Health Communication](https://www.cdc.gov/Other/PlainWriting.html)
- The [CDC Clear Communication Index](https://www.cdc.gov/Other/PlainWriting.html)

The website also has information on how visitors can provide feedback on the use of plain language in our documents and materials, as well as examples of public-facing materials CDC programs have created using plain language.

As in previous years, CDC CIOs launch and maintain their own intranet sites offering key writing resources, links to plain language tools, and material development resources, or to refer staff to the Nation Center for Environmental Health’s [Clear Writing Hub](https://www.cdc.gov/Other/PlainWriting.html). CDC’s Office of the Associate Director for Communication (OADC) maintains an intranet site that we regularly update with plain language training opportunities and plain language promotion materials.

### Best Practices

HHS reinforces the plain writing requirements through best practices, such as senior officials promoting plain writing and programs for tracking and measuring plain writing effectiveness.

*From February 2021 through February 2022, please describe:*
a. How senior officials in your agency reinforced the plain writing requirements through Plain Writing Act-related directives.

CDC reinforces compliance with the Plain Writing Act through Office of the Director-level coordination of plain language activities and an agency operational policy. OADC is in the CDC Office of the Director and coordinates plain language work for the agency. OADC supports two positions in health literacy and plain language. OADC led the agency in developing an operational policy to implement the Act at CDC.

Senior agency officials reinforce plain writing by sponsoring and releasing staff for training, requesting briefings, inviting presentations at staff meetings, and reminding staff of the importance of plain language and complying with the law. CDC leadership continually reinforces the importance of complying with the Plain Writing Act through the CDC intranet, newsletters, and agency-wide announcements. In 2021, CDC Director, Dr. Rochelle P. Walensky, continued supporting CDC’s dedication to offering guidance to the public in clear, understandable, and digestible ways: https://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/leaders-talk-about-health-literacy.html

b. How you tracked the conversion of existing documents into plain writing.

CIOs use a variety of electronic systems to track and clear documents. These systems include

- eClearance
- Documentum
- Sharepoint
- OneDrive
- CDC ATSDR Policy System (CAPS)

CIOs use these systems to enter Clear Communication Index scores, provide descriptive notes about needed or completed plain writing revisions, and upload supporting documentation that reviewers can see as the document progresses through the clearance process.

CIOs also used plain language assessment software, which is licensed to OADC, to analyze text for passive voice and sentence length. The software provides suggestions on how to clarify text. When the CIOs have revised the text, OADC runs a second assessment to determine if the plain language issues have been addressed.

c. How you measured whether covered documents used plain writing.

The Office of the Director and the 11 CIOs apply plain language criteria during the review and clearance process, which takes place before we release documents to the public. Each of the 11 CIOs has an Associate Director for Communication Science who is responsible for this review. The agency Communication Director may also review sensitive, complex, or emergency response materials and apply plain language criteria.
CDC continued using the Clear Communication Index (the Index). This tool scores documents and other material on its use of characteristics that enhance and aid people’s understanding of information. CDC developed the tool based on a review of the scientific literature in communication and related disciplines and field-tested the tool to ensure its validity. The Index references the Federal Plain Language Guidelines and expands the items we consider for clear communication. Staff use the Index to score documents on a scale of zero to 100. We track document scores and use them to identify steps we can take to increase clarity.

**d. How you measured (i) the effectiveness of the plain writing program for your office; and (ii) the effectiveness of your plain writing documents (i.e., whether the public can easily understand and use them.)**

We measure effectiveness of the plain writing program through data and feedback from the Associate Directors of Communication Science in the CIOs and from members of the CDC Health Literacy Council. We promote use of a flow chart diagram that shows how our various plain language and clear communication resources can be helpful at different stages of developing materials. When time and funds allow, we measure effectiveness of our documents through audience testing, such as:

- focus groups
- interviews
- paraphrase testing
- usability testing

In addition, our website uses pop-up surveys based on the American Customer Satisfaction Index to solicit feedback from our visitors. We use standardized customer satisfaction measures to track user satisfaction with CDC webpages.

**e. The obstacles to measuring these aspects of your plain writing program.**

Given the large number of documents and other materials we produce, we would need a dedicated team to track the extensive review process and measure writing quality for all documents.

Although testing documents with the intended audience and asking for customer feedback on our plain language use are the ideal ways to measure, these activities are resource intensive. Individual programs often don’t have enough resources to thoroughly audience-test all documents they produce.

**f. Other relevant best practices.**

CDC translates many of its print and online resources into other languages so that people whose primary language is not English or people who use American Sign Language (ASL) can benefit from our messaging. See:

- [CDC Resources in Languages Other than English](#)
- [ASL video series on COVID-19](#)
CDC’s OADC regularly disseminates notices from other HHS divisions and CDC partners regarding upcoming webinars, conferences, and trainings on plain language or health literacy.

**Innovations**

In the past year, agencies across HHS implemented innovative strategies to promote plain writing, including web banners, webinars, external social media messages, awards, and plain writing skills in position descriptions.

*From February 2021 through February 2022, please describe:*

a. Any innovative activities you implemented to promote plain writing.

The CDC/ATSDR Health Literacy Council, comprising representatives from across CDC and under the leadership of OADC, met 3 times in 2021 to develop guidance to help CIOs comply with the Plain Writing Act and the CDC/ATSDR Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy. The action plan supports the use of plain language.

Health Literacy Council members worked with their local committees to create unique events for CDC colleagues and partners.

- OADC provided the following health literacy activities:
  - OADC hosted a Communicators Network session titled Health Literacy and Health Equity: Advancing Diversity, Accessibility, and Inclusion. The speakers provided new strategies and tools we can use to make our messaging more accessible, inclusive, and successful in reducing health disparities, and answered questions from the audience.
  - OADC hosted a Communicators Network session titled Naming It and Framing It: Communicating the Impact of Racism on the Health of the Nation. The presenters discussed the challenges and framing required to effectively develop and implement communication strategies and messages at the intersection of social justice and health. The presenters also answered questions from the audience.
  - OADC hosted a Communicators Network session titled Accessible Public Health Messaging for People with Disabilities. The presenter discussed how to apply accessibility measures to their communication products. The presenter also answered questions from the audience.
o The Center for Surveillance, Epidemiology, and Laboratory Services’ Public Health Information Office covered the importance and role of health literacy and the dos and don’ts of communication presentations during an all-hands event. Highlights included plain language, compliance with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and presenting in an inclusive way.

o The National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention had web metrics specialist Jonathan Anschel present a webinar on using search engine optimization to make our information more findable, and thus, accessible.

o The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) provided the following health literacy activities:

  - Health scientist Michelle Johns, MD, presented a webinar: LGBTQ+ 101. She described how understanding gender identity and sexual orientation can lead to clearer writing.
  - The NIOSH-This-Week Announcements that go to NIOSH staff featured items about health literacy and health equity and discussed ways to incorporate them into communication.
  - NIOSH hosted a health literacy trivia event. Attendees responded to questions interspersed with fun facts about language and communication. NIOSH hopes to host this event again next year and open it to all CDC staff.
  - NIOSH also produced a NIOSH Science Blog post titled Where Health Literacy Meets Inclusion.

o The State, Tribal, Local, and Territorial Support Task Force included a discussion of plain language and health literacy in their all-hands meeting.

In 2021 we used the RedCap system, referred to as the “Health Literacy Reporting System,” to collect clear-communication data for a full year. This system standardizes data collection on plain language and health literacy initiatives across divisions and CIOs. Items in this system are directly aligned with the goals and strategies outlined in the CDC/ATSDR Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy. The data collected through this system are compiled into an annual report card to assess progress implementing the CDC/ATSDR Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy, which includes activities promoting plain writing.

In October 2021, OADC’s Office of Communication Science prepared five tweets to promote Health Literacy Month. The tweets received more than 550 likes and more than 200 retweets.

b. Incentives or rewards you provided to employees to encourage the use of plain writing.

CDC offers a plain language award and an excellence in communication award in the annual agency awards program (CDC Honor Awards). Each CIO can nominate one employee or team for these awards.
Senior leadership and supervisors in several CIOs reward staff who demonstrate and promote effective, clear communication and health literacy skills through Performance Management Appraisal System ratings, public recognition in senior leadership meetings and All Hands meetings, time-off awards, and special CIO awards.

In October of 2021, OADC’s Office of Communication Science recognized efforts to advance plain language by accepting nominations for its Health Literacy Hero awards. OADC selected winners among the nominees based on established award criteria.

c. Whether you included plain writing skills in relevant job descriptions (i.e., employees who draft, edit, or clear any document). Please provide specific examples.

Yes, our CIOs include plain writing ability in relevant job descriptions and assess clear communication and health literacy skills of new federal employee hires and contract hires, who will be involved in drafting, editing, or clearing public health and safety information for the audiences CDC serves. Some CIOs ask job candidates to provide samples of plain language materials the candidates have produced.

d. The documents your agency nominated for recognition as recipients of ClearMark Awards by the Center for Plain Language.

- ATSDR’s Choose Safe Places for Early Care and Education (CSPECE) Workgroup won the Infographic Award for its Exposure Pathways infographic
- ATSDR’s Community Stress Resource Center won the Posters, Charts, Fliers award for its Are You Worried About the Water, Soil, or Air in Your Community? fact sheet.
- NCCDPHP’s Office on Smoking and Health’s Learn About Quit-Smoking Medicines web pages were nominated

Continuous Improvement

HHS carries out a wide array of training activities to ensure that our employees fully understand the importance of plain writing and how to do it effectively. Many agencies encourage the use of plain language for both internal and external communication. Such agencies also developed trainings and materials to educate stakeholders and the general public on plain writing.

From February 2021 through February 2022, please describe:

a. The specific number of your employees completing plain writing training.
   In 2021, CIOs identified 446 employees who completed plain language training.

b. The feedback you received from those who already completed the training.
   OADC hosted 7 Plain Language & Clear Communication Index trainings in 2021. Over the 7 courses, evaluations revealed that on a 5-point scale, average perceived knowledge and skill scores increased from 3.2 before the training to 4.4 after the training.
c. The plain writing training programs you used.

**Basic Plain Language Skill & Clear Communication Index Training** - virtual training provided on the Zoom platform. 
https://lms.learning.hhs.gov/Saba/Web/Main/goto/GuestCourseDetailURL?otId=cours000000000504439&callerPage=/learning/offeringTemplateDetails.xml

We referred staff who could not make it to the live virtual trainings to a recording of a 3-hour Zoom session titled **Basic Plain Language Skills and Clear Communication Index Training**.

d. Examples of trainings and materials you developed to educate stakeholders and the general public on plain writing.

In April 2021, OADC’s Health Literacy Lead delivered a webinar on how to use plain language guidelines, the CDC Clear Communication Index, and other CDC health literacy tools and resources to create or revise public-facing health- and public health-related materials to 48 registrants of Ithaca College Gerontology Institute’s health literacy speaker series.

In December 2021, OADC’s Health Literacy Team developed and delivered a virtual health literacy training session to 125+ participants from 4 EPA regional offices, EPA’s Office of Research and Development, EPA’s Office of Water, 23 EPA state partners, and 1 EPA tribal partner to help them use health literacy concepts to improve outcomes of fish consumption advisories.

From March 2020 through March 2021, we continued to use the following:

- Plain Language – Communication your audience understands the first time-PDF training document

- Guidelines, Laws & Standards web page -
  https://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/guidelines.html

- Plain Language Materials & Resources web page -
  https://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/developmaterials/plainlanguage.html

e. Ways in which you improved or focused your plain writing efforts.

- OADC’s Office of Communication Science independently reviewed at least 30 webpages per month (more than 360 pages for the 12-month period) for use of plain language guidelines. When we identified areas where the use of plain language could be improved, we provided that feedback to the CIOs that developed the content for those webpages.
In February 2021, CDC’s Health Literacy Council passed a resolution calling for each CIO and Office of the Director (OD) office to develop their own health literacy or plain language goal for the year to align with the CDC/ATSDR Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy. Ten out of 15 CIO or OD offices met or exceeded their goal. This effort is continuing in 2022.

We continue to standardize the application of plain language guidelines and the Clear Communication Index via our trainings.

We emphasize the need for ongoing and refresher training in plain language. We ask CIOs to identify specific individuals and types of employees who would benefit from advanced or refresher trainings.

We recognize staff and programs for effective plain language use. In addition to an agency plain language award, many CIOs offer their own plain language and clear communication awards. Finally, staff skills in plain language are recognized through the ClearMark competition.

**Equity**

The President issued Executive Order (EO)13985 on *Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government* on January 20, 2021.

The term “equity” provided in EO 13985 means the consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment, such as Black, Latino, and Indigenous and Native American persons, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality. EO 13985 further provides that the term “underserved communities” refers to populations sharing a particular characteristic, as well as geographic communities, that have been systematically denied a full opportunity to participate in aspects of economic, social, and civic life, as exemplified by the list in the preceding definition of “equity.”

Promoting equity is essential to the Department’s mission of protecting the health of Americans and providing essential human services.

*From February 2021 through February 2022, please describe:*

1. *How your agency used plain writing to promote equity in your agency’s policies, programs, and activities.*

   - CDC released *Health Equity Guiding Principles for Inclusive Communication*, which emphasizes the importance of addressing all people inclusively and respectfully. These
principles are intended to help public health professionals, particularly health communicators within and outside of CDC, ensure their communication products and strategies adapt to the specific cultural, linguistic, environmental, and historical situation of each population or audience of focus.

- CDC has established a web portal, “Racism and Health,” that promotes public discourse and provides education on how racism negatively affects health and communicates potential solutions. Working with the broader public health community, CDC will further investigate the impact of racism on health and efforts to achieve health equity for all.

- CDC’s National Center for HIV, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention’s Health Equity Speaker Series offers internal and external partners the opportunity to present on groundbreaking health equity-focused research findings and programs to increase our understanding and awareness of contemporary health equity issues and the social determinants of health.

- CDC has launched a new web page, Health Equity in Action, to highlight CDC’s efforts to reduce health disparities among groups at higher risk for COVID-19. The projects on this page align with CDC’s COVID-19 Health Equity Strategy and provide examples of CDC’s efforts to improve the health outcomes of groups that have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19.

- The new Barriers to Equity in Alzheimer’s and Dementia Care web page highlights the fact that people of color face discrimination when seeking health care for Alzheimer’s disease and related dementias and provides recommendations on how to move forward.

- In support of the Center for Global Health’s (CGH) commitment to workforce diversity and inclusion, CGH has launched the “Hello, My Name Is…” app, a name pronunciation guide. CGH staff can manually insert the phonetic spelling of their first and last name and include a special note about the names’ meaning, history, or other information.

- Bring Down Barriers and Create Community are digital media toolkits that suggest ways people can work together to reduce and remove barriers to emergency preparedness and response. Long-standing systemic and social inequities have created health disparities that put many people, including people with disabilities and people from racial and ethnic minority groups, at increased risk during and after disasters. These toolkits build on previous #PrepYourHealth social media content to bring additional focus to the needs of all populations affected by disasters. Emergency preparedness and response equity occurs when everyone can be as prepared as possible.

- The Alcohol Program incorporated elements to address health equity in its Notice of Funding Opportunity DP21-2105, Promoting Population Health through Capacity in Alcohol Epidemiology & the Prevention of Excessive Alcohol Use.

- The Arthritis Program uses plain language to promote health equity in its communication products. For example, the program conducted a peer-reviewed study on social determinants of arthritis and arthritis-related outcomes among racial/ethnic groups. The results highlight racial and ethnic disparities in arthritis-related outcomes. The program
will use plain language in communication materials that highlight the findings.

- Cultural and Linguistic Review of CDC Translated Communication Materials is a collaborative effort among CDC’s Chief Health Equity Office, the Globally Mobile Populations (GMP) Team, the Multilingual Services Team and the Graphics Branch within the Division of Communication Services of the Office of the Associate Director for Communication, the Joint Information Center, the Office of Minority Health and Health Equity, the Diabetes Program, and others. The effort has resulted in the implementation of a formalized process to review CDC translated communication materials. Over 160 volunteer multilingual CDC staff who are representative of diverse communities have been trained to review materials from a cultural and linguistic perspective.

- Health Equity Through Human-Centered Design Campaigns. CDC’s GMP Team’s health equity achievements have come from embracing partnerships with organizations that focus on human-centered design. Human-centered design has been crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic, a public health emergency that has called attention to existing health disparities. A one-size-fits-all approach is not sufficient for reaching communities that vary greatly in their languages and dialects, countries of origin, religions, cultures, and personal experiences.

  The process of human-centered design grounds the campaigns in a community’s needs. By listening deeply to community leaders and through activities that allow for co-creation, materials and brands are designed in a way that allows for unique and authentic expression, and one that builds unity and trust across communities. This approach ensures that the campaigns are linguistically and culturally appropriate not for a broad audience, but for a specific, hyperlocal community.

- NCEH/ATSDR’s writer-editor services team reviews materials and identifies health equity concerns and provides trainings that encourage writing that promote equity. ATSDR’s health equity workgroup is developing strategic goals and guidance documents to promote equity, health equity, and policies in all programs, communication, and partnerships.

- CDC’s National Center for Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases (NCEZID) had six health equity focus areas in 2021, one of which was to ensure timely, accessible communications and outreach tailored for diverse populations. To support NCEZID’s divisions' goals and efforts within this focus area, NCEZID’s Health Equity Office provided trainings on CDC's new Health Equity Guiding Principles for Inclusive Communications, participated in preclearance and/or clearance review of NCEZID materials focused on health disparities and inequities, and provided technical assistance on health equity issues to NCEZID staff.

**Contacts**

The Act requires each department to designate one or more senior officials to oversee implementation of plain writing requirements. A list of such HHS agency officials can be found on the HHS website here: [https://www.hhs.gov/open/plain-writing/](https://www.hhs.gov/open/plain-writing/)
Please confirm the senior official in your Operating or Staff Division responsible for plain writing.

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Note: We will include the name and e-mail address of this person on the Department’s plain writing webpage.