



**Department of Health and Human Services
2021 Plain Writing Act Compliance Report
[Request for Information](#)**

Department of Health and Human Services
2021 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 eight compliance reports here: <http://www.hhs.gov/open/plain-writing/>

The Department’s Exec Sec is developing our 2021 compliance report to demonstrate our continued compliance with the requirements of the Act. The report includes sections on accomplishments, best practices, innovations, continuous improvements, and HHS contacts overseeing implementation of plain writing requirements. This year, we are adding a new section on “new initiative for 2021” to highlight how the Department plans to use plain writing to promote equity in policies, programs, and activities.

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 5pm Tuesday, March 30, 2021.

If you have any questions, please contact Dr. Ekaterini (Kat) Malliou at Ekaterini.Malliou@hhs.gov.

Centers for Disease Control & 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 March 2020 through March 2021, please describe:

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

Things to Know about the COVID-19 Pandemic – For good use of plain language principles.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/need-to-know.html>

COVID-19 Stop the Spread of Germs Video - For good choice of images and text to alert travelers, help stop the spread of COVID-19 and other respiratory illnesses by following these steps. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=03ly4d2tk3I&feature=emb_title

Your Guide to Masks - For good choice of images and text supporting CDC's wearing masks recommendations to help stop the spread of COVID-19.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/about-face-coverings.html>

- 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 **850** documents meeting plain language standards. Of those documents, **688** were new and **162** were substantially revised for plain language. Document types include:

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

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

Tips From Former Smokers ® (*Tips*®)

<https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/campaign/tips/index.html>

The *Tips* campaign entered its 10th year on March 1, 2021, with new ads that encourage people who smoke to quit. This year's *Tips* campaign features ads that will air on national and cable television, online, and streaming radio.

Learning Connection

<https://www.cdc.gov/training/learning/index.html>

The CDC Learning Connection helps public health and healthcare professionals stay informed about quality trainings from CDC, other federal agencies, and federally funded partners. To ensure that we are promoting quality training, we review trainings against a set of criteria that align with the [CDC Quality Training Standards](#).

Gateway to Health Communication

<https://www.cdc.gov/healthcommunication/>

The Gateway to Health Communication Team updated the site to remove out-of-date pages, combine pages that repeated content, and revising the remaining pages so that they all scored 90 or higher on the [CDC Clear Communication Index](#). The Clear Communication Index is a tool that indicates how many clear communication criteria the material addressed. Scores can range from 0 to 100.

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

CDC's agency website for Plain Writing was last updated in November 2020 (<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
- the federal plain language guidelines
- the federal plain language website
- the plain writing plan from the Department of Health and Human Services
- the 2020 Plain Writing Act Compliance Report
- Everyday Words for Public Health Communication
- the Clear Communication Index

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

As in previous years, CDC CIOs are asked to 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 online clear writing resources and toolkit. 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 March 2020 through March 2021, 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 2020, former CDC Director, Dr. Robert R. Redfield, continued supporting CDC's dedication to the use of plain language principles when communicating with the public:

<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 monitor 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 can be seen by reviewers 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 the CDC Health Literacy Council. We promote use of a flow chart diagram that shows how our various plain language and clear communication products 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 from 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 aspect of our plain writing program, these are resource-intensive activities. 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 for whom English is not their primary language 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 March 2020 through March 2021, 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 4 times in 2020 to develop guidance to help CIOs comply with the Plain Writing Act and the CDC/ATSDR Health 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 hosted a New Communicators Network session titled Clear Communication in Times of Uncertainty. Panelists answered questions on message testing, combatting misinformation, building trust with our various audiences of readers and listeners, and addressing the changing state of what scientists know and don't know during public health emergencies.
- The Center for State, Tribal, Local, and Territorial Support's Communication Unit challenged staff to a series of health literacy activities designed to *tone* and *strengthen* their health communication *body* of knowledge. Participants submitted snippets of public health content that they made easier to understand or content they came across that *fit* the theme of each week's challenge.
- The Center for Surveillance, Epidemiology, and Laboratory Services' Division of Laboratory Systems used an issue of their monthly newsletter to inform readers about the importance of using health literacy principles to transform science-based, data-driven results into content that's easy for people to find, understand, and use.
- The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) hosted the following health literacy events:

- A webinar with Dr. Deborah Bosley, founder of [The Plain Language Group](#), on the use of empathy in plain language
- Weekly book club meetings, where participants discussed *Last Reader Standing: The Story of a Man who Learned to Read at 54*
- A plain language scavenger hunt, where participants competed to be the first to find specific CDC or NIOSH health literacy and plain language resources on the web

NIOSH also shared weekly plain writing tips shared via TGI Friday emails and provided a [NIOSH Science Blog](#) post titled Recognizing Health Literacy at NIOSH.

- The National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion conducted a webinar titled The Power of Plain Language. It included an overview of the Plain Writing Act and examples of strategies staff can use to make their materials easier to understand.
- The National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention presented an agency-wide webinar titled TB Surveillance Data through a Digital First Perspective. Epidemiologist Clarisse Tsang and Web Team Lead Chitvan Yadav explained the process of moving surveillance data to a more flexible, searchable, and accessible digital format.

In 2020 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 2020, OADC’s Office of Communication Science prepared five tweets to promote Health Literacy Month. The tweets received more than 400+ likes, more than 175 retweets, and more than 15 comments.

In December of 2020 OADC’s Office of Communication Science released enhancements to *Pulse Check*, a communication concept testing system that provides rapid feedback on materials prepared by CDC programs. OADC recommends that CDC staff use Pulse Check in the early stages of material development to ensure they are writing clearly for their intended audience. Pulse Check does not replace formal audience testing. It can help fine-tune materials before programs conduct formal audience testing or disseminate the communication material.

- 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 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 2020, OADC's Office of Communication Science recognized efforts to advance plain language by opening 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.

- [NIOSH Personal Protective Equipment Tracker App](#) received a [ClearMark Award of Distinction](#) in the special COVID-19 category

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 March 2020 through March 2021, please describe:

a. The specific number of your employees completing plain writing training.

In 2020, CIOs identified **299** employees who completed plain language training.

b. The feedback you received from those who already completed the training.

OADC hosted 6 Plain Language & Clear Communication Index trainings in 2020. Over the 6 courses, evaluations revealed that on a 5-point scale, average perceived knowledge and skill scores increased from 3.4 before the training to 4.4 after the training.

c. The plain writing training programs you used.

In 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we pivoted from in-person **Agency Wide Training: Basic Plain Language Skill & Clear Communication Index Training** to virtual training provided on the Zoom platform.

<https://lms.learning.hhs.gov/Saba/Web/Main/goto/GuestCourseDetailURL?otId=cours00000000504439&callerPage=/learning/offeringTemplateDetails.xml>

We referred staff who could not make it to the live virtual trainings to an **Adobe Flash recording of a 3-hour in-person training on Basic Plain Language Skills**. As of January 2021, this training was removed because internet browsers no longer support Adobe Flash files. The training was replaced with 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 May 2020, we developed and delivered a virtual plain language training to grantees who work in the occupational safety and health field.

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

- Plain Language – Communication your audience understands the first time- PDF training document
<https://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/pdf/checklist-H.pdf>
- Guideline, Laws & Standards Webpage-
<https://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/guidelines.html>
- Plain Language Materials & Resources Webpage-
<https://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/developmaterials/plainlanguage.html>

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

- From March 2020 through March 2021, 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 to develop their own health literacy or plain language resolution to align with the CDC/ATSDR Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy. Progress on each CIO’s resolution will be assessed throughout the year.
- 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. Specific individuals and types of employees who would benefit from advanced

trainings are identified and trained.

- 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.

New Initiative for 2021

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.

For 2021, please describe:

a. How your agency plans to use plain writing to promote equity in your agency’s policies, programs, and activities.

- CDC’s Office of Minority Health and Health Equity (OMHHE) aims to accelerate CDC’s health impact in the U.S population and to eliminate health disparities for populations at higher risk for poor health outcomes as defined by race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, geography, gender, age, disability status, risk status related to sex and gender, and among other populations identified as at-risk for health disparities. OADC and other CIOs across the agency consult with OMHHE to ensure that we use culturally sensitive, unbiased language along with plain language.
- With permission of the leads of the HHS Health Literacy Workgroup, we have invited members of CDC’s Health Literacy Council to attend the workgroup’s meeting scheduled for March 23. At that meeting, [Janet Ohene-Frempong](#), a plain language and cross-cultural communication consultant, will be the guest speaker. She will speak on avoiding bias in communication.

- In 2020, the COVID-19 Response Chief Health Equity Team developed a *Health Equity Style Guide for the COVID-19 Response: Principles and Preferred Terms for Non-Stigmatizing, Bias-Free Language*. In 2021, CDC plans to expand use of this guide across the agency so that we can incorporate language related to health equity into all our work.

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/>

Please confirm the senior official in your Operating or Staff Division responsible for plain writing.

Name: Dogan Eroglu, Ph.D.

Title: Associate Director for Communication Science, Office of the Associate Director for Communication (OADC), CDC

Email: Dogan.eroglu@cdc.hhs.gov

Phone: 404.498.6119

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