# U.S. Department of Energy
# Plain Writing Act
# Compliance Report
### April 13, 2018

## I. Introduction

The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) sees the implementation of the Plain Writing Act as an important initiative that helps the Department share relevant information clearly, concisely, and informatively.  The areas referenced in this report summarize some of our successes as we continue to emphasize writing in Plain Language.

## II. DOE Plain Writing Officials

**A.** Ingrid Kolb, Director of the Office of Management, Senior Agency Official Responsible for Plain Writing

**B.** Michael Coogan, Office of the Executive Secretariat, Plain Language Point-of-Contact

## III. Examples of Agency Website Communications Available in a Format Consistent with the Plain Language Guidelines

**A.** *[Office of Public Affairs (PA)](#)*.  The Office of Public Affairs manages DOE's public website — [Energy.gov](#).  The office has consolidated more than 30 of the DOE's staff and program offices from separate websites onto [Energy.gov](#).  This consolidation allows visitors to enter a search term and find their information on Energy.gov; previously, the relevant information was scattered across many stand-alone DOE program and office websites not searchable from Energy.gov.

The new Energy.gov represents PA's commitment to principles of open government and Plain Language in a number of ways, including:

- *Blogs and articles.*  The blog section highlights timely content featuring many exciting innovations across DOE, from program offices to the National Laboratories.  Energy.gov blogs and articles provide Plain Language summaries of complex scientific processes and discoveries in a conversational style for the public.  Writers also develop interactive content, such as timelines and quizzes, to explain topical energy concepts to the public.

- *Training.*  Contributors to Energy.gov are encouraged to follow the principles of Plain Language in the website areas they maintain.  They receive content guidelines and training on using Plain Language and following web best practices for making content accessible.  In addition, PA holds agency-wide digital training sessions on a variety of topics.

- *Accessibility.*  With assistance from the Office of the Chief Information Officer, Public Affairs helped evaluate and implement a Section 508 tool called SiteImprove.  This tool helps energy.gov content owners identify broken links, misspellings, grammatical errors, and other accessibility/usability issues.

- *Google Analytics and Google Webmaster Tools*.  PA provides Google Analytics training to other DOE offices.  This training helps content owners understand important metrics, such as website visitor trends, behavior, and keyword searches within the internal website and external search engines such as Google.  Offices can use these metrics to guide their digital strategy and ensure content is reaching target audiences, including the public.  For instance, using Google Webmaster Tools and Google Analytics, PA has found most user search queries consist of terms that are simple and in Plain Language.  This means content writers should use similar terms to connect with even more potential readers.

- *Podcast.*  In 2016, PA launched a podcast called Direct Current that tells engaging, conversational stories about how DOE and the National Laboratories are making a positive difference for millions of Americans.  Direct Current's format is similar to National Public Radio, which hailed it as "more ambitious" than other government podcasts.  To date, PA has aired 26 full and partial episodes, each with corresponding transcripts and supplemental content.

- *Social Media.*  Public Affairs also uses Plain Language on social media, converting complex, scientific information into easy-to-understand, bite-sized messages.  PA manages several agency-level social media platforms, including the @Energy Twitter account, which now has more than 770,000 followers.

B. *U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA)*.  In March 2015, EIA published the third edition of its *EIA Writing Style Guide*.  The style guide contains 135 pages of examples, explanations, grammar rules, and advice on writing in Plain Language.  The latest edition includes an extensive index to help writers find topics and advice.  EIA's Office of Communications offered several training classes to introduce this edition of the style guide and explain changes and additions.

In 2016, the *EIA Writing Style Guide* received an Award of Distinction at the seventh annual ClearMark Awards, sponsored by the Center for Plain Language. The style guide was selected as one of nine finalists in the "original document (long format)" category.

The *EIA Writing Style Guide* has become popular with other government agencies as well. Several agencies have requested permission to copy it, in whole or in part, to meet their needs for an internal writing style guide.

In 2016, EIA offered a writing curriculum — a series of eight writing courses aptly named *Write Right.* EIA trained 88 Federal employees and contractors in 2016, and 96 employees and contractors in 2017. EIA staff who attended these courses improved their Plain Language skills — punctuation, grammar, proofreading, and conciseness. EIA worked with a contractor who learned about the products EIA writers produce and areas where writers and their managers needed to improve. To customize each course, the contractor — with input from the EIA editorial staff — used EIA writing samples for EIA-relevant hands-on writing activities.

In 2017, EIA offered the three most popular *Write Right* classes twice each during the year, based on responses to an employee survey:

- Introduction to the EIA Writing Style Guide (1.5 hours each)
  - ❖ Course topics:
    - — Overview of topics covered in the EIA Writing Style Guide
    - — Why have a style guide
    - — How to use the style guide
    - — Hands-on practice writing in EIA style

- Policy-Neutral Writing at EIA (2 hours each)
  - ❖ Course topics:
    - — Why EIA writing must be policy neutral
    - — Which situations pose the most risk for policy-neutral writers
    - — Which words and phrases writers should avoid
    - — How to be policy neutral when talking to the media
    - — How to comply with DOE social media policy and manage your personal social media profiles outside the agency
    - — Whom to contact for help with policy-neutral writing

- How to Edit and Proofread Your Own Writing (3.5 hours each)
  - ❖ Course topics:
    - — How editing and proofreading differ

- — Why you should edit before you proofread
- — How to plan your document by brainstorming customer questions
- — How the Document Planner can make your writing easier and more effective
- — How to check your work for common grammar and punctuation errors
- — Strategies for seeing your own writing with fresh eyes
- — How to use Microsoft Word tools for editing and proofreading
- — How to proofread and give feedback on your peers' work
- — How to develop and use checklists that support editing and proofreading

The curriculum attracted a wide range of participants with different writing responsibilities.  Many EIA employees registered for more than one course.  The *Write Right* curriculum continues to be successful because EIA has made a serious commitment — in time, money, and enthusiasm — to helping staff write more effectively.  As one senior manager said, "We've definitely sent a signal that the agency is taking writing quite seriously and considers it a top priority."  EIA has more writing and editing classes planned in 2018.

EIA is also active on Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and YouTube.  EIA uses social media to promote *Today in Energy* stories and newly published reports and analyses.

In 2017, EIA launched three Plain Language infographic campaigns through social media that highlighted interesting energy data.  Two campaigns were based on popular EIA reports: the *Residential Building Energy Consumption Survey* and the *Winter Fuels Outlook*.  The third campaign was a compilation of interesting state-level data called the *State Energy Tour*, which highlighted unique energy facts about a different state each week.  The use of Plain Language was a constant in all three campaigns.  EIA has a *World Energy Tour* planned for 2018.

EIA's YouTube channel features short how-to videos about EIA surveys and forms, short clips on featured topics, informational videos on data tools and how to use them, and webinars on pressing energy issues.

EIA's website contains education reflecting Plain Language principles, including:

- Today in Energy.  These short articles use Plain Language along with graphics, photos, maps, and animations to educate the public on timely energy issues, topics, and trends.  Every business day, EIA provides bite-sized pieces of information that readers can use in business, government, schools, and their

personal lives.  Energy experts explain topical data, reports, issues, and trends to build the public's understanding of energy issues.

- [Energy Kids](#).  This student-friendly website provides opportunities—through information and activities — to learn about energy while improving research and reading skills.  The teacher guide provides activities for teachers who use Energy Kids as a resource to teach students about energy in a fun and interactive way.

- [Energy Explained](#).  This extensive resource describes the different sources and uses of energy in understandable, everyday language.  EIA updated more than 167 Energy Explained pages in 2017.

- [Frequently Asked Questions](#) (FAQs).  This EIA resource provides answers in Plain Language to sometimes complicated questions about energy that the public and other stakeholders asked EIA through its website, Twitter, and Facebook.  EIA frequently updates the FAQ page to include the most current information and most popular inquiries.  EIA updated 98 FAQs in 2017.

C. ***[Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy (EERE)](#)***.  EERE manages two popular websites on [Energy.gov](#) — [Energy Saver.gov](#) and [energy.gov/eere/office-energy-efficiency-renewable-energy](#), the main EERE website.

In 2017, EERE's content was about seven percent of Energy.gov content but represented half of all page views.  EERE content accounted for three of the top five most viewed web pages in Energy.gov.

The EERE and Energy Saver websites contain a number of features reflecting Plain Language guidelines, including:

- [16 Ways to Save Energy in the Laundry Room](#).  This website provides easy-to-follow instructions for making energy-efficient home improvements.

- [EERE Blog](#).  This blog discusses energy topics and technologies in a conversational tone.

- [Energy Saver Blog.](#)  As a consumer resource on saving energy and using renewable energy technologies at home, this blog provides energy efficiency information to families, homeowners, renters, and drivers.  Plain Language is used throughout the site.  One example is a blog post from November 2017, ["Updated Energy Saver Guide Covers New Technologies,"](#) which highlights the recent update of EERE's *EnergySaver Guide,* a printed and downloadable energy efficiency and energy conservation guide for consumers.  The post focuses attention on the accessibility of the guide's language and graphics for all reading levels.

- Energy 101 Videos.  EERE posts clean energy videos to educate the public on technology basics.  Each accompanying script is written in Plain Language to appeal to a wide audience on topics such as Sustainable Public Transportation and Clean Energy Manufacturing.

- Social Media Posts.  EERE manages 19 social media accounts, including eight for the Solar Decathlon.  The most popular posts feature videos such as last year's tour of an NREL wind facility and algal biofuels facility.  EERE also condenses highly technical information about clean energy topics into simple infographics used for multiple purposes, including social media posts, reports, and web pages.

EERE has established a best practices group called the Web Coordinators Team.  This group meets monthly to address common issues, including Plain Language Act compliance.  Each EERE office and program is represented in the group.  In 2017, the Web Coordinators addressed many different content updates, including the Communication Standards site within Energy.gov, and emphasized Plain Language and compliance with EERE's style guide.  Each June and December, the Web Coordinators are required to report to EERE's Web Governance Team on their website content maintenance.

EERE has also established a Product Governance Team that reviews all outreach materials for branding compliance, Plain Language, formatting consistency, and adherence with DOE policies and reviews.  This group also includes subject matter experts from EERE technology and program offices, as well as the National Renewable Energy Lab in Golden, Colorado, to provide varied perspectives on public outreach materials.  Submissions are reviewed as they come in, but the entire team meets as needed to review larger, higher profile, or more complicated publications.  The team also reviews and approves infographics to ensure their messages are conveyed in any easy-to-understand format.

EERE provides a large assortment of Adobe InDesign templates for internal users to develop high-quality printed materials and presentations.  These templates are in a variety of formats, including fact sheets, scientific and technical reports, pamphlets, and handouts.  These templates are embedded with an additional pink-colored layer, which may be toggled on and off, that provides developers guidance on writing including Plain Language references.  EERE also provides PowerPoint templates.

All of EERE's website content and printed materials are written in an easy-to-read style consistent with Plain Language requirements.  EERE's Communication Standards website includes guidelines for content writers and editors, and includes a section explaining the Plain Writing Act and its requirements.  The EERE Communications team receives all EERE printed materials via the Product Governance Team for review and editing before they are published.  The EERE Communications team reviews the materials for adherence to Plain Writing standards

and relevant DOE and EERE guidelines.  Digital versions of all approved printed materials are in EERE's Online Publications Library to allow easy public access.

In addition, team leads for EERE's public correspondence and Web Coordinator meetings encourage writers of public correspondence and web content throughout EERE to take DOE's Plain Language training courses.  Opportunities for Plain Language training are forwarded to Web Coordinators.

To address common queries from the public, the public correspondence team developed Plain Language responses that are consistent, follow best practices, and are aligned with Federal policy.  These prewritten replies expedite DOE's responses to consumers.

D.  *National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA)*.  The NNSA website — nnsa.energy.gov — was recently moved to energy.gov and underwent a major content review using Plain Language principles.  The site is regularly updated with press releases, articles, infographics, animations and videos, newsletters, fact sheets, and other documents.  This information highlights NNSA's mission and activities, including areas such as stockpile stewardship and nuclear nonproliferation.  The website also provides information on NNSA careers and structure, and links to NNSA's social media channels (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr).

NNSA's website reflects Plain Language principles that give the public a better understanding of NNSA's programs, such as:

- Prevent, Counter, and Respond — A Strategic Plan to Reduce Global Nuclear Threats.  This report describes NNSA's planning and program activities on U.S. national security and advance global nuclear security.  The report uses Plain Language principles to clearly define and describe its missions to prevent, counter, and respond to the threats of nuclear proliferation and terrorism.

- Stockpile Stewardship and Management Plan.  This report updates the 25-year plans developed across numerous NNSA programs and organizations.  The report describes NNSA's efforts to maintain and modernize scientific tools, capabilities, and infrastructure to ensure the success of NNSA's nuclear weapons mission.

- Life Extension Programs (LEPs).  These programs guide the repair/replacement of nuclear weapons components, ensuring that our Nation can meet its national security requirements.  The LEP fact sheets help educate the public about the stockpile program and how its maintained, and include photos and easy-to-read bulleted information about the weapon systems.

**E.** *[The Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO)](#).*  Information and technology help DOE meet its mission in energy, science, and nuclear security.  The OCIO makes this happen in programs spanning all these areas.

The OCIO also maintains the Department's internal [Powerpedia](#) system, which educates staff on how to use Plain Language (see V.B).  The OCIO uses Plain Language to convey technical and operational concepts to lay readers that results in understandable and technically sound information.

## IV.  Examples of Other Agency Communications Consistent with the Plain Language Guidelines

*Office of the Executive Secretariat.*  The Office of the Executive Secretariat is responsible for overseeing Secretarial correspondence and most DOE Congressional Reports.  The office provides DOE guidance on these documents consistent with the Plain Writing Act and reviews documents for consistency with the Act's guidelines.

## V.  Informing Agency Staff of the Plain Writing Act's Requirements

**A.** DOE's website contains links to the agency's previous *Plain Writing Act Compliance Reports* in its Open.Gov section.

**B.** The Department's internal wiki — Powerpedia — has a Plain Language page. Through the wiki, DOE encourages contributions and conversations about Plain Language — via the associated talk page — from all users.  The page lists resources and information, including:

- Embedded YouTube videos from the Plain Language Action Information Network that highlight best practices for clear writing
- Training schedules for Plain Language classes
- Guidelines and links for writing in Plain Language
- Before and after Plain Language examples

## VI.  Training

Plain Language training has been a staple at DOE since 2011.  Initially directed toward its headquarters personnel in the District and Germantown, Maryland, training for employees and contractors expanded to the Department's laboratories and field offices across the country via video conferencing. Later, some laboratories and field offices requested in-person instruction. All classes are led by an in-house agency instructor.

DOE personnel have fully embraced Plain Language training.  The Department holds classes for individual employees and contractors, as well as DOE Program Offices as a group (at their request).

The Plain Language training specifics from April 2017 to March 2018:

|  | Classes | Participants |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Forrestal | 1 | 22 |
| Germantown | 1 | 41 |
| **TOTAL** | **2** | **63** |

The totals above reflect a significant decline from previous years. During this timeframe, DOE's Plain Language instructor was serving a detail for more than nine months at the Department of Homeland Security. Although the two classes above were taught at DOE during his detail, he was unable to teach additional classes.

A better indicator of Plain Language training at DOE is reflected in the training specifics for the previous year, from April 2016 to March 2017:

|  | Classes | Participants |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Forrestal | 5* | 120 |
| Germantown | 2 | 39 |
| In-Person Instruction at the Savannah River Site | 2 | 46 |
| In-Person Instruction in Albuquerque (NNSA)** | 2 | 48 |
| **TOTAL** | **11** | **253** |

* *Includes a class specifically requested by the National Nuclear Security Administration.*

** *One class was for NNSA's first-year employees, and one was for the Office of Secure Transportation.*

*(Note:* DOE's in-house instructor also conducts Plain Language Training for other Federal agencies. From April 2016 to March 2017, Plain Language Training was provided to the U.S. Public Health Service, Peace Corps, and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives.)

At both headquarters and its Germantown facility, the Department sends a broadcast email message promoting Plain Language training to all employees and contractors, generating awareness. At DOE facilities across the country, points-of-contact promote Plain Language training.

DOE's Plain Language classes provide tools that allow writers to present information more clearly, including:

- Using active voice

- Using pronouns and everyday words

- Shortening sentences and paragraphs

- Limiting jargon and acronyms

- Identifying the audience and focusing on what the reader needs to know

- Helping the reader find and understand information

- Using lists (bullets, numbers, letters) and tables instead of long-form paragraphs

## VII.   Ongoing Compliance/Sustaining Change

**A.** All DOE employees and contractors are encouraged to incorporate Plain Language principles in their writing.  Some Program Offices have developed style guides that support Plain Language concepts (EIA's *Writing Style Guide* is one example).  Some offices, such as the OCIO and EIA, also integrate Plain Language concepts into their document review process.

The Office of the Executive Secretariat incorporates Plain Language standards in its review of DOE documents and external correspondence and works with Program Offices to emphasize Plain Language principles.

**B.** The Department's Powerpedia internal wiki has an Acronyms List that identifies Department-related acronyms for readers and provides the acronym's description.

**C.** Plain Language training is ongoing for headquarters, Germantown, and field facilities.

## VIII.   DOE Plain Writing Websites/Links

**A.** The Department's Plain Language website

**B.** The Plain Language Page on Powerpedia[1], DOE's internal wiki site

**C.** DOE's link on its Plain Language website to Federal Plain Language Guidelines

**D.** DOE's link on its Plain Language website to the Plain Language Action Information Network

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[1] Accessible only to Department of Energy employees and contractors

**E.** EIA's [Writing Style Guide](#) and its one-page [Tips for Writing sheet](#)

**IX. Customer Satisfaction Evaluation after Experiencing Plain Language Communications**

**A.** DOE's Office of Public Affairs conducted (1) usability testing to assess and improve the experience of visitors on Energy.gov; and (2) an extensive analysis of search terms used by visitors to reach Energy.gov. As a follow-up to these studies, DOE launched a more responsive version of Energy.gov that adapts to the user's device, allowing DOE content to be easily viewed on tablets, smartphones, and other mobile devices.

The Department continues to monitor and optimize how Energy.gov is serving consumers, businesses, governments, educators, researchers, and the public. As DOE places increasing emphasis on mobile-friendly online content, Plain Language principles become more critical in meeting the agency's communications needs.

**B.** The EIA *Writing Style Guide* has won or been nominated for a ClearMark award from the Center for Plain Language twice in the last five years. EIA's style guide is its central document for Plain Language, and employees use the guide for help and advice on the EIA writing style, grammar tips, and writing clearly,. Many EIA employees also post the *Writing Style Guide's* [Tips for Writing sheet](#) on their office walls and doors.

**C.** The attendance numbers for EIA's *Write Right* curriculum — the series of eight writing courses — show that the courses are popular. Comments on the evaluation surveys indicate that participants found the training informative and useful.

EIA's annual web customer satisfaction survey conducted in August 2017 showed that 91 percent of nearly 22,000 respondents indicated they were satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of the information on EIA's website. Ninety-six percent of respondents who visited the website more than once indicated they were satisfied or very satisfied. The adjective selected most often by survey respondents to describe EIA was "informative" (34 percent), followed by "expert" (13 percent). Of the respondents who easily found what they sought, 79 percent indicated the level of detail on the website was just right for their needs. This survey also collects information on who is visiting its website and the information they are seeking.

Other EIA product-specific surveys collect information on how customers use a particular product, if the customer finds it useful, and how EIA can improve it.