U.S. Department of Energy
Plain Writing Act Compliance Report
April 15, 2019

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. PA holds agency-wide digital training sessions on a variety of topics. In addition, Energy.gov offers blog writing and social media guidance to help offices develop easy-to-understand content for the public.

- *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 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. Another example is Instagram, which is becoming an important way to reach the public through eye-catching photos and videos that tell the story of Energy Department-supported science and technology.

B. [*U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA)*](#). In 2016, EIA staff developed and offered an in-house writing curriculum — a series of eight writing courses aptly named *Write Right.* In 2018, EIA trained 92 Federal employees and contractors under *Write Right*. Employees who attend these courses improve their Plain Language skills — punctuation, grammar, proofreading, and conciseness — and

learn more about common writing mistakes and how to plan and revise their work. Each course is customized with EIA-relevant hands-on writing activities and EIA writing samples, and is focused on areas where writers and their managers need to improve.

In 2018, EIA offered two in-house courses and one new *Write Right* class during the year, based on responses to an employee survey:

- Using the EIA Writing Style Guide (1.5 hours)
    - ❖ 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
        - — Common grammar and EIA style mistakes in EIA documents

- Editing Your Own Work (2 hours)
    - ❖ Course topics:
        - — Understanding the difference between editing and proofreading
        - — Using tips and strategies for editing your writing
        - — Reading your draft with fresh eyes
        - — Using Microsoft Word tools for editing
        - — Incorporating Plain Language principles into your writing
        - — Planning your document by brainstorming customer questions
        - — Using the Document Planner to make writing easier and more effective
        - — Checking your work for common grammar and punctuation errors

- How to Improve Your Writing Process and Your Documents (2.5 hours)
    - ❖ Course topics:
        - — Using a document planner
        - — Developing a structure for your document
        - — Making the document flow smoothly from one section to the next
        - — Navigating the writing process when a document has multiple authors

The curriculum attracts a wide range of participants with different writing responsibilities. Many EIA employees register for more than one course.

The *Write Right* curriculum is 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 2019.

In 2018, EIA promoted three Plain Language infographic campaigns through social media that highlighted interesting energy data. EIA expanded two of these campaigns from its 2017 launches: the *Residential Building Energy Consumption Survey* and the *Winter Fuels Outlook*. The third campaign was new and included a compilation of interesting international data called the *World Energy Tour*, which highlighted unique energy facts about different countries each week. Plain Language was consistent through all three campaigns.

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 2018.

- 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 all 99 FAQs in 2018.

EIA maintains several data tools to make browsing EIA data interactive and easy for users. In 2018, EIA updated its popular Energy Disruptions Map, which shows energy outages. EIA added new data layers to help users identify energy outages caused by wildfires and earthquakes. EIA also launched a new interactive tool called the **Natural Gas Storage Dashboard.** The dashboard is a comprehensive way for users to identify Lower 48 and regional storage activity and the key market fundamentals affecting natural gas underground storage activity. This tool provides weekly context to EIA's Principal Federal Economic Indicator — the *Weekly Natural Gas Storage Report*.

EIA is active on Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, LinkedIn, and YouTube. EIA uses social media to promote *Today in Energy* stories and newly published reports and analyses. EIA uses social media to connect consumers with useful EIA tools, such as the U.S. Electric System Operating Data tool, the Status of U.S. Nuclear Outages page, and the Flood Vulnerability Assessment Map.

As Hurricane Florence and then Hurricane Michael threatened the U.S. Southeast in September and October, EIA quickly responded with hurricane status reports and related *Today in Energy* articles that provided information on each storm's potential to disrupt the energy system and analyses of the resulting impacts after landfall.

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 2018, EERE's content was about seven percent of Energy.gov content but represented 28 percent of all page views. EERE content accounted for three of the top five most viewed web pages in Energy.gov. More than seven million visitors came to EERE websites in FY 2018.

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 decisions in the laundry room.

- 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 the energy efficiency and energy conservation consumer guide publication, *Energy Saver Guide: Tips on Saving Money and Energy in Your Home.* The guide is written clearly and formatted to appeal to all reading levels. Links to download the guide in pdf and a variety of eBook formats — in both English and Spanish — are provided.

- 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 22 social media accounts and blogs, including eight for the Solar Decathlon. The most popular posts feature videos such as tours 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 also co-chairs the DOE Web Council, which meets monthly to address common issues, including Plain Language Act compliance. EERE offices and programs are also represented in the group. In 2018, the Council invited DOE's Plain Language instructor to present on Plain Language principles. In addition, the Web Council co-chair outlined EERE's [Communication Standards](#) website that includes guidelines for content writers and editors and a [section explaining the Plain Writing Act](#) and its requirements. The Communication Standards section also includes EERE's style guide and guidelines on ensuring that content is accessible to those with disabilities.

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. The team reviews submissions as they come in, but the entire team weighs in as needed to review larger, higher profile, or more complicated publications. The team also reviews and approves infographics to ensure messages are easy to understand.

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 include 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, social media posts, and printed materials are easy to read in a style consistent with Plain Language requirements. EERE's 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 encourage writers of public correspondence and web content throughout EERE to take DOE's Plain Language training courses. Team leads forward opportunities for Plain Language training to EERE 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 — energy.gov/nnsa — follows 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, Instagram, 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 describes NNSA's efforts to maintain and modernize scientific tools, capabilities, and infrastructure to ensure the success of NNSA's nuclear weapons mission.

- Fact sheets. NNSA produces numerous fact sheets that outline its weapon life extension programs, important missions, other important public-facing documents, and material for the media. The fact sheets follow Plain Language principles.

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's programs span all these areas.

The OCIO also maintains the Department's internal [Powerpedia](#) wiki, which has a section educating staff on how to use Plain Language (see V.B). The OCIO uses Plain Language to convey technical and operational concepts.

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 in 2013 to the Department's laboratories and field offices across the country via video conferencing. In 2014, Plain Language training expanded even further when 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 2018 to March 2019:

	Classes	Participants
Forrestal	6*	131
Germantown	1	16
In-Person Instruction at the Savannah River Site in Aiken, SC**	4	46
In-Person Instruction at the NREL Lab in Golden, CO***	2	30
In-Person Instruction at the WAPA Site in Folsom, CA****	2	50
In-Person Instruction at the WAPA Site in Billings, MT****	1	19
In-Person Instruction at the WAPA site in Watertown, SD****	1	20
TOTAL	**17**	**312**

* *Five of these classes were specifically requested by DOE Program Offices: EERE's Wind Technology; Project Management Oversight and Assessment/NNSA; EERE's Workforce Management Office; EERE's Office of Strategic Programs; and Office of Legacy Management.*

** *Specifically requested by the Office of Environmental Management and NNSA.*

*** *Specifically requested by the National Renewable Energy Laboratory, part of EERE.*

**** *Specifically requested by the Western Area Power Administration (WAPA).*

At both its DC headquarters and Germantown facility, the Department sends a broadcast email message to all employees and contractors promoting Plain Language training and generating awareness. At DOE sites 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 DC 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

E. EIA's Writing Style Guide and its one-page Tips for Writing sheet

IX. Customer Satisfaction Evaluation after Experiencing Plain Language Communications

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

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. Separately, a member of the EIA staff was asked to be a judge for the Center for Plain Language's 2018 ClearMark Awards.

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 2018 showed that 91 percent of nearly 29,230 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 "accurate" (25 percent), followed by "informative" (20 percent) and "relevant" (16 percent). Of the respondents who easily found what they sought, 82 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.