

U.S. Department of Energy

# Plain Writing Act Compliance Report

April 15, 2017

## I. Introduction

The 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. Departmental 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 the Department of Energy's public website — [Energy.gov](http://Energy.gov). The office has consolidated more than 30 of the Department's staff and program offices from separate websites onto [Energy.gov](http://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*. This section — accessible through [Energy.gov](http://Energy.gov) — highlights timely content featuring many exciting innovations across the Energy Department, from program offices to the National Labs. Energy.gov blogs and articles provide Plain Language summaries of complex scientific processes and discoveries in a conversational style for the public.
- *Training*. Contributors to Energy.gov are encouraged to follow the principles of Plain Language in website areas they maintain. They receive content

- guidelines, as well as 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.
- *Google Analytics and Google Webmaster Tools*. PA provides Google Analytics training to other Energy Department 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 and 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.

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

In 2016, the *2015 EIA Writing Style Guide* received an Award of Distinction at the 7th annual ClearMark Awards, sponsored by the Center for Plain Language. The style guide was selected as a finalist in the “original document (long format)” category, along with eight others. Last year was the first year the style guide competed against both private and public sector organizations.

In 2016, EIA offered a writing curriculum — a series of eight different writing courses aptly named Write Right. Classes were open to all Federal employees and contractors. EIA trained 88 employees and contractors in 2016.

EIA staff who attended these courses improved their “small picture” writing skills — punctuation, grammar, proofreading — and their “big picture” skills — plain language 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.

EIA offered five of the eight Write Right classes in 2016:

- Introduction to the EIA Writing Style Guide (1.5 hours)
- Policy-Neutral Writing at EIA (2 hours)
- How to Write in Plain Language for EIA Audiences (2.5 hours)

- How to Edit and Proofread Your Own Writing (3.5 hours)
- Grammar, Punctuation, and Usage Refresher (3.5 hours)

The curriculum attracted a wide range of participants with different writing responsibilities. Many EIA employees signed up for more than one course. The Write Right curriculum project 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 classes planned in 2017.

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

- [Today in Energy](#). These short articles use Plain Language and 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. Training classes were held this year for EIA staff interested in learning how to write *Today in Energy* articles. The guidance emphasizes using Plain Language principles, such as simple words, definitions for technical words, short sentences, short paragraphs, and links to more information.
- [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 using 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 135 Energy Explained pages in 2016.
- [Frequently Asked Questions](#). 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 account, and Facebook page. EIA frequently updates the FAQ page to include the most current information and most popular inquiries. EIA updated 71 Frequently Asked Questions in 2016.

C. [Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy \(EERE\)](#). EERE manages two websites at the Department of Energy — [Energy Saver.gov](#) and the [main EERE website](#). These websites are two of the more popular sites at the Department of Energy ([Energy.gov](#)).

In 2016, the Energy Saver website generated 30 percent of all the Department of Energy's page views. Three of the top 10 most viewed web pages on the Department's main Energy.gov site were on EERE's Energy Saver website.

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

- [Do-It-Yourself Home Energy Projects](#). 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 January 2017, ["Congratulate yourself on achieving one easy energy-saving resolution."](#) This post is written in a concise, conversational style that emphasizes individual calls to action to save energy.

EERE has established a best practices group called the Web Coordinators. This group meets monthly to address common issues, including Plain Language Act compliance. Each EERE office and program is represented in the group. In 2016, the Web Coordinators addressed many different content updates 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 consistency, Plain Language, formatting consistency, and compliance with Departmental policies. 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 meets regularly and reviews materials from a centralized mailbox.

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 placed into EERE's Online Publications Library to allow for 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](http://nnsa.energy.gov) — is regularly updated with press releases, blog items, infographics, animations and videos, newsletters, fact sheets, and other documents. This information highlights NNSA's initiatives and accomplishments and emphasizes the organization's activities, including areas such as nuclear nonproliferation and defense programs. Main sections of the website provide information on NNSA and its mission. It also 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. Information on LEPs helps educate the public about the program and includes photos and easy-to-read bulleted information about weapon systems in the program.

- E. **[The Office of the Chief Information Officer \(OCIO\)](#)**. The OCIO oversees Information Technology (IT) and cyber governance for the Department. The OCIO provides a number of diverse IT and cybersecurity services and programs, including issuing directives, producing guides, and offering training on topics, such as Records Management, Privacy, Capital Planning and Investment Control, and Cybersecurity.

The OCIO also maintains the Department's internal [Powerpedia](#) pages. The OCIO uses Plain Language to convey technical and operational concepts to lay readers with a goal of producing 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 Departmental Congressional Reports. The office provides Departmental 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. The Department of Energy's website contains a link to the agency's *Plain Writing Act Compliance Reports* and initial [Plain Writing Act Compliance Report of July 13, 2011](#) in its Open.Gov section.
- B. The Department's internal wiki — Powerpedia — has a Plain Language page. Through the wiki, the Department encourages contributions and conversations about Plain Language — via the associated talk page — from all users. The page includes 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

Instruction for writing in Plain Language successfully continues at the Department of Energy. In 2011 and 2012, Plain Language training was directed toward Department of Energy employees and contractors at the Department's headquarters in the Forrestal Building in Washington, DC, and its facility in Germantown, Maryland. In 2013, training was expanded to the Department's laboratories and field offices across the country using the Department's video training conference capabilities. In 2014, laboratory and field office training expanded to include in-person instruction.

Plain Language training continues at the Department, with classes for individual employees and contractors as well as Program Offices as a group (at their request). Plain Language training specifics from April 2016 to March 2017:

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

\* *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.*

At both headquarters and Germantown, the Department sends email messages promoting the training to all employees and contractors, generating interest and enthusiasm. Registration closes early for some classes because attendance limits are reached. For field facilities, each facility's point-of-contact promotes Plain Language training.

All classes are led by an in-house agency instructor. (*Note: The Department of Energy's in-house instructor also taught three Plain Language classes outside the agency to the US Public Health Service in Rockville; Peace Corps office in Washington, DC; and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives in Washington, DC.*)

The Department'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 Department of Energy 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 Departmental 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 full name.
- C. Plain Language training is ongoing for headquarters, Germantown, and field facilities.

## **VIII. DOE's Plain Writing Websites/Links**

- A. The Department's [Plain Language website](#)
- B. The [Plain Language Page on Powerpedia](#)<sup>1</sup>, the Department of Energy's internal wiki site
- C. The Department's link on its Plain Language webpage to [Federal Plain Language Guidelines](#)
- D. The Department's link on its Plain Language webpage to the [Plain Language Action Information Network](#)
- E. EIA's [Writing Style Guide](#) and its one-page [Tips for Writing sheet](#)

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<sup>1</sup> Accessible only to Department of Energy employees and contractors



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

- A.** The 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, the Department launched a more responsive version of Energy.gov that adapts to the user's device — meaning Department content can now 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, and researchers. As the Department places increasing emphasis on mobile-friendly online content, Plain Language principles become more critical in meeting the agency's communications needs.

- B.** In April 2013, the U.S. Energy Information Administration's 2012 Writing Style Guide won a ClearMark award for the best public Plain Language document from the Center for Plain Language. Now that EIA has a central document and point of contact for Plain Language, employees know where to go for help and advice on writing clearly. Many EIA employees post the Writing Style Guide's [Tips for Writing sheet](#) on their office walls and doors.
- C.** The U.S. Energy Information Administration's *Today in Energy* publication, which uses Plain Language to educate the public on energy topics, received two awards — best electronic publication and best web article — in April 2013 from the National Association of Government Communicators.
- D.** The attendance numbers for EIA's Write Right — the series of eight writing courses — show that the courses were popular. The participants' comments on the evaluation surveys indicate that people who attended found the training informative.
- E.** A U.S. Energy Information Administration web customer satisfaction survey conducted in August 2016 showed that 95 percent of the nearly 2,500 survey respondents said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of the information on EIA's website. The adjective selected most often by survey respondents to describe EIA was "informative."