

U.S. Department of Energy

# Plain Writing Act Compliance Report

April 15, 2020

## 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](https://www.energy.gov). The office has consolidated more than 50 of the DOE's staff and program offices from separate websites onto [Energy.gov](https://www.energy.gov). This consolidation allows visitors to enter a search term and find their information on [Energy.gov](https://www.energy.gov); previously, the relevant information was scattered across many stand-alone DOE program and office websites not searchable from [Energy.gov](https://www.energy.gov).

[Energy.gov](https://www.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](https://www.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](https://www.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](https://www.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, PA helped evaluate and implement a Section 508 tool called SiteImprove. This tool helps [Energy.gov](https://www.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](https://www.energy.gov/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 [27 episodes](#), each with corresponding transcripts and supplemental content.
  - *Social Media.* PA 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 2019, EIA trained 149 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 focused on areas where writers and their managers need to improve.

In 2019, EIA offered five courses in the *Write Right* curriculum:

- **Course One:** Microsoft Word Editing Tools (1 hour)
  - ❖ Course topics:
    - Enabling advanced *Spell Check* features
    - Using *Speak* to read your paper aloud
    - Using *Find* as an editing tool
    - Using *Find and Replace* to correct pervasive mistakes
    - Creating and using macros to fix mistakes across documents and make multi-author documents cohesive
  
- **Course Two:** Policy Neutrality (1.5 hours)
  - ❖ Course topics:
    - How to recognize bias in your writing
    - Ways to write about data that keep your tone objective
    - Value judgment words to avoid
  
- **Course Three:** 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
  
- **Courses Four and Five:** Email Writing Skills, Parts 1 and 2 (2.5 hours each)
  - ❖ Course topics:
    - Maintaining a professional tone in your emails
    - Writing effective subject lines and messages
    - Using appropriate email etiquette

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 new writing and editing classes planned in 2020 that place more emphasis on Plain Language and statistical writing.

From its nearly 70 reports published in 2019 on energy topics such as electricity consumption, renewable energy, electric vehicles, and carbon dioxide emissions, EIA selected three high profile reports and developed social media infographic campaigns that helped convey interesting energy data. EIA used Plain Language principles consistently throughout all three social media campaigns – the *Annual Energy Outlook 2019*, *International Energy Outlook 2019*, and *Summer Fuels Outlook*. The infographics highlighted notable and meaningful energy and forecasting data for visitors.

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, webinars on pressing energy issues, and product launch events with private sector partners, such as the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

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 2019. In addition, EIA redesigned its [Energy Explained](#) resource to include enhanced navigation features, a more user-friendly interface, interactive data visualizations, and more.
- [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 2019.

- [Glossary](#). Because the nature of EIA’s content can be very technical, EIA maintains an extensive glossary of terms that EIA authors can use to hyperlink technical terms for readers who want more detailed explanation about a term or process. The glossary is also a searchable tool web users can easily find on EIA.gov.

EIA maintains several data tools to make browsing EIA data interactive and easy for users. In 2019, EIA redesigned and enhanced the U.S. Electric System Operating Data tool and renamed it the [Hourly Electric Grid Monitor](#). The updated tool provides new and more flexible options for visualizing data and allows users to create custom dashboards they can save and share. EIA also enhanced the [Electricity Data Browser](#) to simplify access to information. To increase customer understanding of weather-related energy issues in New England, EIA released an [interactive dashboard](#) showing energy market conditions in that region.

On May 15, 2019, EIA launched a beta release of its new [State Energy Portal](#). The portal provides greater access to more state-level U.S. energy data with interactive, customizable views of more than 150 charts, tables, and maps. Infographics show the overall energy context for the states, and state rankings provide a way to compare states. Users can download charts and embed them in their websites. EIA developed this tool in response to feedback from a wide variety of customers who use our state-level data. EIA also updated its [U.S. Energy Mapping System](#) to include several new layers.

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](#).

EIA continues to enhance its ability to respond to electricity emergencies with the [Energy Disruptions](#) web page, hurricane status reports, and related [Today in Energy](#) articles that provide information on a 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 EERE’s main website, [energy.gov/eere/office-energy-efficiency-renewable-energy](#). In 2019, EERE’s content was about seven percent of [Energy.gov](#) content but represented 28 percent of all page views.

Some 2019 highlights:

- EERE and Energy Saver websites made up about **45 percent of all page views across [Energy.gov](https://www.energy.gov)**.
- EERE content made up **three of the top five** most viewed pages across all of [Energy.gov](https://www.energy.gov).
- EERE's *How Do Wind Turbines Work* was one of the top three most popular pages on the Department's [Energy.gov](https://www.energy.gov) website in 2019.
- EERE websites had more than **8.4 million users**, a 10 percent increase over 2018 (7.7 million).
- Users logged more than **26.6 million page views**, a nine percent increase over 2018 (24.3 million).
- And while the Energy Saver website saw a 28 percent decrease in users (3.8 million compared with 2018's 5.3 million), four EERE offices saw double digit percentage increases in site visits compared to the previous year. These offices are Vehicles (24 percent), Weatherization (21 percent), Bioenergy (16 percent), and Hydrogen and Fuel Cells (12 percent).

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

- [EERE Blog](#). This blog discusses energy topics and technologies in a conversational tone, including some first-person accounts of saving energy.
- [How Do Wind Turbines Work?](#) This popular EERE web page provides an easy-to-understand explanation of how wind turbines operate and defines technical terms in Plain Language.
- 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 the smart grid, algae-to-fuels innovations, and a specially-designed chute that propels migrating fish over a hydro dam.
- Social Media Posts. EERE manages 22 social media accounts and blogs. In 2019, EERE's social media accounts had a total audience of 252,161 followers, an increase of 4.6 percent from the previous year.
- Videos and Graphics. The most popular social media posts feature videos such as tours of a 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. The Web Council co-chair promoted 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's Product Governance Team – which includes subject matter experts from EERE technology and program offices, as well Department of Energy national laboratories – reviews all EERE printed outreach materials and provides varied perspectives. The Product Governance Team ensures documents adhere to Plain Writing standards and relevant DOE and EERE guidelines, including branding compliance and formatting consistency. 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. Digital versions of all approved printed materials are in EERE's Online Publications Library to allow easy public access.

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.

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 is a semi-autonomous agency within the Department of Energy responsible for enhancing national security through the military application of nuclear science. NNSA maintains multiple websites that follow Plain Language principles. NNSA's primary website – [Energy.gov/nnsa](http://Energy.gov/nnsa) – 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, LinkedIn, Instagram, and Flickr).

NNSA also maintains a [Directives website](#) that serves as a content and document management system for policies and procedures. This public website allows users to access and organize the Department's Technical Standards and other information simply and quickly.

NNSA's websites reflect 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.
- [Top 10](#). This page provides users with the ten most frequently accessed policies and directives from the preceding month.

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 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 2019 to March 2020:

	<u>Classes</u>	<u>Participants</u>
Forrestal*	8	187
Germantown	2	57
In-Person Instruction at the WAPA site in Phoenix**	2	27
In-Person Instruction at the WAPA site in Salt Lake City**	1	19
In-Person Instruction at the WAPA site in Lakewood, CO**	1	31
In-Person Instruction at the WAPA site in Loveland, CO**	1	21
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>342</b>

\* *The National Nuclear Security Administration requested two classes.*

\*\* *The Western Area Power Administration (WAPA) specifically requested this class.*

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 Department 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
- Focusing not on what you want to say, but what the reader needs to know
- Using lists (bullets, numbers, letters) and tables instead of long-form paragraphs
- Making your document easier to read

## **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. DOE's [Plain Language website](#)
- B. The [Plain Language Page on Powerpedia](#),<sup>1</sup> 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 [tip 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* [tip sheet](#) on their office walls and

---

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

doors. In November 2019, EIA began an update process for the [EIA Writing Style Guide](#), which will continue into 2020. This update will be the first since 2015. Separately, in 2020, for the second consecutive year, a member of the EIA staff was asked to be a judge for the Center for Plain Language’s 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 2019 showed that 92 percent of 27,515 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 “relevant” (24 percent), followed by “accurate” (19 percent) and “informative” (18 percent). Of the respondents who easily found what they sought, 81 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.