U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
2025 Plain Writing Act Compliance Report

Background

On October 13, 2010, the Plain Writing Act (Act) was signed into law. The Act requires federal agencies to use clear government communication that the public can understand and use. Communication in plain language is especially important in the context of health care and human services. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) recognizes that using plain language can help address the needs of those with limited literacy skills, as well as those with limited health literacy skills. Plain language helps people understand health information because the writing is clear, concise, organized, and jargon-free. Documents written in plain language are less complex and therefore easier for everyone to understand.

In ongoing application and implementation, the Act requires agencies to write annual compliance reports and post these reports on its plain language web page. You can find links to HHS's previous compliance reports here: http://www.hhs.gov/open/plain-writing/.

The Department's Immediate Office of the Secretary Executive Secretariat (Exec Sec) developed the 2025 compliance report in collaboration with HHS Divisions to demonstrate our continued compliance with the requirements of the Act from January 1, 2024, to December 31, 2024. The report includes sections on accomplishments, best practices, innovations, and continuous improvements.

Accomplishments

HHS seeks to reach all Americans with useful health information they can easily understand. To accomplish this goal, HHS regularly reviews new and existing reports, documents, and web content for plain writing to ensure the largest impact on the public.

The Administration for Children & Families (ACF) Office of Child Support Services (OCSS) published new documents and updated web content for several audiences on the OCSS website following plain writing guidelines. Some of the new content included:

- 12 *Child Support Report* newsletters and 35 entries on the OCSS Policy webpage of: "dear colleague letters", action transmittals, information memoranda, and policy interpretation questions.
- Infographics depicting high-level statistics for 2023 for the national child support program and the tribal child support program.

OCSS ensured that all child support information on our website was written plainly for parents and child support agency caseworkers. These are several examples of pages with clarified content for parents and case workers:

- International Parents.
- Child Support When You're Afraid of the Other Parent.

- [Domestic Violence Training and Technical Assistance](#).

The ACF Office on Trafficking in Persons (OTIP) continued to prioritize plain language across its communications to reach individuals at risk of or experiencing trafficking and to equip professionals working to prevent and respond to exploitation in their communities. This initiative aimed to make key anti-trafficking resources more accessible, understandable, and actionable for a wide range of audiences, including survivors, service providers, and the public.

Key resources in plain language included:

- [Look Beneath the Surface Campaign Posters](#): Visually engaging materials with information and resources for people at-risk or experiencing human trafficking. Messaging from this campaign also appeared in transit ads in communities across the United States.
- [Human Trafficking Prevention Month 2025 Toolkit](#): Audience-specific resources designed to build awareness about human trafficking among frontline professionals.

OTIP published the following types of documents using plain language during the specified time: report (1), outreach material (22), information memorandums (1), press releases (2), infographics (1), how-to-guide (5), and program instruction (2). Plain language was used to promote these resources via social media.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's top three plainly written documents were:

1. Overdose Prevention and Response Toolkit (also available in Spanish) at: https://library.samhsa.gov/product/overdose-prevention-response-toolkit/pep23-03-00-001
2. SAFE-T Suicide Assessment: Five Step Evaluation and Triage at: https://library.samhsa.gov/product/safe-t-suicide-assessment-five-step-evaluation-and-triage/pep24-01-036
3. SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approached at: https://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://library.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/sma14-4884.pdf

Living with HIV requires proactive management, including adherence to treatment, a healthy lifestyle, and addressing mental health, to promote overall well-being. The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health's top plainly written document was *HIV and Aging* at: https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/living-well-with-hiv/taking-care-of-yourself/aging-with-hiv)

The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs (ASPA) posted web content (internal and external) and social media posts using plain language to reach a wide audience and have a positive impact.   ASPA ensured that plain language for federal websites was not just about lowering the grade-reading level of web pages but also making sure that the information was complete and answered the public's questions. ASPA wrote content for a 7th-grade reading level but recognized that required names and acronyms for government departments, programs, laws, and regulations mean the grade reading level may stay higher.

For social media, ASPA emphasized the following plain language principles when drafting and editing content:

- Keep posts short. Start with the main point, rather than burying it at the end of the post.
- Have a personal and friendly tone.
- Use active voice verbs to keep posts short and clear.
- Avoid unfamiliar terms and technical jargon. Define acronyms.

Here are some examples of content with a wide impact that ASPA wrote in plain language:

Social media:
- Hundreds of posts over the course of the year across X, Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram.
- Post on X that explains postpartum depression in plain language: Many new moms feel overwhelmed, sad, anxious, or exhausted during their pregnancy or after the baby is born. If you're feeling this way, the National Maternal Mental Health Hotline is here for you. Call or text 833-852-6262. For more information, visit: https://mchb.hrsa.gov/programs-impact/national-maternal-mental-health-hotline. https://twitter.com/HHSGov/status/1787905238109655119.

HHS.gov website:
- Developed a new section of the website about the health workforce using plain language principles to simplify dozens of federal resources into easy-to-understand short descriptions: https://www.hhs.gov/healthcare/workforce/index.html
- Developed this section of the HHS website to offer descriptions of different health insurance options using clear vocabulary and headings to make it easy to choose a topic: https://www.hhs.gov/programs/health-insurance/index.html
- This website for new mothers on how to care for a newborn is easy to scan and understand. It implements all elements of plain language, including clear headings, short sentences, active voice, personal tone and no jargon or acronyms: https://www.hhs.gov/healthcare/maternal-health/newborn-supply-kit/support-for-baby/index.html

Best Practices

HHS reinforces the plain writing requirements through best practices, such as senior officials promoting plain writing and programs for tracking and measuring plain writing effectiveness.

ASPA's plain language expert promoted plain language across HHS by making presentations at conferences and through trainings including:

- Plain Writing Act of 2010 Presentation, Interdepartmental Health Equity Collaborative Roundtable.
- Four sessions of a Plain Writing Training for the Office of Chief Information Officer (about 100 staff members).
- One session of a Plain Writing Training for the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Financial Resource (about 100 staff members).

The Center for Disease Control and Prevent (CDC) reinforced compliance with the Plain Writing Act through the Immediate Office of the Director (IOD) that:

1. Coordinated plain language activities and the CDC operational policy.
2. Supported two positions in health literacy and plain language.
3. Led CDC's Health Literacy Council.
4. Periodically updated CDC's Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy.
5. Served as consultants on applying the Plain Writing Act at CDC.

The leadership at the Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health (ARPA-H) reinforced plain writing requirements by requiring all staff to submit externally facing communication products to the clearance process. This directive ensured that every public-facing document, including guidance documents and external reports, were professionally reviewed for full technical editing, compliance with the ARPA-H Writing Style Guide, federal plain language standards, and Section 508 compliance accessibility. Notably, Section 508(c) accessibility review also included an assessment of plain language. All documents received final clearance from a designated federal official before public release, promoting accountability and consistency.

<u>Innovations</u>

In the past year, agencies across HHS implemented innovative strategies to promote plain writing, including web banners, webinars, external social media messages, awards, and plain writing skills in position descriptions.

The National Institutes of Health nominated and supported several products submitted for the Center for Plain Language's ClearMark Awards. For example, the National Eye Institute submitted the innovative article "How to Watch an Eclipse Safely" for a ClearMark Award that produces the following results:

- Increased Web Traffic: It drove significant web traffic, becoming the top-performing article of 2024 receiving 31,190 views, far surpassing the typical average of around 3,000 views per article. The next highest-performing article, also related to solar eclipse safety, further demonstrated the public's strong interest in this topic.
- Increased User Engagement: The average time spent on the eclipse-related content was 52 seconds, which is notably longer than usual for similar articles, indicating that users were engaging with the information.
- Increased Social Media Impact: In March and April of 2024, posts about the solar eclipse on Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) achieved some of the highest engagement rates of the months.
- Increased Reach and Awareness: The content's success in becoming the most popular news article of the year highlighted its effectiveness in capturing public attention and addressing timely and eye-health relevant issues.

CDC's Office of Laboratory Systems and Response promoted plain language resources and training sessions. Twenty-fine percent of the CDC laboratories' internet pages were reviewed using the [Everyday Words for Public Health Communication](#).

CDC's Office of Readiness and Response conducted semiannual training on the suite of communication products that focus on the health literacy principles, with a focus on the importance and benefits of having scientists, policy staff, and communicators collaborate on developing clear information for nonscientific, nonacademic audiences.

Continuous Improvement

HHS carries out a wide array of training activities to ensure that our employees fully understand the importance of plain writing and how to do it effectively. Many agencies encourage the use of plain language for both internal and external communication. Such agencies also developed training to educate stakeholders and the general public on plain writing. For example:

- The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid (CMS) updated the Plain Writing Training on the HHS Learning Management System and used it to train new employees. CMS increased outreach to various offices with tailored training on plain writing and user-centered communication design upon request to meet the specific needs of these offices. These sample comments are indicative of the success of these in-depth training courses:
  - *"Every government employee needs this training! Thank you for being so great at your job!"*
  - *"This was really helpful thank you!"*

- NIH staff were encouraged to take training on plain language, 508-compliance, and accessibility. Post-training surveys showed high participant satisfaction, and the training encouraged staff to apply plain writing in future internal and external communications. The plain writing training programs that NIH staff developed and/or participated in were:

  - CDC's Plain Language Materials & Resources.
  - Center for Plain Language training.
  - NIH Library ChatGPT Plain Language Prompt Training.
  - NIH Science, Health and Public Trust.
  - NIH Style Guide.
  - NIH Training Center's Effective Writing Refresher training.
  - NIH's Clear Communication materials.
  - U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Plain Language Training.

Conclusion

HHS's implementation of the Plain Writing Act has grown in scope and effectiveness with each year. Through persistent leadership, HHS has cultivated a plain writing culture, ensuring all new and existing documents and web content for the public, other government entities, and HHS employees were written in plain language. If you have questions or feedback about this Report, please contact Dr. Ekaterini Malliou in the HHS Office of the Executive Secretary at Ekaterini.Malliou@hhs.gov.