

**U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)
Plain Writing Act Compliance Report
April 2017**

I. Senior Agency Officials for Plain Writing:

- a. Tonia Bock, Executive Secretary, Office of the Secretary, Office of the Executive Secretariat
- b. Seboria Kargbo, Executive Writer, Office of the Secretary, Office of the Executive Secretariat

The Department's Staff Offices also provide representatives who serve on VA's Plain Language Working Group.

II. Explain what specific types of agency communications you have released by making them available in a format that is consistent with the Plain Writing guidelines.

VA has issued several types of communications to the public in a format that is consistent with the Plain Writing Act. Examples include: eBenefits.gov electronic brochures explaining VA benefits (over 4.49 million users); eligibility letters to VA beneficiaries regarding health care enrollment and the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014; claims development letters to VA applicants clarifying what is needed to process their claims; all VA forms; VA blogs; and other information posted on social media.

III. Inform agency staff of Plain Writing Act's requirements:

- a. Information on the Act is posted on the Department's external websites and available at the following links: <http://www.va.gov/> and http://www.va.gov/opa/Plain_Language.asp.
- b. The Office of The Executive Secretary will revise the Correspondence Guide and write the Correspondence Directive, which will include information about writing in Plain Language.

IV. Training

VA's Learning University developed a series classes to educate Department employees who write policies, reports, memos, briefs, and other business documents. These modules assist with teaching employees how to apply plain language techniques and requirements.

In 2016, a Plain Language subject matter expert presented a training to the Plain Language Working Group on writing in Plain Language. Plain Language subject matter experts will be invited to present other trainings at future Plain Language Working Group meetings.

The following courses are available in VA's Talent Management System:

<p>Prerequisite eLearning Module: Formal Writing Using Plain Language – 2 hours: A Web-based training that presents a practical approach to understanding Plain Language.</p>
<p>Module 1 - Addressing Data Calls – 4 hours: Learn how to address data calls with accuracy, diplomacy and professionalism.</p>
<p>Module 2 - Drafting Memorandums – 4 hours: Learn how to communicate effectively to internal audiences by drafting clear and concise memorandums that convey complex information, establish policy guidance or request action.</p>
<p>Module 3 - Writing Issue Briefs – 4 hours: Learn how to summarize information on an issue or event and deliver clear and effective issue briefs to inform VA Leadership.</p>
<p>Module 4 - Responding to Congressional Inquiries – 4 hours: Learn how to tailor written communications for positive impact and provide succinct, diplomatic responses to congressional inquiries.</p>
<p>Module 5 - Evaluating Data & Summarizing Findings – 4 hours: Learn how to present data for the greatest impact and accurately summarize findings for all audiences.</p>
<p>Module 6 - Writing for Procurement – 4 hours: Learn how to write key procurement documents to procure goods and services, or receive internal funding.</p>
<p>Module 7 - Writing Strategic Plans – 4 hours: Learn how to write strategic plans, including vision and mission statements, values, goals and SMART objectives.</p>
<p>Module 8 - Writing Grants – 4 hours: Learn how to write clear, succinct and compelling grant responses.</p>
<p>Module 9 - Writing Business Cases – 4 hours: Learn how to write accurate and convincing business cases for decision makers.</p>
<p>Module 10 - Writing Position Papers – 4 hours: Learn how to write succinct and compelling position papers to generate awareness or support for an issue.</p>
<p>Document Testing – 3 hours: Learn how to perform Plain Language compliance testing on documents.</p>
<p>Writing Journey: Building Writing Skills: Learn the basics on how to write clearly and accurately.</p>
<p>Writing Journey: Writing and Editing for Accuracy: Learn how to make your writing more effective in achieving results in business.</p>
<p>Writing Journey: Communicating Complex Issues Clearly: Learn how to apply logic, reasoning, and persuasion to maximize the effectiveness of your documents.</p>
<p>Formal Writing Using Plain Language (FWUPL): Prerequisite eLearning Module: Learn about Plain Language.</p>

FWUPL - Course 1: Addressing Data Calls: Learn how to respond to various types of data calls.
FWUPL - Course 2: Drafting Memorandums: Learn how to draft memorandums.
FWUPL - Course 3: Writing Issue Briefs: Learn how to write issue briefs.
FWUPL - Course 4: Responding to Congressional Inquiries: Learn how to respond to Congressional inquiries.
FWUPL - Course 5: Evaluating Data and Summarizing Findings: Learn how to respond to evaluate data and summarize findings.
FWUPL - Course 6: Writing for Procurement: Learn how to write procurement-related documents.
FWUPL - Course 7: Writing Strategic Plans: Learn how to write strategic planning documents.
FWUPL - Course 8: Writing for Grants: Learn how to write grant documents.
FWUPL - Course 9: Writing Business Cases: Learn how to write business case documents.
FWUPL - Course 10: Writing Position Papers: Learn how to write position papers.
FWUPL- Course 11: Writing SOPs with Work Instructions: Learn how to write SOPs using Plain Language.

V. Ongoing compliance/sustaining change

- a. In September 2014, VA underwent a dynamic period of change and restructuring through the initiative, MyVA, which reorients VA around Veterans' needs and empower employees to assist them in delivering excellent customer service to improve the Veteran experience. Through this initiative, offices use Plain Language to assist in improving the following:

- 1) the Veteran experience
- 2) the employee experience so they can better serve Veterans
- 3) internal support services
- 4) the culture of continuous improvement, and
- 5) strategic partnerships.

As a result of the MyVA initiative, VA created the Vets.gov website, which is a new service delivery platform that will provide streamlined, Veteran-centric, and easy-to-understand information with Veterans and their families. Included on Vets.gov is the newly developed the *VA Style Guide*, available at: <https://www.vets.gov/playbook/>, which provides guidance for creating information to be posted on VA's webpages and brochures. The *VA Style Guide* also enables the MyVA team to conduct a comprehensive review of all existing

website content and online materials to create a standardized/uniform look and feel.

- b. VA continues to use Plain Language to write new and rewrite older regulations. The staff is currently rewriting and reorganizing all 280 of its regulations on disability compensation benefits. The goal is to make VA's regulations easier to understand and apply, which will help Veterans and their Survivors better understand their rights and also assist Veterans Service Organization representatives who advocate for them.
- c. VA continues to review products that will test documents for Plain Language compliance.
- d. On July 22, 2014, VA made writing in Plain Language Department policy <http://www.va.gov/opa/docs/0001dir14.pdf>. This policy is reviewed annually.

VI. Agency's plain writing website

- a. VA's Plain Language website: http://www.va.gov/opa/Plain_Language.asp
- b. Contact Us page: http://www.va.gov/opa/Plain_Language.asp and VAPlainLanguage@va.gov
- c. Link from VA's homepage: <http://www.va.gov/>
- d. Link from VA's Open.gov page: <http://www.va.gov/open/>
- e. Links to Compliance reports: http://www.va.gov/opa/Plain_Language.asp 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2016 reports are available.
- f. Links to OMB and PLAIN: http://www.va.gov/opa/Plain_Language.asp

VI. Customer Satisfaction Evaluation after Experiencing Plain Writing Communications

Through the MyVA initiative, specifically through the new [Vets.gov](http://www.vets.gov) website, VA will receive continuous feedback from its future community advocacy groups to ensure that VA is providing communications that are meaningful to all diverse Veterans groups throughout the country. In addition, the VA Plain Language Working Group will continue to engage employees to ensure that it is providing the best Plain Language writing tools.