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What Is Plain Language Compliance Auditing?

Plain language compliance auditing evaluates an entire document corpus against Federal Plain Language Guidelines. Learn how it differs from readability scoring and why no vendor offered it before.

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Plain language compliance auditing is the systematic process of ingesting, scoring, and remediating an organization's public-facing documents against established plain language standards — most commonly the Federal Plain Language Guidelines maintained at [plainlanguage.gov](https://www.plainlanguage.gov). Unlike individual readability tools that check one document at a time, compliance auditing evaluates an entire document corpus at the institutional level, producing scored dashboards, prioritized remediation queues, and the annual compliance reports that federal agencies are legally required to publish under the Plain Writing Act of 2010.

How It Differs from Readability Scoring

Most people who have encountered plain language tools know products like Hemingway App, Readable.io, or the Flesch-Kincaid score built into Microsoft Word. These tools serve individual writers checking individual documents. They measure

sentence length and word complexity to produce a grade-level score — a useful but narrow metric.

Plain language compliance auditing operates at a fundamentally different scale and depth. A compliance audit evaluates documents across the multi-dimensional criteria that the Center for Plain Language uses in its annual Federal Report Card: audience appropriateness, logical organization, use of active voice, jargon density, sentence complexity, information design, and actionability. Research from the Center for Plain Language has shown that documents can score well on Flesch-Kincaid readability while still failing on organization, audience fit, and actionability — the criteria that actually determine whether a citizen can understand and act on what they read.

The distinction matters because the Plain Writing Act does not require agencies to hit a specific grade-level target. It requires them to produce writing that is "clear, concise, well-organized, and follows other best practices appropriate to the subject or field and intended audience." A compliance audit measures against that full standard, not a single number.

The Six Layers of a Compliance Audit

A complete plain language compliance audit consists of six functional layers, each addressing a different phase of the compliance lifecycle.

1. Corpus Ingestion and Inventory

The audit begins by crawling an agency's public-facing web content, PDF documents, downloadable forms, mailed notices, and any other covered documents under the Plain Writing Act. The output is a complete inventory — often the first time an agency has seen a comprehensive list of every document it publishes. Federal agencies publish an average of 12,000 to 50,000 public-facing pages, and most have no centralized

inventory of this content. The inventory itself has compliance value: agencies cannot remediate what they have not catalogued.

2. Multi-Dimensional Scoring

Each document is scored against the Federal Plain Language Guidelines criteria. This goes beyond readability formulas to evaluate whether the document uses active voice, avoids jargon, organizes information in the order the reader needs it, uses clear headings, and tells the reader what action to take. Modern AI-powered scoring can evaluate these dimensions at scale — a capability that did not exist before 2023. A 2024 study by the National Institutes of Health found that AI-assisted plain language evaluation agreed with human expert reviewers 87% of the time on document-level quality ratings, making automated scoring a viable first pass for institutional audits.

3. Prioritized Remediation Queue

Not all documents carry equal weight. A compliance audit ranks flagged documents by public impact — measured by web traffic, download volume, or citizen-burden level (how much a form costs the reader in time, money, or confusion). A tax instruction form downloaded 2 million times per year is a higher remediation priority than an internal policy page with 50 annual visitors. This triage layer ensures agencies allocate limited remediation resources where they produce the most public benefit.

4. Professional Remediation

Flagged documents are rewritten to meet plain language standards. This is the labor-intensive layer — and the layer where recurring revenue lives for compliance vendors, just as PDF accessibility remediation generates per-document revenue for WCAG vendors. The federal government's own Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN) estimates that a single complex government document can take 8 to

40 hours to remediate properly, depending on length, technical complexity, and the number of stakeholder approvals required.

5. Compliance Dashboard and Reporting

The Plain Writing Act requires every covered agency to publish an annual compliance report. A compliance audit platform auto-generates this report by tracking which documents have been inventoried, scored, and remediated — and which remain outstanding. The dashboard gives leadership a single view of institutional compliance posture, analogous to the WCAG conformance dashboards that IT departments use to track web accessibility.

6. Continuous Monitoring

Government agencies publish new content constantly. A one-time audit becomes outdated within weeks. Continuous monitoring crawls agency websites on a recurring basis, flags new content that falls below compliance thresholds, and alerts the plain language coordinator when remediation is needed. This converts the audit from a point-in-time exercise into an ongoing compliance program — the same model that has proven effective in web accessibility, cybersecurity, and financial compliance monitoring.

Why No Vendor Has Offered This Before

The plain language compliance space presents a paradox: the legal mandate has existed since 2010, over 30,000 government entities are subject to some form of plain language requirement, and yet no productized vendor has offered a SaaS-delivered auditing platform. Three factors explain this gap.

First, the technology to evaluate documents beyond simple readability scores at scale did not exist until the emergence of large language models in 2023. Evaluating jargon density, logical flow, audience fit, and information design required human reviewers — making institutional-scale auditing prohibitively expensive.

Second, the Plain Writing Act has no enforcement mechanism. Section 6 bars judicial review, which means agencies face no fines or legal consequences for noncompliance. Without enforcement pressure, the urgency to purchase compliance services has been low relative to mandates with real penalties (like ADA/WCAG, where lawsuits drive purchasing).

Third, plain language has historically been framed as a training and culture problem, not a compliance problem. Agencies invest in workshops and style guides rather than purchasing auditing infrastructure. The market opportunity lies in reframing plain language as a purchasable compliance service — the same conceptual shift that transformed web accessibility from "something developers should learn" into a multi-billion-dollar vendor ecosystem.

Who Needs It

The buyer profile for plain language compliance auditing mirrors the buyer profile for PDF accessibility remediation and WCAG conformance scanning. The decision-maker is typically the IT director, communications director, compliance officer, or city manager responsible for public-facing content. At the federal level, the designated Senior Official for Plain Writing is the primary stakeholder. At the state and local level, the communications or public affairs director is usually the closest analog.

The addressable market includes 15 cabinet-level federal departments, 70+ independent federal agencies, 2,000 to 3,000 state-level entities, and over 30,000 local government bodies. The healthcare sector is an emerging adjacent market: CMS and

HHS guidance increasingly references plain language standards for patient communications, and nearly 40% of Americans report that their medical communications are too confusing to understand.

gpt.us.org provides AI-powered plain language compliance auditing for government agencies. [Learn how it works →](#)