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What Is the Plain Writing Act of 2010?

The Plain Writing Act of 2010 requires all federal agencies to use clear language in public-facing documents. Learn what the law requires, who must comply, and the current state of enforcement.

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The Plain Writing Act of 2010 is a United States federal law (Public Law 111-274) that requires all executive branch agencies to use clear, understandable language in every public-facing document they issue or substantially revise. Signed by President Obama on October 13, 2010, the law applies to forms, notices, letters, web content, instructions, and any document the public needs in order to obtain a government benefit, understand a government service, or comply with a government requirement.

Why the Plain Writing Act Exists

The average American adult reads at a 7th- to 8th-grade level, yet most federal government documents are written at a college or post-graduate reading level. A 2020 analysis by the National Center for Education Statistics found that 54% of U.S. adults between ages 16 and 74 read below a sixth-grade level, making most government communications effectively inaccessible to the majority of the population. The cost of this gap is enormous: the federal government spends an estimated \$400 million

annually answering questions that would be unnecessary if the original documents were written clearly.

The law was preceded by President Clinton's 1998 Memorandum on Plain Language in Government Writing, which set the same goal but lacked statutory authority. The Plain Writing Act codified the requirement into law, creating permanent obligations that survive changes in administration.

What the Law Requires

Every covered federal agency must take five specific actions under the Plain Writing Act. First, the agency must use plain language in every covered document it issues or substantially revises after October 13, 2011. Second, each agency must designate one or more Senior Officials for Plain Writing to oversee implementation. Third, agencies must train employees in the use of plain language. Fourth, each agency must create and maintain a plain writing section on its official website to inform the public of compliance efforts. Fifth, each agency must publish an annual compliance report describing its ongoing efforts.

Covered documents include any document that is necessary for obtaining a federal government benefit or service, provides information about a federal government benefit or service, or explains to the public how to comply with a requirement that the federal government administers or enforces. This encompasses paper and electronic formats, including web pages, PDFs, printed forms, mailed notices, and email communications.

What the Law Does Not Do

The Plain Writing Act contains a critical limitation that shapes its enforcement landscape. Section 6 of the Act explicitly states that there shall be no judicial review of compliance or noncompliance. This means no citizen, organization, or oversight body can sue an agency for violating the law. Compliance is enforced exclusively through the annual reporting requirement and public accountability — not through courts, fines, or penalties.

This enforcement gap has created a paradox. Agencies report high procedural compliance — they appoint coordinators, file reports, and conduct training — while actual writing quality remains poor. The Center for Plain Language's most recent Federal Report Card reviewed 21 executive branch agencies and found that the average writing quality grade was a C, even though compliance procedure grades averaged a B+. Only 3 of 21 agencies received an A for writing quality.

Who Must Comply

The Plain Writing Act applies to all federal executive branch agencies, which includes 15 cabinet-level departments (Defense, Treasury, Health and Human Services, etc.) and over 70 independent agencies (EPA, FCC, SEC, NASA, etc.). It does not apply to the legislative or judicial branches, though Congress has applied plain language principles to its own drafting in practice.

Beyond the federal mandate, 193 state-level plain language statutes are currently on the books across the United States. States including Oregon, Minnesota, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania have enacted their own plain language requirements for insurance policies, consumer contracts, government forms, and other public-facing documents. Local governments that receive federal funding inherit compliance expectations through grant conditions, extending the effective reach of plain language requirements

to an estimated 30,000+ cities, counties, school districts, transit authorities, and public utilities nationwide.

How Plain Language Is Defined

The Plain Writing Act defines plain writing as writing that is clear, concise, well-organized, and follows other best practices appropriate to the subject or field and intended audience. The Federal Plain Language Guidelines, maintained at plainlanguage.gov, provide the operational framework. These guidelines evaluate documents across multiple dimensions that go far beyond simple readability scores.

The guidelines assess audience appropriateness (is the document written for its intended reader?), logical organization (does the structure follow the reader's needs?), use of active voice, sentence and paragraph length, jargon avoidance, use of common everyday words, clear headings and subheadings, use of lists and tables where appropriate, and overall actionability (can the reader understand what to do after reading?).

This multi-dimensional framework is more sophisticated than readability formulas like Flesch-Kincaid, which measure only sentence length and syllable count. Plain language experts, including those at the Center for Plain Language, have consistently argued that readability scores alone are insufficient proxies for document clarity and can even undermine proven techniques for improving comprehension.

The Current State of Compliance

Despite the law being in effect for over 15 years, systematic compliance remains elusive. No productized vendor solution exists to help agencies audit their full document corpus against the Federal Plain Language Guidelines, track remediation

progress, or auto-generate the annual compliance reports the law requires. Agencies have relied on internal training programs, ad hoc document reviews, and individual-use writing tools like Hemingway App or Readable.io — none of which provide institutional-grade compliance infrastructure.

The technology landscape shifted significantly starting in 2023 with the emergence of large language models capable of evaluating documents for plain language quality at scale. AI-powered auditing can now assess jargon density, logical flow, audience fit, and information design across thousands of documents — capabilities that were previously available only through expensive human review. This technological shift has made it feasible, for the first time, to build a productized compliance service that treats plain language the way WCAG scanning treats web accessibility: as a purchasable, measurable, continuously monitored compliance obligation.

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