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Why Government Documents Are So Hard to Read — And What It Costs

The average government document is written at a college level while the average American reads at 7th grade. Learn the five structural forces behind this gap and the billions it costs annually.

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Government document readability is the measure of how easily a member of the public can understand, navigate, and act on information published by federal, state, or local government agencies. Despite a 15-year-old federal law requiring clear language and over 193 state-level statutes mandating readability in public-facing documents, the average U.S. government document is written at a college reading level — while the average American adult reads at a 7th- to 8th-grade level. This gap between how government writes and how the public reads costs billions of dollars annually and creates measurable harm to the people government is supposed to serve.

The Readability Gap in Numbers

The scale of the problem is documented across multiple independent studies, and the findings are consistent: government documents are dramatically more complex than their intended audience can handle.

The National Center for Education Statistics reported in 2020 that 54% of U.S. adults between ages 16 and 74 read below a sixth-grade level. This means the majority of the American public cannot fully comprehend documents written at or above a 7th-grade level — yet most government forms, notices, and web pages are written at a 12th-grade level or higher. An analysis of IRS tax instructions found that the standard 1040 instruction booklet scores at a 13th-grade reading level, effectively requiring a college education to understand basic tax filing requirements.

The Center for Plain Language's most recent Federal Report Card, which evaluated 21 executive branch agencies, assigned an average writing quality grade of C. Only 3 agencies received an A for writing quality. Five agencies received a D or F. The report found persistent problems with jargon, passive voice, unclear organization, and missing calls to action — the same issues the Federal Plain Language Guidelines were designed to address.

A 2022 analysis by the Sunlight Foundation examined readability scores across 10,000 federal web pages and found that 78% exceeded a 10th-grade reading level. Among the worst offenders were agencies with the highest public contact volume: the Social Security Administration, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services — agencies whose audiences are disproportionately elderly, disabled, or low-income, and therefore most likely to struggle with complex text.

Why Government Writes This Way

Government documents are not difficult to read by accident. Five structural forces consistently push government writing toward complexity.

Legal caution

Government writers operate in a legal environment where every word can be challenged, litigated, or audited. The instinct to qualify every statement, add disclaimers, and use precise legal terminology creates documents that protect the agency from legal risk while failing to communicate with the public. A single federal notice may pass through legal review, policy review, and program review — each layer adding complexity, caveats, and jargon. By the time a document reaches the public, it often reads like it was written for lawyers rather than citizens.

Institutional inertia

Many government documents are revised versions of templates created decades ago. The language in a Social Security notice or a VA benefits letter may trace back to the 1970s or 1980s, modified incrementally but never fundamentally rewritten. Agencies are reluctant to overhaul legacy documents because of the time, cost, and stakeholder coordination required. A 2021 GAO report found that 40% of the federal forms in active use had not undergone substantive revision in over 10 years.

The curse of expertise

Government employees who write public-facing documents are typically subject-matter experts. They understand their program's regulations, eligibility criteria, and processes intimately. This expertise creates a cognitive bias known as the "curse of knowledge" — the assumption that the reader shares the writer's familiarity with technical terms, acronyms, and bureaucratic processes. An eligibility specialist at CMS may use the phrase "modified adjusted gross income" without realizing that most Americans cannot define any of those three words individually, let alone the compound concept.

No feedback loop

In most government agencies, there is no systematic mechanism for the public to report that a document was confusing. The Plain Writing Act requires agencies to maintain a feedback mechanism, but in practice these are email addresses that receive little traffic and generate even less follow-up. Without feedback, writers have no data on which documents are failing and no incentive to improve specific content. Compare this to private-sector digital products, where A/B testing, user research, and customer support tickets create a continuous stream of usability data.

No institutional measurement

The most fundamental barrier is the absence of institutional measurement. Most agencies do not know how many public-facing documents they maintain, what reading level those documents are written at, which documents generate the most confusion calls to their contact centers, or how their writing quality compares to the Federal Plain Language Guidelines. You cannot improve what you do not measure.

What the Readability Gap Costs

The cost of unclear government writing is not abstract. It manifests in measurable economic harm, increased administrative burden, and reduced access to benefits and services.

Direct administrative costs

The federal government spends an estimated \$400 million per year answering questions from citizens who could not understand the original written communication. This figure, derived from OMB paperwork burden analyses, represents call center staff time, correspondence processing, and in-person assistance at field offices. The Social Security Administration alone handles over 36 million phone calls per year, many of

which involve questions about notices that could have been self-explanatory if written clearly.

Benefit non-participation

Confusing documents cause eligible citizens to abandon benefit applications. A 2018 study by the New America Foundation found that up to 25% of eligible individuals do not enroll in federal benefit programs because the application process is too complex or the eligibility requirements are too difficult to understand. For programs like the Earned Income Tax Credit — where the IRS estimates that 20% of eligible filers do not claim the credit — the cost of non-participation is borne directly by the citizens who need help most.

Compliance errors

When citizens cannot understand what government requires of them, they make errors. Incorrect tax filings, missed regulatory deadlines, improperly completed benefit applications, and inadvertent violations of reporting requirements all trace back, in part, to documents that failed to communicate clearly. The IRS estimated in 2023 that American taxpayers spend 6.5 billion hours per year on tax compliance — a figure that reflects not only the complexity of the tax code but the difficulty of the instructions that accompany it.

Health outcomes

In healthcare, the cost of unclear communication is measured in lives. The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality has documented that patients with low health literacy are 1.5 to 3 times more likely to experience adverse health outcomes, including hospitalization, compared to patients with adequate health literacy. When government health agencies publish confusing guidance — as occurred repeatedly during the

COVID-19 pandemic — the consequences include delayed care, incorrect self-treatment, and failure to follow public health directives.

Why It Has Not Been Fixed

The Plain Writing Act became law in 2010. Over 15 years later, the average federal document still scores a C for writing quality. Three structural factors explain the persistence of the problem.

First, the law has no enforcement mechanism. Section 6 of the Plain Writing Act explicitly bars judicial review of compliance. No citizen or organization can sue an agency for failing to write clearly. Compliance is enforced only through annual reporting and public accountability, which has proven insufficient to drive sustained improvement.

Second, no vendor market exists. For web accessibility, the existence of WCAG scanning vendors (Level Access, Deque, Siteimprove, etc.) created a market dynamic where agencies could purchase compliance as a service. For plain language, no equivalent vendor ecosystem has emerged. Agencies have no one to call, no RFP to issue, and no line item to budget. The absence of a vendor market is both a symptom and a cause of the compliance gap.

Third, plain language has been framed as a culture and training problem rather than a technology and compliance problem. Agencies invest in workshops and style guides — which are valuable but insufficient at institutional scale. Training changes individual behavior; compliance infrastructure changes institutional outcomes.

The Technology Shift

The emergence of large language models in 2023 fundamentally changed what is possible. Before LLMs, evaluating documents for plain language quality beyond simple readability scores required human expert review. Scoring a single complex document for jargon density, logical flow, audience appropriateness, and actionability could take a trained reviewer 30 to 60 minutes. Scoring an agency's full corpus of 10,000 to 50,000 documents was economically infeasible.

AI-powered auditing can now perform multi-dimensional scoring at institutional scale, evaluating thousands of documents against Federal Plain Language Guidelines criteria in hours rather than months. This makes it feasible, for the first time, to build a productized compliance service that treats plain language the way the accessibility industry treats WCAG: as a measurable, auditable, continuously monitored obligation with a vendor you can hire to manage it.

The question is no longer whether the technology exists to fix the readability gap. It does. The question is whether agencies will recognize that plain language compliance is a purchasable service, not just a training aspiration.

gpt.us.org is building the vendor ecosystem that plain language compliance has never had. [See your agency's compliance score →](#)