

**U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)  
Plain Writing Act Compliance Report  
April 2016**

**I. Senior Agency Officials for Plain Writing:**

- a. Tonia Bock, Executive Secretary, Office of the Secretary, Office of the Executive Secretariat
- b. Jennifer Jessup, Deputy Executive Secretary, Office of the Secretary, Office of the Executive Secretariat
- c. Rachel Eisinger-Baskin, Executive Writer and Team Leader, Office of the Secretary, Office of the Executive Secretariat
- d. Dannielle Blumenthal, Chief, Executive Correspondence, National Cemetery Administration
- e. Katrice Pasteur, Director, Office of Executive Correspondence, Veterans Health Administration
- f. Alexa Jensen, Executive Reviewer, Veterans Benefits Administration

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

- Office of Acquisition, Logistics, and Construction
- Office of Information and Technology
- Office of Policy and Planning
- Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs
- Office of Security and Preparedness
- Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs
- Office of Human Resources and Administration
- Center for Women Veterans

**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); easy-to-read webpages on the Affordable Care Act; 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/>, <http://www.va.gov/open/>, and [http://www.va.gov/opa/Plain\\_Language.asp](http://www.va.gov/opa/Plain_Language.asp).
- b. The Act's requirements were briefed to Office of the Secretary (OSVA) leadership during the OSVA Special Programs Meeting hosted by the VA Deputy Chief of Staff. Plain Language requirements and updates were a topic of discussion at 2013 and 2014 leadership meetings. Senior Leaders are also briefed regularly on Plain Language updates during the Chief of Staff's Management Review meetings.
- c. The Plain Language Working group continues to meet semiannually to discuss the group's tasks under the Charter, new membership, training, and additional ideas for increasing the Department's knowledge.
- d. The Plain Language Working group briefed VA's Web Governance Board about Plain Language in March 2015 and meetings continue.
- e. The MyVA team created a new website, [Vets.gov](http://Vets.gov), which is a new, streamlined, Veteran-centric approach to sharing easy-to-understand information with Veterans and their families. Include on [Vets.gov](http://Vets.gov) is the newly developed *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.
- f. 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 spring 2015, 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:

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

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| <b>FWUPL - Course 3: Writing Issue Briefs:</b> Learn how to write issue briefs.  |
| <b>FWUPL - Course 4: Responding to Congressional Inquiries:</b> Learn how to respond to Congressional inquiries.                 |
| <b>FWUPL - Course 5: Evaluating Data and Summarizing Findings:</b> Learn how to respond to evaluate data and summarize findings. |
| <b>FWUPL - Course 6: Writing for Procurement:</b> Learn how to write procurement-related documents.                              |
| <b>FWUPL - Course 7: Writing Strategic Plans:</b> Learn how to write strategic planning documents.                               |
| <b>FWUPL - Course 8: Writing for Grants:</b> Learn how to write grant documents.   |
| <b>FWUPL - Course 9: Writing Business Cases:</b> Learn how to write business case documents.                                     |
| <b>FWUPL - Course 10: Writing Position Papers:</b> Learn how to write position papers.   |
| <b>FWUPL- Course 11: Writing SOPs with Work Instructions:</b> 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 new 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 new 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. VA's Plain Language Working Group, consisting of representatives from the VA Administrations and Staff offices, meets regularly to provide recommendations for implementing the Act, and disseminates information throughout the respective Administrations and Staff Offices.
- e. 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](http://www.va.gov/opa/Plain_Language.asp)
- b. Contact Us page: [http://www.va.gov/opa/Plain\\_Language.asp](http://www.va.gov/opa/Plain_Language.asp) and [VAPlainLanguage@va.gov](mailto: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](http://www.va.gov/opa/Plain_Language.asp) 2013, 2014, and 2015 reports are available.
- f. Links to OMB and PLAIN: [http://www.va.gov/opa/Plain\\_Language.asp](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.