NATIONAL ARCHIVES, 2016

Official Guide to the Plain Language Report

OUR COMMITMENT

We at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) are committed to improving our service to the public by using plain language in all of our communications. We are using plain language in all new or revised communications about
- any of our services and benefits,
- obtaining any of our benefits or services, or
- complying with a NARA requirement.

Our commitment to the goals of the Plain Writing Act of 2010 is part of our larger mission of providing public access to Federal Government records in our custody. We actively promote that access through a wide range of activities.

We view access not simply as opening a gate but as building a bridge. By inviting the public to transcribe handwritten documents through crowdsourcing, we open up those documents to millions more, now and in the future. Through online and on-site workshops, tutorials, and lectures, we provide context to the records that will allow researchers to make further discoveries. And by promoting better records management in agencies, before the records even get to the National Archives, we ensure the documentation of our Government's work will endure for generations to come.

These records are the bedrock of our democracy. They document our rights and entitlements as citizens. They provide a means by which our government officials can be held accountable. And they serve as first-hand witnesses to the important events, triumphs as well as tragedies, of our national experience.

As the Plain Writing Act promotes "clear Government communication that the public can understand and use," NARA wants to ensure that the public can understand and use its own Federal records.

NARA'S SENIOR OFFICIAL FOR PLAIN WRITING

The NARA Senior Official for plain writing is Maria Carosa Stanwich, Chief of Staff.

LONG-TERM ONGOING PLAIN WRITING ACTIONS IN 2015

In 2016, we continued several activities to promote the use of plain writing in all our communications.

Plain Language Tips for Staff

We promote plain writing through Plain Language Tips posted on our internal website NARA-at-Work and featured on video message screens in several locations across the country. We've also posted a

sample of these tips on our *Plain Writing* page on Archives.gov. Subjects include:

- *Plain Language: Can we talk?*
- *Plain Language: Staying on topic*
- *Plain Language: Make a list, then check it twice*
- *Plain Language: Do your readers need a decoder ring?*
- *Plain Language: A few words from the Federal Register*

Using Plain Language in Policy Documents

We are carrying out a top-to-bottom review of all our policy directives and guidance for currency, appropriateness, and plain language. As a result, we're eliminating some and rewriting others.

As a part of our continuing policy review we have a program to develop pamphlets to accompany some policies. These pamphlets allow staff and visitors to easily find out exactly how the policy affects what they do.

- Learning and Organizational Development *Before | After*

Plain Language Represented in Staff Performance Plans

Communication is one of the core competencies for all supervisors at NARA. Effective use of plain language is central to achieving that competency, and we are developing criteria to determine how well supervisors communicate with their staffs.

We are also working on inserting a requirement for using plain language—in written and oral communication—in all performance plans. Coaches, identified by our Editorial Services staff and selected by the employee, will help staff members improve their writing skills.

Specific Actions by NARA Units to Improve Writing

- *Declarations,* our in-house print and online newsletter, uses plain language and carries articles about the use of plain language.

- Our editorial staff conducted training for our Records Management Policy and Outreach staff.
- In our Public Vaults exhibit, visited by more than 1 million persons annually, we edit exhibit text to be brief and engaging, reformatted case text so the title of display object was separated and bolded from body explanatory text for visual clarity, and minimized word counts and simplified language for exhibit text.
- Our Museum Services group improved task orders and contracts by using clear language, providing explicit explanation of the work required, and using defined technical language only when necessary for specifications.
- Our printed flyers advertising public events were mailed to 1,500 subscribers monthly and handed out at public programs. The flyers were edited to assure clear strong keywords for event titles and descriptive information. Program events were accompanied by illustrations whenever possible.
- At the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, handouts and mailers for public programs were edited to make them easier to read.
- At the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, writers and editors were mentored in one-on-one sessions to improve both internal and public documents.
- At the William J. Clinton Presidential Library visitor brochures were revised to improve the graphics. Reference request response letters were edited to make them less complex and more friendly.

Classes in the Use of Plain Language

The National Archives offers several web-based courses to help staff improve their writing:

- Writing with Intention
- Avoiding Grammatical Errors in Business Writing
- Getting the Most from Business Documents

- Writing to Reach the Audience
- Crisp Composition
- The Writing Process
- Business Writing: Know Your Readers and Your Purpose
- Business Writing: How to Write Clearly and Concisely
- Business Writing: Editing and Proofreading
- Business Grammar: Parts of Speech
- Business Grammar: The Mechanics of Writing
- Business Grammar: Punctuation
- Business Grammar: Sentence Construction
- Business Grammar: Common Usage Errors

Our Creative Services Staff

Our Editorial Services staff offers plain writing reviews of NARA Notices, press releases, and other material submitted to it, in addition to editing *Prologue* magazine. These reviews include copyediting, substantive editing, and, when necessary, reorganization of the material for better readability and understanding.
- Records Management Services Customer Satisfaction Survey *Before | After*
- Presidential Library Essay *Before | After*
- Federal Records Centers *Before | After*

Our Design and Production Services staff adds dimension to our editorial services. Plain writing is only one step in the communications process. Often how a message is displayed is as important as the language used. Our Creative Services Staff bring their talents in layout and design to specific projects when asked. Some examples of the benefits of layout and design are shown in the examples below
- Making Access Happen *Before | After*
- Gal-entines *Before | After*
- Information Technology Organizational Chart *Before | After*
- Screening Records for Privacy *Before | After*
- Japanese Internment *Before | After*

Our Web Services

Our Web and Social Media Branch helps staff develop new web content and reviews updates to pages to ensure excellent usability and compliance with the Plain Writing Act.

We use the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) Survey on Archives.gov to help staff create "an effective and easy website for our users." The survey includes three questions on plain language:
- Please rate the thoroughness of the information on this site.
- Please rate how understandable this site's information is.
- Please rate how well the site's information answers your questions.

We review and *post data online* from the survey each month:
- The current Archives.gov Content Satisfaction score is 77 out of 100

Tools for Accessing Our Records

We encourage our audiences to become active partners in making historical documents available today and for the future.
- On October 13, Archives.gov underwent a substantial behind-the-scenes overhaul. The underlying infrastructure was completely rebuilt and migrated into Drupal, an open source content management system. Drupal allows more NARA staff to more easily update the site content, resulting in a fresher experience for our users. Improvements also included: a better experience on smartphones and tablets, an updated section of the site dedicated to America's Founding Documents, and a new searchable calendar of national events.

Training the Trainers

The National Archives trains and supports record managers throughout the Federal Government.

- We train Federal agency staff in Washington, DC; at locations around the country; and in online Virtual Classrooms.
- Agency staff who successfully complete a set of Knowledge Area classes may earn *NARA's Certificate in Federal Records Management Training Program*.
- The national curriculum also offers classes in Basic Records Operations, Electronic Records Management, and Vital Business Information.
- We offer a series of online briefings that address a variety of records management topics. These briefings are recorded and posted for public use on *NARA's YouTube Channel*.

The National Archives trains and supports teachers in the use of original documents in the classroom.

- *Docs Teach* provides access to thousands of primary source documents that bring the past to life as classroom teaching tools. Teachers can find written documents, images, maps, charts, graphs, and audio and video materials that span the course of American history.
- *Special topics and tools*—eBooks, YouTube, iTunes U—provide even more ways to explore our records.
- *Workshops and webinars* offer educators additional opportunities for professional development.
- *Our Documents* provides access to 100 milestone documents in American history selected by the National Archives staff.

Teaching Civics

Our public programs put government records in historical and current context.

- Dozens of free programs are presented each month in our William G. McGowan Theater in Washington, DC. Some of the programs in 2016 discussed these topics:
  * The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation After the Genome
  * The Long Emancipation: The Demise of Slavery in the United States
  * Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural
  * The Equal Rights Amendment: Yesterday and Today
  * The People and the Police
  * Revolutionary Movements Then and Now: Black Power and Black Lives Matter
  * Facing Slavery's Legacy at Georgetown University
  * The Bill of Rights in the 21st Century
- We sponsor special programs on using government records in genealogical research. Topics in 2016 included:
  * Introduction to Genealogy at the National Archives videos on YouTube
  * Virtual Genealogy Fair was attended by over 7,000 persons
  * "Help! I'm Stuck" Genealogy Consultation onsite
  * Resources for Genealogists and Family Historians
  * Genealogy Workshops on military records, newspapers, and oral histories
  * Genealogy camp for kids