



First Annual Plain Language Compliance Report

April 13, 2012

INTRODUCTION

On October 13, 2010, President Obama signed the Plain Writing Act of 2010 (the Act) into law.¹ The purpose of the Act is to make federal documents easy to understand and use. The Act requires federal agencies to write all publicly distributed documents, including publications, letters, forms, notices, and instructions, in a "clear, concise, well-organized" manner using the principles of plain language.

In April 2011, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) issued final guidance on implementing Plain Writing Act requirements that included deliverables and deadlines. The Agency for International Development (USAID) met both the July 13, 2011 and October 13, 2011 commitments by:

- Designating a senior official
- Creating a webpage
- Publishing an implementation report
- Using plain writing when issuing communications covered under the Act

OMB's guidance also required agencies to submit a compliance report by April 13, 2012. This, our first annual compliance report, outlines the projects USAID has implemented -- and will continue to support -- to improve communications that will enhance the work we do. USAID is working hard to ensure that we effectively communicate our work in global development to save lives and improve human welfare around the world. Ensuring the principles of plain language are embedded in our daily operations is a critical step in this process.

USAID strongly embraces the principles of transparency and openness expressed in the Plain Writing Act. Requiring federal agencies to use "clear Government communication that the public can understand and use" will also promote the goals of the Administration's Open Government Initiative. Plain writing is indispensable to achieving the President's Open Government goals and improving government transparency, public participation, and collaboration with stakeholders and the American public.

¹"Plain Writing Act of 2010," Public Law 111-274, dated October 13, 2010.

I. USAID APPOINTS SENIOR PLAIN WRITING OFFICIAL AND PROJECT TEAM

The USAID Administrator officially designated a Senior Agency Official for Plain Writing in an Action Memorandum signed on July 12, 2011. The Senior Agency Official assigned Plain Language Coordinators from USAID's Bureau for Management (M) and the Office of the Executive Secretariat (ES) to be responsible for implementing the requirements outlined in the Plain Writing Act of 2010.

The Plain Language Coordinators oversee the Plain Language work group that was established to devise and implement a plan to complete the required deliverables. The work group is composed of members from M, ES, Legislative and Public Affairs (LPA), and the Office of Human Resources (OHR). The work group met weekly and formulated a plan that was approved by the Agency's Senior Plain Writing Official.

II. PLAIN WRITING INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL WEBSITES

USAID's designated Plain Language Coordinators posted information about the Agency's plain writing projects on both the USAID intranet and internet websites. For external partners and stakeholders, information was posted on the USAID Open Government webpage (www.usaid.gov/open). Information on the public site includes: USAID points of contact responsible for implementing the Act and their email addresses; an overview of the most important documents and public information that should be written in plain language; and a link to the Federal Plain Language Guidelines (plainlanguage.gov).

The Plain Language project staff also developed a Plain Language internal website and blog, <http://blogs.usaid.gov/plainlanguage>, to share information and engage with Agency employees. Information on the internal site includes links to training videos, tips and tools to help staff use plain language, and links to relevant articles and external tools. This internal communication mechanism has increased staff's awareness of plain language and gives complete access to training, tips and tools offered by the Agency.

III. COMMUNICATING PLAIN WRITING REQUIREMENTS TO AGENCY STAFF

USAID has taken steps to ensure Agency employees are fully informed of the Act requirements and the importance of plain writing to openness and transparency. In addition to posting information on the internal and external websites, USAID's Plain Writing work group sent email notifications to staff through the Agency's General Notices System. The Agency's Notice System is an internal communications tool that distributes announcements daily via email to all Agency employees. It is similar to an electronic "bulletin board." Two key USAID messages have

been released through the Agency's Notice System to all employees concerning the steps taken to be in compliance with the Plain Writing Act.

- A November 8, 2010, General Notice was sent to all employees that included a link for staff to view the full text of the Plain Writing Act as published by the Government Printing Office on October 13, 2010. The Notice also included a link to the Federal Plain Language Guidelines website (Plainlanguage.gov) for further information and guidance, as well as specific points of contact to learn more.
- An October 13, 2011, General Notice was sent to all employees announcing the one-year anniversary of the law and stating that staff must begin writing new materials in plain language to comply with the Act's requirements. It also contained a link to the USAID Plain Language internal website/blog (<http://blogs.usaid.gov/plainlanguage/>) for training, tips, and tools to help staff use plain language.

IV. TRAINING

USAID is integrating Plain Writing Act requirements into its everyday work by ensuring that Agency employees are trained on how to create clear and easy to understand communications. The Agency has developed both computer-based and in-person training materials to reach employees located around the world.

USAID University Staff Training

In February 2012, USAID launched a new course, "Principles of Plain Writing," on the USAID University. This course is available to all USAID employees interested in learning how to present information in a clear, more efficient style. A short video presentation gives tips on the length of a sentence, the length of a paragraph, and the use of the active voice. The course is an hour long and there is a short quiz at the end. Persons interested in taking the course register through USAID University at the University Website: <https://university.usaid.gov/>. Since the course is online, users can take it any time and may access it from anywhere. Through the USAID University, the project team can also track the number of employees registering and completing the course. Since launching in February, 118 staff have registered for the class.

Computer-Based Automated Directives System (ADS) Training

The Agency's policy directives and required procedures also follow the Federal Plain Language Guidelines. Staff drafting the documents to be published in the Agency's policy repository, the Automated Directives System (ADS) (<http://www.usaid.gov/policy/ads/>), are instructed to follow an "ADS Style and Format Guide" in ADS Chapter 501 (<http://www.usaid.gov/policy/ads/500/501mac.pdf>). Section I of Chapter 501 provides guidance to promote clarity and consistency when drafting policy and procedures. The chapter also references the Federal Plain Language Guidelines as an additional reference.

Additionally, ADS training is available as a computer-based training (CBT) course to all USAID staff online at <http://inside.usaid.gov/ADS/>.

Executive Secretariat Guidance

USAID's Office of the Executive Secretariat (ES) functions as the Office of the Administrator's coordination and communications mechanism. It is also the authoritative channel for official communications between USAID and the interagency community. ES released a Style Guide that was developed in accordance with Plain Language principles. All USAID staff drafting documents for Agency principals are required to do so in accordance with the Style Guide. The Style Guide is posted on the USAID intranet and is accessible to approximately 11,500 USAID staff in the United States and overseas.

Briefings to Key Staff and Offices

USAID's "New Employee Orientation" included in-person training on the importance of plain writing. Plain language training materials are shared with new hires joining the Agency under the Foreign Service Development Leadership Initiative as well. In addition, the USAID Plain Language Project team has briefed individual Agency offices on the Plain Writing Act and presented the plain language tools and resources available to USAID staff at office staff meetings.

VI. USAID PLAIN WRITING WORK GROUP POINTS OF CONTACT

The USAID points of contact are:

- Lisa Glufling
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USAID Plain Language Coordinator
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- Albert Moesle
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USAID Plain Language Coordinator
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- Christine Brown
Office of the Executive Secretariat

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VII. MEASURING PERFORMANCE

USAID measures the effective use of Plain Writing in official Agency communication with the public by monitoring information on the Agency's website. The public can post feedback through the USAID internet to let us know if our documents or the pages on our Internet site are difficult to understand, or if we have not written a document in plain language. Agency Plain Language Coordinators are tracking any public inquiries and comments. To date, no public inquiries have been received.