



2014 Federal Plain Language Report Card



It is plain language when target readers can

- Find what they need
- Understand what they find
- Act on it



Federal Plain Language Report Card - 2014

Prepared by the Center for Plain Language

Department	Compliance	Writing	Information Design
Consumer Financial Protection Bureau	A	A	C
Department of Agriculture	A	B	C
Department of Commerce	A	C	C
Department of Defense	A	C	C
Department of Education	D	C	B
Department of Energy	A	B	B
Department of Health and Human Services	A	A	C
Department of Homeland Security	A	A	B
Department of Housing and Urban Development	A	B	C
Department of the Interior	F	I	I
Department of Justice	A	A	C

Department	Compliance	Writing	Information Design
Department of Labor	A	B	C
Department of State	F	I	I
Department of Transportation	A	B	C
Department of the Treasury	A	B	C
Department of Veterans Affairs	A	A	C
Environmental Protection Agency	A	B	C
General Services Administration	A	A	C
NASA	A	C	C
Securities and Exchange Commission	A	A	B
Small Business Administration	A	B	C
Social Security Administration	A	A	B

2014 Federal Plain Language grades



- Compliance
- Writing
- Information design

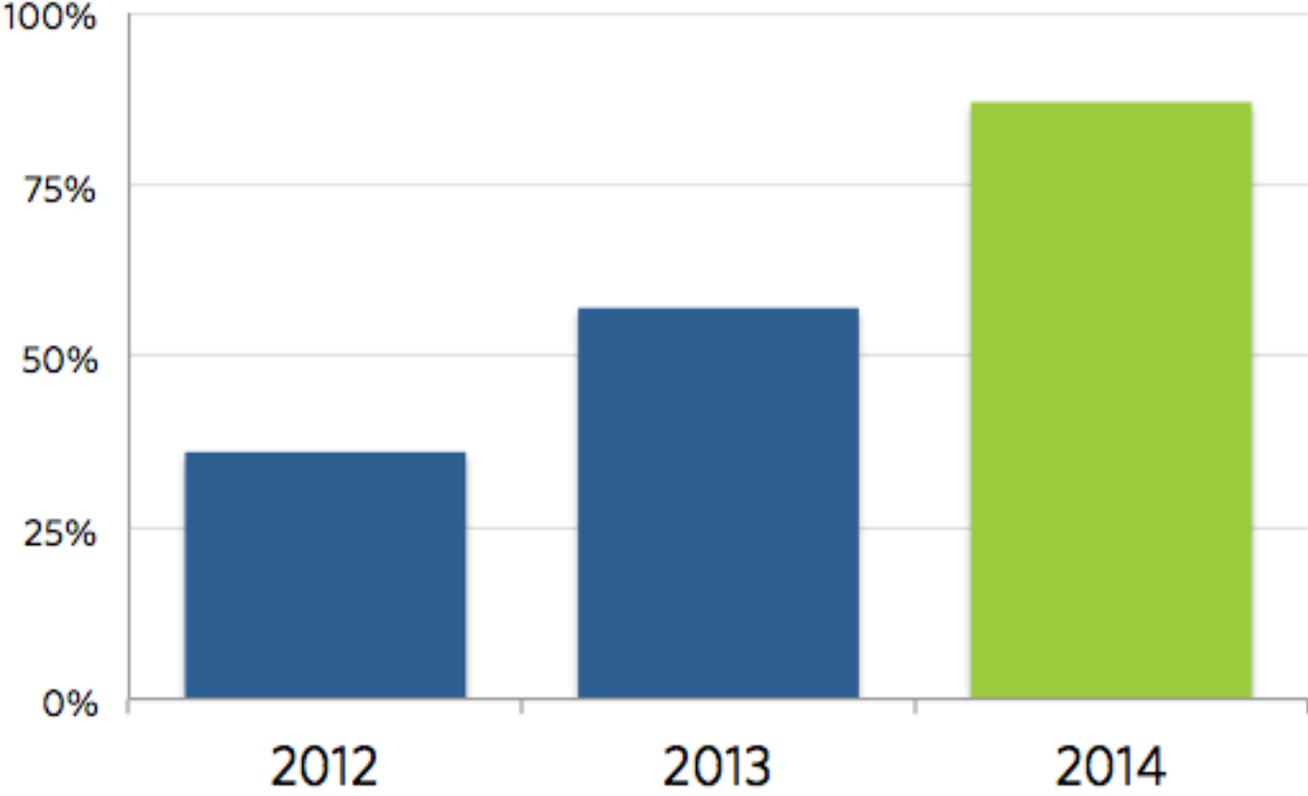
How did we score compliance?



Does the department fulfill the requirements of the Plain Writing Act of 2010?

- Plain Language Webpage (and link on homepage)
- Implementation plan
- Compliance Reports (2013 & 2014)
- URL with contacts posted
 - Sr Official Name, Title, Contact
 - Other Contact, Title Other Contact
- Feedback Email
- Response time
- Training program(s) available to staff

Compliance is improving

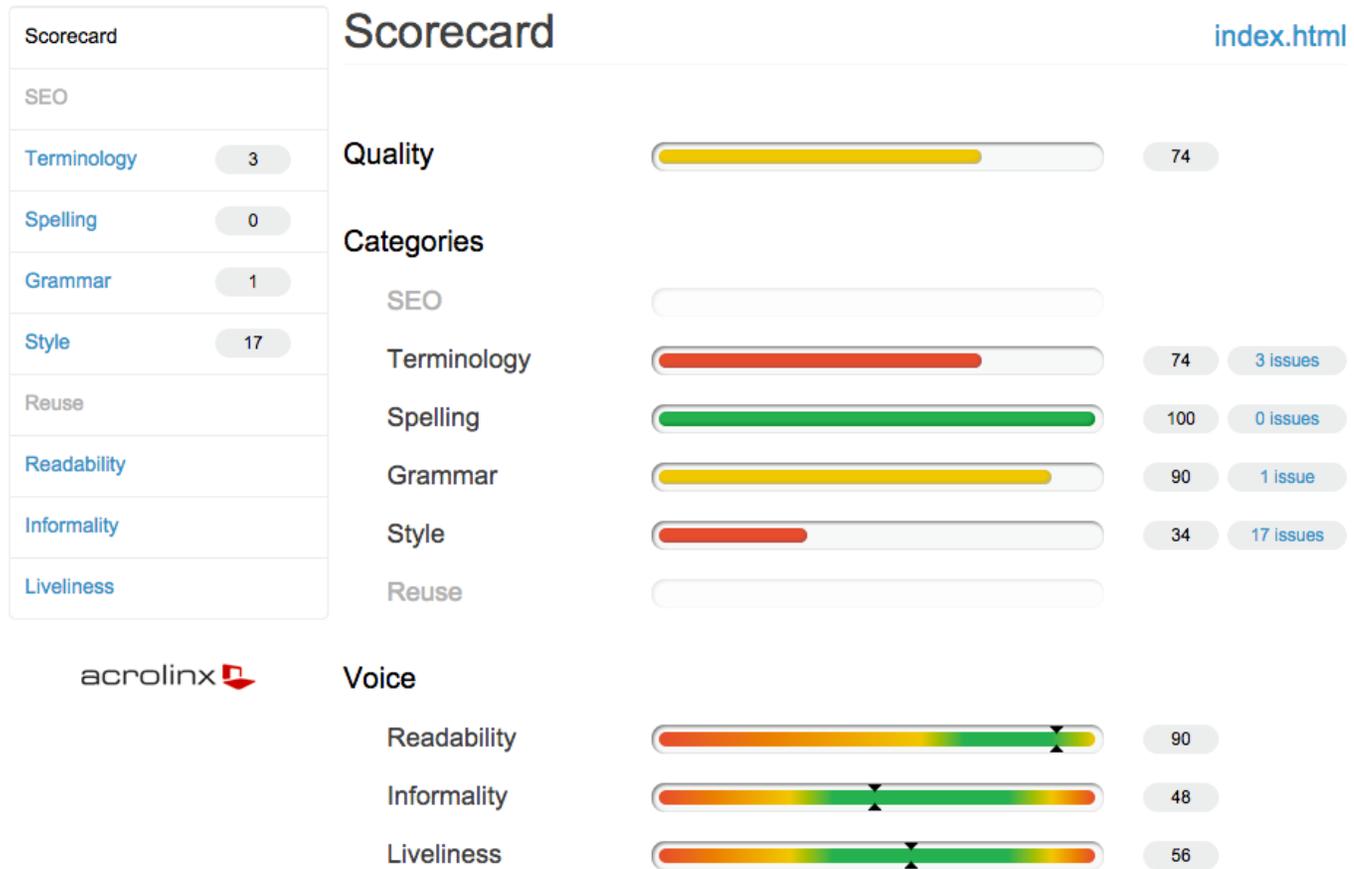


Opportunities to improve: Compliance



- Enhanced Training
- Make giving feedback easier

How did we score writing?



Opportunities to improve: Writing



- # of Long sentences
- Passive Verbs
- Hidden Verbs
- Modal verbs
- Extra words
- Subject / Verb agreement
- Use pronouns

How did we score information design?



Each document was independently rated on

- Typography
- Whitespace
- Color
- Icons
- Images
- Charts and Graphs

Opportunities: Information Design



- Typography
- Whitespace
- Color
- Icons
- Images
- Charts and Graphs

Other Opportunities



- Message testing (Usability testing for content)
- Cultivating a Plain Language Culture

Developing a plain language culture



- Recognize plain writing as an independent skill
- Provide role-specific tools and training
- Develop metrics and standards of excellence
- Recognize and reward achievements
- Publicize and celebrate successes

[Building a Plain Language Culture in the US Government](http://centerforplainlanguage.org/building-a-plain-language-culture-in-the-us-government/)

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Questions?

The 2015 Federal Plain Language Report Card
White Paper: <http://slidesha.re/1zTM8qo>



About the topic & speakers



For more information about:

The 2015 Plain language Report card: <http://slidesha.re/1zTM8qo>

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About the Center for Plain Language



What we do



Award great work

Each spring, we give juried ClearMark Awards to the best consumer-directed writing from government, private, and non-profit organizations.



Blog

Experts provide tips, discuss emerging trends and answer questions about plain language.



Publicize bad writing

WonderMark Awards publicize bad writing. Companies who fix it can win Turn-around Awards.



Connect companies and consultants

Need an expert? Check our list of experienced consultants, speakers and trainers.



Federal Plain Language Report Card

Each fall, we grade US federal agencies on their plain language efforts. This gets some great press!



Support plain writing legislation

We educate Congress (and others) about the importance of plain language, both on the Hill and in our home districts.



Examples of writing challenges

Writing challenges: Long sentences



Original:

Our close partnerships with State partners and the electricity industry to provide knowledge, resources, and support in developing effective risk-based approaches which help identify impacts in advance of events will continue to play a crucial role in helping to ensure that the nation is ready for the challenges of today's dynamic environment. (52 words)

More readable:

Risk-based approaches, developed with State and the Electric industry partners, determine the impact of events before they occur. They help our nation prepare for the challenges of today's dynamic environment.

What's the problem?

Longer sentences take more memory and mental energy to understand.

Writing challenges: Subject/Verb agreement



- Food made by hand that require no cooking; e.g., puddings, sandwiches...
- Belligerent behavior, inappropriate jokes and threats is not tolerated.
- The Marketplace and the Safety Net has what you need to know about the health insurance Marketplace, ...

What's the problem?

Spelling and Grammatical errors make a source less credible.

Writing challenges: Passive Verbs



Original: The date **has been determined by** the manufacturer of the product.

More readable: The manufacturer determined the date of the product.

What's the problem?

When you switch from active voice to passive voice, the standard order of who did what to whom is also switched reversed. This makes understanding these sentences harder to read. Reading passive sentences takes longer than reading active ones.

Writing challenges: Hidden Verbs



- He will conduct an **investigation**... (or He will investigate...)
- take into **consideration** (or consider)
- take a **look** (or look)
- make **adjustment** (or adjust)
- take **action** (act)

What's the problem?

Hidden verbs happen when people create nouns from verbs. These forms typically include more words, and are harder to read and understand. Use the simple (original) verb, instead. (Linguists joke about "verbing nouns" "nouncing verbs")

Writing challenges: Modal Verbs



Original: Food safety is extremely important and **should** be practiced with every meal you eat or prepare.

More readable: Food safety is extremely important. Practice it with every meal you eat or prepare.

What's the problem?

Modals verbs or auxiliary verbs, like might, may, shall, should typically indicate requirements or possibilities in the future. Unless you need to hedge, don't.

NB. There are contexts, like scientific claims, where writers need to allow for possible alternatives.

Writing challenges: Extra words



- This kind of behavior (How about “this behavior”?)
- particularly important
- very powerful
- actually comprised
- completely unprotected
- generally accepted

What's the problem?

Extra words mean extra work for readers.