

National Archives, 2014

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 the agencies before the records even get to the National Archives, we ensure that 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 Donna Garland, Chief Strategy and Communications Officer.

LONG-TERM ONGOING PLAIN WRITING ACTIONS IN 2014

In 2014, we began and continued several activities to promote the use of plain writing in all our communications.

Plain Language Tips for Staff

We promote plain writing through biweekly writing tips to our staff, published in our inter-

nal blog 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:

- [Wake up your sentences](#)
- [Breaking up is easy to do](#)
- [Veterans Day – Getting it right](#)
- [First things first](#)
- [Why? The Plain Writing Act of 2010](#)

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.

In some cases, we've created concise pamphlets to replace or accompany policy directives and guidance. These pamphlets allow staff and visitors to easily find out exactly how the policy affects what they do. Three examples are:

- a [pamphlet](#) on emergency communication systems within our buildings that covers the issues most relevant to the reader and includes pictures of the devices described in the [guidance memo](#);
- a six-panel [pamphlet](#) that summarizes the most important points in a 13-page [policy directive](#) on access to our Washington, DC, area buildings; and
- another six-panel [pamphlet](#) that describes how NARA offices can get business cards, stationery, and other material printed. [The original directive can be seen online.](#)

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 (the Plain Language Tips).
- Our web staff sponsored a webinar on “plain writing on the web.”
- A brown-bag lunch on using the NARA Style Guide also focused on using plain language.
- Staff at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library rewrote its [blog](#) on “Demystifying Declassification” to help researchers better understand how declassification works. [The Before version is available on our Plain Language page.](#)
- Agency bulletins on records management were edited to focus on clarity and readability. The customer satisfaction survey showed that 89 percent of the respondents agreed with the statement that the bulletins are clear.
- The Information Security Oversight Office edited its report to the President for plain language and simplified charts. Analytical content was eliminated to focus the reader's attention on data and results rather than the staff's interpretation of the findings.
- The Office of Government Information Services edited its website to avoid jargon, explain acronyms, and explain the feedback process. In the customer satisfaction survey, 87 percent of the respondents answered that material from the Office is clear and easy to understand.

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 Editorial Services

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.

Blog Post [Before | After](#)

NARA Notice [Before | After](#)

Federal Records Centers [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 clarity of the wording on Archives.gov.
- Please rate how well you understand the wording on Archives.gov.
- Please rate Archives.gov on its use of short, clear sentences.

We review and *post data online* from the survey each month:

- The current Archives.gov Content Satisfaction score is **76** out of 100

In 2014 NARA changed the name of its Washington, DC, museum from “National Archives Experience” to “National Archives Museum” to clarify what visitors can expect to find at the National Archives Building. We updated the name throughout our website. www.archives.gov/museum/

We redesigned the Center for Legislative Archives web page to make it easier to read. www.archives.gov/legislative/

We redesigned the library of past issues of *Prologue* magazine to make it easier to find previously published volumes. www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/index/

2014 Plain Language Activities by Office

Major units within the National Archives report their plain writing achievements annually. Those reports are available [online](#).

Tools for Accessing Our Records

We view access not simply as opening a gate but as building a bridge. We encourage our audiences to become active partners in making historical documents available today and for the future.

- We developed a Citizen Archivist Dashboard (www.archives.gov/citizen-archivist/) through which the public can identify photographs, transcribe documents, and share knowledge of how our documents created history.
- We are sponsoring two Presidential Innovation Fellows who are looking at open-source tools and how we can work with citizen archivists and citizen developers. They are reviewing what we've done with the Citizen Archivist Dashboard and working to help us develop the next generation of our crowd-sourcing efforts.

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. (www.archives.gov/education/special-topics.html)
- Workshops and webinars offer educators additional opportunities for professional development. (www.archives.gov/education/distance-learning/professional-development.html)
- Our Documents (www.ourdocuments.gov) provides access to 100 milestone documents in American history selected by the National Archives staff.

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 (<http://docsteach.org/documents>) provides access to thousands of primary source documents to bring the past to life as classroom teaching tools. Teachers can find written documents, images,

Teaching Civics

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

- Dozens of free programs are presented each month in our William McGowan Theater in Washington, DC. Some of the programs in 2014 discussed these topics:
 - * Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad
 - * A Forum on the Rosenberg Case
 - * Vietnam and the Paris Peace Accords
 - * The Monuments Men of World War II
 - * The Role of Congress in International Crisis
 - * Conference on Bipartisanship
 - * Congress and the White House
- We sponsor special programs on using government records in genealogical research. Topics in 2014 included:
 - * Introduction to Genealogy at the National Archives
 - * Identifying and Reviewing Sensitive Records
 - * World War I and the Birth of the United States Veterans' Hospital System