

2013 Plain Writing Act Compliance Report: U.S. Census Bureau

Plain Language Officer: Neil Tillman, Chief, Promotions Branch, Center for New Media and Promotions

Web Site: http://www.census.gov/aboutus/plain_writing.html

Feedback: cnmp.plain.language@census.gov

Summary

Even before the Plain Writing Act, the Census Bureau had a special commitment to clear communication with the public. We ask people to fill out their census and survey forms. The forms undergo rigorous testing to ensure people understand the questions and answer them accurately.

According to *Federal Computer News*, a November 2011 study ranked the Census Bureau web site third among 30 agencies in readability, transparency and clarity.

For the 2000 Census and even more so for the 2010 Census, we developed an integrated communications campaign that explained clearly how easy, important and safe it was to fill out a census questionnaire. Our tests indicate that the plan was successful: America responded despite trends over past decades showing declines in survey participation, a more diverse population, a difficult economic environment and a growing distrust of government.

More than 72 percent mailed back their census questionnaire and follow-up operations went so smoothly that [\\$1.6 billion in savings](#) were returned to the U.S. Treasury.

Lessons learned during the 2010 Census operations have led to many improvements in clarity: we have expanded our use of social media, redesigned our [home page](#), and launched a new, easier-to-read [economic census web site](#). The Census Bureau is currently overseeing a web transformation directed at organizing census.gov according to the topics that users look for, rather than our own internal program areas.

We believe our user-friendly economic census web site – business.census.gov – has had an impact in raising awareness of the census and encouraging response, particularly among small businesses.

Central to these efforts is the goal of simplifying our web site so that the public can use it more efficiently.

To further promote the goal of clear communication and meet the requirements of the Plain Writing Act, we funded a [business case](#) that aimed at two key goals:

1. Developing a simple, easy-to-use glossary tool to help the public cope with technical terms used in our tables and reports.
2. Building a “dissemination culture” in which we further enhance our employees’ communication skills.

Plain Language Glossary

The Plain Language Team built a plain language glossary, using open source, no cost software. A beta version of the glossary is being tested before public launch in Spring 2013. We believe this project is in line with the federal government’s overall digital strategy to use innovative technology in improving awareness of and access to statistics and enhancing customer satisfaction.

As we prepare for launch, the glossary has gone through three rounds of usability testing and more rounds are planned. Testers looked at the functionality of the glossary application and the clarity of the definitions.

Promoting Plain Language

In June 2012, the Plain Language Team, along with the Data Visualization Team, hosted a town hall for employees stressing the importance of clarity in images and words. Then-Deputy Director Thomas Mesenbourg stressed the importance of a “customer-centric” approach in serving the public. The presentation highlighted the 10 steps toward clearer writing, internal web resources, and available writing training.

During the past year, the Plain Language Team met with senior managers throughout the agency highlighting plain language opportunities and the plain language glossary. Short “brown bag lunch” sessions have shared writing tips with employees. Articles in our monthly newsletter have highlighted plain language activities.

Intranet Site and Training

We have created an Intranet site to help our staff understand and meet the requirements of the Plain Writing Act. The site features –

- Links to the Plain Writing Act, the Office of Management and Budget Plain Language Guidance, the Federal Plain Language Guidelines, and the many resources on the plainlanguage.gov web site.
- Testimonial videos from employees on the importance of plain writing in their work and the benefits of the plain writing training.

- Helpful tips on writing clearly.
- Recommendations for managers on creating a plain writing environment in their offices.

The Census Bureau has long offered training on writing. Courses vary greatly in scope; examples include writing for the web and an intensive multi-day course designed to build critical clear thinking and writing skills.

Between January 1, 2012, and March 15, 2013, the Census Bureau offered 29 classroom courses focused on helping employees write more clearly, plus a number of off-site courses and a host of online writing training courses through the Census Learning Center. In all, over 400 employees received formal training. Among the training opportunities were more advanced courses aimed at making our senior program staff better communicators.

Customer Satisfaction

The Census Bureau uses usability and cognitive testing on an ongoing basis to measure customer satisfaction with our web site. We routinely consult our web logs to study how successful users are in searching our site.

Since 2007, we have used an ongoing pop-up survey to measure the customer satisfaction. This survey will eventually test for plain writing. We conduct more detailed studies of key sites such as the American Community Survey and the American FactFinder data tool and use the results to improve user access.

We developed special usability tests to establish a baseline for our efforts to simplify language on the site.

Feedback

All Census Bureau employees from top management on down have clear communication as a part of their performance plan. We take clear communication very seriously and we are working hard to make our information easier for the public to access and understand.

We value comments from you flagging problems and offering suggestions. Please contact us at <cnmp.plain.language@census.gov>.