

NATIONAL ARCHIVES, 2015

Official Guide to the Plain Language Report



NATIONAL  
ARCHIVES

# 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, Acting Chief Strategy and Communications Officer.

## LONG-TERM ONGOING PLAIN WRITING ACTIONS IN 2015

In 2015, we carried out several activities to promote the use of plain writing in all our communications

### Plain Language Tips for Staff

We promote plain writing through writing tips to our staff, published in our internal 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:

- *Comma or No Comma*
- *The Department of Redundancy Department*
- *Passive Voice and Zombies*
- *Tightening Up*
- *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.

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. 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.”
- Our editorial staff conducted two training sessions for our IT staff focused on using plain language.
- In our Public Vaults exhibit, visited by over 1 million annually, we edited exhibit text to be brief and engaging, reformatted case text so 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 55 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 Ford Presidential Library, the ArtPrize handout was edited to make it more readable. (<http://www.archives.gov/open/plain-writing/examples/>)
- The staff at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library created an index of textual material in the Library's collection to accompany a two-day conference on American Indian Policy during the Nixon Administration. This 27-page *index* was designed and edited to make it easy to read.

## 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.” In November, we shortened and simplified the survey and changed the Plain Language questions to:

- 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 for the period April 1, 2015 to March 31, 2016 is 77 out of 100

## 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 revamped the most-used sections of the [Citizen Archivist Dashboard](#)—Tagging and Transcription—to streamline and simplify the look and feel of the dashboard. Citizen Archivists tagged and transcribed records on the topics of Pearl Harbor, Letters from Royalty, Holidays at the White House, National Forest Photographs, and Abraham Lincoln.
- Our Presidential Innovation Interns developed a more accessible search tool that enables users to look for and identify records (in multiple formats) using not just the pre-provided archival descriptions, but also the keywords, categories, entities, and taxonomies that the system is able to parse out automatically. Building on the foundation that already exists for NARA’s records—specifically, archival descriptions and any manually-added metadata—the software is able to dramatically expand the depth and richness of the metadata that is attached to any single record, whether it’s textual, handwritten, electronic, photographic, or another type.

The more records the system processes, the smarter it gets, and the more it's able to predict what it's seeing with increasing levels of confidence.

- The Office of Innovation upgraded the underlying technology that powers our internal web, NARA@work. The new system (Drupal 7) makes it easier to keep pages up-to-date. This intranet project provides valuable experience to apply to our public website, Archives.gov, which will be migrated to Drupal 7 in 2016.

## 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 addressing 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 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. ([www.archives.gov/education/special-topics.html](http://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](http://www.archives.gov/education/distance-learning/professional-development.html))
- Our Documents ([www.ourdocuments.gov](http://www.ourdocuments.gov)) 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 McGowan Theater in Washington, DC. Some of the programs in 2015 discussed these topics:
  - \* Then and Now: Women in Civil Rights Leadership
  - \* Five Came Back: A Story of Hollywood and the Second World War
  - \* The Young Madisons: Why a New Generation Is Standing Up for the Constitution
  - \* Writers and Scholars Roundtable on Civil Rights
  - \* The Law of the Land: A Grand Tour of Our Constitutional Republic and Lincoln's Constitutional Vision
  - \* Temperance and Woman Suffrage: Reform Movements and the Women Who Changed America
  - \* 1920s Style: Prohibition-Era Fashion
  - \* Capital Beer: A Heady History of Brewing in Washington, D.C.
- We sponsor special programs on using government records in genealogical research. Topics in 2015 included:
  - \* Introduction to Genealogy at the National Archives videos on YouTube
  - \* Virtual Genealogy Fair live and videos on YouTube
  - \* "Help! I'm Stuck" Genealogy Consultation on-site