Center for Plain Language
Make it clear.

2018 Federal Plain Language Report Card

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Executive Summary

Since 2012, the Center for Plain Language has graded federal agencies on compliance with the Plain Writing Act - - the 2010 law that requires government writing to be clear, concise, and well-organized. After years of progress, grades in this year's Report Card slumped, with C replacing B as the average writing grade.

Who and what we graded in 2018
We evaluated 23 Executive Branch agencies, including all 15 cabinet-level departments, in terms of both writing and organizational compliance with the Plain Writing Act. This is the first time since 2015 we have evaluated organizational compliance (which covers internal staffing, communication, and training and which we had stopped grading in 2015 because agencies had been doing so well organizationally). For the separate writing grade, we evaluated two high-profile webpages from each agency: the homepage and the most-visited webpage, identified through 12-month usage data or, absent that data, via the public data on www.analytics.usa.gov.

Key findings:
- **C replaced B as the average writing grade**; see the one-page Report Card with all grades listed below.
- **Turnover spiked**. Since 2015, 13 of 23 agencies in our report have replaced people in *both* of the two required plain language positions. See below, "Turnover and Grade Trends, 2015-2018."
- **Turnover hurt internal staffing, communication and training**. Of those 13 agencies where turnover spiked, nine declined in organizational compliance, including three that failed it. Conversely, of the 10 agencies that retained a plain language official, eight maintained or improved in organizational compliance. See "Agency Turnover and Grade Trends for individual agency grade changes since 2015. See below, "Turnover and Grade Trends, 2015-2018."
- **Organizational compliance, in turn, drove writing quality**. Of the 11 agencies that dropped a grade in organizational compliance, 10 also saw their writing grade drop. Meanwhile, among the six agencies where writing grades have risen or stayed constant since 2015, all have retained a plain writing official and maintained or improved their organizational compliance. Staffing and training matter. See below, "Turnover and Grade Trends, 2015-2018."
- **Agencies forgot a plain language principle – focus on your audience.** On too many homepages, self-promotional news crowded out tasks and information for users, while jargon and acronyms stayed entrenched (can anyone guess what NSOPW stands for?). Two exceptions earned A's: homepages for the Small Business Administration and the Consumer Finance Protection Bureau. See the end of this document for good and bad examples.
- **Top-scorers made vital tasks easier.** Judges lauded the Social Security Administration's "My Account" page; Defense's "TRICARE" page, serving the 9.4 million eligible for the military's health plan; and USDA's "Choose My Plate," showcasing selections from the five food groups. See the end of this document for good and bad examples.
- **Our list of most-visited agency webpages** reveals that Americans seek help from federal agencies on everything from getting rid of bed bugs (EPA) and spotting signs of Lyme disease (HHS) to locating sex offenders (DOJ) and learning how turbines work (DOE). See below, "Bedbugs, Debt Collectors, and Sex Offenders."

"With so much turnover, agencies need to recommit to plain language, especially training programs," said David Lipscomb, who led this year's Report Card. "Then writing grades will jump back up."

"Here's something all Americans can agree on — government webpages should be clear and easy to use," said Congressman Loebsack. "That's why I'm troubled that so many agency webpages are still filled with jargon and

acronyms and focused more on themselves than the everyday people who need government services, data, and help. We can do better. And there's a law on the books that says we have to do better."

How we graded
We graded writing and organizational compliance independently, with a separate set of judges for each (3 judges for organizational compliance, 12 for writing). As we have for several years, we used the Center's grading criteria, which we also use for ClearMarks, our annual plain language awards; criteria include understanding of audience, style, structure, and design. To ensure a consistent approach to these criteria, judges completed a norming exercise on sample webpages, and overall Report Card lead, David Lipscomb, had frequent check-ins with team leads. Once grading was complete, we averaged each agency's homepage grade and most-visited webpage grade to arrive at their final writing grade.

*One other potential reason for lower grades: we chose the writing samples
In the previous five years, agencies had the ability to submit only their very best versions of particular genres (such as Q&As and infographics last year). This year, agencies could not weed out bad writing and spotlight their best; there is only one current version of an agency's homepage or its most-visited webpage. Consequently, we believe that this year's writing sample selection approach resulted in a more accurate sampling of an agency's writing quality. Still, we had not expected grades to fall quite as much as they did, given that we drew our writing samples from such high-profile and highly visited pages. We should, however, caution against reading too much into these writing grades, given that we evaluated only two webpages from each agency (most agencies have thousands of webpages). So while it's true we now have a better snapshot of Government writing quality, we could improve the accuracy if we had the resources to judge more pages.

FEDERAL PLAIN LANGUAGE REPORT CARD

Prepared by the Center for Plain Language

Agency	Organizational compliance*	Writing quality
Consumer Financial Protection Bureau	B	B+
Department of Agriculture	A+	A–
Department of Commerce	F	C
Department of Defense	A+	B
Department of Education	D	A–
Department of Energy	A+	C
Department of Health and Human Services	A+	C+
Department of Homeland Security	A–	D
Department of Housing and Urban Development	F	D
Department of Interior	C–	B
Department of Justice	D	C
Department of Labor	A–	C
Department of State	A+	C
Department of Transportation	F	C–
Department of Treasury	F	D+
Department of Veterans Affairs	A+	B
Environmental Protection Administration	D	C–
General Services Administration	A+	B+
National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)	C	C+
National Archives and Records Administration	A+	B
Securities and Exchange Commission	A–	C
Small Business Administration	A+	A
Social Security Administration	A+	A

_____   October 12, 2018
                                          _____
Chair, Center for Plain Language   Date

A: Excellent   B: Good   C: Average   D: Needs Improvement   F: Fail

*Organizational compliance covers staffing, communication and training required by the Plain Writing Act.

AGENCY TURNOVER AND GRADE TRENDS, 2015-2018

Agency	Staff from 2015 retained in the two required plain language jobs	Change in compliance grade since 2015	Change in writing grade since 2015
Consumer Financial Protection Bureau	0	↓	↓
Department of Agriculture	0	↔	↔
Department of Commerce	0	↓	↓
Department of Defense	1	↑	↑
Department of Education	1	↓	↔
Department of Energy	1	↑	↓
Department of Health and Human Services	0	↔	↓
Department of Homeland Security	0	↓	↓
Department of Housing and Urban Development	1	↓	↓
Department of Justice	0	↓	↓
Department of Labor	1	↑	↓
Department of State	1	↑	↔
Department of Interior	0	↓	↓
Department of Treasury	0	↓	↓
Department of Transportation	0	↓	↓
Department of Veterans Affairs	0	↔	↓
Environmental Protection Administration	0	↓	↓
General Services Administration	1	↑	↑
National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)	0	↓	↓
National Archives and Records Administration	0	↔	↔
Securities and Exchange Commission	1	↔	↓
Small Business Administration	1	↔	↑
Social Security Administration	1	↔	↔

Anatomy of an excellent homepage

Everything — photo, fonts, colors, placement — works to guide your eye to the focal point: starting and growing your business. Content is all about the user, especially answering the users' questions. At the sentence level, note how strong verbs do the work in simple sentences.
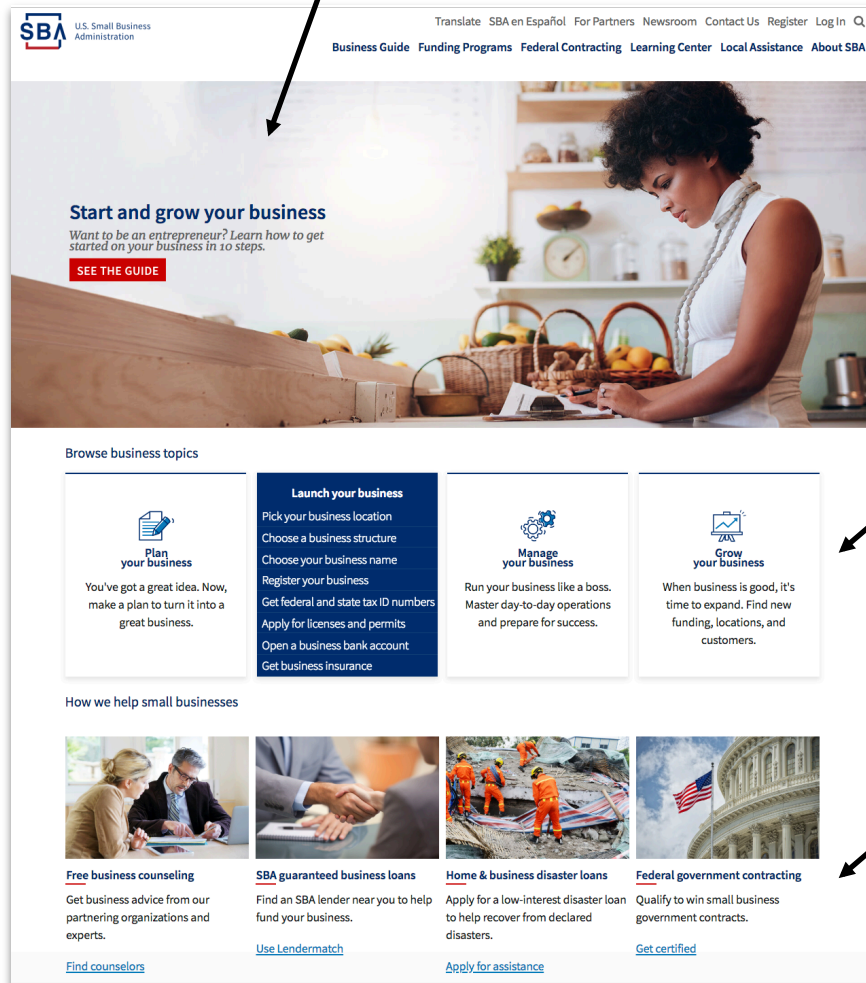
The layout is clean and simple and the color palette is restrained, keeping the focus on the what the user needs to do. Strong verbs continue to carry the weight in the headings, as a conversational tone in the captions builds trust.

The focus shifts to nouns in this section, identifying the types of help SBA can offer. Below the headings, verbs pick up the workload, again, guiding the user through the ways to use the site and SBA.


Judges' comments:
"This homepage is all about the user, not the agency."

I immediately knew what this homepage offered and what the customer can expect from it — unusual in a federal webpage. It masterfully uses spare language and active verbs. It makes me think, "I can do this."

"The page exudes optimism and energy. It actually makes me want to start a small business. Bravo, SBA."

Anatomy of an excellent USDA page

The plate imagery not only spotlights the guiding metaphor here; it also unifies the sections in a design that is as elegant as it is simple. Although there's a lot going on here, the smart use of white allows the eye to travel where the designers want us to go — to the five food groups in the center of the page.
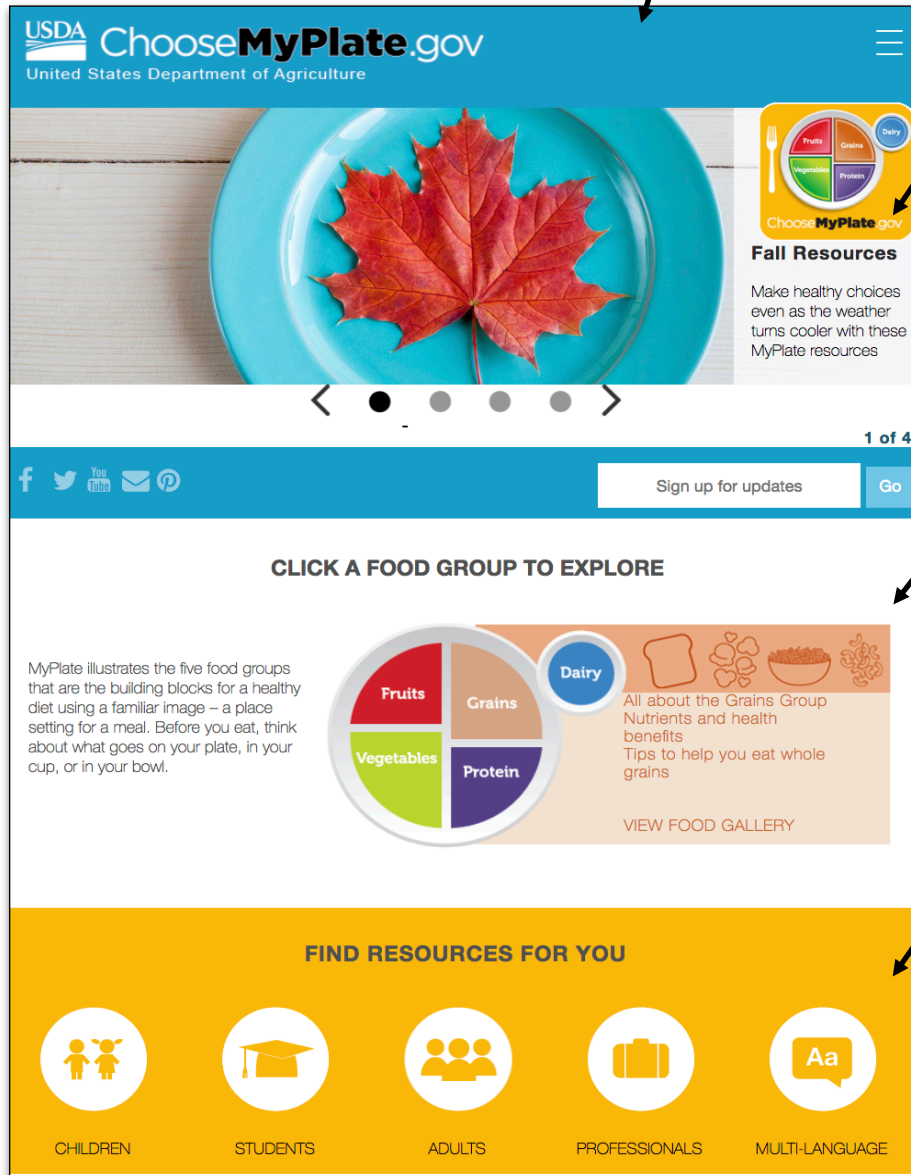
A conversational tone engages users.

Earth tones keep the feel healthy here, as you can learn at several degrees of detail about grains, fruits, vegetables, protein, and dairy. Great use of active voice, with pronouns that address the reader.

User research paid off here, as the page segments audiences, giving each a custom view.

Judges' comments:

"A well-thought-out page. The writers and designers worked well together — keeping user experience in mind."

"I love the use of questions that anticipate the reader's needs."

"Just what a parent who's laying out a weekly meal plan would needs."

A homepage that needs work

This tiny menu heading is the only text that addresses a user.

All about the Department. According to Department of Energy staff, this homepage is aimed at the public — including scientists, consumers, and entrepreneurs — who come to this page to learn about energy programs and technologies, to seek funding, and to save energy and money. Unfortunately, the page is not designed or written to help them do these things. It's all about the Department.

The Department as subject. Of the 10 headlines visible in this screenshot, the Department is the grammatical subject in five, the president in one, and Department Secretaries in three. Nowhere will you find public scientists, consumers or entrepreneurs, nor any verbs about what they can do or find. The words "you" and "your" do not appear. Instead, jargon such as "resilience" and subsector appear prominently.
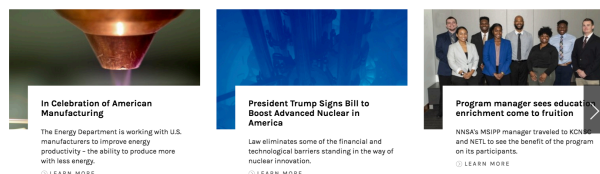
The one item that's of human interest is more appropriate for an internal intranet. Few outside the Department of Energy could translate this sentence: "NNSA's MSIPP manager traveled to KCNS and NETL to see the benefit of the program on its participants."
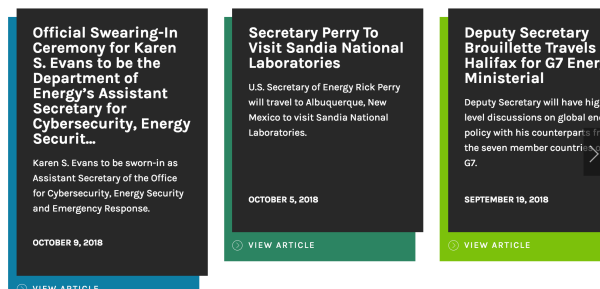
Judge's comment:
"While the page shows an updated design, the content is still very old-fashioned, focusing on news of the agency and the agency's administration. The news is all about DOE does this and DOE does that and our Secretary does this and that- not about what the agency's clients are doing or what they need from the agency's website."

Judge's comment:
"As a fan of DOE and a longtime veteran and manager of federal communications shops, I'm disappointed because I know DOE can do better. "

What is the Center for Plain Language?

The Center for Plain Language is a 501(c)(3), non-profit organization. We champion clear communication so people and organizations can thrive. As a volunteer organization, we support plain writing not only in the federal government but in the corporate and non-profit worlds. For example, many of our members work in the health industry, promoting equal access to vital health information. In addition to generating the Federal Report Card, the Center promotes clear writing through numerous other activities and projects:

- We educate Congress about the importance of plain writing. Our efforts contributed to the passing of the Plain Writing Act.
- Since 2010, we have celebrated great writing through our annual ClearMark Awards, which recognize the best plain writing in English and Spanish from the public, private, and non-profit sectors. We accept submissions in January, so get planning!
- Though our Consultant List, we link companies and agencies who want plain language services to the best consultants in the plain language field.
- We advocate for plain language in our e-book, *Clear Communication with Clear Results: How to start a plain language program where you work*; our blogs; and at conferences.
- We work to establish standards for plain language by cooperating with other international plain language organizations: PLAIN and Clarity – International, the international organization for plain legal language.

Acknowledgements

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- Congressman Dave Loebsack of Iowa for his support of Plain Language and for helping publicize these results.
- Former Representative Bruce Braley of Iowa and former Senator Daniel Akaka of Hawaii, for sponsoring the Plain Writing Act of 2010.
- The four women who devoted much of their careers to plain language and whose hard work helped establish PLAIN, the Center for Plain Language, and the Plain Writing Act of 2010: Annetta Cheek, Joanne Locke, Susan Kliemann, and Ginny Redish. Their legacy will always be plain inspiring.
- The plain language officials and coordinators from each federal agency who invested time in identifying most-visited pages and sharing audience and purpose information on their websites. These people – so many of them new in their positions -- work on the frontlines advocating for clear communication in their agencies. Among these plain language officials, I'd like to single out the work of Mike Coogan, who not only advocates forcefully for plain language within his home agency, the Department of Energy, but who also worked tirelessly to help us identify all the new people across government who stepped into plain language roles in the last few years.
- Diane Chojnowski, Dean Draznin Communications, for coordinating our media outreach for the release of this report.
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