



Center for Plain Language

Make it clear.

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Center for Plain Language Releases 10th Annual Federal Plain Language Report Card

Several Agencies Earn High Marks on Coronavirus Pages

RICHMOND, VA — It’s become conventional wisdom that federal agencies can’t communicate effectively when it comes to the pandemic. But the reality is more nuanced, with several agencies now earning high marks for their coronavirus webpages. That’s one finding from this year’s Federal Plain Language Report Card, released today by the Center for Plain Language.

2021 Federal Plain Language Report Card

Agency	Organizational Compliance*	Writing Quality**
Consumer Financial Protection Bureau	A	A-
Department of Agriculture	F	C
Department of Commerce	F	C-
Department of Defense	A+	C
Department of Education	A+	C+
Department of Energy	A+	C
Department of Health and Human Services	A+	B-
Department of Homeland Security	A+	B
Department of Housing and Urban Development	F	C
Department of the Interior	A+	B-
Department of Justice	A+	B-
Department of Labor	A+	C+

Department of State	A	C
Department of Transportation	F	C
Department of the Treasury	F	B
Department of Veterans Affairs	A+	B-
Environmental Protection Agency	A	B-
National Archives	A+	B
Securities and Exchange Commission	A-	B
Small Business Administration	F	A
Social Security Administration	A+	B+

*Note: * Organizational compliance covers the staffing, communication, and training required by the 2010 Plain Writing Act.*

*** Each agency’s writing quality grade is the average of the two grades: one on its coronavirus webpage and one on its FOIA request webpage.*

Read the full report.

Every year the Report Card grades 21 federal agencies on their writing, while also providing a separate grade that reflects how well they comply with basic requirements of [The Plain Writing Act of 2010](#).

For this year’s writing grade, the Center graded two webpages that every agency is required to publish: a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request page and a coronavirus page, which the Center had also graded last year. Grades on these two pages were averaged to get each agency’s “writing quality” grade, which appears on the one-page version of the Report Card.

The single writing grade contains two very different stories. Overall, the average writing grade was a B-, unchanged from last year. But that average was pulled down by poor marks for the FOIA request pages, where the average grade was a C+. Within that average is a far more positive story: for the coronavirus pages, the average mark jumped up from a C to a B, driven by big improvements from the Department of Treasury, the Social Security Administration (SSA), the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the Small Business Administration (SBA).

Highlights include the following:

- Compared to last year, this year’s coronavirus pages do a much better job keeping the focus on readers’ needs and addressing those needs directly in plain language.
- A new problem is that some agencies are overloading readers with pandemic information, instead of highlighting the specific information each agency can best provide.
- Honors for most-improved coronavirus page go to HUD (from a D to a B) and the SBA (from a C to an A).
- As they did last year, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau earned an A for its Coronavirus page, providing a model that’s clear, well organized, and user focused.

On the FOIA pages, most agencies barraged readers with extraneous information and legal language. To fix these pages, agencies need to lay out a clear path for making a FOIA request and cut out jargon and acronyms. An excellent model is the Department of Homeland Security's [FOIA request page](#), the only FOIA page to earn an A.

Grades took a bigger jump in the “organizational compliance” category—where agencies are evaluated on how well they meet the staffing, training, and annual reporting requirements of the 2010 Plain Writing Act. *More than two-thirds of agencies surveyed this year earned an A on organizational compliance.* Most-improved awards go the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Department of Interior, whose compliance grade jump from an F to an A+.

“As the nation continues to work and learn virtually, we are committed to providing resources that are easily accessible and understandable,” said Melissa Schwartz, the Department of Interior’s communication director. Added Barbra Kingsley, chair of the Center for Plain Language, “We’re so happy to see how agencies have embraced plain language over the 10 years we’ve been producing this report.”

The Social Security Administration provides a perfect example of that transformation. Back in 2012, when the Center first launched its Federal Report Card, SSA earned a C for compliance. Since then, it has earned straight A’s in compliance and either A’s or high B’s in writing.

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ABOUT THE CENTER FOR PLAIN LANGUAGE

The Center for Plain Language is a North American non-profit organization that helps government agencies and businesses write clear and understandable documents. The Center sponsors the annual ClearMark Awards for the best communications in plain language, the WTF (Work That Failed) Awards, and the Federal Plain Language Report Card, which evaluates how well federal agencies are complying with the Plain Writing Act of 2010. To become a member or for more information, visit us at www.centerforplainlanguage.org and follow us on [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#), and [Facebook](#).