



U.S. Railroad Retirement Board Plain Writing Act of 2010 Annual Compliance Report April 2021

Background

The Plain Writing Act, enacted in October 2010, requires agencies to communicate in a manner “that the public can understand and use,” and applies to any application, form, informational material, letter, or notice. It also defines plain writing as “clear, concise, well-organized, and follows other best practices appropriate to the subject or field or intended audience.”

The U.S. Railroad Retirement Board (RRB) has always tried to communicate with its customers and stakeholders in a clear, understandable manner. We have continued this effort with renewed emphasis in the context of the intent and requirements of the Plain Writing Act, with the goal of improving our ability to clearly communicate information about our benefits and services, and how to access them.

Implementation

The RRB has a page on its website – **RRB.gov** – dedicated to plain language, as required by the law, which is accessible by clicking on the *Plain Writing @ RRB* link at the bottom of the home page. The page includes information on guidelines and best practices in this area, as well as an e-mail address should a visitor to the page have any questions or concerns about agency documents. The agency also posts its most recent annual compliance reports on this page, with the RRB’s Public Affairs unit overseeing these activities. The home page also includes a link to the comprehensive website on this subject – **PlainLanguage.gov** – which provides additional background as well as many examples throughout government.

Current Activities

The RRB has a Learning Management System (LMS) that includes an online training platform known as *RRB University*. The LMS helps the RRB manage and plan training activities. It includes a specific online course on the tenets of the Plain Writing Act, along with several other in-person and online courses on the subject of written communication.

In the past year, 44 employees completed the Plain Writing Act training. (The vast majority of agency employees first completed this training in 2016, when initially offered, with some subsequently repeating it as a refresher course.) Most of the employees who completed this training were new hires, with others taking it after being promoted into different positions with added responsibility for written communication. While this is a slightly smaller number than in recent years, it reflects reduced hiring by the agency and challenges associated with the coronavirus pandemic.

The pandemic also led the RRB to implement a maximum-telework policy, which limited training to online classes. In the past year, 25 employees completed “Audience and Purpose in Business Writing,” 18 employees completed “Clarity and Conciseness in Business Writing,” and 13 completed an entry-level course titled “Business Writing.” Altogether, agency employees took eight online courses related to effective writing, with other online courses including “Troublesome Words and Phrases” and “Improving Technical Writing Skills.”

An ongoing activity at the RRB is the review of all written communications, including letters, publications, and online content, to make them clearer, following guidelines and best practices related to plain language and writing. The focus in recent years has been on online content, as it represents an increasing share of direct customer communication, including improved appearance and navigation of **RRB.gov**. In addition, the agency paid particular attention in the past year to printed and online communication related to the pandemic, including press releases and frequently asked questions regarding benefits provided in coronavirus relief legislation.

Questions or requests for additional information can be directed to Director of Public Affairs Michael P. Freeman as follows.

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