

## US Government passes Plain Language Act

It's official. The government must write in clear English. In October 2010 Congress passed the Plain Language Act requiring federal employees to write tax returns, aid applications and forms in easy-to-understand language. The Act could make government more transparent and save millions of dollars.

No one questions the beneficial aims of the Act. The Senate passed the Act unanimously in an unusual show of bipartisan support. So the politicians and the taxpayers want clear writing – but can federal employees deliver? They might need some help from StyleWriter to break the habits built up over a couple of hundred years of Washington-speak.

As far back as 1817 Thomas Jefferson lamented that when his fellow lawyers drafted statues they insisted on:

*“making every other word a ‘said’ or ‘aforesaid’, and saying everything over two or three times, so that nobody but we in the craft can untwist the diction to find out what it means.”*

- In 1972 President Nixon decreed all agency rules to be in layman's terms.
- In 1977 President Carter ordered all agencies to use plain English.
- In 1998 President Clinton launched the plain-language initiative.
- In 2010 President Obama signed the Plain Language Act.

The Federal Government has worked hard to improve the clarity of documents. Many agencies have run plain language initiatives, including training courses. Yet few federal employees consistently write in plain English and a StyleWriter audit of government documents shows most writers have a poor style.

The benefits of clear writing are well documented. Clear writing leads to better administration, less wasted time, reduced paperwork and greater efficiency. For example, the US Navy estimated that if its employees wrote in plain language it would save up to \$350 million a year. Veteran Benefits Administration saved \$40,000 by redrafting one letter in plain language.

Source: Joe Kimble – Writing for Dollars

## StyleWriter and the Electronic Writing Course

Several agencies already use **StyleWriter** to encourage clear writing. Federal Aviation Administration, for example, has a 1,500-user license to StyleWriter. Farm Credit Administration has a StyleWriter license for all its employees. The

**Writing Course** – designed with advice from the government’s own Plain Language Action Network – uses federal government documents to teach the techniques needed to draft and edit document into a clear style. The Course means agencies can train employees at a fraction of the cost (from \$10 an employee for large licenses) of traditional writing courses.

Annetta Cheek, a former Chair of the government’s Plain Language Action Network, recommends our software solutions.

***I'd strongly recommend you look closely at the StyleWriter editing software. It transforms writing into clear, concise and readable style - a style lacking in most documents, including the federal government. This software is so much more useful than the grammar checker and the new version 4 offers even more writing, proofreading and editing expertise.***

*I have been writing for the federal government for over 20 years. For the last 10 or so, I have been the chair of a movement to get the government to communicate more clearly with citizens. We call our initiative plain language, and we are on the web at: [www.plainlanguage.gov](http://www.plainlanguage.gov)*

***I have been using StyleWriter for almost 10 years, and would not send out a document without using this software.** I consider myself a good writer (don't most of us?). However, I need StyleWriter to remind me when, in the pressure of the moment, I slip and make some style errors I had hoped were eliminated from my writing long ago.*

*While it's not intended as a training program, I believe StyleWriter provides training in the best possible way - while you are doing your work. Every time it tells me I have used a hidden verb or a redundant expression, it is teaching me by showing me the style faults in my own writing, close to the time I created the material. Since the "correction" can come so quickly on the heels of the behavior, the training is maximally effective.*

*Because of this training ingredient, StyleWriter helps me not only by improving individual pieces of writing, but also by improving my writing style generally. I find that I now get better scores the first time I run StyleWriter on a document than I did when I first started using the software. This is satisfying - I am years away from getting a report card, and I enjoy getting one again, especially since it's usually a good one.*

**Annetta Cheek**  
**Former Chair of the Plain Language Action Network**

## **Government Agencies around the World use StyleWriter**

It’s not only the Federal Government that’s using StyleWriter. Government agencies in Australia, Britain, Canada, South Africa and most English-speaking nations use the program. State agencies have also found it transforms writing style. For example, the City of Los Angeles invested over \$200,000 in StyleWriter to guarantee its employees write clearly. One senior manager summarized StyleWriter’s usefulness:

*The software guides the writer to use active verbs, short sentences and simple language. Plain language is language that everyone in your audience can understand. It means writing in a way that is easy to read, looks good, is organized logically, and is understandable the first time you read it.*

*StyleWriter helped me clarify, simplify and cut excess words. The software taught me to change my own writing habits.*

**Otto Solorzano**  
Chief Deputy Director – City of Los Angeles

## **How to Guarantee a Successful Plain Language Training**

Any training, especially training trying to change the culture of an organization, is only effective if the trainee puts into effect the lessons learned. Most plain language training fails because:

1. Trainees forget many of the ideas presented in the course.
2. Trainees don't have the knowledge and experience to know the thousands of words and phrases, passive verbs and hidden verbs that need editing in typical government documents.
3. Managers often undermine plain language initiatives by insisting their subordinates write in their style rather than plain language.

Audits of writing samples taken before and after plain language training show most trainees remember a few basic ideas such as shortening sentences and avoiding a dozen or so words or phrases. Soon, even these ideas fall by the wayside.

Our Writing Course based on federal government writing samples and StyleWriter is a cost-effective way to guarantee permanent improvement in employee writing style. StyleWriter is the perfect backup to plain language training. It works on the employees' own writing, showing how to edit each sentence. Trainees don't have to remember dozens of rules and thousands of words and phrases to avoid – StyleWriter does this consistently in every document. As well as improving the clarity and readability of the document, each StyleWriter edit, reinforces the lessons of plain language training.

StyleWriter helps in other ways as well. Each US federal agency can adapt StyleWriter to suit its specific needs by creating a **house style**. The house style adds thousands of specific rules to StyleWriter such as checking for the correct capitalization of all federal agencies or the preferred way of writing dates. In this way, each agency can buy StyleWriter with the rules already built in.

StyleWriter can also audit the current style of government documents and how writing style improves. The program's **Statistical Archive** lets each agency report on the specific progress it has made in changing the writing style of its employees.

Several agencies already use StyleWriter to encourage clear writing. Federal Aviation Administration, for example, has a 1,500-user license to StyleWriter. Farm Credit Administration has a StyleWriter license for all its employees. Are our software solutions the key to writing plain language in your government agency? We're confident StyleWriter and the Electronic Writing Course can guarantee your agency writes consistently in plain language.

Contact Editor Software at [info@editorsoftware.com](mailto:info@editorsoftware.com) for more information.