

How the Environmental Protection Agency is using software to transform the way it writes



The [Environmental Protection Agency](#) is using plain-language software tools to encourage staff to write in a clear style. One thousand employees are taking part in a pilot to train using a custom-designed Electronic Writing Course and an online editor, called StyleWriter to help put plain language into practice in every document.

EPA, like most Federal Government agencies, has worked hard to improve its written communications. Most notably, EPA has published scores of new and revised regulations in the plain-language style, breaking out of traditional models by organizing material for the reader in question-and-answer format. The Agency uses personal pronouns, such as 'you' to address the reader, focuses on the active voice and pares down long sentences and paragraphs. But no matter how much effort the Agency puts in to plain language training, a major problem remains—how do you train 15,000 people and then make sure they put the training into practice. Software may be the key to guaranteeing the success of any plain-language initiative.

When the [Plain Language Action Network](#) organized a demonstration of plain English software by UK-based company, [Editor Software](#), EPA decided to become the lead agency to test the software alternative to traditional training methods. EPA commissioned an Electronic Writing Course and bought a 1,000-user license to the StyleWriter editing package.

The Electronic Writing Course

Learning to write the plain-language style means breaking the habits so often found in writing to bring out people's natural communication skills. There are many ideas to learn—although most are common sense. People need to practice on relevant examples and learn from expert tuition.

Usually, this means one-day or two-day training courses for a dozen people. This traditional training is time-consuming, expensive and cannot reach everyone. One estimate is that fewer than one public official in every 100 has had training in clear writing.

The [Electronic Writing Course](#) EPA commissioned used 200 writing documents from government agencies. Crucial in designing the Course was the work of Annetta Cheek and Laurie Ford at the Plain Language Action Network. This cooperation meant the designers could cover everything staff need in plain language training. For example, there's an important section on "How to Write Clear Regulations," giving essential information for anyone drafting rules.

Tony Britten has been coordinating the plain-language software project at EPA.

After four years working with plain language, I was surprised by the many new ideas and techniques the Electronic Writing Course taught me. It's like sitting down one on one with a professional writer and getting instant feedback. That packs a lot of learning power into a short time. And the Writing Course is always right there at your desktop.

StyleWriter — the plain-language editor

To make sure staff put into practice the lessons they learn using the Electronic Writing Course, EPA has also invested in the [StyleWriter](#) editing program. This sits in the toolbar of the word-processing program ready to help anyone edit the document into plain English. It highlights everything that detracts from clear writing. The program measures and highlights passive verbs, hidden verbs, complex words, wordy phrases, long sentences and many more style faults. It also

highlights common slips of English, such as confused and misused words or hyphenation and word division errors.

One key way EPA uses StyleWriter is to set writing standards. For example, StyleWriter gives every document a clear style score.

The best plain-language writing scores under 20. Publications such as Time, Newsweek, the Washington Post and Scientific American consistently score under 20. By contrast, a random sample of over 200 government documents showed the average style score was 90, with some scoring as high as 160 — eight times the recommended level. Only one in fifty government documents was in plain language.

Yet any document can be in plain language — without taking away content. Here's an example.

Every agency has a problem in improving writing standards and adopting plain language. StyleWriter can immediately show if writers are using plain language, where the specific faults lie and how they can break any bad writing habits they have. People who use StyleWriter on their documents soon learn the skills needed to write well.

Tony Britten has high hopes for these computer programs to change the culture and help staff write to the highest standards. “The demand from staff to get on our pilot has been strong. The software will help anyone who wants to write well. It means we have now given staff the tools to write in plain language rather than just wishfully encouraging them to do so.”

For more information on Plain English visit www.editorsoftware.com

TYPICAL GOVERNMENT STYLE

The Agency established dedicated commuter lanes (DCLs) to facilitate the processing of pre-approved, frequent boarder travelers. The DCLs are lanes dedicated to travelers who have passed rigorous background checks that qualify them for expedited entry and minimal inspection. This and other boarder processing initiatives will result in the majority of travelers being cleared through the process in 30 minutes or less except on weekends and at peak traffic times. At the same time, we will safeguard against the introduction of harmful pests and diseases of animals and plants.

STYLEWRITER'S ANALYSIS

Words: **88**
Style Index: **102 (Bad)**

PLAIN ENGLISH REDRAFT

The Agency set up dedicated commuter lanes to help process pre-approved, frequent boarder travelers who have passed vigorous background checks to qualify for quick entry and minimum inspection. With other initiatives, most of these travelers will clear in 30 minutes or less, except on weekends and peak traffic times. There are safeguards against introducing harmful pests and animal and plant diseases.

STYLEWRITER'S ANALYSIS

Words: **61 (30% shorter)**
Style Index: **16 (Excellent)**