

Plain Writing Act Compliance Report of the Farm Credit Administration

April 15, 2020

FCA staff who are responsible for Plain Writing Act compliance

- Mike Stokke, director of the Office of Congressional and Public Affairs, is the senior agency official for plain writing. His email address is stokkem@fca.gov.
- Emily Yaghmour, deputy director of the Office of Congressional and Public Affairs, is the agency's plain language coordinator. Her email address is yaghmoure@fca.gov.

FCA documents covered by the Plain Writing Act

FCA has identified the following agency documents as covered by the Plain Writing Act:

- Reports of Examination
- Informational Memorandums
- Bookletters
- Policy Statements
- Legal Opinions
- Major agency reports, such as the Annual Report on the Farm Credit System, the Performance and Accountability Report, and the Annual Proposed Budget and Performance Plan
- Text for the website
- Regulatory preambles

The following table provides more detail about some of these documents.

Table 1. FCA documents to which plain language principles are applied

Publication type	Audience	How we ensure these documents comply
All major agency reports, all of which are available on our website.	<p>These documents have multiple audiences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representatives of the Farm Credit System • Members of Congress • Media representatives • The general public 	Staff members in the Office of Congressional and Public Affairs edit these documents. They are well trained in the principles of plain writing.
Reports of Examination — presented to directors on the boards of the institutions we regulate	<p>Directors on the boards of Farm Credit System institutions review these reports. FCA examiners use these reports to document findings from the exams they perform.</p> <p>Approximately 10 to 20 individuals (the institution's directors and members of management) review each report. The System consists of 73 lending institutions.</p>	Supervisory examiners now review these reports specifically for their clarity.
Guidance documents for Farm Credit System institutions, including informational memorandums and board policy statements.	<p>Directors on the boards of Farm Credit System institutions, as well as members of management, review these documents. The number of readers range from 1,000 to 2,000.</p> <p>However, because these documents are posted on our website, the general public may also read these documents.</p>	<p>Each major office division in the agency now has a designated plain writing reviewer. The reviewer for the office that is primarily responsible for producing a particular document reviews it for clarity.</p> <p>Frequently, the office division requests the agency's plain writing coordinator to edit documents for plain language.</p>
News releases, issued electronically and posted on the agency's website	The primary audiences include agricultural and finance reporters and representatives of the Farm Credit System. We send our releases to more than 300 reporters in print and broadcasting.	<p>Since long before the Plain Writing Act was enacted, we have worked hard to write our releases in journalistic style.</p> <p>As a result of plain writing training, FCA writers and editors are more knowledgeable of the principles of plain writing.</p>
FCA website	<p>The audiences for our website include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representatives of the Farm Credit System • Borrowers and potential borrowers • Members of the media • Members of Congress • The general public 	In 2018, we revamped our website. We reviewed all the pages for plain writing and rewrote much of the content. The vendor that worked with us to revamp the site also provided some plain writing guidance.

Publication type	Audience	How we ensure these documents comply
FCA Today, the agency's electronic employee newsletter	The agency's workforce of about 300 individuals constitutes the audience for the newsletter.	Individuals from across the agency submit content for the newsletter to the Office of Congressional and Public Affairs. OCPA editors provide plain-language edits to the articles and clear these edits with the article authors.

How we communicate Plain Writing Act requirements to staff

On FCA's intranet site, we maintain a plain writing SharePoint site as part of the FCA intranet. In March 2020, we redesigned this page to make it more user-friendly and engaging. The purpose of the page is as follows:

- List the documents we produce that must comply with the Plain Writing Act
- Provide employees with information about training
- Provide links to many plain writing resources
- Refer employees to StyleWriter, a tool on the agency's network that employees can use to help them evaluate the clarity of their documents
- Encourage submissions for consideration for the annual FCA Plain Writing Award

In 2016, we launched a Publication Resources SharePoint site. It contains the agency style guide in HTML. Chapter 2 of the style guide focuses on writing in plain language. We added a link to the style guide from the homepage of our intranet site for quick access.

Also, since April 2019, we have published the following articles in FCA Today, the agency's electronic employee newsletter:

- "Use Stylewriter to improve your writing," Feb. 20, 2020
- "OCPA hosts training on Associated Press style," Feb. 5, 2020
- "Mirror, mirror, on the wall, whose is the plainest of them all? Plain Writing Award submissions due Oct. 31," Oct. 2, 2019
- "OCPA announces winner of final editing challenge," Aug. 7, 2019
- "OCPA announces winner of editing challenge for week 7, releases challenge for week 8," June 25, 2019
- "OCPA announces winner of editing challenge for week 6, releases challenge for week 7," May 29, 2019
- "OCPA announces winner of editing challenge for week 5, releases challenge for week 6," May 16, 2019
- "Lead by example: Use plain language," May 7, 2019
- "OCPA announces winner of editing challenge for week 4, releases challenge for week 5," May 2, 2019
- "OCPA announces winner of editing challenge for week 3, releases challenge for week 4," April 25, 2019

Since starting the program in 2011, we have provided training in various ways. The following table shows training that has occurred since April 15, 2016.

Table 2. FCA plain writing training, April 2019 – April 2020

Type of Training	Number of Employees Trained	Date
<p>Online training for new employees. To provide plain writing training to new employees, we have adapted Kathryn Catania’s plain writing PowerPoint presentation for our purposes. Leland A. Strom, the agency’s Chairman and CEO from 2008 to 2012, narrated the slides. Every new employee is required to view the presentation online.</p> <p>We have also posted the training on our Plain Writing SharePoint page for use by all employees.</p>	27	April 15, 2019 – March 31, 2020
<p>“Can you fix this sentence.” This is an article series published by the Office of Congressional and Public Affairs in FCA Today, the agency’s newsletter. It was introduced in March 2019. Each article in the series published a sentence with several grammatical, punctuation, and style errors. We invited employees to try to identify the errors and send in their corrections or revisions. We selected the best submission and published the name of the person who submitted it in the article for the following week. We also published the revised sentence and discussed the errors in the original sentence.</p>	Undetermined	March 26, 2019 – August 7, 2019
<p>Online training, which consists of two courses, Writing I and Writing II. These courses, which were developed by a contractor several years ago for use by FCA employees, cover many of the principles in the Federal Plain Language Guidelines. These two courses are part of the mandatory training that all associate examiners receive when they join FCA.</p>	<p>Writing I course: none</p> <p>Writing II course: none</p>	New course materials are in development. New associate examiners are learning concepts on the job and through Communications I and II courses.
<p>Editing course. OCPA hired Charles Long of Business Training Works to provide two in-person half-day training sessions to a group of examiners in the Bloomington, Minnesota, field office. The course taught participants what to look for when editing a document, and it covered many of the principles of plain writing.</p>	Approximately 20	May 16 and 17, 2019
<p>Brief plain writing refresher. The agency’s plain language coordinator made a half-hour presentation at a staff meeting of the Office of Regulatory Policy, which produces many of the agency’s guidance documents. The presentation provided before-and-after examples from agency documents to demonstrate how to use plain language principles to improve clarity.</p>	Approximately 12	February 19, 2020

Type of Training	Number of Employees Trained	Date
<p>Live agencywide webinar titled “Grammar Girl’s Guide to Beginner and Intermediate AP Style.” In this live webinar streamed to our five office locations, Mignon Fogarty (Grammar Girl) explained the most important rules of Associated Press style, reinforced concepts with quick quizzes, and took live questions. Many of the concepts focused on plain writing principles.</p>	<p>Approximately 30</p>	<p>February 25, 2020</p>

Note: In 2011, each of the agency’s senior managers identified all employees in his or her office who either write or edit documents that would be considered covered by the Plain Writing Act. In all, 57 employees were identified. FCA made plain writing training mandatory for all of these employees. Ninety-three percent of these employees received the training.

Awards program

We have developed a plain writing awards program for which offices submit documents that are exemplary for their clarity. The agency presents annual awards to the authors of the winning documents.

Last year (2019) was the seventh consecutive year that we presented plain writing awards. The winning documents were a series of two newsletter articles on cybersecurity and a report of examination.

Clearance process

Staff in the Office of Congressional and Public Affairs reviews and edits many agency documents for clarity and ease of use. To measure the effectiveness of these reviews, we sometimes run the StyleWriter application on documents before and after reviewing them.

Most agency documents receive plain language reviews within their originating offices. All major offices in the agency have designated plain writing reviewers. These individuals review covered documents produced by their offices to ensure that they are plainly written. FCA’s plain writing coordinator held a training session for the reviewers in March 2013.

In addition, the plain writing reviewer for our Office of Examination added the following element to an internal control document that FCA examiners must use when they review reports of examination:

Was the report edited for plain language with consideration of the following?

- *Written for the average reader*
- *Organized to serve the reader’s needs*
- *Uses headings*
- *Uses “you” and other pronouns*
- *Uses active voice*
- *Uses short sections and sentences*
- *Uses simplest tense possible*

- *Uses base verbs, not hidden verbs*
- *Omits excessive words*
- *Uses “must” to express requirements*
- *Places words carefully*
- *Uses lists and tables*
- *Uses no more than two or three subordinated levels*

Style guide

In late 2015, the Office of Congressional and Public Affairs worked with plain language consultant Ginny Redish to finalize a style guide for the use of all FCA employees. We modeled the style guide after the National Archives’ guide. For the most part, our guide follows the style conventions of the Associated Press.

In addition to providing guidance on punctuation, capitalization, and other style issues, the guide contains a section on plain writing. It includes many examples from FCA documents. In April 2016, we published the guide in a wiki library on the agency’s intranet site. The guide should be a valuable resource to all the agency’s writers and editors, and particularly to our plain writing reviewers.

Implementation timeline

We set up our plain writing program in 2011. The following table shows a timeline for the implementation of the program.

Table 3. FCA’s timeline for implementing the Plain Writing Act

Action	Target Deadline	Results
The agency will train all employees who write or edit documents covered by the Plain Writing Act.	April 13, 2012	Ninety-three percent of the 57 employees for whom training was mandatory have received training. In addition, 54 employees for whom the training was not mandatory have received training.
FCA will complete an online training presentation that will serve as mandatory plain writing training for all new FCA employees.	April 13, 2013	The agency began using the online training presentation in August 2012.
The agency will implement an awards program to recognize examples of plain writing.	April 13, 2013	The chair of the FCA board approved creation of the plain writing award program in March 2013, and the awards program was announced to senior managers in April.
FCA will provide resources and guidance to plain writing reviewers throughout the agency.	April 13, 2013	FCA held a training session for five plain writing reviewers on March 20, 2013.

Action	Target Deadline	Results
In July 2013, FCA announced the 2013 FCA Plain Writing Award in its electronic employee newsletter. The announcement encouraged employees to submit documents to be considered for the award. In November, a panel of reviewers from across FCA gathered to review and judge 11 submissions.	December 2013	In a ceremony on Dec. 11, 2013, FCA board chair Jill Long Thompson presented plain writing awards to two FCA employees.
On Oct. 29, 2014, we hired Ginny Redish, renowned plain language expert and author of "Letting Go of the Words," to deliver a half-day workshop to FCA employees.	Oct. 29, 2014	Approximately 30 employees, including many examiners and attorneys, attended the training. We collected 23 surveys, ranking the workshop as "excellent" or "very good."
In October 2014, FCA employees submitted 14 documents for consideration for the 2014 Plain Writing Award. The panel of judges selected a winning document written by two FCA employees.	December 2014	In a ceremony on Dec. 11, 2014, FCA board chair Jill Long Thompson presented Plain Writing Awards to two FCA employees.
In October 2015, FCA employees submitted 10 documents for consideration for the 2015 Plain Writing Award. The panel of judges selected a winning document.	December 2015	In the agency's annual awards ceremony on Dec. 9, 2015, FCA board chairman Kenneth A. Spearman presented the author of the document with the 2015 Plain Writing Award.
In October 2016, FCA employees submitted 10 documents for consideration for the 2016 Plain Writing Award. The panel of judges selected a winning document.	December 2016	In the agency's annual awards ceremony on Dec. 8, 2016, FCA board chairman Dallas P. Tonsager presented the author of the document with the 2016 Plain Writing Award.
In October 2017, FCA employees submitted seven documents, or portions of documents, for consideration for the 2017 Plain Writing Award. Using StyleWriter statistics on each document and a checklist from plainlanguage.gov, the panel of judges selected two winning documents.	December 2017	In the agency's annual awards ceremony on Dec. 14, 2017, FCA board member Jeff Hall presented the authors of two documents with the 2017 Plain Writing Award.
In spring 2018, we hired a contractor to help us redesign and upgrade our website. Part of this process involves reviewing the site for plain language and improving the clarity of web content.	May 2018	We completed the redesign and upgrade of our website. In March 2019, the project won a website award from PR News.
In October 2018, FCA employees submitted 12 documents, or portions of documents, for consideration for the 2018 Plain Writing Award. Using StyleWriter statistics on each document and a checklist from plainlanguage.gov, the panel of judges selected two winning documents.	December 2018	In the agency's annual awards ceremony on Dec. 13, 2018, FCA board member Jeff Hall presented three co-authors of one document with the 2018 Plain Writing Award.

Action	Target Deadline	Results
In October 2019, FCA employees submitted 13 documents, or portions of documents, for consideration for the 2019 Plain Writing Award. Using StyleWriter statistics on each document and a checklist from plainlanguage.gov, the panel of judges selected two winning documents.	December 2019	In the agency's annual awards ceremony on Dec. 12, FCA board member Jeff Hall presented the authors of two documents with the 2019 Plain Writing Award.

Agency's plain writing website

[Plain Writing at FCA](http://www.fca.gov/home/plainwriting.html) is the agency's official plain writing web page. It is located at www.fca.gov/home/plainwriting.html. A link to the page is available from our homepage.

Our plain writing page contains a link to the [FCA Plain Writing Act Implementation Plan](#), which was published on July 8, 2011.

To give the public an opportunity to report FCA documents that are difficult to understand, the agency's plain writing web page provides contact information for Emily Yaghmour, the agency's plain writing coordinator.

As of yet, we have received no feedback from the public, either positive or negative, through our plain writing web page.