

Social Security's 2024 Plain Language Compliance Report

March 2025





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INTRODUCTION

At Social Security, our commitment to plain language is foundational to our service. By using clear and concise language in our correspondence — be it letters, emails, or reports — we aim to enhance understanding for every person who interacts with our agency.

The importance of drafting messages that are easily understood cannot be overstated. When recipients can grasp the content of our communications on their first reading, we reduce the potential for confusion and frustration. This not only streamlines the user experience but also minimizes the need for follow-up communications, which can often take valuable time for both the agency and the recipient.


Employing plain language also fosters transparency in our interactions. It ensures that our messages are accessible to all people, regardless of their background or level of familiarity with our programs and services. This clarity strengthens trust and reinforces our commitment to serving the public with integrity.

The use of plain language is more than a best practice; it is an essential principle that enhances our service delivery and cultivates a more informed and empowered community.

“...our commitment to plain language is foundational to our service.”



LEADING BY EXAMPLE



Social Security's commitment to plain language exemplifies our dedication to transparency and accessibility in communication. For nearly a decade, we have maintained a leading position in federal government communications, consistently achieving high ratings on the Center for Plain Language's *Federal Plain Language Report Card*. Our accolades are not merely metrics; they reflect our mission to serve the public effectively.

Using plain language principles is crucial, especially given the complexity of the topics we address. We understand that the information we provide impacts the lives of millions, and it is imperative that this information is conveyed in a manner that is straightforward and understandable.

The *Plain Writing Act of 2010* mandates that government communication be accessible to the public, ensuring that individuals can read, understand, and use

the information provided. Our motivation extends beyond legal compliance; it embodies a core aspect of our customer service philosophy.

Our aim is simple: to create written materials — whether they are notices, webpages, reports, or forms — that a reader can understand during their initial engagement. We continually strive to enhance the clarity of our communications, recognizing that simplicity is key to effective information sharing. By prioritizing plain language, we foster trust, empower our customers, and promote a positive experience when interacting with our agency.

We are pleased to present our *2024 Plain Writing Compliance Report*, which highlights our agency's compliance with the Act. The report also includes specific details about our accomplishments and samples of effective plain language.

WHO WE SERVE

Social Security serves:

- 185 million workers who are covered under Social Security, and
- almost 69 million Americans who receive monthly Social Security benefits, totaling about \$1.6 trillion in benefits.

It is for them that we strive to explain our complex programs clearly and make it easier to understand.

In addition to the public, Social Security communicates on a regular basis with White House staff members, Congressional offices, state and local government agencies, advocacy groups, and third-party groups and organizations. Clear and concise communication is vital to providing outstanding customer service to these offices and organizations.

We recognize that many components across the agency communicate with the public. So, we provide the following plain writing resources to all employees:

- Plain Language Hub.
- Plain Writing website.
- Commissioner's Writing Center.
- Quality Initiative for Commissioner's Correspondence (QUICC) Handbook.


Additionally, we:

- Train agency employees about the *Plain Writing Act*, plain writing best practices, and the use of available tools.
- Raise awareness among agency employees, encouraging a commitment to plain language.



- Review written materials from other components across the agency to make sure they adhere to plain language principles.
- Maintain and respond to inquiries received about plain language from agency employees and the public.

We encourage agency employees and the public to submit feedback about our written communications and plain language efforts to [*PlainLanguage@ssa.gov*](mailto:PlainLanguage@ssa.gov).

A photograph of two women, one Black and one White, looking at a document together. The Black woman is on the left, wearing a white top and large hoop earrings. The White woman is on the right, wearing a green top. They are both smiling and appear to be in a collaborative work environment.

“It is for them that we strive to explain our complex programs clearly and make it easier to understand.”

PLAIN LANGUAGE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Social Security has an efficient and effective Plain Language Program. In 2024, we continued to drive plain language principles and practices throughout the agency. Here are some of the priorities we have accomplished over the past year. We:

- Made plain language reviews a mandatory part of our agency's official notice review process.
- Reviewed an average of 69 pages (17,773 words) each month as part of the Plain Language Notice Review Process.
- Reviewed other written materials, such as forms, webpages, applications, screen language, text messages, and reports.
- Created a Plain Language Tracker to manage the notice review workload, key performance indicators, and other language reviews.
- Launched and maintained the *Plain Language Hub* — an internal, centralized location with plain language resources for employees, including training materials, articles, videos, and checklists.
- Produced a series of plain language videos promoting the benefits of plain language.





- Developed a series of articles, checklists, and resources to help educate agency employees about plain language and how it can benefit them in their work.
- Developed a Priorities Spreadsheet that documents and prioritizes our projects.
- Created a Plain Language Roadmap that provides a timeline for plain language projects and priorities.
- Developed and launched the Plain Language Communication Plan.
- Worked with the Office of Strategy, Learning and Workforce Development (OSLWD) to develop an agencywide plain language training.
- Participated in the agencywide strategic workgroups aimed at improving the agency's notices.
- Established an executive-level Plain Language Steering Committee to provide agencywide guidance, support, and buy-in on plain language priorities. Ratified the charter with executives throughout the agency.
- Simplified and redesigned this *Plain Language Compliance Report*.
- Documented work processes and began drafting Standard Operating Procedures for conducting plain language reviews and other workloads.
- Met with other components to create awareness about the Plain Language program and to establish partnerships.
- Participated in the broader plain language community of practice, participating in workshops, seminars, and activities with plain language professionals within and outside Social Security.

- Introduced and rolled out three organizational badges to recognize employees who completed plain language training or contributed to fostering clear communication within the agency. The badges appear on a person's internal profile. This initiative encourages engagement, celebrates achievements, and reinforces our commitment to spread the principles of plain language throughout the agency. The three badges include:

**Plain Language Explorer:**

This badge is earned by completing a course or attending a presentation conducted by the Plain Language Team.

**Plain Language Influencer:**

This badge is earned by actively participating in plain language activities, such as joining the Plain Language Team, plain language workgroups, or by demonstrating active involvement with plain language efforts.

**Plain Language**

Trailblazer: This badge is earned by employees who have supported our agency's plain language efforts by joining the Plain Language Team, serving a detail assignment with the plain language team, or showcasing plain language in a big way.

“...we continued to drive plain language principles and practices throughout the agency.”



HOW WE EXECUTE OUR PLAIN LANGUAGE PROGRAM

In 2024, the day-to-day operations of our Plain Language Program was managed by the Plain Language Team within Social Security's Office of Communications.

The team focused its efforts on notice language reviews, development of the Plain Language Hub resource center, collaboration, training, and outreach. Our team members are skilled in writing, editing, leadership, organization, administration, and management.

In 2024, we established the executive-level Plain Language Steering Committee that includes executives from throughout our agency. The Steering Committee ratified its charter in December 2024 and meets regularly to discuss plain language efforts and priorities. Subgroups within the committee meet to work on specific topics related to the Plain Language Action Plan. The Steering Committee helps with outreach and raises awareness of plain language principles throughout the agency.



PLAIN LANGUAGE RESOURCES



The ***Plain Language Hub*** is an online tool where employees can access a variety of resources, which include articles, fact sheets, videos, best practices, and links to additional plain language sources.



The ***Commissioner's Writing Center***, an online resource for employees, promotes techniques to improve grammar and writing style preferences to ensure agency correspondence is clear to the public.



The ***Quality Initiative for Commissioner's Correspondence Handbook*** includes guidelines to prepare, review, and submit correspondence for signatures of the Commissioner and other executives, with examples of proper formatting for letters and memorandums.



The ***Plain Language Team*** provides trainings, briefings, resources, and review services across the agency about plain language. We are developing universal *Plain Language Guidelines* that can be used by all employees. Members of the team make themselves available to assist people seeking plain language guidance.



Plain Language Training is offered by the Office of Strategy, Learning, and Workforce Development to all employees. This includes video on demand, online lessons, instructor-led courses, books, and additional plain language resource materials.

TELL US HOW WE'RE DOING

Our goal is to communicate with the public in a clear, organized way. We encourage members of the public and agency employees to submit comments and suggestions to PlainLanguage@ssa.gov.

We benchmark our plain language practices against those of other agencies. For example, in preparation for our redesign of this year's Compliance Report, we studied the published *Compliance Reports* for other federal agencies.

We reviewed plain language practices of both the private and public sector. We researched best practices of plain language academia and experts and the Community of Practice.



Federal Plain Language Report Card

2013 - 2022

Year	Organizational Compliance	Writing and Design Quality
2013	A	A
2014	A	B
2015	A+	A
2016	n/a	B+
2017	n/a	A+
2018	A+	A
2019	A+	A
2020	A+	B
2021	A+	B+
2022	A+	A

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The *Federal Plain Language Report Card* is a measure of each federal agency's level of success, and we strive to make sure our written materials rise to the high standards required to earn favorable marks. In the years the Center for Plain Language graded Social Security, we have achieved high marks.

We also consider awards and honorable mentions in the annual ClearMark awards to be a measure of success.

The Center for Plain Language has recognized us several times and even cited our writing as an example to follow.

Perhaps the best measure of success is seeing more and more requests from throughout the agency for plain language reviews of written materials. The result is that more of our written communications are provided in language that is easy to read, understand, and use.

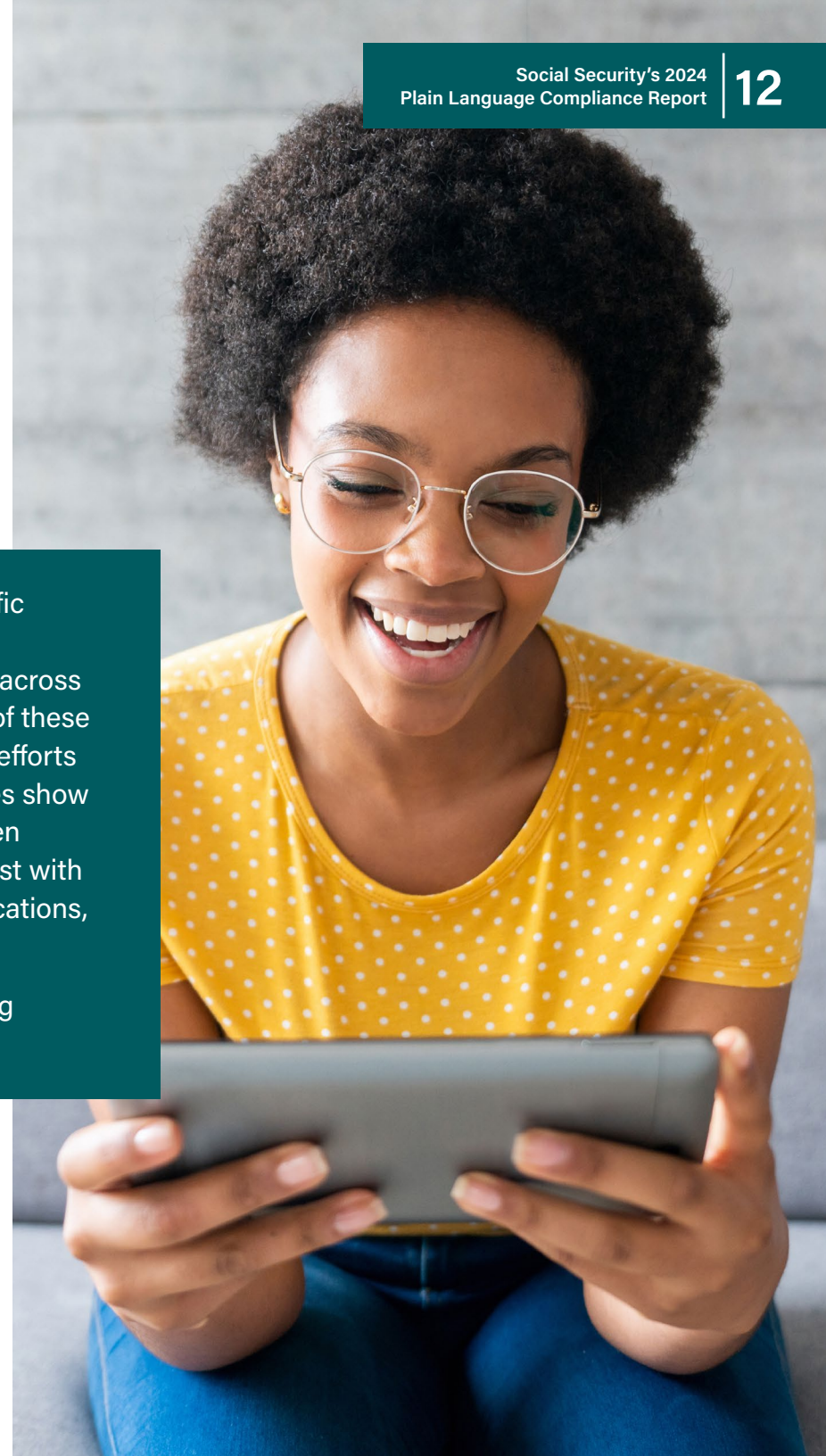
TRANSPARENT REPORTING

Each year, we publish an annual *Plain Language Compliance Report*. You are reading our 2024 Compliance Report, published in March 2025.

The Office of Communications drives the effort, but we do it with the support of countless employees throughout our agency. The following are component-specific examples of communications our agency created using plain writing principles.

Although released by the specific components, many of these documents reflect cooperation across teams and departments. Each of these examples reflects plain writing efforts across the agency. These entries show our efforts to improve our written communication products not just with materials created by Communications, but throughout the agency.

We included examples of writing samples in Appendix A.



OFFICE OF THE CHIEF ACTUARY

Email: Response to members of the public

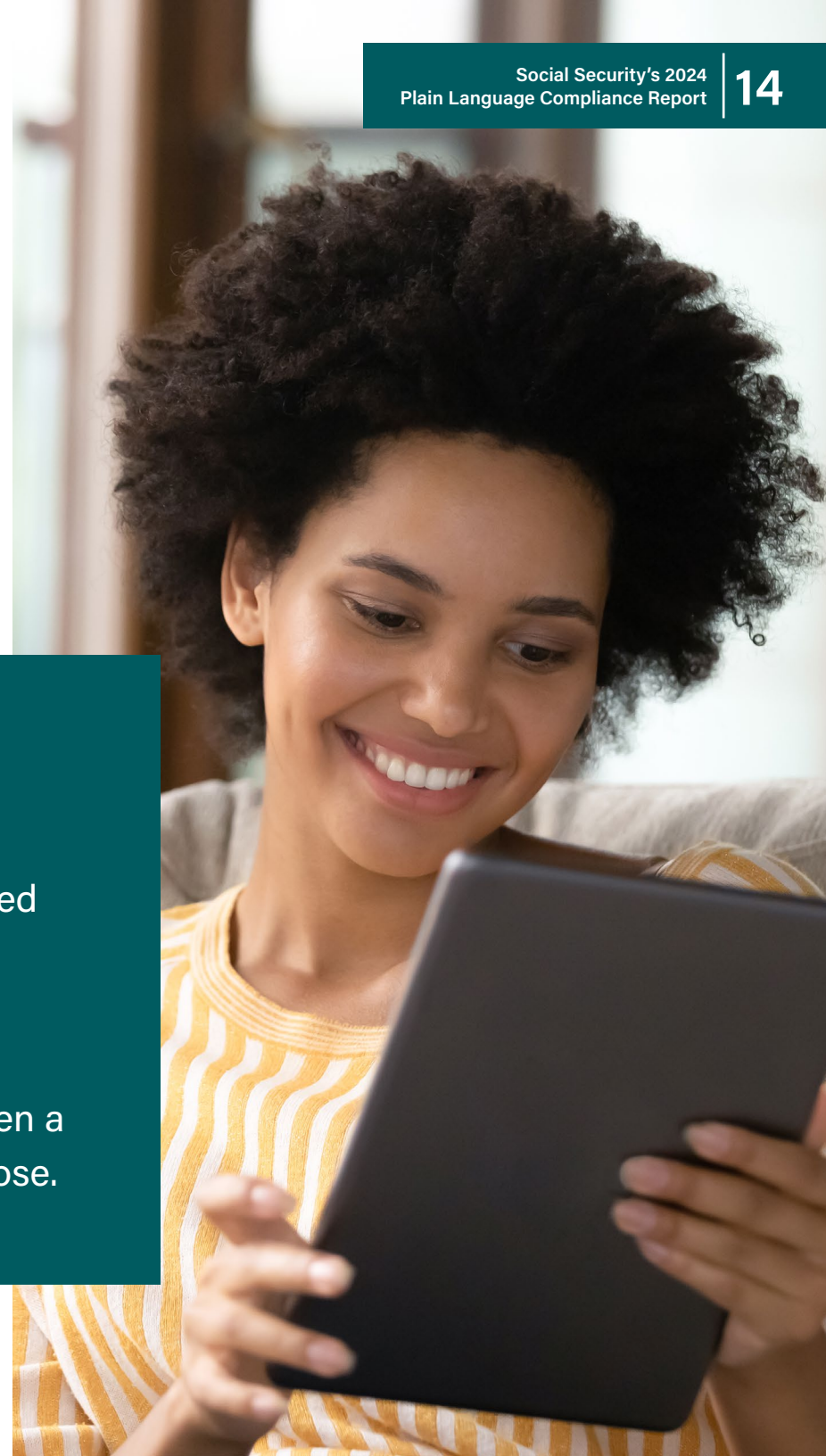
When replying to questions we receive from the public, we keep the response concise, informative, and direct. Multiple reviewers check the response to ensure the language is plain and easy to understand.



OFFICE OF GENERAL COUNSEL

Webpage: Submit an Electronic Consent to Disclose Records

In July 2024, the Office of General Counsel (OGC) updated the *Privacy Program - Submit an Electronic Consent to Disclose Records* webpage to be clearer and more user friendly. The page uses bulleted lists for readability and clarity. The revised page includes scenarios to show when a person can use the form and what records we can disclose.



OFFICE OF RETIREMENT AND DISABILITY POLICY

Policy & Guidance: Notice Language Clearance Process

The Notice Language Clearance Process provides detailed instructions to agency staff on the process to use when creating national notices. What was previously a content dense, wordy policy section now has easy-to-follow, step-by-step instructions organized into subchapters. Information is easier for employees to find and use.

Notice: 2025 Title II COLA Notice (Mailing and online)

The Title II Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA) notice provides recipients with specific information about their new payment amount and deductions after applying the COLA each year. We redesigned the notice for 2025 to make it easier for customers to find the information they need. The simplified notice uses plain language, is personalized, and provides exact dates and dollar amounts of a person's new payment amount.



OFFICE OF HEARING OPERATIONS

Brochure: How to Attend Your Hearing

In November 2024, we published the brochure *How to Attend Your Hearing*. Social Security mails the brochure to people who have requested a hearing. The brochure explains multiple ways people can attend a hearing before an administrative law judge. It explains the scheduling process in an easy-to-follow, step-by-step format.



OFFICE OF HUMAN RESOURCES

Policy & Guidance: Personnel Policy Manual (PPM) S630_9, Excused Absence and Administrative Leave

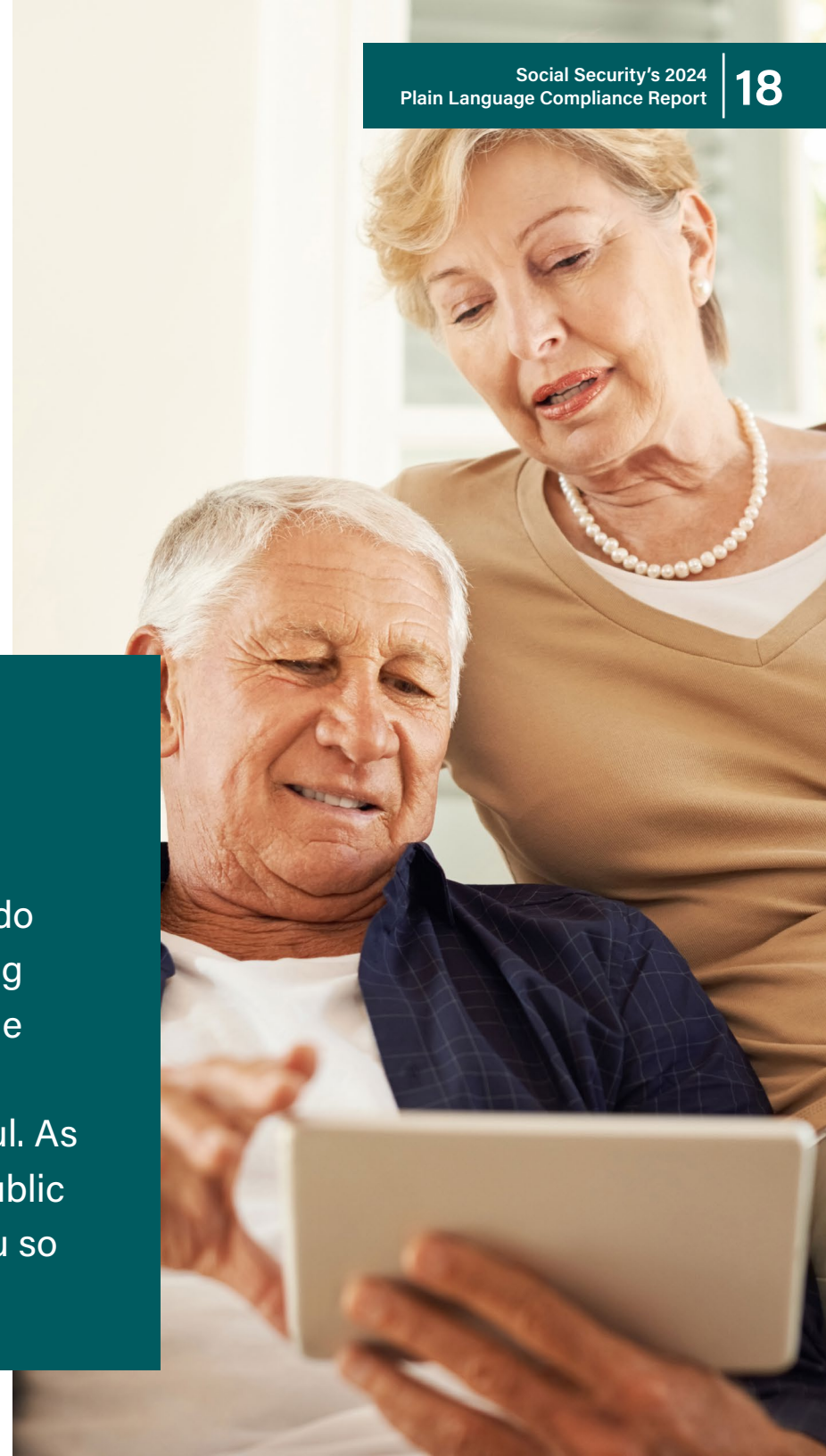
The Personnel Policy Manual (PPM) is the official Social Security manual that provides the personnel policies and procedures that supervisors need to fulfill their personnel-related responsibilities. The document breaks down complex policies to ensure clarity and ease of understanding by employees. The streamlined manual uses plain language to enhance readability so employees can easily understand and use the content.



OFFICE OF ANALYTICS, REVIEW, & OVERSIGHT

Blog Post: Protect Yourself from Identity Thieves (February 2024)

The blog post informs the public about how identity thieves steal and use personal information and what to do if they believe someone has stolen their identity. The blog uses a conversational, friendly tone but provides valuable information. The clear headlines make it easy to locate specific information. Each bulleted list is short and useful. As of November 2024, more than 12,000 members of the public have read this blog. One reader commented, "Thank you so much for the reminder. I needed that."



OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS

Blog Post: Social Security Video Connect: Connect with Us from Anywhere (May 2024)

This blog post shares services that can be provided by video appointment, how to make a video appointment, and how to connect. This blog message is clear, well organized, and easy to follow. This blog effectively complies with plain language principles for online guidance.

Blog Post: Your Clients Can Still Use Social Security Online When Traveling (July 2024)

This blog post offered customers practical advice on how to obtain information from the agency or use our services despite being on the move. This communication is clear and provides information that is easy to follow.

Blog Post: Celebrate Medicare's Anniversary with Greater Access to "Extra Help" With Prescription Costs (July 2024)

This blog provided the public an informative two-minute read about the inception of Medicaid and Medicare along with guidance on how to apply for Extra Help. This communication effectively used the plain language principles for online content. Its message is clear, easy to read and use.

"This blog post offered customers practical advice..."





Blog Post: Social Security Has Protected the Nation's families for 89 Years (August 2024)

This blog post provides a brief history of Social Security programs and offers insight into how Social Security has had an impact on one of our employees. Intended for the public, this blog effectively uses headings to organize its data and makes its content easy to digest.

Blog Post: Supplemental Security Income for Children with Disabilities (August 2024)

This blog post, which was guest authored by an advocate, offers parents helpful information about the Supplemental Security Income program and the Compassionate Allowance program. This message effectively incorporated plain language principles for online content. Its message is clear and easy to understand.

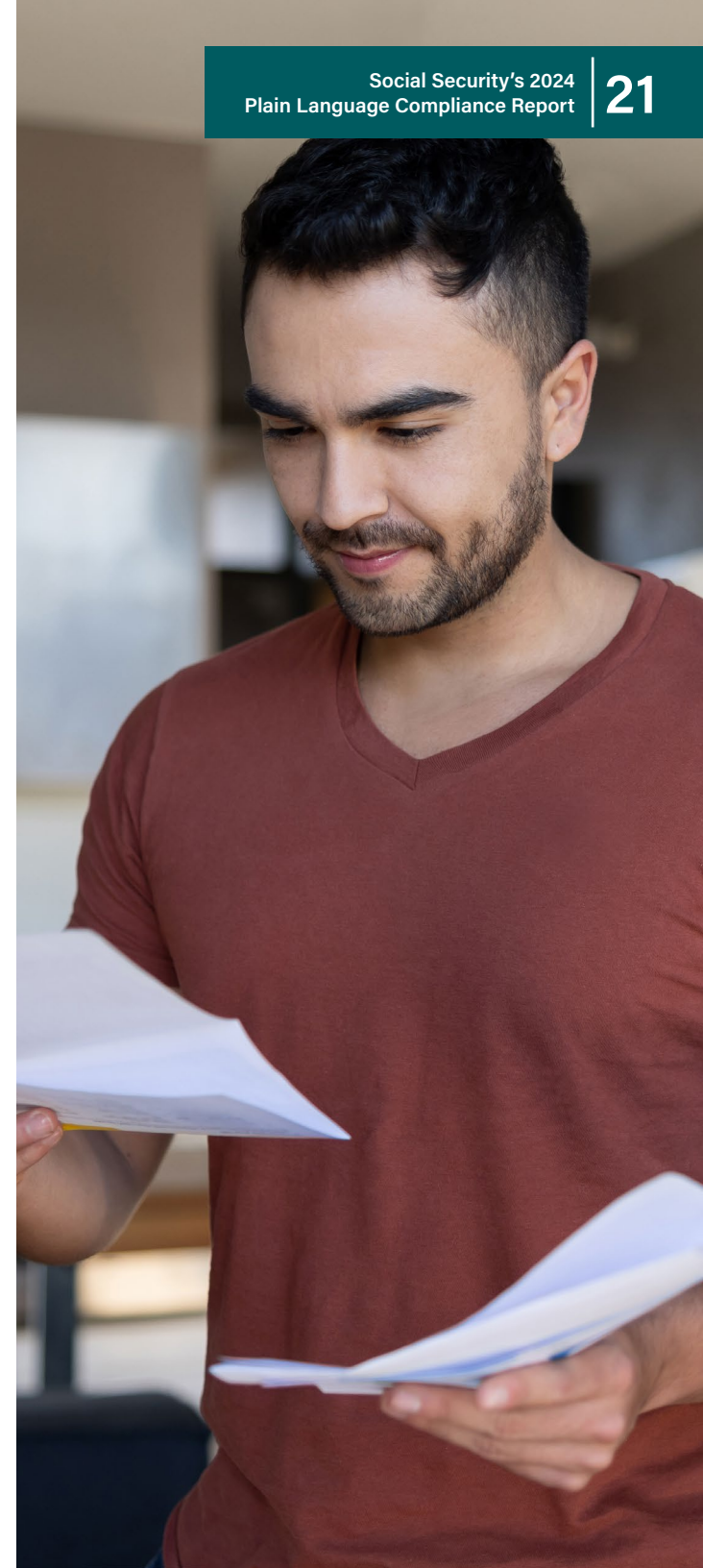
OFFICE OF OPERATIONS

Infographic: Technician Experience Dashboard (TED) Fact Sheet

The Technician Experience Dashboard (TED) is a web-based customer relationship management tool that allows our frontline employees to view, track, and complete customer transactions. The helpful fact sheet highlights the features of TED and explains the value it brings to improve our customer service. The document received positive feedback from the regions on the clarity of the message.

User Guide: Global Ad Hoc Tracker

The Office of Operations (HQ) prepared a detailed instructional PDF guide on The Global Ad Hoc Tracker (GAT). The GAT is a web-based application that allows for distribution of ad hoc workloads to regional offices, area director offices, and local offices. This PDF effectively incorporated plain language principles and organized its content appropriately for its targeted audience. The purpose of this PDF is to improve office staff understanding of this web application and serve as a desk reference for continuous use.





Policy & Guidance: Administrative Message (AM)-24028 Reminders on Retroactivity for Surviving Spouse Benefits

This well-organized administrative message meant for employees in our local offices, telephone service centers, and program service centers, provides guidance about retroactivity for Surviving Spouse Benefits. This communication effectively used headings, bullets, and appropriate spacing to enhance its content flow. The purpose of this administrative message was to reduce errors in processing claims.

Policy & Guidance: Online Social Security Number Application Program (oSSNAP) Instructions

Instructional materials that provide clear, easy-to-follow steps on how to apply for a social security card online. This was intended for foreign workers and international students to help with oSSNAP. This guide aligned with Social Security digital-first strategy of promoting online services.

Policy & Guidance: Online Social Security Number Application Program (oSSNAP) Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Developed a set of clear and concise **FAQs** document about the oSSNAP application addressing many of the questions our frontline employees were asked. The FAQs were shared extensively with foreign workers, international students, employers, and college administrators. This information was also shared online to extend its reach.

TRAINING

Office of Human Resources Business Writing and Grammar

In 2024, we offered a 2-day training course "Business Writing and Grammar" for employees. We offered this course during the months of June, July, and August with 91 employees attending. The business goals of this course included:

- Learning and avoiding grammatical pitfall errors,
- Exploring sentence structure, word usage, and appropriate punctuation, and
- Editing letters, memoranda, email, and other written materials so they are clear and concise.

Advanced Business Writing

In 2024, we offered a second 2-day training course "Advance Business Writing" for its employees. We also offered this course during the months of June, July, and August with 87 employees attending. The business goals of this course included:

- *Improving* writing techniques to increase readability and credibility,
- *Making* writing clear, concise, and correct, and
- *Improving* sentence construction and paragraph development.



Training: Effective Writing Guidelines

In October 2024, the Office of Analytics Review and Oversight (OARO) offered an “Effective Writing Guidelines” training course for its employees. The business goals of this training course were to explain the principles of effective writing, share tips for how to write effectively, and provide examples of effective writing as they pertain to OARO. The course objectives included: organizing your information, being concise, and keeping your message clear by careful word choice.

Complete staff work

The Office of Electronic Services & Technology (OEST) provided training to 16 staff members focused on all aspects of completed staff work. The training underscored the importance of writing for the audience and ensuring you do not use jargon or acronyms. It emphasized being clear, concise, and technically and grammatically correct as well as using proper punctuation.



APPENDIX A: PLAIN WRITING EXAMPLES

Forms and Publications

1. *Privacy Program: Submit an Electronic Consent to Disclose Records*
2. *How to Attend Your Hearing Brochure*

Blogs

1. *Social Security Matters Blog: Protect Yourself from Identity Thieves*
2. *Social Security Matters Blog: Celebrate Medicare's Anniversary With Greater Access to "Extra Help" With Prescription Costs*
3. *Social Security Matters Blog: Social Security Has Protected the Nation's Families for 89 Years*
4. *Social Security Matters Blog: Social Security Video Connect: Connect with Us from Anywhere*

Policy

1. *Notice Language Clearance Process*

APPENDIX B: PLAIN WRITING LINKS

This Appendix lists external plain language resources that support our agency compliance with the Plain Writing legislation.

- *Plain Writing Act of 2010 - Public Law 111 - 274*
- *Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Final Guidance on Implementing the Plain Language Act of 2010*
- *Federal plain language guidelines*

The following are external agency links that support compliance with the Plain Writing Legislation.

- *Social Security Administration Agency Notice Standard - NL 00610.000 - Social Security Administration (SSA) Notice Standards - Table of Contents*
- *What is Plain Language - NL 10602.115 - What is Plain Language?*
- *Social Security Administration Plain Writing Site - Plain Writing*



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