



# U.S. Railroad Retirement Board Plain Writing Act of 2010 Annual Compliance Report April 2014

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## **Background**

President Obama signed the Plain Writing Act of 2010 into law on October 13, 2010. This law 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 renewed this effort as a result of the Plain Writing Act, and are committed to meeting its goals and requirements. As a result, we plan to clearly communicate any and all information about our benefits and services, including how to go about obtaining them.

## **Initial Implementation**

In recent years, the RRB has used a training vendor affiliated with the Chicago Federal Executive Board, SkillPath Training, to help our employees improve their writing skills. SkillPath offers several different courses on various forms of written communication, and RRB employees typically attended such classes at a central offsite location. As a result of the Plain Writing Act, the RRB arranged three different onsite training courses by SkillPath in November 2010 and October 2012. These classes, attended by 140 employees, each included components on effective business writing, while the later course also included a component on correct use of grammar.

The RRB also created a page on its website dedicated to plain language, as required by the law, in July 2011. The page includes information on guidelines and best practices in this area, as well as a link to an e-mail address should a visitor to the web page have any questions, concerns or complaints about agency documents. The agency also posted its initial implementation and compliance plans on this page, and designated the RRB’s Public Affairs unit to oversee these efforts.

## **Current Activities**

In the past year, we have continued to review documents and online postings to make them simpler and more understandable as suggested by the guidelines and best practices on plain language. As part of these efforts, we have evaluated our most common and popular publications using a variety of benchmarks. These included the Flesch Reading Ease Test and the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level calculation. The sources for these statistics were Microsoft Word and a

separate grammar and writing analysis software program called RightWriter. These software programs also provide data on use of passive language and jargon, which are added measures of clarity and strength in writing.

In the past year, we have determined that use of the automated software program was showing diminishing returns due to the fact that many of the suggested edits to RRB publications had been already been addressed or incorporated in earlier reviews. While this software program was extremely helpful as part of initial efforts to make improvements to agency documents and publications, in the past year we have relied exclusively on our own well-trained employees to make additional improvements.

This is particularly helpful because the employees have a detailed understanding of the RRB's programs and customers, including certain terms and expressions that may seem overly complex to an outside observer. However, in virtually all instances, these terms from statute and regulation are vital to understanding our benefit programs and requirements and our customers understand these terms and their meaning. Still, in all of our publications, we also make sure that we include simplified explanations and examples of these terms so as to make the information comprehensible to the general public.

An example is the term "current connection," which basically means that an individual has not worked extensively outside the railroad industry in the period immediately before his or her retirement date. Railroad retirement benefits are also set up on a two-tier basis, with tier I roughly equivalent to social security benefits and tier II comparable to a private pension payment. While these terms are often flagged by software programs as jargon, an adequate explanation of them means that subsequent references are shorter yet more precise. The same applies to use of "RRB" in our written documents, as automated reviews typically discourage use of acronyms.

While the agency has found that improved word choice and shorter sentences have demonstrated relatively minor improvements in the Flesch Reading Ease Test, the RRB has seen more significant improvement in reducing use of passive voice in many publications. For example, in one of our most popular booklets, "Medicare for Railroad Workers and Their Families," the incidence of passive voice was relatively low to start, but we still reduced it from 14 percent to 10 percent. Also, in our "Agency Overview" pamphlet – one of our shorter but heavily used publications as it provides basic background on the RRB and its programs – the frequency dropped from 39 percent to 17 percent. However, in both cases, the Flesch measurement remained about the same. We do plan to continue making marginal improvements in the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level index. Virtually all of our publications are in a grade-level range between 14 and 16, although we typically bring the measurements down slightly in each successive revision.

As an example of improved language in the Medicare booklet, the 2012 version contained the following sentence: “Railroad workers are covered under the Medicare program just like workers covered under social security.”

Substituting active voice for passive voice and simplifying the sentence resulted in the following in the 2014 update: “The Medicare program covers railroad workers just like workers under social security.”

Similarly, the 2012 version contained the sentence, “Medicare is financed by a portion of railroad retirement tier I and social security payroll taxes paid by employees and employers.”

The same paragraph in the 2014 version reads, “A portion of railroad retirement tier I and social security payroll taxes paid by employees and employers finances Medicare.”

The 2012 “Agency Overview” contained the sentence, “The financing of the two systems is linked through a financial interchange under which, in effect, the portion of railroad retirement annuities that is equivalent to social security benefits is coordinated with the social security system.”

This 2014 version reads as, “A financial interchange links financing of the two systems by coordinating the portion of railroad retirement annuities that is equivalent to social security benefits with the social security system.”

And while the agency has made progress in improving and simplifying its public forms and publications, it also turned its attention to using plain and improved language for internal purposes. In March 2014, the RRB arranged for its outside training contractor to conduct a 2-day seminar on “How to Write Clear and Concise Policies and Procedures.” Twenty-five employees attended this seminar, which had originally been set for October 2013 but was rescheduled due to the government shutdown. In addition, while these policies and procedures tend to have limited external distribution, they nevertheless govern how the agency administers its benefit programs, which is a key consideration in making sure our customers understand our requirements and standards in applying for and obtaining benefits to which they are entitled.

### **Future Plans**

In the coming year, the RRB will continue to provide training, subject to availability of budgetary resources, on effective writing. This has been increasingly popular for both employees and managers, and has provided benefits with respect to plain language. Specifically, program staff members who have taken this training are suggesting changes that improve clarity and simplicity as part of their technical review of agency documents and publications.

We will also look to supplement this training with content directly related to use of plain language in written communication. The RRB has reviewed several online training modules in this area that other federal agencies developed. Based on our review, it appears that the one in

use by the Department of Agriculture is one of the most comprehensive and thorough. As a result, Public Affairs staff will work with the agency's training staff to fully evaluate this online training program for its possible adaptation or use by the RRB.

We will also continue to analyze and improve our written documents, with an increased emphasis on routine/recurring correspondence (i.e., form letters and paragraphs) and website content.

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

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