



# **U.S. Railroad Retirement Board Plain Writing Act of 2010 Annual Compliance Report May 2015**

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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 continued this effort with renewed emphasis in the context of the intent and requirements of the Plain Writing Act, with the goal of improving our ability to clearly communicate information about our benefits and services, and how to access them.

## **Initial Implementation**

The RRB 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 has posted its implementation plan and subsequent compliance reports on this page, with the RRB’s Public Affairs unit charged with overseeing these activities.

## **Current Activities**

In recent years, the RRB has used a training vendor affiliated with the Chicago Federal Executive Board, SkillPath Training. This company offers several different courses on various forms of written communication, and we have had employees with responsibilities that involve written communication periodically attend these courses. In fiscal year 2014, we had 51 employees participate in training on effective business writing and grammar skills.

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 fiscal year 2014, the agency also focused these efforts on internal communications, arranging for an outside training contractor to conduct a 2-day seminar on writing clear and concise policies and procedures, attended by 25 employees. While these policies and procedures have limited external distribution, they nevertheless govern how the agency administers its programs, which is a key consideration in making sure our customers understand our requirements and standards in obtaining benefits to which they are entitled.

In the past year, we have continued to review documents and online postings to make them simpler and more understandable, following various guidelines and best practices related to plain language and writing. In the process, we have reviewed our most common publications using a variety of benchmarks, including the Flesch Reading Ease Test and the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level calculation, with recent years showing diminished returns as initial changes suggested by the review were incorporated into the documents. As a result, in the past year we have used a more informal approach that relies on our trained employees to identify further improvements.

This has proven effective because our 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 can be found in laws or regulations. For this reason, their use cannot be avoided, and we are fortunate that their historical and legal basis has resulted in our customer base having a good understanding of their meaning. Still, in all of our publications, we make sure to include simplified explanations and examples so that the general public can understand their meaning and significance as well.

One 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 or, in the case of survivor benefits, his or her date of death. Another example involves the breakdown of railroad retirement benefits into two "tiers," with tier I roughly equivalent to social security benefits and tier II comparable to a private pension payment. By providing an adequate explanation of these terms on first use in our publications, this enables subsequent references to these terms to be shorter and better understood.

### **Future Plans**

The RRB is in the process of enhancing its internal training and development capabilities. In October 2014, the RRB procured a learning management system (LMS) to help the agency train and develop its employees in a more comprehensive, effective manner. The LMS, which will be managed through RRB University, allows the Agency the technological abilities to: create, track and report both online specialized/technical training and general business skills training for all employees; develop career/individual development plans and track the progress of the plans; and assess competencies so as to identify possible skill gaps within a given RRB specialty.

In addition, in 2015 the agency created RRB University to represent the training and development responsibilities within its Bureau of Human Resources. Besides managing the LMS, RRB University is also charged with creating, implementing and modifying the overall training and development policies, procedures and programs within the agency. RRB University's goal is to create developmental opportunities to assist agency employees in building the competencies needed to achieve its mission, values and strategic goals. One of the specific course offerings available through RRB University is a class developed by SkillSoft specifically devoted to the Plain Writing Act and its goal of improved communication with agency customers

and the general public. After reviewing this course content, the RRB is in the process of identifying employees who should take this course and developing a training plan for their participation.

We will also continue to analyze and improve our written documents, with an increased emphasis on correspondence and website content. In most instances, general-use documents and publications are posted virtually verbatim on the website in an accessible format. However, there is also content that is either altered or original for this format, and the agency has started reviewing this information from a plain language perspective.

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

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