Putting plain language to the test

Plain Language Summit 2020

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Agenda

- Brief history of the plainlanguage.gov redesign
- Hard sell on content research
- Content research methods
Case study
plainlanguage.gov is a critical resource for civil servants. We need a modern and accessible site with up-to-date examples and resources for writing in plain language.
# Timeline

<table>
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<th>August</th>
<th>September</th>
<th>October</th>
<th>November</th>
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<tr>
<td>Discovery</td>
<td>Prototyping</td>
<td>Usability testing</td>
<td>Transition</td>
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- **Kickoff, late Aug**
- **Design workshop, early Oct**
- **Launch, mid-Nov**
Activities

- User and stakeholder interviews
- Content audit
- Sitemapping exercise
- Technical review
- Analytics review
- Prototyping
- Usability testing
- Launch planning
- Documentation
Plain language makes it easier for the public to read, understand, and use government communications.
Team

**PLAIN**
Kathryn Catania
Katherine Spivey
Miriam Vincent
Wendy Wagner-Smith

**GSA partners**
Jeremy Zilar
Lane Becker
Federalist team
U.S. Web Design System team

**18F**
Nicole Fenton
Cyd Harrell
Brian Hurst
Corey Mahoney
Ryan Thurlwell

**And many more...**
GitHub contributors
Community members
Why plainlanguage.gov is an interesting case study

- Strong mission
- Broad audience (over 2 million people)
- Legacy system
- Limited budget
- Short timeline (6–8 weeks)
- Extensive content
PLAIN’s work at a glance

- reviewing government publications
- giving countless hours of feedback
- leading workshops and discussions
- identifying common questions from emails and events
- working directly with usability experts in and outside of government
- building this incredible community without direct funding
Where research comes in
Initial goals

- Make it easier to find and navigate the content
- Use existing tools to modernize the publishing process (Federalist and the U.S. Web Design System)
- Expand PLAIN’s reach and amplify their message
Research questions

● What are the highest priority improvements for PLAIN and our users?
● Which topics or content types are most useful?
● How should we organize the content generally?
● How might we better highlight top content and plain language examples?
User research brings us closer to the people we serve in order to design better experiences.

Gregg Bernstein
99% of the time, [training] requests are from people who are writers by necessity.

Stakeholder interview for PLAIN
We have to bring users into our workflow.
Improve the effectiveness and accountability of federal agencies to the public by promoting clear government communication that the public can understand and use.

Plain Writing Act of 2010
The American people have questions for us.
<table>
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<th>Central Pacific</th>
<th>Eastern Pacific</th>
<th>Atlantic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Atlantic Tropical Cyclones and Disturbances</td>
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</table>

7:26 pm EDT
Mon Oct 19 2020

Current Disturbances and Two-Day Cyclone Formation Chance:
- < 40%
- 40-60%
- > 60%
- Tropical or Sub-Tropical Cyclone
- Near-Hurricane
- Storm
- Hurricane
- Post-Tropical Cyclone or Remnants

Active Storms | Marine Forecasts
2-Day Graphical Tropical Weather Outlook | 5-Day Graphical Tropical Weather Outlook
IRS website

Forms and Instructions

1040 and Schedules 1-3
Individual Tax Return

Other 1040 Schedules
Information About the Other Schedules Filed With Form 1040

Form 2290
Heavy Highway Vehicle Use Tax Return

Search Forms & Instructions
Current Air Quality

Primary Pollutant:
This pollutant currently has the highest AQI in the area.

- **OZONE** 90  Moderate
  If you are unusually sensitive to ozone, consider reducing your activity level or shorten the amount of time you are active outdoors.

- **PM10** 60  Moderate
- **PM2.5** 54  Moderate

Air Quality Forecast

Forecast courtesy of
San Joaquin Valley Unified APMD
How to report a civil rights violation

If you believe that you or someone else experienced unlawful discrimination, you can report a civil rights violation.

1. **Report using our online form.**
   By completing the online form, you can provide the details we need to understand what happened. You will receive a confirmation number and your report is immediately sent to our staff for review.

2. **We review your report.**
   Teams that specialize in handling your type of issue will review it. If it needs to be forwarded to another team or agency, we will try to connect your complaint to the right group.

3. **We determine next steps and get back to you.**
   Possible outcomes include: following up for more information, starting a mediation or investigation, directing you to another organization for further help, or informing you that we cannot help.

Have you or someone you know experienced a civil rights violation?

[Submit a report]

If you cannot access the online form, you can [call] to report a violation or report a violation by [mail].
Plainness is a step toward a more understandable, trustworthy, and inclusive government.
We have to test our content and our assumptions along the way.
Content research methods
Make a Mad Libs exercise

The new plainlanguage.gov will help civil servants [user goal] and [user goal].

To do this, we must deliver content that is [adjective], [adjective], and [adjective].

The new site will help PLAIN [business goal] by encouraging users to [user task], [user task], and [user task].
Paid leave example

Notifications will help claimants and employers understand where they are in the application process, make informed decisions, and reduce delays in processing.

To do this, we must deliver content that is actionable, relevant, and consistent with the portal...
“I’m not sure what the difference is between Law and Requirements and Federal Guidelines.”

“This kind of organization makes a lot of sense. I think the title of it being Federal Guidelines throws me off. When I think Federal Guidelines, I think much more statutory information. There might be a more friendly way of referring to that... Maybe just Writing Guidelines.”
The Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA) is a law governing how federal agencies collect information from the public.

Get started with the PRA

› When does the PRA apply?
   What kind of information needs PRA approval, and what’s exempt.

› Plan ahead for the PRA process
   The approval process often takes between 6-9 months; get your information organized early.

› Get help with the PRA
   Find agency resources to help you prepare your request.
Audit strategically

Everyday Information Architecture: Auditing for Structure
by Lisa Maria Martin · April 18, 2019
Published in Information Architecture

A note from the editors: We're pleased to share an excerpt from Chapter 4 of Lisa Maria Martin's *Everyday Information Architecture*, from A Book Apart.

Just as we need to understand our content before we can recategorize it, we need to understand the system before we try to rebuild it.

Enter the structural audit: a review of the site focused solely on its menus, links, flows, and hierarchies. I know you thought we were done with audits back in Chapter 2, but hear me out! Structural audits have an important and singular purpose: to help us build a new sitemap.

This isn’t about recreating the intended sitemap—no, this is about experiencing the site the way users experience it. This audit is meant to track and record the structure of the site as it really works.

**Setting up the template**

First, we’re gonna need another spreadsheet. (Look, it is not my fault that spreadsheets are the perfect system for recording audit data. I don’t make the rules.)

Because this involves building a spreadsheet from scratch, I keep a "template" at the top of my audit files—rows that I can copy and paste into each new audit (Fig 4.1). It’s a color-coded outline key that helps me track my page hierarchy and my
<table>
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Tips for content audits

● Team up with an engineer to scrape the data
● Focus on top user tasks and internal priorities
● Highlight the top 20–30 pages based on traffic and search queries
● Map user and content needs up with your larger experience (e.g., service blueprint, contact center training)
Test content in context and on its own

- Plan at least two studies (e.g., usability test, tree test, A/B test)
- Frame research questions around user needs and internal goals
- Check out Josh Tong’s roundup on ways to test content
Instructions

Here's how it works:

1. You will be asked to find a certain item and presented with a list of links.
2. Click through the list until you arrive at one that you think helps you complete the task.
3. If you take a wrong turn, you can go back by clicking one of the links above.

This is not a test of your ability, there are no right or wrong answers.

That's it, let's get started!

Continue
“The most effective things for me is to see what not to do, and then an explanation. Examples are the thing that really helped me understand it.”
EXAMPLES + BEFORE AND AFTER

Medicaid Eligibility

This example was created for training and is not official agency text.

Before

Medicaid: Apply if you are aged (65 years old or older), blind, or disabled and have low income and few resources. Apply if you are terminally ill and want to receive hospice services. Apply if you are aged, blind, or disabled; live in a nursing home; and have low income and limited resources. Apply if you are aged, blind, or disabled and need nursing home care, but can stay at home with special community care services. Apply if you are eligible for Medicare and have low income and limited resources.

After

You may apply for Medicaid if you are:

- Terminally ill and want hospice services
- Eligible for Medicare and have low income and limited resources
- 65 years old or older, blind, or disabled and have low income and few resources and:
  - Live in a nursing home
  - Need a nursing home care but can stay at home with special community care services
Assume the data exists

- Top questions from the contact center, events, social media, or direct emails
- Indirect mentions on social media (e.g., topical discussion, untagged critiques)
- Site analytics and click map patterns
- Search keywords
- Surveys or internal reporting
- Bug reports
Keep the conversation going

- Focus on building trust and community
- Don’t just push out content without testing it
- Make it easy for people to give you feedback throughout the process
- Develop site documentation (e.g., wiki)
- Consider an open source model (e.g., GitHub contributions)
Content research methods

Make a Mad Libs exercise
Use direct quotes
Audit strategically
Test content in context and on its own
Assume the data exists
Keep the conversation going
Thank you!

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