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U.S. GOVERNMENT

# 2016

PLAIN WRITING

# INDEX

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## The VisibleThread Website Index, U.S. Government – 2016

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### Executive Summary

The [Plain Writing Act of 2010](#) mandates clear communications for U.S. citizens. The Act requires federal agencies use writing that is clear, concise, well-organized and appropriate to the intended audience. While leaders positioned the law as a consumer victory, the Act benefits the Government, too. Specifically, the law would help the Federal Government increase revenues and avoid unnecessary costs.

Clear writing helps government agencies accomplish two goals:

- **Improve engagement and compliance:** essentially, when more people understand what you want them to do they are more likely to do it. For example, the state of Washington Department of Revenue agency estimates it collected \$800k in extra revenue after rewriting one tax collection letter.<sup>i</sup> Likewise, when people understand agency programs and services, they are more likely to be effective.
- **Reduce costs:** When people know what the government asks of them, there's a better chance they'll comply. Improved compliance reduces the need for costly extra mailings, follow-up calls and even litigation. In one example, The Veterans Administration revised a letter asking beneficiaries to update contact information. The effort saved the VA \$8 million in follow-up costs.<sup>ii</sup>

Following the deadline in [October 2011](#), VisibleThread published an Index of 30 federal agency websites based on clarity of written content. We measured up to 100 pages on each website, across these four dimensions:

- [Readability](#) – How readable is the content?
- [Passive Language](#) – Active Language communicates clearly. What proportion of sentences is passive?
- [Long Sentences](#) – What proportion of all sentences are too long?
- [Word Complexity Density](#) – Complex words make web pages hard to understand.

In January 2016, VisibleThread conducted a follow-up analysis of 29 the same 30 federal agency websites. [National Aeronautics and Space Administration's \(NASA\)](#) website was left out of the 2016 rankings for technical reasons. The 2011 Index provides a benchmark for comparison and further analysis suggests the following:

- Federal Agency website communication is worse today than it was five years ago.
- Furthermore, agencies with compliance departments ranked lower on average, likely resulting in higher costs due to poor writing practices.

We show a more detailed analysis later in this report.

## Key Findings

### Clear Language:

The following guideline definitions will help you understand the information we present in the Key Findings section:

- Readability – a score of 50 is ideal, approximately an 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading level.
- Passive language – 4% or less is ideal.
- Long Sentences – 5% or less across all content is ideal.
- Complex language density – complex words/total words\*100

You can find detailed definitions of ranking criteria in the Methodology section.

### Overall Leaders

The [U.S. Geological Survey](#) (rank 1) and the [U.S. Mint](#) (2<sup>nd</sup>) topped the 2016 rankings. Both agencies scored higher across all categories compared to their peers, but excelled in a handful of key areas to take the top spots in the rankings. The U.S. Mint was the only agency we measured with an acceptable Readability Score (50). The Mint also scored first in the long-sentence and readability category, but was dragged down with a higher than ideal passive voice score (8%). The U.S. Geological Survey was one of only a handful of agencies that registered acceptable levels of passive voice. The agency also performed well in the complexity and long-sentence categories – notable given the agency is the only scientific agency managed by the Department of the Interior. Both agencies had lower numbers of web pages included in the analysis.

[The Smithsonian](#) (3<sup>rd</sup>), [The Department of the Interior](#) (4<sup>th</sup>), the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) and the [Bureau of the Census](#) (tied for 5<sup>th</sup>) rounded out the Top 5 spots in the 2016 Index. The Smithsonian scored higher than many peers across all categories. Both the Department of the Interior and the Bureau of the Census met acceptable levels for passive voice. The Bureau of Labor Statistics ranked first in Complexity rankings.

VisibleThread™ Web Index		U.S. Government – Q1, 2016											
		Num Pages	Clear Writing		Readability		Passive		Long		Complex		Num Words
			Index	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank		
1	U.S. Geological Survey (the Interior)	20	4.25	41	7	4%	4	16%	2	1.65	4	11241	
2	U.S. Mint (the Treasury)	21	5	50	1	8%	12	16%	1	1.33	6	8883	
3	Smithsonian Institution	100	6.5	41	7	7%	8	17%	4	2.15	7	23433	
4	the Interior	100	7.75	40	10	4%	1	25%	17	1.42	3	53340	
5	Bureau of Labor Statistics (Labor)	100	3	37	16	8%	11	13%	8	1.28	1	82676	
5	Bureau of the Census (Commerce)	104	3	43	5	4%	2	17%	3	6.08	26	23334	

### Notable Mentions

- **Six agencies that moved up in the 2016 rankings:**
  - Federal Highway Administration (Transportation) +16
  - Department of Transportation +13
  - Federal Railroad Administration (Transportation) +12
  - U.S. Mint (Treasury) +12
  - Homeland Security +9
  - The Interior +9

Relative to its peers, the [Department of Transportation \(DoT\)](#) fared well in our 2016 assessment. All but one of the DoT agencies included improved in overall rank. The exception was the [Federal Aviation Administration](#) (-2), which still ranked 12th among all agencies in 2016. DoT improved agency rankings by reducing passive voice on its sites. However, overall DoT’s gains in the Index rankings are somewhat misleading. It would be more accurate to describe DoT’s performance as regressing at a slower rate than its peers. DoT agencies scored worse in Readability and Complex Word Density in the 2016 Index.

VisibleThread™ Web Index	2011 Rank	2016 Rank	Rank Change
Federal Highway Administration (Transportation)	25	9	↑ 16
Transportation	27	14	↑ 13
U.S. Mint (the Treasury)	14	2	↑ 12
Federal Railroad Administration (Transportation)	30	18	↑ 12
The Interior	13	4	↑ 9
Homeland Security	23	14	↑ 9

• **Five agencies that struggled in the 2016 rankings:**

- Natural Resources Conservation Service (Agriculture) -13
- Health Resources and Services Administration (Health and Human Services) -8
- Federal Bureau of Investigation (Justice) -8
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (Health and Human Services) -8
- Community Oriented Policing Services (Justice) -8

The [Department of Agriculture](#), the [Department of Justice](#) and the [Department of Health & Human Services \(HHS\)](#) struggled with clear writing on their web properties. The Department of Agriculture’s [Natural Resources Conversation Service](#) dropped 13 places to rank 25<sup>th</sup> overall in the 2016 Index – no other agency fell further. All Department of Justice agencies included decreased in rank and appeared in the bottom half of both 2011 and the 2016 rankings. While websites for the [Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\)](#) and [National Cancer Institute \(NCI\)](#) were bright spots, all but one of HHS agencies lost ground in the 2016 rankings. The exception was the [Program Support Center](#), which improved seven spots to no. 18.

VisibleThread™ Web Index	2011 Rank	2016 Rank	Rank Change
Natural Resources Conservation Service (Agriculture)	12	25	↓ -13
Health Resources and Services Administration (Health and Human Services)	16	24	↓ -8
Federal Bureau of Investigation (Justice)	17	25	↓ -8
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (Health and Human Services)	19	27	↓ -8
Community Oriented Policing Services (Justice)	21	29	↓ -8
Centers for Disease Control (Health and Human Services)	2	7	↓ -5
National Cancer Institute (Health and Human Services)	5	10	↓ -5

A full table of 2016 rank change is available in the Detailed Results Table section found later in this report:

**Room for Improvement:**

Six different agencies shared the bottom five places in the rankings: the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS); the [Health Resources Services Administration \(HRSA\)](#); the [Federal Bureau of Investigation \(FBI\)](#); the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\)](#); the [Pension Benefits Guaranty Corporation \(PBGC\)](#) and the [Community Oriented Policing Service \(COPS\)](#).

VisibleThread™ Web Index			U.S. Government – Q1, 2016											
			Num Pages	Clear Writing		Readability		Passive		Long		Complex		Num Words
				Index	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank		
24	Health Resources and Services Administration (Health and Human Services)	<a href="http://www.hrsa.gov">http://www.hrsa.gov</a>	100	20.25	31	23	10%	21	26%	19	3.22	18	44328	
25	Natural Resources Conservation Service (Agriculture)	<a href="http://www.nrcs.usda.gov">http://www.nrcs.usda.gov</a>	100	20.5	29	26	9%	17	29%	22	3.20	17	36071	
25	Federal Bureau of Investigation Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (Health and Human Services)	<a href="http://www.fbi.gov">http://www.fbi.gov</a>	100	20.5	29	26	10%	20	36%	26	2.56	10	78486	
27	Services Administration (Health and Human Services)	<a href="http://www.samhsa.gov">http://www.samhsa.gov</a>	100	21.75	30	25	11%	23	40%	28	2.66	11	13058	
28	Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation	<a href="http://www.pbgc.gov">http://www.pbgc.gov</a>	100	22.25	34	19	11%	24	33%	24	4.04	22	84262	
29	Community Oriented Policing Services (Justice)	<a href="http://www.cops.usdoj.gov">http://www.cops.usdoj.gov</a>	100	24	24	28	10%	22	36%	25	3.66	21	49967	

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Excluding more favorable scores for complexity earned by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, all sites scored in the bottom half of the rankings across all categories.

Factors making these the worst performers were:

- High proportion of long sentences (between 26% and 40%). For example, SAMHSA ranked 28<sup>th</sup> in this category as a result of content like the following on its site: “The Health Care and Health Systems Integration Strategic Initiative is designed to focus and leverage SAMHSA’s resources and partnerships to increase access to appropriate, high-quality prevention , treatment , recovery , and wellness services and activities; reduce disparities between the availability of services for mental and substance use disorders compared with the availability of services for other medical conditions; and ensure that behavioral health and physical health services are well integrated and coordinated.”
- High levels of passive language (between 12% and 15%) - In fact, even though most agencies reduced passive voice, the bottom five fell below the 2016 median. In fact, with the exception of NRCS (9%), the entire group fell below the 2011 median.
- High degrees of complex language – collectively, this category was least problematic for the bottom six (density between 2.56 and 4.04),
- Poor readability ratings (between 24 and 34).

The COPS website ranked last among all sites measured. An extraordinarily poor readability score (24) and a high rate of lengthy sentences (36%) explain COPS’ last place finish.

**Takeaways:**

**1. Wide variability between best and worst performers**

There is very wide variability between the best and lowest scoring websites. This applies across all metrics.

For example, readability ranges from 50 (out of 100) for the 1<sup>st</sup> place U.S. Mint in contrast with a very low 24 (out of 100) for the bottom placed COPS site. A score of 24 means that someone reading the COPS site would need a higher level degree, while a person with general secondary education can understand the U.S Mint site.

**2. Agencies can dramatically improve clarity by focusing on certain metrics**

Many agencies scored well in certain areas but stumbled on one or two metrics.

For instance, the Bureau of the Census tied for 5<sup>th</sup> overall, however, it ranks 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> on passive voice and sentence length. The score for complexity (6.08) ranks 26<sup>th</sup>. So here, we will see possibility for immediate improvement by reducing the complexity of writing and word choice.

**3. Complex content can be clear**

U.S. Geological Survey (rank 1) is a scientific agency and an excellent example of how clear writing is possible for a website that handles complex subject matter. It demonstrates that sites can be clear even when dealing with technical topics. Of note, Centers for Disease Control (rank 7) and the National Cancer Institute (Rank 10), both agencies dealing with medical topics, performed well.

**4. Agencies who engage with the public to complete tasks online can reduce costs by improving clarity**

Agencies where people can complete tasks online without recourse to phone will save money by improving clarity. For instance, the Social Security Administration can improve clarity by reducing the number of long sentences (27%) and levels of passive language (9%).

**5. Agencies with compliance departments should focus on clarity to increase online conversions and reduce cost**

Agencies such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service (tied for 25<sup>th</sup>), U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (tied for 21<sup>st</sup>) and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (27<sup>th</sup>) all need to focus on improving clarity of copy and online instruction. The effect of complex copy is to drive business and citizens to engage through more costly channels such as phone. If these sites use clearer copy, direct cost savings and increased satisfaction will result.

## Detailed Results Tables

We show the full detailed tables below.

We color-code, green to red, each score in the Index. Green indicates best, red indicates worst. Color-coding helps us to understand sites where one or two specific scores may be dragging down the overall ranking. Flagging specific areas (for instance, passive language) pinpoints areas for improvement.

VisibleThread™ Web Index			U.S. Government – Q1, 2016										Num Pages	Num Words
			Clear Writing		Readability		Passive		Long		Complex			
			Index	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank			
1	U.S. Geological Survey (the Interior)	<a href="http://www.usgs.gov">http://www.usgs.gov</a>	20	4.25	41	7	4%	4	16%	2	1.65	4	11241	
2	U.S. Mint (the Treasury)	<a href="http://www.usmint.gov">http://www.usmint.gov</a>	21	5	50	1	8%	12	16%	1	1.93	6	8889	
3	Smithsonian Institution	<a href="http://www.si.edu">http://www.si.edu</a>	100	6.5	41	7	7%	8	17%	4	2.15	7	23439	
4	the Interior	<a href="http://www.doi.gov">http://www.doi.gov</a>	100	7.75	40	10	4%	1	25%	17	1.42	3	59340	
5	Bureau of Labor Statistics (Labor)	<a href="http://www.bls.gov">http://www.bls.gov</a>	100	9	37	16	8%	11	19%	8	1.28	1	82676	
5	Bureau of the Census (Commerce)	<a href="http://www.census.gov">http://www.census.gov</a>	104	9	43	5	4%	2	17%	3	6.08	26	29394	
7	Centers for Disease Control (Health and Human Services)	<a href="http://www.cdc.gov">http://www.cdc.gov</a>	100	11	44	4	9%	15	20%	9	3.04	16	43287	
8	Veteran Affairs	<a href="http://benefits.va.gov/benefits/">http://benefits.va.gov/benefits/</a>	100	11.25	46	2	7%	10	18%	6	6.69	27	50139	
9	Federal Highway Administration (Transportation)	<a href="http://www.fhwa.dot.gov">http://www.fhwa.dot.gov</a>	100	12.5	32	22	8%	14	17%	5	2.53	9	39681	
10	National Cancer Institute (Health and Human Services)	<a href="http://www.cancer.gov">http://www.cancer.gov</a>	100	12.75	45	3	13%	28	23%	15	1.70	5	95753	
10	National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)	<a href="http://www.archives.gov">http://www.archives.gov</a>	100	12.75	38	13	7%	9	20%	10	3.41	19	71812	
12	Federal Aviation Administration (Transportation)	<a href="http://www.faa.gov">http://www.faa.gov</a>	100	13	39	11	5%	5	18%	7	10.73	29	16296	
13	State	<a href="http://www.state.gov">http://www.state.gov</a>	22	13.5	33	20	4%	3	46%	29	1.35	2	43900	
14	Homeland Security	<a href="http://www.dhs.gov">http://www.dhs.gov</a>	101	15.5	31	23	7%	7	26%	18	2.75	14	28984	
14	Transportation	<a href="http://www.dot.gov">http://www.dot.gov</a>	100	15.5	38	13	9%	16	29%	21	2.73	12	44046	
16	Social Security Administration (Health and Human Services)	<a href="http://www.ssa.gov">http://www.ssa.gov</a>	100	16.25	39	11	9%	19	27%	20	2.98	15	79722	
17	Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation	<a href="http://www.fdic.gov">http://www.fdic.gov</a>	100	17.25	35	18	8%	13	23%	14	5.04	24	47912	
18	Program Support Center (Health and Human Services)	<a href="http://www.psc.gov">http://www.psc.gov</a>	100	17.5	41	7	13%	27	30%	23	2.74	13	85657	
18	Federal Railroad Administration (Transportation)	<a href="http://www.fra.dot.gov">http://www.fra.dot.gov</a>	100	17.5	24	28	6%	6	25%	16	3.44	20	54904	
20	Small Business Administration (Labor)	<a href="http://www.sba.gov">http://www.sba.gov</a>	101	17.75	43	5	12%	26	21%	12	9.76	28	42840	
21	U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (Justice)	<a href="http://www.uscis.gov">http://www.uscis.gov</a>	20	18.5	38	13	11%	25	21%	11	5.58	25	7981	
21	General Services Administration	<a href="http://www.gsa.gov">http://www.gsa.gov</a>	100	18.5	33	20	9%	18	21%	13	4.46	23	35658	
23	National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (Transportation)	<a href="http://www.nhtsa.gov">http://www.nhtsa.gov</a>	100	20	37	16	13%	29	38%	27	2.45	8	213523	
24	Health Resources and Services Administration (Health and Human Services)	<a href="http://www.hrsa.gov">http://www.hrsa.gov</a>	100	20.25	31	23	10%	21	26%	19	3.22	18	44328	
25	Natural Resources Conservation Service (Agriculture)	<a href="http://www.nrcs.usda.gov">http://www.nrcs.usda.gov</a>	100	20.5	29	26	9%	17	29%	22	3.20	17	36071	
25	Federal Bureau of Investigation (Justice)	<a href="http://www.fbi.gov">http://www.fbi.gov</a>	100	20.5	29	26	10%	20	36%	26	2.56	10	78486	
27	Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (Health and Human Services)	<a href="http://www.samhsa.gov">http://www.samhsa.gov</a>	100	21.75	30	25	11%	23	40%	28	2.66	11	130585	
28	Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation	<a href="http://www.pbgc.gov">http://www.pbgc.gov</a>	100	22.25	34	19	11%	24	33%	24	4.04	22	84262	
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## The VisibleThread Website Index, U.S. Government – 2016



The Rank Change chart shows how agencies fared between the 2011 and the 2016 reports, relative to their peers.

	2011 Rank	2016 Rank	Rank Change
U.S. Geological Survey (the Interior)	4	1	3
U.S. Mint (the Treasury)	14	2	12
Smithsonian Institution	6	3	3
The Interior	13	4	9
Bureau of Labor Statistics (Labor)	1	5	-4
Bureau of the Census (Commerce)	3	5	-2
Centers for Disease Control (Health and Human Services)	2	7	-5
Veteran Affairs	10	8	2
Federal Highway Administration (Transportation)	25	9	16
National Cancer Institute (Health and Human Services)	5	10	-5
National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)	7	10	-3
Federal Aviation Administration (Transportation)	10	12	-2
State	9	13	-4
Homeland Security	23	14	9
Transportation	27	14	13
Social Security administration (Health and Human Services)	15	16	-1
Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation	24	17	7
Program Support Center (Health and Human Services)	25	18	7
Federal Railroad Administration (Transportation)	30	18	12
Small Business Administration (Labor)	22	20	2
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (Justice)	17	21	-4
General Services Administration	20	21	-1
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (Transportation)	28	23	5
Health Resources and Services Administration (Health and Human Services)	16	24	-8
Natural Resources Conservation Service (Agriculture)	12	25	-13
Federal Bureau of Investigation (Justice)	17	25	-8
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (Health and Human Services)	19	27	-8
Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation	28	28	0
Community Oriented Policing Services (Justice)	21	29	-8



## Methodology – what are the metrics?

- We analyzed the sites on January 5, 2016.
- We scanned up to 100 pages of content using automated crawling techniques. In some cases, we found less than 100 pages, so we included the page count and word count for each agency.
- We crawled starting from the publically available URL.
- Certain pages within the sample of 100 contain non-textual content (eg: videos). We omitted these pages from our scan.

We calculated the index based on 4 metrics. Each metric contributes equally to the final score. The metrics are:

Metric	Formula
<b>1. Readability</b>	
Readability ranges from 1 to 100. 100 is the top mark. If communicating with citizens, aim for at least 50.  This is based on the <a href="#">Flesch Reading Ease</a> index.	$(206.835 - (1.015 \times \text{Average Sentence Length}) - (84.6 \times \text{Average Syllables per Word}))$
<b>2. Passive Language</b>	
The % rating is the proportion of sentences with a passive construction. Passive language is where the subject acted upon appears before the verb. For example:  "Quality is monitored" vs. "We monitor quality"  If you use active voice, you will increase clarity & strength. You will also flush out the 'actor', i.e. who did the action?	$(\text{Passive Sentences} / \text{Total Sentences} * 100)$
<b>3. Long Sentences</b>	
The % rating is the proportion of sentences that are longer than 25 words. Long sentences mask multiple concepts. Splitting up these sentences will result in a clearer message.	$(\text{Long Sentences} / \text{Total Sentences} * 100)$

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#### 4. Complex Word Density

The density rating is the proportion of complex words relative to the total word count. This scan looks for complex words/phrases based on Federal Guidelines. See <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/wordsuggestions/simplewords.cfm> for the list scanned. Replacing complex words with simpler words helps your readers concentrate on your content.

(Complex Words/Total Words \* 100)

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### About VisibleThread

VisibleThread helps executives in large organizations govern content quality with less cost and risk. Sales and marketing teams in diverse industries use our technology to improve many functions, including proposal development, contract review and brand audits. Our software finds brand compliance, poor readability and other issues in websites and documents. Unlike consumer-grade analysis tools, VisibleThread processes hundreds of documents and web pages in minutes. Fueled with greater organizational intelligence, customers drive efficiency and reduce cost across their organizations. For more information, visit [www.visiblethread.com](http://www.visiblethread.com)

#### For questions or if you want a specific sector index:

- For a specific agency or bureau index, email: [sales@visiblethread.com](mailto:sales@visiblethread.com)
- For questions on the metrics or methodology, email: [support@visiblethread.com](mailto:support@visiblethread.com)
- For inquiries from members of the press or media, email: [sangslan@anurastrategies.com](mailto:sangslan@anurastrategies.com)

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<sup>i</sup> - [http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2006-12-10-washington-plain-talk\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2006-12-10-washington-plain-talk_x.htm) & <http://www.governor.wa.gov/priorities/plaintalk/default.asp>

<sup>ii</sup> - <http://abcnews.go.com/WN/obama-signs-law-understand/story?id=11902841>