

A black and white photograph of the United States Capitol building, showing its iconic dome and classical architecture. The image is partially obscured by a large, stylized green arrow graphic that points from the top right towards the bottom left. The arrow is composed of several thick, overlapping segments.

▶ 2017

US GOVERNMENT

WEBSITE CLARITY INDEX

VisibleThread
Clarity Index

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VisibleThread Web Clarity Index, U.S. Government – 2017

Executive Summary

Seven years ago, the passage of the [Plain Writing Act of 2010](#) mandated clear communications in materials for U.S. citizens. Under the Act, federal agencies are required to use writing that is concise, clear, and appropriate for the audience. At a minimum, readers with a high school level of education should be able to understand the content that is written on government websites.

The law is a win for consumers, who benefit from an increased understanding of rules and resources. But it is also beneficial for agencies and their budgets, where clarity can lead to greater compliance. Clear communication saves agencies time and money, which is a win for both government and taxpayer.

Clear writing helps government agencies accomplish two goals:

- **Improve accessibility and compliance:** Clear communication helps agencies establish a better connection with the public. Citizens are more likely to comply when they can clearly understand what is expected of them. And agencies benefit too. For example, the Department of Revenue for the state of Washington estimates it collected \$800,000 in extra revenue after rewriting one tax collection letter. ⁽¹⁾
- **Reduce costs:** If the government eventually implements current budget priorities, it will force nearly all federal agencies to do more with less. Clear written communication is a cost-effective way to dispense information. Focusing on plain language can help fill the gap caused by human capital reductions and smaller operating budgets. Example: The state of Washington’s Department of Labor and Industries developed clearer instructions and explanations for citizens requesting public records. About 10% of those people were calling with routine process questions, slowing staff response times. In the year after the department introduced the improved instructions, phone calls dropped by 95%. The department withdrew a budget request for two additional employees at \$110,000 a year and responded to triple the requests without increasing staff the following year. ⁽²⁾ Improved clarity can drive these kinds of outcomes in many scenarios. Agencies that still need to provide critical public information, but with reduced resources, should not overlook the potential savings.

VisibleThread’s Web Clarity Index is a methodology for measuring the clarity of web content. In 2016, VisibleThread published an Index as a follow-up comparison to a 2011 review of 29 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.

The 2017 analysis is a follow-up and comparison of federal agency websites that were indexed in 2016. Changes in the White House administration, particularly between political parties, frequently bring change to agencies. As policy changes, content must reflect new priorities and changes to programs and the law. VisibleThread was interested if these changes would impact website clarity.

The [Small Business Administration](#) and the [Census Bureau](#) have been omitted from this index for technical reasons. Inclusions to this new index are: [Department of Education](#), [Department of Energy](#), and the [Environmental Protection Agency](#). The 2016 index provides a benchmark for comparison and further analysis suggests the following:

- Federal Agency website communication is improving, albeit slowly. Overall clarity is still under recommended levels.
- There appear to be cultural shifts in clear writing compliance within some agencies. This trend has led to some significant changes in this year’s rankings.
- While Clear Writing Index and Long Sentence Use scores have remained flat, there is some improvement in scores for Readability, Passive Voice Use, and Complexity.

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

- Readability – a score of 50 is ideal, approximately an 8th grade reading level.
- Passive language – 4% or less is ideal.
- Long Sentences – 5% or less across all content is ideal.
- Complex language density – The percentage of complex words relative to total word count.

Overall Leaders

Overall leaders this year include a group of climbers in the rankings. The Smithsonian was the only agency ranked in the Top 5 in the 2016 rankings. New to the top spots are [The National Archives](#) at #1 and [Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\)](#) at #2. The National Archives moved up from 10th place in 2016 to take the top spot. The CDC moved up from 7th place in 2016 to come in 2nd on this year’s index. Both agencies excel in several key

areas to earn their rankings. The National Archives is #1 in Clear Writing and Long Sentence Use. The CDC is #2 in Clear Writing and #1 in Readability.

A real bright spot in the Top 5 is the inclusion of [Community Oriented Policing Service \(COPS\)](#) at #3. This group was dead last in the 2016 rankings, climbing 26 spots in just one year. They rank 1st in Passive Voice Use and Complexity, and 4th in Readability. COPS is a testament to the improvements that can be made when clear writing is put into practice.

[The Smithsonian](#) (#4) and the [Federal Aviation Administration](#) (#5) round out the Top 5 in the 2017 index. The Smithsonian is a returning member, keeping relatively consistent but with slight drops in Clear Writing, Readability, and Long Sentence Use over 2016. The FAA climbed 7 points in 2017 to make our Top 5. Improvements in Clear Writing, Passive Voice, Long Sentence Use and Complexity all contributed to this climb.

VisibleThread Clarity Index		U.S. Government – 2017														
Rank	Agency	URL	Num Pages	Clear Writing		Readability		Passive		Long		Complex		Num Words	2016 Rank	YoY Change
				Index	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank				
1	National Archives and Records Administration	http://www.archives.gov	100	5	43	6	6%	5	15%	1	1.90	8	66785	10	➔	9
2	Centers for Disease Control	http://www.cdc.gov	100	7	49	1	6%	10	21%	11	1.87	6	68370	7	➔	5
3	Community Oriented Policing Services	http://www.cops.usdoj.gov	100	8.5	47	4	2%	1	37%	28	1.29	1	104149	29	⬆️	26
3	Smithsonian Institution	http://www.si.edu	100	8.5	37	15	6%	8	19%	7	1.68	4	35840	3	➔	0
5	Federal Aviation Administration	http://www.faa.gov	100	12	38	14	3%	2	16%	2	10.10	30	13974	12	➔	7

Notable Mentions

- **Six agencies that moved up in the 2017 rankings:**
 - National Cancer Institute +4 (Health and Human Services)
 - Social Security Administration +6 (Health and Human Services)
 - Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation +15
 - National Highway Transportation and Safety Administration +10 (Department of Transportation)
 - Health Resources and Services Administration +8 (Health and Human Services)
 - Homeland Security +1

Relative to its peers, the Department of Health and Human Services fared well in our 2017 assessment. Most HHS agencies in our index improved in overall rank. The exceptions are the Program Support Center (-6) the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, which came in last in our rankings. The Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation (+15) and the National Highway Transportation and Safety Administration (+10) were two of our highest climbers.

Many of our gainers showed improved performance in the areas of Readability and a reduction in the use of complex language. Changes in these metrics can go a long way in improving overall scores.

VisibleThread Clarity Index			U.S. Government – 2017													
Rank	Agency	URL	Num Pages	Clear Writing		Readability		Passive		Long		Complex		Num Words	2016 Rank	YoY Change
				Index	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank				
6	National Cancer Institute	http://www.cancer.gov	104	12.5	48	3	12%	29	21%	9	1.96	9	89625	10	➔	4
10	Social Security Administration	http://www.ssa.gov	100	13.75	35	17	5%	3	22%	15	2.93	20	52658	16	➔	6
13	Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation	http://www.pbgc.gov	100	15.25	49	1	9%	22	22%	12	4.83	26	61890	28	⬆️	15
13	National Highway Traffic Safety Administration	http://www.nhtsa.gov	100	15.25	42	9	8%	19	28%	23	2.03	10	71942	23	➔	10
13	Homeland Security	http://www.dhs.gov	100	15.25	35	17	6%	9	24%	17	2.70	18	35470	14	➔	1
16	Health Resources and Services Administration	http://www.hrsa.gov	100	15.5	40	12	8%	17	43%	30	1.45	3	91309	24	➔	8

• **Five agencies that struggled in the 2017 rankings:**

- Bureau of Labor Statistics (Department of Labor) -7
- U.S. Geological Survey (Department of the Interior) -17
- U.S. Mint (Department of Treasury) -18
- Department of Transportation -9
- Program Support Center (Health and Human Services) -6

What is interesting about this group is how far some of these agencies and departments have fallen in just one year. The [U.S. Geological Survey](#) fell from #1 in 2016 to #18 in 2017. The [U.S. Mint](#) fell from #2 in 2016 to #20 in 2017. And the [Department of Transportation \(DoT\)](#) – which fared well against its peers in 2016 – dropped 9 places, down to #23.

The [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) also fell out of last year’s Top 5 down to #12. The [Program Support Center](#) – under Health and Human Services – lost nearly all last year’s gains, falling from #18 to #24 in this year’s index.

There is no departmental pattern to these losses. What seems to be the common denominator is a marked decrease in Readability. This group averages a score of 34 in Readability, a full 4 points lower than the full index average of 38. The U.S. Mint and U.S Geological Survey had the largest drops in Readability, decreasing by 8 and 7 points respectively.

VisibleThread Clarity Index			U.S. Government – 2017													
Rank	Agency	URL	Num Pages	Clear Writing		Readability		Passive		Long		Complex		Num Words	2016 Rank	YoY Change
				Index	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank				
12	Bureau of Labor Statistics	http://www.bls.gov	102	14.75	34	21	9%	20	23%	16	1.38	2	125764	5	⬇️	-7
18	U.S. Geological Survey	http://www.usgs.gov	100	16.25	25	29	7%	11	22%	13	2.08	12	68862	1	⬇️	-17
20	U.S. Mint	http://www.usmint.gov	100	16.5	42	9	10%	24	27%	20	2.12	13	54323	2	⬇️	-18
23	Transportation	http://www.dot.gov	101	17.25	31	25	6%	7	22%	14	3.69	23	26551	14	⬇️	-9
24	Program Support Center	http://www.psc.gov	100	17.5	37	15	9%	21	26%	19	2.34	15	82294	18	⬇️	-6

Room for Improvement

Four departments shared the bottom five places in the rankings:

- The [Federal Railroad Administration](http://www.fra.dot.gov) (Department of Transportation)
- The [Federal Bureau of Investigation](http://www.fbi.gov) (Department of Justice)
- The [Federal Highway Administration](http://www.fhwa.dot.gov) (Department of Transportation)
- The [Natural Resources Conservation Service](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov) (Department of Agriculture)
- The [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](http://www.samhsa.gov) (Health and Human Services).

The Department of Transportation agencies in this group saw huge decreases in ratings over 2016.

VisibleThread Clarity Index			U.S. Government – 2017																		
Rank	Agency	URL	Num Pages	Clear Writing			Readability			Passive			Long			Complex			Num Words	2016 Rank	YoY Change
				Index	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank					
26	Federal Railroad Administration	http://www.fra.dot.gov	100	21	25	29	7%	13	25%	18	3.70	24	55351	18	↓	-8					
27	Federal Bureau of Investigation	http://www.fbi.gov	100	21.25	40	12	15%	30	29%	26	2.59	17	89025	25	↔	-2					
28	Federal Highway Administration	http://www.fhwa.dot.gov	100	22	31	25	11%	27	28%	22	2.20	14	50861	9	↓	-19					
29	Natural Resources Conservation Service	http://www.nrcs.usda.gov	100	22.75	31	25	9%	23	27%	21	3.14	22	42492	25	↔	-4					
30	Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration	http://www.samhsa.gov	101	24.25	32	24	10%	25	37%	29	2.77	19	133223	27	↔	-3					

Excluding average scores by the FBI in Readability (12th), Federal Railroad Administration in Passive Use (13th) and Federal Highway Administration in Complexity (14th), all listed sites scored in the bottom half of the rankings across all categories.

Factors making these the worst performers were:

- Poor Readability ratings – Agencies in this category have an average Readability rating of 32. This is 6 points below the index average of 38. Scores range from a high of 40 (FBI) to a low of 25 (Federal Railroad Administration). This sentence is a clear example of why readability scores are so low among the agencies ranked at the bottom of the index:

“In accordance with 49 U.S.C. 24405(a)(7), a person or entity is ineligible to receive any contract or subcontract made with FRA grant funds if a court or department, agency, or instrumentality of the Government decides the person intentionally - (A) affixed a "Made in America" label, or a label with an inscription having the same meaning, to goods sold in or shipped to the United States that are used in a project to which this subsection applies but not produced in the United States; or (B) represented that goods described in subparagraph (A) of this paragraph were produced in the United States.”

- High proportion of long sentences (between 25% and 37%). Members of this group use long sentences 4% more than the index average (29%). SAMHSA ranked 29th in this category, using long sentences in 37% of their content. An example of SAMHSA content is:

“Designed to collect data based on the location of the facility, the objectives of N-SSATS are (1) to collect multipurpose data that can be used to assist SAMHSA and State and local governments in assessing the nature and extent of services provided and in forecasting treatment resource requirements; (2) to update SAMHSA's Inventory of Behavioral Health Services (I-BHS); (3) to analyze general treatment services trends; and (4) to generate the Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator <http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/>.”

- High levels of passive language (between 7% and 15%) – This group averaged slightly more than 10% in use of passive language. This is 2% higher than the index average of 8%. The FBI came in last with 15% passive language use. Use of passive language was up 33% for the agency from its 10% mark in 2016.

Takeaways

1. Wide variability between best and worst performers

There is very wide variance between the best and worst scoring websites. This applies across all metrics. Readability ranges from 49 (CDC) to 25 (U.S Geological Survey and Federal Railroad Administration). Clear Writing Index Scores range from 5 (National Archives) to 24.25 (SAMHSA). This lack of clarity in SAMHSA's content is important to mention. This is the federal agency for people seeking information on substance abuse and mental health services. The United States is experiencing unprecedented opioid abuse. The epidemic is taxing federal resources and destroying families. Current statistics suggest 1 in 4 Americans will suffer from a mental illness at some point in their lives. Getting the right information to the right people in a clear and correct manner will save both money and lives.

2. Agencies can make huge improvements through dedication to clear writing principles

The Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) is a success story that should be emulated. This organization went from dead last in 2016 to #3 in 2017. They accomplished this through dedication to a few core clear writing principles. They jumped to #1 in use of passive language and complexity. Improvement in these two categories contributed to a 4th place ranking in Readability. While they still have work to do in the use of long sentences, these strides should be commended. Community policing and law enforcement have been frequently in the news in recent years, often for the wrong reasons. It is critical that organizations such as COPS make every effort to effectively communicate to increase public safety and improve perception.

3. Long Sentences are an epidemic in federal government communications

The average use of long sentences across indexed agencies is 25%. This is the same percentage as 2016. This area is among the easiest to address and can lead to some of the biggest gains in clarity. The best

score comes from the National Archives at 15%. This is less than the ideal 5% or lower. An example taken from the site of one agency illustrates this problem:

“FRA and FTA initially obtained input during a webinar held in July 2016 with the stakeholders that participated in an FRA-led study mandated by the 2008 Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act that resulted in a report to Congress in 2013 titled Streamlining Compliance with Section 4(f) of the Department of Transportation Act and Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act for Federally Funded Railroad Infrastructure Repair and Improvement Projects”

- 4. There needs to be improvement in readability across all agency websites in times of tightening budgets**
The average readability across the 2017 index is 38, 12 points below the recommended low-end average of 50. More people than ever access their information through written communication on the Internet. This is not a trend, but a reality. Essential information needs to be written clearly and specifically to impact its intended audience. Budgets for domestic agencies are shrinking and an aging federal workforce is not being replaced at a commensurate rate. Written information needs to be clear to avoid negative impacts on the lives of citizens and unnecessary costs to administration. Agencies need to do more with less. Clear writing is one solution to this problem.

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 Clarity Index		U.S. Government – 2017										Num Pages	Clear Writing Index	Readability			Passive		Long		Complex		Num Words	2016 Rank	YoY Change
		Index	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score			Rank	Score	Rank									
1	National Archives and Records Administration	http://www.archives.gov	100	5	43	6	6%	5	15%	1	1.90	8	66785	10	➔	9									
2	Centers for Disease Control	http://www.cdc.gov	100	7	49	1	6%	10	21%	11	1.87	6	68370	7	➔	5									
3	Community Oriented Policing Services	http://www.cops.usdoj.gov	100	8.5	47	4	2%	1	37%	28	1.29	1	104149	29	👆	26									
3	Smithsonian Institution	http://www.si.edu	100	8.5	37	15	6%	8	19%	7	1.68	4	35840	3	➔	0									
5	Federal Aviation Administration	http://www.faa.gov	100	12	38	14	3%	2	16%	2	10.10	30	13974	12	➔	7									
6	The Interior	http://www.doi.gov	100	12.5	31	25	6%	6	18%	3	2.46	16	35403	4	➔	-2									
6	National Cancer Institute	http://www.cancer.gov	104	12.5	48	3	12%	29	21%	9	1.96	9	89625	10	➔	4									
8	Department of Education	http://www.ed.gov/	100	13.25	35	17	6%	4	29%	25	1.89	7	41702	NA	➔	0									
9	Environmental Protection Agency	http://www.epa.gov/	100	13.5	35	17	7%	12	18%	4	3.04	21	33734	NA	➔	0									
10	Social Security Administration	http://www.ssa.gov	100	13.75	35	17	5%	3	22%	15	2.93	20	52658	16	➔	6									
11	Veteran Affairs	http://benefits.va.gov/benefits/	102	14.25	45	5	8%	16	20%	8	5.67	28	65410	8	➔	-3									
12	Bureau of Labor Statistics	http://www.bls.gov	102	14.75	34	21	9%	20	23%	16	1.38	2	125764	5	👇	-7									
13	Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation	http://www.pbgc.gov	100	15.25	49	1	9%	22	22%	12	4.83	26	61890	28	👆	15									
13	National Highway Traffic Safety Administration	http://www.nhtsa.gov	100	15.25	42	9	8%	19	28%	23	2.03	10	71942	23	➔	10									
13	Homeland Security	http://www.dhs.gov	100	15.25	35	17	6%	9	24%	17	2.70	18	35470	14	➔	1									
16	Health Resources and Services Administration	http://www.hrsa.gov	100	15.5	40	12	8%	17	43%	30	1.45	3	91309	24	➔	8									
17	State	http://www.state.gov	100	16	43	6	10%	26	34%	27	1.82	5	60272	13	➔	-4									
18	Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation	http://www.fdic.gov	101	16.25	43	6	11%	28	19%	6	4.45	25	52958	17	➔	-1									
18	U.S. Geological Survey	http://www.usgs.gov	100	16.25	25	29	7%	11	22%	13	2.08	12	68862	1	👇	-17									
20	U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services	http://www.uscis.gov	102	16.5	42	9	8%	18	21%	10	5.68	29	46270	21	➔	1									
20	U.S. Mint	http://www.usmint.gov	100	16.5	42	9	10%	24	27%	20	2.12	13	54323	2	👇	-18									
22	General Services Administration	http://www.gsa.gov	100	17	34	21	8%	15	18%	5	4.84	27	23741	21	➔	-1									
23	Transportation	http://www.dot.gov	101	17.25	31	25	6%	7	22%	14	3.69	23	26551	14	👇	-9									
24	Program Support Center	http://www.psc.gov	100	17.5	37	15	9%	21	26%	19	2.34	15	82294	18	👇	-6									
24	Department of Energy	http://www.energy.gov/	100	17.5	34	21	7%	14	28%	24	2.05	11	40526	NA	➔	0									
26	Federal Railroad Administration	http://www.fra.dot.gov	100	21	25	29	7%	13	25%	18	3.70	24	55351	18	👇	-8									
27	Federal Bureau of Investigation	http://www.fbi.gov	100	21.25	40	12	15%	30	29%	26	2.59	17	89025	25	➔	-2									
28	Federal Highway Administration	http://www.fhwa.dot.gov	100	22	31	25	11%	27	28%	22	2.20	14	50881	9	👇	-19									
29	Natural Resources Conservation Service	http://www.nrcs.usda.gov	100	22.75	31	25	9%	23	27%	21	3.14	22	42492	25	➔	-4									
30	Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration	http://www.samhsa.gov	101	24.25	32	24	10%	25	37%	29	2.77	19	133223	27	➔	-3									

Methodology – what are the metrics?

- We analyzed the sites on April 26, 2017.
- 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
1. Readability	
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 Flesch Reading Ease index.	$(206.835 - (1.015 \times \text{Average Sentence Length}) - (84.6 \times \text{Average Syllables per Word}))$
2. Passive Language	
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?	$(\text{Passive Sentences} / \text{Total Sentences} * 100)$
3. Long Sentences	
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.	$(\text{Long Sentences} / \text{Total Sentences} * 100)$

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)

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

For questions or if you want a specific sector index:

- For a specific agency or bureau index, email: sales@visiblethread.com
- For questions on the metrics or methodology, email: support@visiblethread.com
- For inquiries from members of the press or media, email: charles.farrell@visiblethread.com

(1) http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2006-12-10-washington-plain-talk_x.htm & <http://www.governor.wa.gov/priorities/plaintalk/default.asp>

(2) <https://www.michbar.org/file/barjournal/article/documents/pdf4article2064.pdf>