# Putting plain language to the test

Plain Language Summit 2020

nicolefenton@navapbc.com
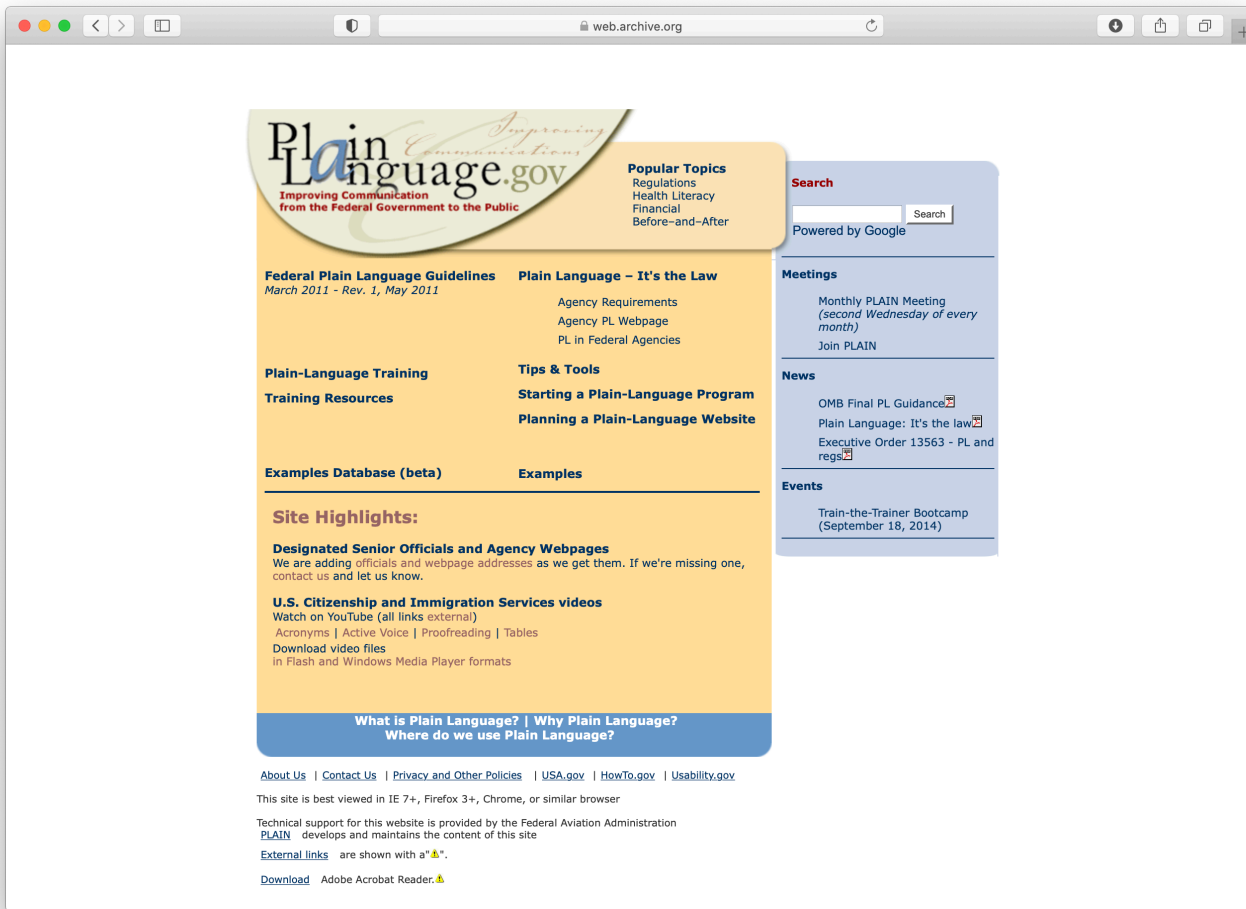
@nicoleslaw

# Agenda

- Brief history of the plainlanguage.gov redesign

- Hard sell on content research

- Content research methods

# Case study

# Plain Language.gov

*Improving Communication*
*from the Federal Government to the Public*

**Popular Topics**
Regulations
Health Literacy
Financial
Before–and–After

**Federal Plain Language Guidelines**
*March 2011 - Rev. 1, May 2011*

**Plain Language – It's the Law**

Agency Requirements

Agency PL Webpage

PL in Federal Agencies

**Plain-Language Training**

**Training Resources**

**Tips & Tools**

**Starting a Plain-Language Program**

**Planning a Plain-Language Website**

**Examples Database (beta)**

**Examples**

## Site Highlights:

**Designated Senior Officials and Agency Webpages**
We are adding officials and webpage addresses as we get them. If we're missing one, contact us and let us know.

**U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services videos**
Watch on YouTube (all links external)
Acronyms | Active Voice | Proofreading | Tables
Download video files
in Flash and Windows Media Player formats

**What is Plain Language? | Why Plain Language?**
**Where do we use Plain Language?**

About Us | Contact Us | Privacy and Other Policies | USA.gov | HowTo.gov | Usability.gov

This site is best viewed in IE 7+, Firefox 3+, Chrome, or similar browser

Technical support for this website is provided by the Federal Aviation Administration
PLAIN develops and maintains the content of this site

External links are shown with a" ⚠ ".

Download Adobe Acrobat Reader. ⚠

**Search**

[ Search field ] [ Search ]

Powered by Google

**Meetings**

Monthly PLAIN Meeting
*(second Wednesday of every month)*

Join PLAIN

**News**

OMB Final PL Guidance
Plain Language: It's the law
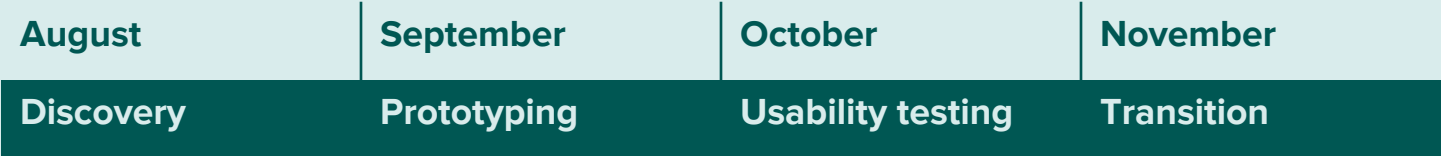Executive Order 13563 - PL and regs

**Events**

Train-the-Trainer Bootcamp
(September 18, 2014)

# 10x pitch

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

| August | September | October | November |
|--------|-----------|---------|----------|
| **Discovery** | **Prototyping** | **Usability testing** | **Transition** |

**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

plainlanguage.gov

Search...

Home    Law and requirements    Plain language guidelines    Examples    Training    Resources    About

# Plain language makes it easier for the public to read, understand, and use government communications.

**Learn more**

### Law and requirements »

Learn about the Plain Writing Act, policy memos, and executive orders that require agencies to use plain language.

### Plain language guidelines »

Official writing guidelines for understanding your audience, being clear and concise, and testing your content.

### Training »

Request in-person training for your federal agency, or use our videos and materials to create your own class.

### Examples »

See plain language in action in a variety of regulations, legal documents, handbooks, and publications.

# 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.

# CDC
## Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
CDC 24/7: Saving Lives, Protecting People™

Search

Advanced Search

Diseases & Conditions ▾      Healthy Living ▾      Travelers' Health ▾      Emergency Preparedness ▾      More ▾

## Coronavirus Disease 2019
CDC is responding to the novel coronavirus outbreak.

Learn More About COVID-19

### COVID-19 Vaccines
What you need to know about COVID-19 vaccination planning in the United States.

### Common Colds
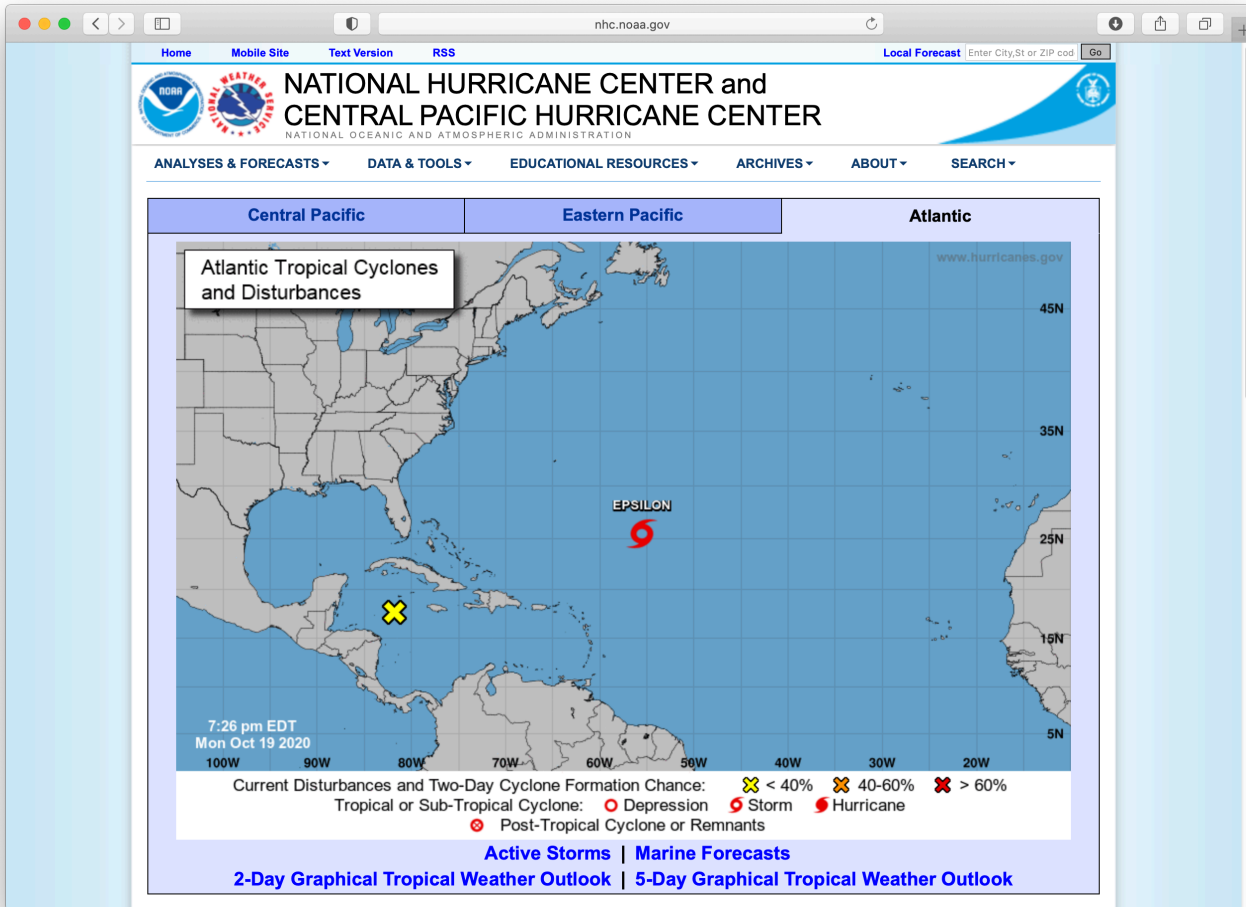Protect yourself and others from the common cold.

### Protect Yourself & Your Family from Flu
Everyone 6 months of age and older should get annual flu vaccine by the

### Wildfire Smoke & COVID-19
Protect yourself and your family from wildfire smoke during the pandemic.

Local Forecast    Enter City,St or ZIP cod    Go

# NATIONAL HURRICANE CENTER and
# CENTRAL PACIFIC HURRICANE CENTER
NATIONAL OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

ANALYSES & FORECASTS▾    DATA & TOOLS▾    EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES▾    ARCHIVES▾    ABOUT▾    SEARCH▾

| Central Pacific | Eastern Pacific | Atlantic |
| --- | --- | --- |

www.hurricanes.gov

Atlantic Tropical Cyclones
and Disturbances

45N

35N

EPSILON

25N

15N

5N

7:26 pm EDT
Mon Oct 19 2020

100W    90W    80W    70W    60W    50W    40W    30W    20W

Current Disturbances and Two-Day Cyclone Formation Chance:    ✕ < 40%   ✕ 40-60%   ✕ > 60%
Tropical or Sub-Tropical Cyclone:    O Depression   🌀 Storm   🌀 Hurricane
⊗ Post-Tropical Cyclone or Remnants

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

**IRS**

Help · News · English ⌄ · Charities & Nonprofits · Tax Pros

File · Pay · Refunds · Credits & Deductions · Forms & Instructions

Search

Get My Economic Impact Payment

Non-Filers: Enter Payment Info Here

Get Coronavirus Tax Relief

Get Your Refund Status

Do Your Taxes for Free

Get Your Tax Record

View Your Account

Make a Payment

## 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**
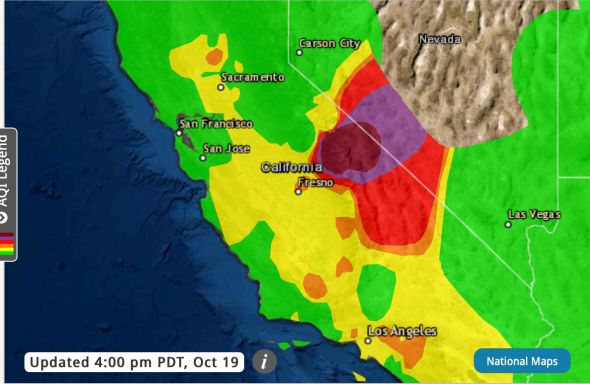
AirNow

AirNow | AQI & Health | Fires | Maps & Data | Education | International | Resources

EPA and PARTNERS

Fresno, CA | ZIP Code, City, or State | AQI | 81 °F

# 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

Carson City
Nevada
Sacramento
San Francisco
San Jose
California
Fresno
Las Vegas
Los Angeles

Updated 4:00 pm PDT, Oct 19

National Maps

AQI Legend

# Air Quality Forecast

Forecast courtesy of
San Joaquin Valley Unified APCD

| Today | Tomorrow |
| --- | --- |

# 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...*

# Use direct quotes

Usability-Sprint-1.pdf
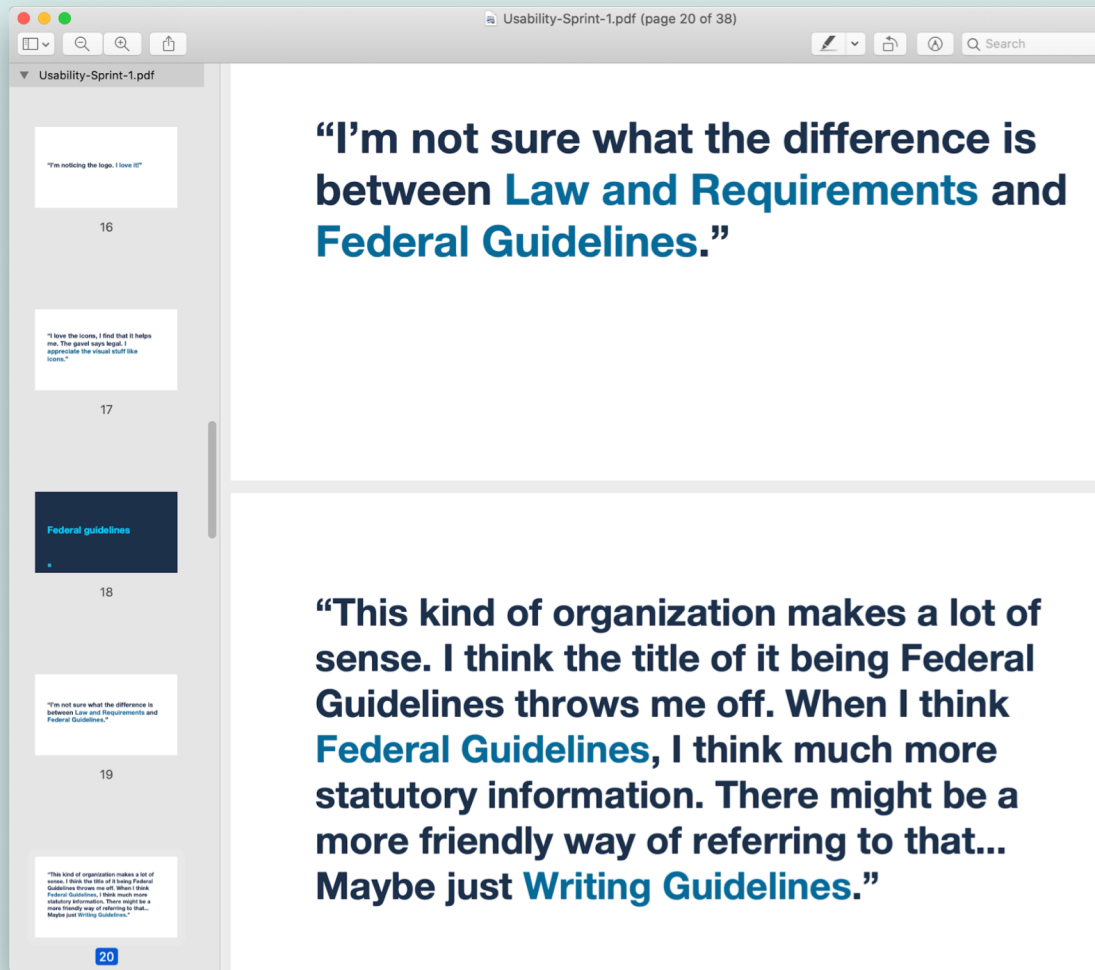
"I'm not sure what the difference is between **Law and Requirements** and **Federal Guidelines**."

"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**."

A guide to the
## Paperwork Reduction Act

About the PRA    Do I need clearance?    PRA approval process    Clearance types    Estimating burden    Additional resources

# The Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA) is a law governing how federal agencies collect information from the public.
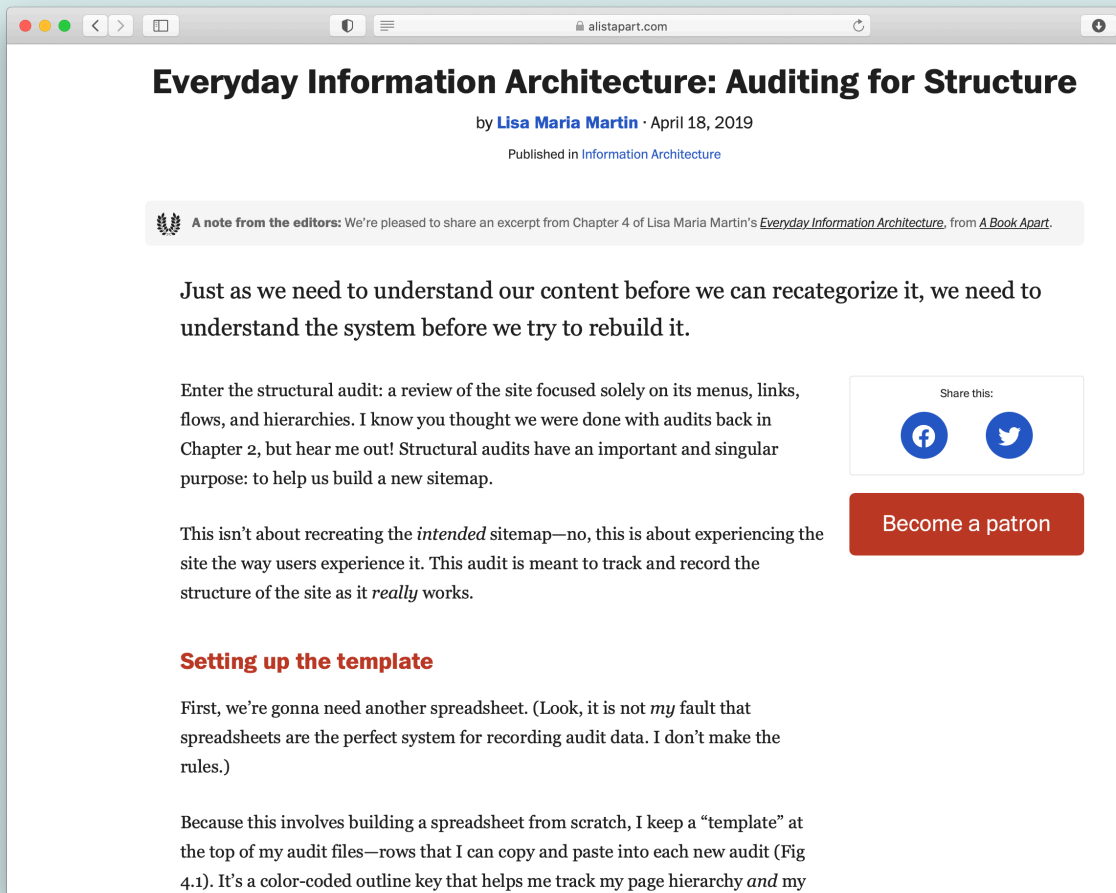
**Learn what the PRA does**

# 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.

Share this:

Ⓕ  Ⓣ

Become a patron

## 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

File   Edit   View   Insert   Format   Data   Tools   Add-ons   Help     All changes saved in Drive

🖨  ↶  ↷  🖌    100% ▾    $  %  .0̲ .0̲0̲  123 ▾    Arial ▾    10 ▾    B  I  S̶  A ▾   🖍 ▾ ⊞ ▾ ⊟ ▾    More ▾                                ⌃

*fx* | Examples

| | A | B | C | D | E | F | G |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Migrated | Edited | Level | Topic | Subtopic | Title | URL |
| 2 | X | X | 0.00 | Site | Terms | Privacy Policy | http://www.plainlanguage.gov/site/privacy.cfm |
| 3 | X | X | 0.00 | Site | | 404: Oops! | http://www.plainlanguage.gov/site/oops.cfm |
| 4 | X | X | 2.00 | Law and Requirements | Compliance | How to Comply with the President's Me | http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/guidelines/PresMemoGuidelin |
| 5 | X | X | 2.00 | Law and Requirements | Compliance | Plain Writing Act Compliance Report | http://www.plainlanguage.gov/plLaw/law/agency_compliance_repor |
| 6 | X | X | 2.00 | Law and Requirements | Compliance | Plain Writing Act of 2010: Plain Langua | http://www.plainlanguage.gov/plLaw/fedGovt/ |
| 7 | X | X | 2.00 | Law and Requirements | Compliance | Plain Language: It's the law | http://www.plainlanguage.gov/plLaw/index.cfm |
| 8 | X | X | 2.00 | Law and Requirements | Compliance | Model Language for Agency Plain Lang | http://www.plainlanguage.gov/plLaw/law/agency_pl_page.cfm |
| 9 | X | X | 2.00 | Law and Requirements | Compliance | Plain Writing Act of 2010: Federal Ager | http://www.plainlanguage.gov/plLaw/law/index.cfm |
| 10 | X | X | 2.00 | Law and Requirements | Examples | Army Regulations | http://www.plainlanguage.gov/examples/before_after/govregarmy.c |
| 11 | X | X | 2.00 | Law and Requirements | Examples | Before-and-After Comparisons | http://www.plainlanguage.gov/examples/before_after/index.cfm |
| 12 | X | X | 2.00 | Law and Requirements | Examples | Johnson Space Center Manual Examp | http://www.plainlanguage.gov/examples/before_after/johnsonmanu |
| 13 | X | X | 2.00 | Law and Requirements | Examples | Johnson Space Center Manual Examp | http://www.plainlanguage.gov/examples/before_after/johnsonmanu |
| 14 | X | X | 2.00 | Law and Requirements | Examples | Johnson Space Center Manual Examp | http://www.plainlanguage.gov/examples/before_after/johnsonmanu |
| 15 | X | X | 2.00 | Law and Requirements | Examples | Johnson Space Center Manual Examp | http://www.plainlanguage.gov/examples/before_after/johnsonmanu |
| 16 | X | X | 2.00 | Law and Requirements | Examples | Johnson Space Center Manual Examp | http://www.plainlanguage.gov/examples/before_after/johnsonmanu |
| 17 | X | X | 2.00 | Law and Requirements | Examples | Johnson Space Center Manual Examp | http://www.plainlanguage.gov/examples/before_after/johnsonmanu |
| 18 | X | X | 2.00 | Law and Requirements | Examples | Plain Language and Jury Instructions | http://www.plainlanguage.gov/examples/before_after/jury.cfm |
| 19 | X | X | 2.00 | Law and Requirements | Examples | Health Resources and Services Admin | http://www.plainlanguage.gov/examples/before_after/pub_hhs_hlth |
| 20 | X | X | 2.00 | Law and Requirements | Examples | Public Health Service, Department of H | http://www.plainlanguage.gov/examples/before_after/pub_hhs_lose |
| 21 | X | X | 2.00 | Law and Requirements | Examples | National Marine Fisheries Service, Nati | http://www.plainlanguage.gov/examples/before_after/regfisheries.c |

# 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., <u>service blueprint</u>, contact center training)

## Legend

Internal page

External site

PDF

## Home

### Nav

- Law and Requirements
- Writing Guidelines
- Training
- Resources
- About Us

### Footer

- Contact Us
  - Email
  - Twitter
  - Facebook
  - GitHub
- Join the Listserv
- USA.gov
- Usability.gov
- Privacy policy
- FOIA policy

# 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 <u>ways to test content</u>

# 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.*"

User interview for PLAIN

plainlanguage.gov

Search...

Home    Law and requirements    Plain language guidelines    **Examples**    Training    Resources    About

## IN THIS SECTION

**Before and after**

Award winners

Reports and brochures

Handbooks and manuals

Letters and notices

Regulations

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

## Subscribe to our mailing list

# 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)

**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!

nicolefenton@navapbc.com

@nicoleslaw