Legislative Report

Driver and Vehicle Services plain language implementation

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Driver and Vehicle Services plain language implementation

Executive summary

Clear, plain language ensures people from different educational backgrounds, language proficiencies and learning styles have an equal opportunity to demonstrate what they know.

Gov. Mark Dayton signed Executive Order 14-07 in 2014 defining plain language as "communication, which an audience can understand the first time they read or hear it." He directed state agencies to use language commonly understood by the public, write in short and complete sentences, present information in a format that is easy to find and easy to understand, and clearly state directions and deadlines to the audience. There is no grade level equivalent mentioned in the definitions, leaving that to the discretion of the agencies.

A driving test should measure a person's understanding of traffic rules and safe driving practices, not their ability to decode confusing vocabulary or complex sentence structures. By removing unnecessary barriers to comprehension, plain language exams help ensure licensed drivers truly understand the rules of the road, making roads safer for everyone. The Legislature passed a law in 2024 requiring written driver's exams to be written in plain language, protecting both fairness and public safety.

Part of this legislative act requires a report to the chairs, ranking minority members and legislative staff having jurisdiction over transportation finance and policy. The report must detail the implementation of plain language standards for the written portion of the driver's knowledge examination required under Minnesota Statutes, section 171.13, subdivision 10.

Implementation of plain language standards

Class D written examination questions are pulled directly from the Minnesota Driver's Manual, as close to word-for-word as possible. Changing the test questions means changing the driver's manual first.

To implement plain language standards into the written exam, Driver and Vehicle Services (DVS) worked with the Enterprise Translation Office, Office of Communications and Department of Transportation, keeping information relevant but simplifying the message and updating illustrations.

Test questions were reviewed by the Test Maintenance Committee (TMC), a team of DVS employees who supervise, manage, perform examinations and in other ways serve Driver Services. Once questions were updated to reflect current verbiage in the driver's manual, they were uploaded by our test vendor and went live on March 1, 2025.

Analysis of new written driver's knowledge exam across languages

DVS tracks pass/fail rates for driver knowledge tests in eight languages. The top five by volume are English, Spanish, Somali, Russian and Hmong

Plain language was implemented for the English, Hmong and Somali tests on March 1, 2025, so an accurate comparison required a dataset from March through December rather than a more traditional calendar or fiscal year. At the time of this report, plain language revisions have been completed in the other top languages but have not been implemented into the written tests.

As indicated in figure 1, after the implementation of plain language into the exam, the pass percentage for English increased by five points, Hmong rose by four and Somali dropped by four. Plain language was not implemented into the Spanish or Russian exam. The pass percentage rose by eight points for Spanish and dropped by seven for Russian. These initial findings suggest the conversion to plain language may have had a lesser impact than previously hoped; however, the sample time frame is too short to make a full determination.

Figure 1, Pass and fail rates

	03/01/2024-12/15/2024			**03/01/2025-12/15/2025**			
Language	Pass	Fail	Pass percentage	Pass	Fail	Pass percentage	Increase or decrease
English*	96,714	73,629	**57%**	99,685	60,841	**62%**	**5**
Hmong*	174	800	**18%**	240	860	**22%**	**4**
Somali*	745	3,671	**17%**	690	4,524	**13%**	**-4**
Spanish	18,386	51,238	**26%**	13,811	27,105	**34%**	**8**
Russian	1,002	1,262	44%	259	437	37%	**-7**

* Indicates plain language exam

During this same time frame, the English class D knowledge exam took an average of 18 minutes and 48 seconds to complete prior to plain language implementation, and 18 minutes and 28 seconds after the new test went live. A 20-second improvement seems inconsequential, but the sample time frames are not long enough to provide a strong data set.

Expenditures

The Legislature appropriated $212,000 to DVS for the implementation of plain language. No additional staffing was needed to implement these standards, and future updates are expected to be handled by the TMC. The appropriation was spent almost evenly between translation services and vendor fees, including the cost for the vendor to reprogram and randomize the updated test questions.

Although translations have been completed, plain language standards have only been uploaded for the English, Hmong and Somali class D knowledge exams. Additional funding will be necessary to work with the

vendor to program questions in additional languages. DVS recommends plain language standards be implemented in all currently available languages.

Figure 2, Expenses incurred

Supplier	Description	Received date	Total
Latitude Prime LLC	Total translation cost — Quality assurance: Ukrainian, Russian, Vietnamese, Pashto, Dari, Karen Recordings: Dari, Karen, Hmong, Somali, American Sign Language Service: written translation statewide	2/10/2025	$63,965.62
Latitude Prime LLC	Dari 5,508 words transcription, 50% rush charge, 5.5 fixed recording fee, 50%rush charge, 1 fixed rate	2/11/2025	$19,576.51
Latitude Prime LLC	1 English (USA) 5.5 fixed recording fee, 1 fixed rate	2/11/2025	$13,564.85
Latitude Prime LLC	Translation of one sample question for Dari, Pashto and Ukrainian for plain language class D knowledge test. Service: written translation statewide	Pending	$450
Latitude Prime LLC	Latitude Prime file separation for five languages audio files related to plain language Class D	9/4/2025	$7,087.02
IDEMIA Identity & Security USA LLC	Amendment 7 Minnesota Statue 171.13 sets the plain language requirements which become effective 2/1/2025. Amendment updates contract with need to conform to those standards	Pending updated processing and servicing costs	$107,356

Feedback

At the time of this report, plain language has not been implemented in languages other than English, Hmong and Somali, so there is no data or feedback regarding other non-English speaking test takers or language professionals.

The Driver's Education unit of DVS has reported a lack of reaction from high school and commercial driving schools driver's education programs. This is seen as positive as schools generally conduct business with little to no interaction with the state unless problems or concerns arise. Written tests differ from behind-the-wheel

road tests in that examiners are largely hands-off, with the exceptions of oral tests, so examiner feedback is measured by success rates.

Conclusion

The increase of five percentage points in English and four points in Hmong exams suggests the plain language implementation reduced unnecessary language barriers and improved accessibility, allowing assessments to better reflect actual knowledge rather than reading complexity. This conclusion does not account for test results in other languages, with some improvement and some declining test scores.

Taking all these factors into consideration indicates that content knowledge and studying for the test makes the biggest impact on success.