

GUIDELINES FOR COMMUNICATING INFORMATION ELECTRONICALLY

These guidelines for electronic submission of reaffirmation materials contain suggestions that focus on three areas:

- Considerations for deciding whether to use an electronic format for submitting documentation in support of its compliance
- Flow of information, electronic formatting and specifications
- Tips for ensuring user friendly access

The content and materials submitted for reaffirmation should be the same regardless whether the information is presented in hardcopy or electronically. The institution must submit one hardcopy of the completed, signed Compliance Certification document to the Commission office, even if an electronic version is available. (The hardcopy of the Compliance Certification should not include copies of the links referred to in an electronically prepared Certification). In addition, the institution may also include an electronic version if presenting information electronically.

Dedicated electronic materials submitted for reaffirmation may not be altered after the institution submits its Compliance Certification. After the Commission staff member provides the institution with a report from the Off-Site Review Committee, the institution may make changes to its electronic or print materials and resubmit as part of a Focused Report.

DECIDING ON A FORMAT

The purpose of the Compliance Certification is to provide appropriate, accurate, and honest information to the Commission on Colleges about the institution's assessment of the extent of its compliance with Core Requirements and Comprehensive Standards.

The following is a number of considerations the institution should address when deciding whether to provide materials in an electronic format. In this case, the electronic format consists of either Web-based (*html*) or CD/DVD-based (*.pdf*) formats. This decision needs to be made early in the process.

Examination of the Advantages/Disadvantages of Electronic Formats

- 1) Access. A Web-based version is easily accessed by a wide variety of people, including faculty and staff of the institution, board of directors, and various constituencies. Various techniques (e.g., password protection, separate servers or site) may be used to limit what information the institution wants accessible and who may see various documentations.
- 2) Currency. Web sites may provide the current information, but the *url* or link address and/or the content may change. Once the Compliance Certification is submitted to the Commission, the electronic presentation dedicated to reaffirmation cannot be modified until the off-site review is complete. This may mean freezing a presentation website, using an additional alternate website, or keeping the information on CD or DVD.

Placement of some documents on Web sites and use of online databases can have long-term usefulness to the institution. The institution needs to recognize that this decision has consequences for long-term staffing needs. If an institution decides to use a Web version,

consider setting an “end date” for de-activating the site. If an end date is determined, include it on the opening page of the Web site so that users will be informed.

- 3) Flexibility. If the institution plans to integrate the principles of accreditation into its strategic planning, evaluation and assessment processes, the electronic format might provide continued access and long-term flexibility. The ability of the reviewers to see the individual planning and assessment documentation in the institution’s own format may be an advantage.
- 4) Function. Can the electronic documentation be valuable, in and of itself, to inform the members of the institution and its constituencies, independent of the need for SACS compliance? If so, the effort of producing an electronic version of the Compliance Certification may be well worth the time and effort, if the information is kept updated.

Electronic formats, in the final analysis, are much easier to update and integrate into ongoing assessment and planning activities than are hard copies of materials. By placing materials on the web or on a CD/DVD, all users around the institution can easily extract information for a variety of purposes.

- 5) Special Needs. There may be special documents that the institution will need to determine whether and, if so, how the information can be reported electronically. It is possible for a few sensitive documents to remain in hardcopy and be referenced as “available on site only.”

Review of an Institution’s Technical Capability

- 1) Resources. Hardware considerations include servers; bandwidth; and CD/DVD replication. Before an institution makes the decision to use an electronic format, it should assess its ability to do so using standard, widely available software packages. It is recommended for Electronic versions that they be in either *html* or *pdf* formats, web based solutions should be browser independent.. Obscure, outdated or the newest packages make use of an electronic approach inappropriate, as some reviewers and other users will be unable to access information, or experience frustration that may distract from the content of the materials submitted. Hardware and/or software may be available on campus or may be outsourced.

If the institution currently has most of its essential documents (catalogs, handbooks, policy & procedure manuals, etc.) in electronic format, then they can be easily updated electronically. Large documents (such as catalogs) will need to be prepared or formatted so that specific sections can be accessed by direct links.

The institution should have the ability to provide timely and consistent back-up of the electronic presentation or an alternate medium if the technology does not work at the time of the review. Alternate Web sites, alternate servers, hardcopy, or CD/DVDs may be used as back-up sources.

- 2) Personnel and Expertise. The institution will need someone able to program Web sites, format (and debug) documents and final reports into *html* or *pdf* versions, provide links (appropriately programmed), and generally ensure information appears and functions properly. This usually requires focused attention on the task – before, during, and even after the written report is drafted. An institution may need to hire a specialist or outsource this project.
- 3) Training. Not all persons involved in the development of compliance materials will be as “electronically savvy” as others, and the need to learn new software or other skills necessary

to produce the materials may delay progress initially. The advantage of this training will be to help integrate technology into normal processes.

It is important that appropriate support people be in place to facilitate training. The earlier the decision is made to provide an electronically formatted presentation, the sooner the institution can work with the technical staff to ensure that the electronic formats and links are effective in all documents.

- 4) Control. The institution must be able to ensure that Web addresses will not change during the review period.
- 5) Volume. If it will take several CDs to present information, then Web-version or DVDs might be more convenient. Whichever medium the institution decides to use, **all** materials should be produced using that medium. The institution should not have links to documents not on the same medium.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE ELECTRONIC DESIGN

The suggestions presented below are not prescriptive; rather, they represent recommendations that have been found to be common, accessible, useful, and least likely to lead to problems.

An institution that chooses electronic presentation of compliance materials also assumes responsibility for ensuring that reviewers are able to evaluate materials via an alternate medium or method, should problems occur with the presentation originally planned. If an institution decides to use electronic presentation, the most important consideration is that reviewers and other end-users have easy access to materials with a minimum of training and learning time.

When considering whether to utilize an electronic presentation, the quality of communication with reviewers is the paramount consideration. Whether using a CD or Web-based approach, reviewers should encounter a user-friendly introduction that guides them through the process. To the extent possible, a reviewer should initially see a short description of the process, followed by a step-by-step guide to using the materials. Once the reviewer has begun the evaluation process, it should be easy to navigate forward or return to a previous location in the process. While there are many possible approaches, the process should make sure that reviewers have little to learn about computer techniques. A simple point and click menu should make it apparent to any user exactly what to do at each step of the process.

Software

The two primary considerations for choosing software are: 1) common availability, and 2) utility on the greatest variety of existing equipment. The institution's presentation must be in a format that is "user friendly" and allows anyone, regardless of computer skills, to access it with ease and without frustration. Use of obscure or outdated software, or software that is too new or complex, is ill advised and will greatly increase the chances that reviewers and/or other users will be unable to access information or experience frustration that will detract from the content of the materials. An obvious example is whether reviewers would have access to DVD readers. It is also necessary to ensure that adequate technical support (in-house or out-sourced) is available and involved early in the process to support the development and implementation of electronic materials.

The following references to specific software reflects only the current availability of these particular programs and do not reflect trademark preferences. If an institution has decided to use CD or DVD as the medium of submission, *Adobe* accessible format (essentially *.pdf* documents) is most useful. This software does not rely on the Internet, thus ensuring that it is more accessible to the reader. If

your institution has decided to use a Web-based approach, then software that produces *html* formats that can be viewed via either *Internet Explorer* or *Netscape* (the current most common browsers) should be used. Specific text or page formatting should be as independent or neutral to browser programs as possible. Some text formatting appears differently on the screen, depending on the browser; e.g., some format coding used for *Internet Explorer* will not directly transfer when the text is viewed using *Netscape*. Regardless of software chosen, the safest approach is to keep formats very simple, using defaults when possible.

An institution should choose a program to produce *html* documents and a browser program first; then design sample tables, reports, titles, and document links. Then view trial runs of materials on “another” browser. This should be done early in the process. Links may be used to web-based documents with either a CD or a Web-based approach. However, remember that embedded links (*url* addresses) to Web-based documents cannot change, so the institution must understand that addresses are frozen for a specified period that includes time for both development and review processes. If Web-based document links are used in a CD presentation, remember to include the requirement for internet access in your instructions and inform both the Commission and your reviewers early of this requirement.

As with any new approach, the development of the needed electronic reports and documents at an institution may require training and learning time for some personnel. Not all persons involved in the campus process will be as “electronically savvy” as others. It is important that appropriate support people be in place to facilitate the process and that time be planned in the institution’s timetable for this education to take place.

General Design

In designing the appearance and organization of a compliance presentation, the most significant consideration is making it easy to follow and as streamlined as possible for off-site and on-site reviewers. This presentation is specifically designed for reaffirmation; a public relations extravaganza will not be useful. Always keep the presentation of information in context of the Core Requirements and Comprehensive Standards. It also is tempting to feel that being different in your design or approach will make your institution “stand out.” Unfortunately, the differences also may impede the ease with which a reviewer can evaluate compliance materials. (Please review the section entitled “Helpful Hints for Use of Electronic Materials by Reviewers” for a perspective on how reviewers may wish to manipulate and manage the compliance information during their reviews and the preparation of their report.) The following four information management tools can be helpful.

- 1) Keep it simple. Maintain simple designs and formats, using defaults when possible. Remember that pictures and graphics take memory, time to load, and standards of resolution that reviewers may not have. Keep the number of levels at a minimum (i.e., do not make reviewers click too many times to get where they need to be).
- 2) Be consistent. If different sections from your opening page are used, keep the organization and the style the same. Beware of changing styles just for appearance or of adding graphics just to “spice it up.”
- 3) Maintain specificity and relevancy of documents and narrative. State clearly and obviously which judgment of compliance your institution has identified for each requirement or standard. As you address each requirement/standard, the text of your report should be framed as a convincing argument that addresses only that particular standard. An electronic presentation makes it particularly easy to include tangential or example documents simply because it is easy; resist this temptation strongly. Cross-references to compliance narratives for other requirements or standards

may be used (i.e., use of other compliance reports as reference documents) and helps to avoid repetition of text among reports.

4) Consider the use of simple navigation. Always consider navigation through your presentation--- i.e., where will the user or reviewer need to go next? It is highly recommend that you provide “BACK TO” links to the previous level of organization. It is not necessary to equip documents used as evidence with such back links; reviewers may use the browser back link itself to return to the previous level (i.e., return to the report under review after viewing a document). Also consider supplying “NEXT” and “PREVIOUS” links with each compliance report to assist reviewers in maneuvering from report to report. The issue of navigation also includes providing reviewers with easily understood directions to a presentation that is organized in a straightforward, simple manner.

Organization

Flow of information is an important consideration and the heart of a presentation is the compliance narrative. It is important that reviewers not get “lost” or distracted before finding compliance materials, and then not get lost in documentation and miss cogent points. It is the institution’s responsibility to make a case for compliance, but reviewing only documents may distract the reader from the case. The following suggestions may help facilitate the reviewers’ navigation.

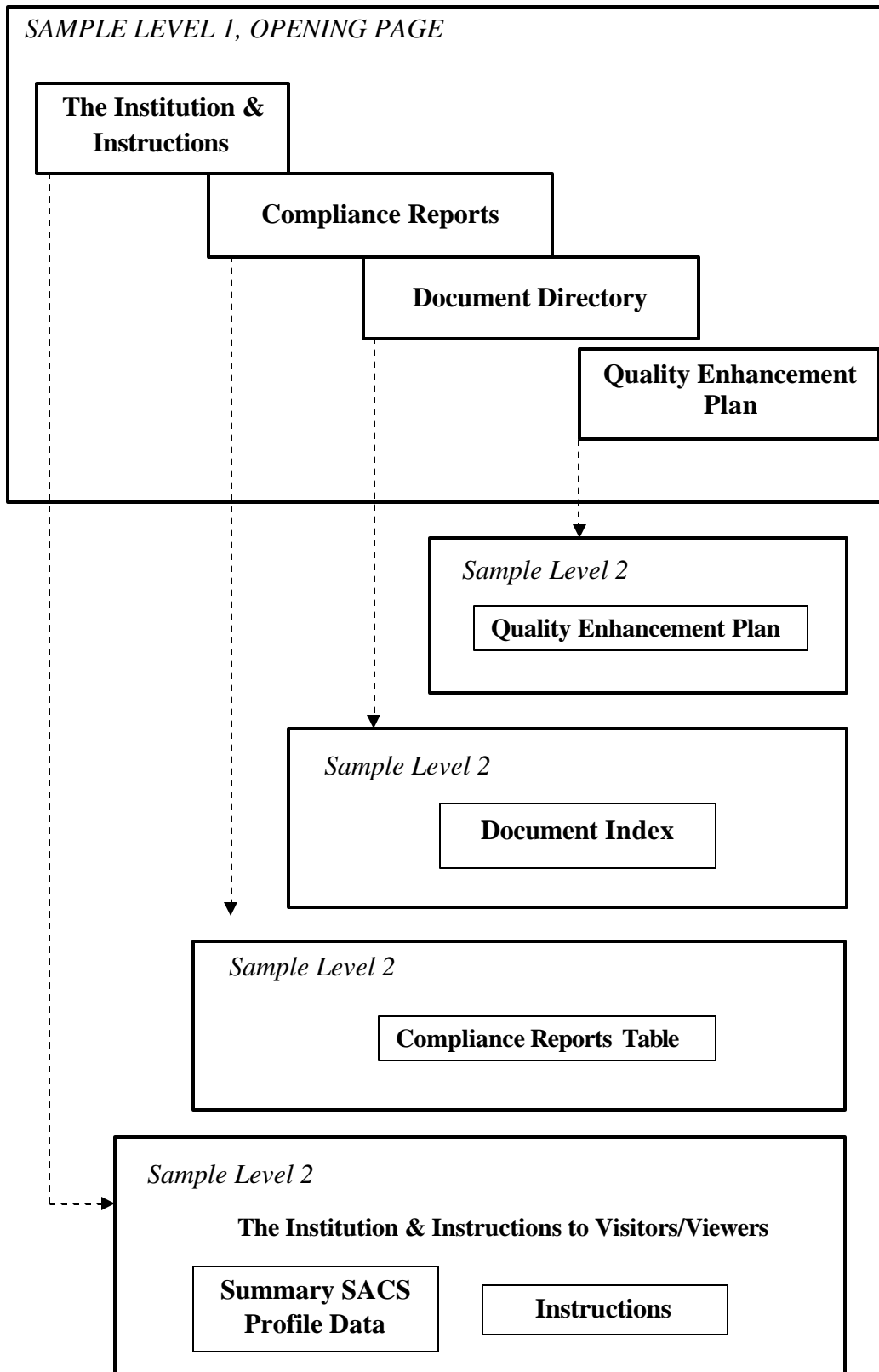
The first or main page should provide an overview of the structure and basic arrangement of information available (see Figure A). The simplest approach would be to include references to three categories on the Opening Page that will serve as links to the next level in the organizational hierarchy. Reviewers then “click” on one of these references to go to the second level of organization for that category. The recommended guideline would be to use reference links to the following three categories:

1. *The Institution and Instructions.* This reference provides links to two sections---one to information about *The Institution* and a second to *Instructions for Visitors/Viewers*. The section on the institution should contain the contents of the Commission’s “Summary Form Prepared for the Compliance Certification Review.” Resist the temptation to provide public relations materials. Instructions to Visitors/Reviewers could reference preferred software (e.g., “better viewed with X” or “requires internet access); an overview of the contents of each section; and any special instructions or hints for ease of use.

2. *Compliance Reports.* This section is primarily the entry to convincing compliance narratives arranged by requirements and standards. There are many ways to organize this, but it is suggested that a table be used. The table becomes an entry to the third level, which includes the convincing compliance narrative (compliance report) for each requirement/standard. By using this approach, the reviewers’ attention is directed to the most salient information.

3. *Document Directory.* Many reviewers will greatly appreciate a way to directly access the full referenced documents and databases without having to go to each report. The availability of a centralized directory of documents also gives reviewers the opportunity to gain additional understanding of the institution. The inclusion of an Index to Documents—basically a topic- or subject-oriented list of documents, with each entry linked directly to the entire document or database, would be useful for quick access to a document. Remember to use the same major titles used in reports; e.g., reference to a section in the undergraduate catalog used in a report would be represented simply as the undergraduate catalog in the Index to Documents. It is expected that the entire document will be available through links from the Directory, and that links to complex documents (e.g., catalogs) will take the user directly to a contents or index for that document.

ORGANIZATION OF ELECTRONIC PRESENTATION (SAMPLE)(Figure A)



Compliance Reports

With direct access from the Compliance Report Table, reviewers should have easy access to convincing compliance narrative for each Core Requirement and Comprehensive Standard. It would be helpful to repeat the text of the requirement or standard at the top of each report and then repeat the statement of judgment of compliance by the institution. The format of these arguments should be in a document or report style for ease of reading.

The issue of how to reference evidence (i.e., documents to support your statements) within your report is not easily resolved. Considerations center on length of the report and format of document references. References that show the actual *url* or link addresses as part of the text can be distracting and interfere with the readability of your compelling argument. However, the document titles should appear so that the actual link addresses are “hidden,” then the title itself serves as a “hot link” and will be easy for reviewers to access.

Alternatively or in addition, you may wish to include a two-column table of documents (titles listed separately from visible link addresses) at the end of each compliance report. Within such a table, documents could be listed either by order of occurrence or alphabetically by title. This approach encourages the reviewer to finish reading the compliance narrative, then go to the relevant documents from the summary table at the end of the narrative. The document summary table also offers added advantages for the reviewer by presenting an organized summary and by providing visible link addresses.

It is valuable for institutions to clearly identify the organizational units (e.g., offices, departments, programs, etc.) that are responsible for or relevant to each particular requirement/standard. The organizational structure of institutions and assignments of functions among units vary considerably among colleges and universities. Providing a list (either in text or a table) of the relevant units and the functions that pertain to each requirement/standard greatly assists reviewers in determining whether their review is complete.

Document References and Links

Documents cited as evidence of compliance must be directly relevant to the particular requirement or standard. Resist citing any documents useful only as examples or those only tangentially related to the issue under discussion.

References to documents should be explicit and linked to the document source in a manner that encourages reviewers to focus attention on the compliance narrative (i.e., does not distract the reviewer). Consistency in titles is paramount; titles referenced in compliance reports should be the same when referenced across all reports and in the index that appears in the Document Directory. Document titles should be descriptive and concise. Linked titles should be programmed to use the default color (set by user on their personal computer) to identify and set them off from the rest of the text.

Links for most documents should be accessible directly from the compliance narrative and should not require delving through multiple levels of imbedded links. A few documents may have many sub-documents (such as departmental assessment reports). In this situation, the link from the compliance report may go to a contents list so that reviewers may select the individual documents they wish to review. In a few instances, documents may not be available electronically because of age, format, or length or because of special sensitivity; these documents may be referenced as “Available on site.”

A Summary Document Table at the end of each compliance report is optional but recommended. In this table, the exact same document titles that were used in the text of the report should appear in

one column of the table and the visible link address should appear in a second column. These tables are useful to reviewers as a quick overview of the types of documents used as evidence for each argument. These tables also are useful because they will be needed for the Compliance Certification document required in hard-copy by the Commission.

Special Concerns and Issues

- ? If your institution decides to use a Web version, consider setting an “end date” for deactivating the site.
- ? Whether using CD or Web-based methods, back-up plans are essential. Produce multiple copies of materials; back-up Websites on tape, a different web address, or CD.
- ? For a variety of reasons, web addresses may not be directly accessible when moved to a CD and vice versa. Consequently, institutions using a CD-based approach might consider either switching or providing duplicate stand-alone documents (and links) for relevant material from Web-based documents on the CD. Thus, a user could access the entire document with the availability of a browser but, in effect, could review all relevant material on a laptop with no internet access.

TIPS FOR ENSURING USER FRIENDLY ACCESS

An institution's electronic compliance materials should be designed and intended primarily for reviewers, not a general audience. Highlighted below are tips to ensure that reviewers are able to successfully access the electronic documents you have designed. Following the tips is a section entitled "Helpful Hints for Use of Electronic Materials by Reviewers." These hints provide institutions with a perspective on how reviewers may wish to manipulate and manage the compliance information during their reviews and the preparation of their report.

- Use standard software---limit to *html* and *pdf*. Use a *pdf* format that can be bookmarked, highlighted, and copied.
- Use only one medium---either Web-based or CD/DVD presentation. The use of multiple CDs may annoy some reviewers, so institutions may want to consider using the newer DVD technology. However, since DVD technology is not yet widely available, institutions may need to produce both a DVD and a set of CDs.
- If using a password-protected, web-based presentation, give the reviewers the password or other authentication methods well in advance of their scheduled review meeting (off- or on-site review). Emails are useful for this task, but provide complete instructions in the email and state your preference as to how secure you wish passwords to remain.
- Provide a link to the free *Adobe Acrobat Reader* on your compliance Web site or have auto-install on CD/DVD software that will load *Adobe Acrobat Reader* automatically.
- Provide a brief tutorial showing how the reviewer can move back and forth from argument to documents. Navigation links (e.g., back to, return to, next, previous) on each level of organization are important and significantly ease the reviewers' task.
- Clearly title documents in addition to providing the *url* address.
- Provide access to appropriate materials that are otherwise protected from outside users. For example, it is extremely useful that reviewers have access to all of the institution's library electronic resources.
- Identify which offices, departments or administrative are responsible for functions addressed in the compelling argument to support compliance. Reviewers may use this information as both a common starting point and common template for communication with other reviewers and for their reports. Some reviewers will actually extract this list and use it in table form to integrate information across compliance reports. As a common template, this approach also assists the review committee chair who has the task of merging reviewer's reports into a single final review.

HELPFUL HINTS FOR USE OF ELECTRONIC MATERIALS BY REVIEWERS - A Tutorial for Review Committee Members –

Reviewers read, organize, and evaluate large amounts of data to determine institutional compliance with Commission standards. The advent of large-scale, web-based institutional reporting allows fuller review of compliance issues before arrival on campus, but reviewers lack source documentation unless they print copies of web documents. Even when reviewers make extensive copies, further data extraction and organization are regularly necessary to complete review of specific compliance areas.

Web-Based Materials

An alternative approach exists for easily extracting and organizing Web-based material. Assuming you are using a PC and “Windows,” begin by creating a word processing document listing in detail your specific areas of compliance review responsibility. Most people will use *Microsoft Word*, but parallel functions exist for *Word Perfect* and other generally available word processing software. It will be helpful to boldface individual compliance areas and separate them by three hard returns to allow insertion of material between headings. With this word processing document open and minimized, use your Internet search engine (*Internet Explorer, Netscape, etc.*) to take the reviewer to the Web addresses of institutional compliance materials.

Read the materials provided on the Web, use “click and drag” to highlight with the cursor specific information documenting relevant individual compliance areas. With the specific needed material highlighted, click on “Edit,” then under Edit, click “Copy.” To return to your word processing document and insert this extracted material, click on the rectangle on the bottom of your screen identifying your minimized word processing document. Doing so will bring that document back to full size. Place the cursor on the spot in the word processing document where you wish to insert material and click the “Paste” icon.

The reviewer can repeat the process by clicking on the rectangle indicating the minimized web search engine (e.g., Internet Explorer, Netscape, etc.), to bring it back to full size and continue the review process.

Once you have inserted several compliance item extracts into headings of the word processing document, you can reorganize extracted information within the word processing document by using highlighting, cutting, and pasting within that document. Over time you will build an extended document that effectively organizes material and indicates compliance, partial compliance, noncompliance, or makes clear the specific additional information needed for determining compliance.

As a protective measure, save your material regularly, create an alternate copy of the file, and print the word processing document occasionally. Even if you print the updated word processing document daily, you should still print hundreds of pages less than if you print full web documents.

If additional data is needed, communicate with your review team chair for assistance in determining the status of needed material.

CD/DVD Materials

Institutions may also opt to report and document compliance using CDs or DVDs rather than posting material on the Web. Doing so allows reviewers to access institutional materials without spending extended periods of time on the Internet. Use of CDs or DVDs is of particular value when reviewers are limited to slow “dial up” modem access to the Internet.

In order to overcome compatibility issues between competing word processing programs and versions, institutions choosing to report on CDs or DVDs regularly use *pdf* documents created using *Adobe Acrobat* software. The *Acrobat Reader* is “freeware” available without charge. Typically, institutions reporting compliance using *pdf* software will provide *Adobe* software on disk or provide a link to *Adobe* so reviewers can download the software themselves.

Partial or full *pdf* documents can be highlighted, copied, and pasted into word processing using the same approach described above for web documents. In order to highlight and copy from *pdf* documents, however, the user must first click on the large “**T**” with a rectangle near its base. This icon appears near the top left corner of the screen. From this point on, the copying and pasting process is the same as with web-based documents.