

Plain Writing at the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services: April 2017

CMS continues to help our consumers, providers and the public navigate a complex health care system by communicating as clearly, plainly and transparently as possible.

We continue to train CMS employees

The Office of Communications continues to train CMS employees through new employee orientation. We've also been able to provide follow-up training to other components upon request. We are currently updating the existing CMS online plain writing training on the HHS Learning Management System (LMS).

In 2016, CMS implemented a Digital Quality Management system that allows us to scan our websites weekly and fix issues. In the past year, we've fixed more than 300 issues on Medicare.gov, resulting in shorter sentences, more concise headlines, simple terminology, and better metadata summaries for search engines.

We have also developed tools to help staff integrate plain writing into their work. We've included these documents on the intranet and in our plain writing training:

- **Plain Writing Style Guide:** This guide includes plain writing tips, terms to use in place of other terms (both general and program specific), and other guidance.
- **Web Writing Style Guide:** This guide includes tips for writing meaningful and user focused content like writing links, headlines, and content that's easy to scan.
- **7 Plain Writing Basics:** These tips help keep writing direct and focused on the user.
- **CMS Tone of Voice Checklist:** This checklist is a series of questions a writer should answer about their document to make sure it complies with CMS Tone of Voice. Communications from CMS should always sound the same across our communication channels. Users should have the same CMS experience whether they're visiting our websites, reading a publication or calling our call centers.

Plain writing in consumer products

The Office of Communications is a longtime proponent of plain writing, and we've been incorporating plain writing principles into every product we create for years. Most of these products and content are available online at Medicare.gov, HealthCare.gov, and Marketplace.cms.gov and many are also available in print at Medicare.gov/publications and the CMS partner product ordering website at <http://productordering.cms.hhs.gov/>. We're also reaching out to our consumers with plain language messaging through social media channels like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. We continue to use a variety of email campaigns to get plain language messages out about the Health Insurance Marketplace. We also coordinated and executed a robust direct mail campaign as a critical part of CMS outreach efforts to Marketplace consumers during the fourth Open Enrollment. The six major mailing initiatives included multiple letter variations and timelines, to a grand total of more than 6.5 million touches. Below are other specific examples of our recent plain writing efforts:

- **Medicare.gov**
 - **Information for people turning 65 and still working:** Millions of people who are turning 65 and still working don't get enrolled in Medicare automatically. That means they may not enroll when they're first eligible and face late enrollment penalties. We've made this content more accessible to create a better user experience for millions.
 - **Privacy policy for Original Medicare:** This policy describes how a consumer's medical information may be used and how to get that information. We've made this content easier to understand.
 - **Long-Term Care Hospital and Inpatient Rehabilitation Facility Compare tools:** People with Medicare use our compare tools to help them find out about doctors, hospitals and other facilities, specifically to find the services offered, compare the care provided, and get helpful tips on choosing one that meets their needs. We've provided plain language content to make these two new tools user friendly.
- **Help Center at HealthCare.gov/help:** The Help Center provides details about information being asked in the Marketplace application to help consumers applying for coverage. User feedback tells us that the Help Center is a pain point for consumers. Prior to this past Open Enrollment, we reviewed the information architecture of these pages, updated pages, and made numerous changes to provide a better user experience.
- **The Partnership for Public Service** asked the Center for Plain Language to review the use of plain language by six federal agencies including CMS as part of a pilot program to improve customer service. The Center agreed to provide an individual narrative for the six agency websites, as well as a written summary report. The Center evaluated these pages and provided overwhelmingly positive feedback, and we've updated them as needed based on recommendations from the report:
 - "Get Answers/ how can we help you?"
 - "How do I file a claim?"
 - "How do I file an appeal?"

Understanding our audiences

Behavioral science has informed the Office of Communications' product and message development for many years. By understanding our target audiences' health literacy, culture, language, attitudes, perceptions and identifying barriers we have improved our products and therefore our audiences' ability to understand our programs. This knowledge also helps us keep our products person-centered. As our resources allow, we consumer test our messaging and products with our target audiences.

Feedback opportunities

To provide an opportunity for public feedback, we created the CMS Plain Language [webpage](#) to explain the importance of the Plain Writing Act and outline CMS' commitment to full compliance with the Act. The public can contact CMS and send comments about our plain writing efforts via the [feedback form](#) posted on the page.

Looking ahead

We continue to employ the plain writing and web optimization principles we've been using as part of our plain language strategy. We're testing these products with our consumer audiences as resources allow to ensure content and messaging is understandable so that consumers take advantage of coverage opportunities. Below are examples of content we intend to improve this coming year:

- **Medicare Advantage Plans booklet:** We currently have separate booklets for each Medicare Advantage Plan type. We plan to merge these separate documents into one comprehensive guide that will allow beneficiaries to learn about and compare plans using one easy-to-read resource.
- **Hospice Compare tool on Medicare.gov:** We're working to plain language content for this new tool that CMS is launching later this year.
- **Marketplace appeals:** To help consumers avoid requesting appeals for situations that aren't appealable, we created a two-page fact sheet to help consumers understand when they can file an appeal. We're continuing to work on making appeals content more actionable and succinct.