

Plain Writing at the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services: April 2015

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. For example, in June 2014 and February 2015, we conducted plain language training for the Office of Financial Management to provide them with techniques to help them make their annual reports more readable and understandable.

We have 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 Web sites, 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.

Specific examples of our plain writing efforts:

- Medicare.gov: Conducted home page usability testing in June 2014 and ongoing Foresee surveys. Implemented changes in September 2014 based on maximizing real estate and promoting top tasks:

- Finding a plan, applying for Medicare, and getting started are top tasks. Placed green buttons instead of yellow for higher contrast more prominently to provide fast access for users.
- Removed buttons that received little traffic as indicated during usability and heat map testing.
- Applied new treatments to blogs/news/videos tab to help users find this information easily.
- Made significant content changes to improve the consumer experience and promote consistency across Medicare.gov in these applications:
 - [Dialysis Facility Compare](#) (June 2014)
 - [Physician Compare](#) provider look up tool (July 2014)
 - [Home Health Compare](#) (October 2014)
 - [MyMedicare.gov](#) (August and October 2014)
- [CMS.gov](#): CMS.gov has historically been curated through a distributed model where each component with the subject matter expert lead on a particular topic is responsible for the cms.gov pages that correspond to that topic. The Office of Communications continues to work with other components to try to bring cms.gov web pages in better alignment with usability and plain writing principles, and we launched a re-design of the home pages in 2011 to begin to create a better user experience. In October 2014, we launched a re-organization of the [outreach and education pages](#) and continue to work with other components throughout the agency. More and more components are reaching out to us to help better organize and edit their pages for a better consumer experience.
- [Medicare Coverage of Kidney Dialysis and Kidney Transplant Services](#): We revised this booklet in April 2014 to restructure the content in a way that's more streamlined and user friendly. Improvements included grouping payment information in one clearly labeled section to help readers quickly find the information they need.
- Form [40B](#) & [L564](#): Provided plain language edits and coordination to support the December 2014 release of the Form 40B (Application for Enrollment in Part B) and the L564 (Request for Employment Information) and related web content on Medicare.gov, CMS.gov and SSA.gov.
- [Health Insurance Marketplace family application](#): We made revisions to this paper application after the first Marketplace open enrollment period for the start of the next open enrollment in November 2014 to improve processing, understandability, and alignment with the online application.

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 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.