

Plain Writing at the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services: April 2014

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, we recently conducted plain language training for the Office of Financial Management to improve contractor reports.

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 are available online, and many are also available in print at Medicare.gov, Medicare.gov/publications, HealthCare.gov and Marketplace.cms.gov. We're also reaching out to our consumers with plain language messaging through social media channels like Facebook and Twitter. We have also used a variety of email campaigns to get plain language messages out about the Health Insurance Marketplace.

Specific examples of our plain writing efforts:

- [Form 500](#): We've revised this form that's a bill that's directly mailed to people with Medicare for their Part A, Part B, and Part D Income-Related Monthly Adjustment Amount (IRMAA) payment. Through customer service inquiries, we identified points of confusion among consumers in the previous version. We modified the form to make it clear that it's a bill, with defined timeframes for payment.

- Redesigned the [Eligibility & Enrollment Calculator](#) (formerly the Medicare Eligibility Tool) on Medicare.gov: We've redesigned the tool to eliminate duplicative content and streamline it to better meet user needs.

Understanding our audiences

Social marketing 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.