

Plain Writing at the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services: April 2022

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 substantially revised and updated the training living on the HHS Learning Management System (LMS) to better reflect the communication challenges facing CMS staff. This updated training was posted in February 2019 and includes a more attractive interface, more relevant examples and interactive exercises. We implemented another update in 2021 to improve the functionality and update some of the examples and content.

We have also increased outreach to other CMS components with tailored training on plain writing and user-centered communication design upon request for the specific needs of these offices. This sample comment is indicative of the success of these in-depth trainings: *You gave an excellent presentation! I've taken longer writing courses that weren't as impactful as yours. I very much appreciate you sharing your time and talents with us.* CMS components are increasingly reaching out to Office of Communications staff for plain language reviews of countless letters, web content, emails, reports, etc. recognizing the value of clear communication.

The Office of Communications also actively participates in [Plainlanguage.gov](https://www.plainlanguage.gov)'s community of practice.

We've 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.
- **User Interface (UI) Guidelines:** We've implemented guidelines across Medicare.gov to help staff creating content across the site to use consistent terminology, content and design based on best practices and research.

On CMS.gov, we've also posted tools to help people clearly communicate about our programs:

- [Writing for the Web](#) slides with & without notes
- [Toolkit](#) for making written material about health care clear and effective

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 public-facing product we create for years. Most of these products and content are available online at [Medicare.gov](https://www.Medicare.gov), [HealthCare.gov](https://www.HealthCare.gov), and [Marketplace.cms.gov](https://www.Marketplace.cms.gov). Many are also available in print at [Medicare.gov/publications](https://www.Medicare.gov/publications) and the [CMS partner product ordering website](https://www.CMS.gov/partner-product-ordering-website).

Every consumer product that the Office of Communications creates is developed using plain writing principles. Our print products are updated on a yearly or every other year cycle for content accuracy and other improvements. We also track web page metrics using Qualtrics and Google analytics, so we can monitor pain points and update pages early and as often as possible when points of confusion are identified to meet user needs. We also launched a sitewide survey for user feedback in 2021 on Medicare.gov. We've also used A/B testing on the web prior to and during Open Enrollment to test terminology on buttons, etc. to gauge what best invites a desired action.

We're also reaching out to consumers with plain language messaging through social media channels like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to our collective audiences of over 2.16 million followers. We continue to use email campaigns to disseminate clear messaging about the Health Insurance Marketplace to 36.6 million consumers, and the Medicare Open Enrollment Period to 15.5 million consumers. In 2021, we continued to share timely and important information about the COVID-19 pandemic across our social media and email channels to help improve public health outcomes.

Below are other specific examples of our recent plain writing efforts:

Get Started with Medicare: After revising and reorganizing pages for people who are new to Medicare in 2020, we continued to consumer test and redesign to improve the experience in 2021. As of August, these pages are now organized in a series of steps to learn about Medicare, how to sign up and more about your coverage options to help them make the most of their choices and benefits. Since these pages launched in August, our customer satisfaction score increased 6 points, and our goal completion score increased by 8 points, based on our sitewide survey.

Redesigned CMS-500 Medicare Premium Bill & Medicare Easy Pay form: CMS-500 forms are mailed to about 2.2 million people with Original Medicare each month who don't have their premiums deducted from their Social Security benefits. Medicare Easy Pay is a free way to set up recurring monthly payments for these premiums. We're implementing the redesigns this Spring that will help people better understand the actions they should take to pay their premiums and set up bill pay. We implemented plain language and information design best practices throughout and conducted consumer testing to assess effectiveness.

Medicare Part D Explanation of Benefits (EOB) Redesign:

The Part D EOB shows people in Medicare drug plans the prescriptions they filled, what they and their plan have paid, and what counts towards their out-of-pocket costs and their total drug costs. The EOB hadn't been updated in many years and was long and difficult to

understand. Revisions included not only modernizing the layout and streamlining content to help people find the information they need to understand their spending, but it also significantly reduced the instructions needed for plans to implement the EOB. Consumer testing of the redesign in Fall 2021 went extremely well with minor revisions implemented for clarity. We're currently working towards a 2022 implementation for the 2023 plan year.

Understanding our audiences

As our resources allow, we consumer test our messaging and products with our target audiences. Social marketing principles have 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 audience's ability to understand our programs. This knowledge also helps us keep our products person-centered.

We don't routinely perform readability tests like the Fry, SMOG, FOG or Flesch-Kincaid on completed content. These kinds of tests rely largely on counting syllables per word, words per sentence, and sentences per paragraph to determine the grade level. With Medicare and Marketplace materials, there are terms (like "formulary") that are unfamiliar, but necessary, to introduce to our audience. We go to great lengths to explain these terms and concepts that aren't readily understood and incorporate features like navigational cues and graphic elements. But readability tests don't take into account these types of efforts. We focus our attention on making sure readability (Do they know the terms we use and is information organized effectively?), usability (Can they easily find the answers they are looking for?), and understandability (Can they accurately explain the meaning or concept after reading?) are successfully achieved, and do this by following industry best practices and iterative testing with our target audiences whenever possible.

While we don't routinely perform readability tests, we do regularly monitor a digital quality management tool on Medicare.gov called SiteImprove. We made numerous edits to pages this past year to improve the site quality by looking at things like long sentences. To date, our content quality score is a 93.5%, and our content freshness score is 98%. Our overall content quality score is 97.8% (and the industry benchmark for government is 79.8%).

Promoting equity is essential to the Department's mission of protecting the health of Americans and providing essential human services. Part of the CMS Equity Plan for improving the quality of care provided to minority and other underserved populations is improving communication and language access for people with limited English proficiency and people with disabilities. The Office of Communications provides many of its plain language publications in languages beyond English and Spanish and alternate formats such as Braille, Large Print, audio CD, and eReader. The "[Information in other languages](#)" page on Medicare.gov provides translations in more than 20 languages of publications in many popular Medicare topics. We've expanded our language translations over the past year, most notably now offering translations of the "Medicare & You" handbook in Chinese, Vietnamese and Korean. Consumers of the Health Insurance Marketplace also have access to [plain language publications](#) including a Marketplace [application job aid](#) in a [variety of languages](#). Multilanguage lines are also available through our Medicare and Marketplace call centers where people have access to translators for hundreds of languages. We also offer phone numbers for teletypewriter (TTY) users for our Medicare and Marketplace call centers.

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.

The Office of Communications has embarked on a multi-year initiative to update Medicare resources to meet the expectations of people with Medicare for a more personalized experience. The eMedicare initiative is modernizing the way people get information about Medicare through data integration and web development to create new ways to help people make informed health care choices. Over the past 12 months, we've made a variety of related improvements to Medicare.gov.

In April 2021, we launched an improved header menu across all of Medicare.gov. The new menu streamlines the navigation for users and provides a consistent experience across the site. In June 2021, we launched a new message center for people who have accounts on Medicare.gov with messages that are personalized for users. We also launched a consistent design across Medicare.gov on July 2021 that united the look and feel of the pages no matter where you are in the site. We also improved the pharmacy search and print features for people comparing and enrolling in plans. Finally, as previously mentioned, we updated the "Get started" pages in August 2021.