

Plain Writing at the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services: April 2025

CMS continues to help 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 launched an update of the CMS Plain Writing training on the HHS Learning Management System in 2022 to improve the functionality and update some of the examples and content.

We've 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. These sample comments are indicative of the success of these in-depth trainings:

- *“Every government employee needs this training! Thank you for being so great at your job!”*
- *“This was really helpful thank you!”*

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. We've developed tools and guides to help staff and contractors integrate plain writing into their work. We've included these documents on the intranet, CMS.gov and in our plain writing training.

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 [CMS.gov/marketplace/in-person-assisters/information-partners](https://www.CMS.gov/marketplace/in-person-assisters/information-partners). 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 Adobe, 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 have a sitewide survey for user feedback 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, X, Instagram, and YouTube to our collective audiences of over 2.6 million followers. We continue to use email campaigns to disseminate clear messaging about the Health Insurance Marketplace to 45 million consumers, and the Medicare Open Enrollment Period to 21.4 million consumers. In 2024, we shared information about enrollment periods, helping people getting

started with Medicare, fraud prevention outreach that helps consumers spot bad actors, and CHIP and HealthCare.gov coverage and enrollment information including how to get coverage after losing Medicaid.

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

- We launched a new Medicare.gov [landing page](#) of mental health and substance use disorders resources to help people more easily find related coverage information.
- We launched an updated Medicare drug coverage (Part D) section of [Medicare.gov](#) that included a new landing page and reorganized content using the “crawl, walk, run” content strategy (basics, coverage/finding a plan, using coverage) to be more action oriented and better support learning.
- We revised and consolidated Medicare publications on the topics of Medicare drug coverage (Part D), hospital coverage, and nursing home coverage found at [Medicare.gov/publications](#).
- We developed [new consumer-friendly language](#) and [materials](#) to guide impacted patients through a new retroactive appeals process related to inpatient hospital status.
- We’ve embarked on a refresh of Medicare notices and forms to update the forms as they come up for renewal to help make them more clear, actionable, and consistent with other plain language communications. The Office of Communications is refreshing these materials to bring them more in line with current Medicare brand standards and applying research-based best practices in plain language and information design to make them easier for people to understand and use. We’re updating language to align with other tested Medicare materials, trimming redundancy and jargon, applying validated field label standards consistently across forms, and ensuring that critical notices focus on exactly what consumers want and need to know. We’re also including Medicare email opt-in language and updating for accessibility by replacing phrases like “see page” with “go to page” where appropriate. Here are a few examples of these revised materials:
 - [CMS-R285 Medicare Request for Retirement Benefit Information \(PDF\)](#)
 - [Model Notice of Dismissal of Appeal Request Eff 010125 \(ZIP\)](#)
 - [Model Notice of Dismissal of Coverage Request Eff 010125 \(ZIP\)](#)
 - [Notice of Denial Part D Prescription Drug Cvg English Form & Instructs CMS-10146 Eff 010125 \(ZIP\)](#)
- We launched a new [HealthCare.gov](#) home page to help people more easily get the information they seek about the Health Insurance Marketplace and complete top tasks related to their coverage.
- We launched changes to sections of [HealthCare.gov](#) on cancelling coverage when consumers also have Medicare or Medicaid, which included reorganizing content using the “crawl, walk, run” content strategy to be more action oriented and support a streamlined and improved user experience.

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. We 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. Our overall content quality score is 94.9 % (and the industry benchmark for government is 75.3%).

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 continues 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 and will continue to do so in 2025.