

Plain Writing at the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services: April 2024

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

- *Thank you again for your great webinar, my manager is still talking about how useful it was!*
- *I loved your presentation today; it was the best thing I've heard at this whole meeting. I also recognized many of my own shortcomings, and the fact that I realized I'm way too much in love with the sound of my own (writing) voice, and I need a makeover.*

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.

In February, we replaced the outdated and unwieldy 2010 "CMS Toolkit for Clear and Effective Writing" with [Guidelines for Effective Writing](#) on CMS.gov to include updated and modernized content that is more in line with our current plain language practices.

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](#), [HealthCare.gov](#), and [CMS.gov/marketplace/in-person-assisters/information-partners](#). Many are also available in print at [Medicare.gov/publications](#) and the [CMS 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, and YouTube to our collective audiences of over 2.5 million followers. We continue to use email campaigns to disseminate clear messaging about the Health Insurance Marketplace to 41.1 million consumers, and the Medicare Open Enrollment Period to 19 million consumers. In 2023, we shared timely and important information about Medicaid redeterminations across our social media and email channels to help people maintain health coverage.

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

[Part D Explanation of Benefits \(EOB\)](#): This EOB is mailed each month to people with Medicare Part D drug coverage and shows any Part D prescriptions the drug plan filled for the enrollee during a month. It also summarizes an enrollee's monthly and annual spending and current Part D drug benefit stage (which determines how much they pay for a prescription). The previous design was more than 15 years old and used dense and complicated language and design that made it difficult to understand. We applied plain language and information design best practices throughout and leveraged other redesigns to help the statement resemble other CMS forms. We removed significant redundancy and redesigned the spending and drug benefit state charts to help people better find what they've spent, where they are in the benefit stages, and what happens next. Consumer testing reinforced the improvements, and the redesigned EOB launched in May 2023 and hit mailboxes starting in February 2024.

[Home Health Privacy Notices](#): Redesigned and updated Medicare consumer home health privacy notices from 2007 that are referenced on Medicare.gov and reposted them to CMS.gov

Developed [educational and outreach materials](#) (including conference cards, tear pads, postcards, fact sheets, social media message, and flyers) to reach people losing Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) coverage and help them find other coverage options. Updated related Medicare.gov and HealthCare.gov content about Special Enrollment Periods for people who lose coverage.

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 98.8% (and the industry benchmark for government is 76.3%).

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 on many popular Medicare topics. We've expanded our language translations 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: [Other language resources](#), [Materials in other languages](#) and [Application forms for individuals & families](#). 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.

In support of EO 14058 on *Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government*, the Office of Communications is committed to continuing to design and deliver new, personalized online tools and expanded customer support options for consumers of our programs. Here's what we delivered in 2023:

- **Implemented personalized Medicare.gov experiences**
CMS improved the Medicare.gov experience for customers that are "New to Medicare" including developing and testing personalized roadmaps. Approximately 4M people age into Medicare each year.
- **Streamlined the first step of enrolling in Medicare**
CMS implemented changes to the "Get Started with Medicare" section of Medicare.gov that provided streamlined navigation and a new wizard explaining key deadlines and coverage options. Customer satisfaction on "Get Started" increased 13% in 2023.
- **Launched Marketplace plan selection decision-making tools**
CMS developed and implemented improved decision tools to support customers comparing, selecting, and enrolling in Silver plans.

- **Improved navigability of Medicaid.gov**
CMS launched an improved site-wide search feature, a redesigned home page carousel, an improved social section, and a new blog feature to respond to customer pain points.
- **Developed user-specific landing pages on Medicaid.gov**
CMS designed and tested customized landing pages for top customer types to assist with navigation and make it easier to find and access relevant content.

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 continue to do so in 2024.