

Plain Writing at the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services: April 2023

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 (LMS) 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:

- *“Just wanted to reach out before the end of the day and thank you again for your great presentation today! We literally had 4 or 5 groups request your presentation and we had the highest turnout yet for today’s session which says a lot. I personally learned a ton and just updated an SOP with your tips in mind!”*
- *“I want you to know how much your presentation on my Division meeting helped. I am now looking at everything I write from the User Centered perspective. My headings are informative, and I am working on shortening sentences to keep my audience attention. 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.

The Office of Communications also actively participates in [Plainlanguage.gov](https://www.plainlanguage.gov)’s community of practice. Staff also participated as one of 10 speakers at the August 2022 Plain Language Summit. About 1,800 people attended that session, *“Help Them See the Light: Strategies for Training Feds to Use Plain Writing”* which was well received. Here’s just one of many positive comments about the session: *“I really appreciate the reminder that plain writing is research-based science. Thank you! I often say the opposite when talking with project partners (that plain language is an “art”, because there’s often no one right way to write or edit) but it’s so helpful to be reminded that the plain writing approach as a whole is research-based science. It’s an important framing for building trust and buy-in.”*

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. 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 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, Twitter and YouTube to our collective audiences of over 2.3 million followers. We continue to use email campaigns to disseminate clear messaging about the Health Insurance Marketplace to 40.7 million consumers, and the Medicare Open Enrollment Period to 17.7 million consumers. In 2022, 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:

Accountable Care Organization (ACO) model materials: Accountable Care Organizations are groups of doctors, hospitals and other health care providers who work together to improve the quality and experience of care you get. CMS provides model materials to help organizations explain ACOs to consumers. We redesigned model notices and a provider poster explaining the benefits of ACOs and how to make the most of them. With multiple rounds of consumer testing in May and September 2022, we revised and refined these model materials to ensure they were clear and well understood.

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 launched the redesigns in March 2022 to 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.

Quality Improvement Organization (QIO) consumer letters: We worked to significantly improve a number of consumer letters from Quality Improvement Organizations related to actions on consumer Medicare claims. Contractors send more than 500,000 each year and many of these are claim denials with potential to raise concerns and worry. Updates include information design and plain language best practices to make clear what's happening and guide the consumer through next steps and appropriate resources for help.

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 94%, and our content freshness score is 98.3%. Our overall content quality score is 98% (and the industry benchmark for government is 76.5%).

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 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. On HealthCare.gov in 2022, we also enhanced the header and page design using both native languages and English jump links, making it easier for people to find materials. 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

, the Office of Communications is committed to continuing to design and deliver new, personalized online tools and expanded customer support options for Medicare enrollees. In 2022, we [announced](#) our online consumer improvements.

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 2023.