

Plain Writing at the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services: April 2016

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. Here are some examples of trainings we've provided:

- In May 2015, we provided plain language and web writing training to staff on the Electronic Clinical Quality Measures Governance Group.
- In September 2015, we provided plain language and web writing training to Office of Clinical Standards and Quality staff working on Electronic Clinical Quality Improvement.
- In September 2015, we provided plain language and web writing training to Provider Communications Group staff in the Center for Medicare.
- In October 2015, we provided plain language and web writing training to Medicare Fee-For-Service contractors who run provider call centers.

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 and content are available online at Medicare.gov, HealthCare.gov, and Marketplace.cms.gov and many are also available in print at Medicare.gov/publications and the CMS partner product ordering website at <http://productordering.cms.hhs.gov/>. We're also reaching out to our consumers with plain language messaging through social media channels like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. We continue to use a variety of email campaigns to get plain language messages out about the Health Insurance Marketplace. Below are specific examples of our recent plain writing efforts:

- **Health Insurance Marketplace consumer notices:** We underwent an effort to update and streamline our Marketplace notices, including the Eligibility Determination Notice, prior to 2015 Open Enrollment that started November 1, 2015, to help make them more readable and understandable. Samples of these notices are posted: <https://marketplace.cms.gov/applications-and-forms/notices.html>.
- **Medicare Coverage of Durable Medical Equipment and Other Devices:** We revised this booklet to include clear information and guidance on the coverage of oxygen equipment. This revision was prompted by discussion with advocates regarding the information needs of people with Medicare who have chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD): <http://www.medicare.gov/Pubs/pdf/11045.pdf>.
- **CMS.gov:** CMS.gov has historically been curated through a distributed model where each component with the subject matter expert lead on a particular topic is responsible for the CMS.gov pages that correspond to that topic. The Office of Communications continues to work with other components to try to bring CMS.gov web pages into better alignment with usability and plain writing principles. More and more components are reaching out to us to help better organize and edit their pages for a better consumer experience. Here are examples of pages we've updated:
 - Value Based Purchasing pages:
 - Overview: <https://www.cms.gov/Medicare/Quality-Initiatives-Patient-Assessment-Instruments/Value-Based-Programs/Value-Based-Programs.html>
 - Hospital: <https://www.cms.gov/Medicare/Quality-Initiatives-Patient-Assessment-Instruments/Value-Based-Programs/HVBP/Hospital-Value-Based-Purchasing.html>
 - Skilled Nursing Facility: <https://www.cms.gov/Medicare/Quality-Initiatives-Patient-Assessment-Instruments/Value-Based-Programs/Other-VBPs/SNF-VBP.html>
 - Home Health: <https://innovation.cms.gov/initiatives/home-health-value-based-purchasing-model>
 - Merit-Based Incentive Payment System (MIPS) & Alternative Payment Models (APMs) pages: <https://www.cms.gov/Medicare/Quality-Initiatives-Patient-Assessment-Instruments/Value-Based-Programs/MACRA-MIPS-and-APMs/MACRA-MIPS-and-APMs.html>
 - Hospital-Acquired Condition Reduction Program page: <https://www.cms.gov/Medicare/Quality-Initiatives-Patient-Assessment-Instruments/Value-Based-Programs/HAC/Hospital-Acquired-Conditions.html>
 - Hospital Readmission Reduction Program page: <https://www.cms.gov/Medicare/Quality-Initiatives-Patient-Assessment-Instruments/Value-Based-Programs/HRRP/Hospital-Readmission-Reduction-Program.html>
 - Value Modifier Program page: <https://www.cms.gov/Medicare/Quality-Initiatives-Patient-Assessment-Instruments/Value-Based-Programs/VMP/Value-Modifier-VM-or-PVBM.html>
 - Employer page: <https://www.cms.gov/Outreach-and-Education/Find-Your-Provider-Type/Employers-and-Unions/Employer-community.html>
 - Open Payments pages: <https://www.cms.gov/openpayments/>
 - Medicare Open Enrollment pages:

- <https://www.cms.gov/Outreach-and-Education/Reach-Out/Find-tools-to-help-you-help-others/Medicare-Open-Enrollment.html>
- <https://www.cms.gov/Outreach-and-Education/Reach-Out/Find-tools-to-help-you-help-others/Open-Enrollment-Outreach-and-Media-Materials.html>

Understanding our audiences

Behavioral science 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 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. Below are examples of content we intend to improve this coming year:

- **Medicare.gov** information for people turning 65 and still working: Millions of people who are turning 65 and still working don't get enrolled in Medicare automatically. That means they may not enroll when they're first eligible and face late enrollment penalties. Making this content more accessible on Medicare.gov will create a better user experience for millions.
- **Medicare Advantage Plans booklet:** We currently have separate booklets for each Medicare Advantage Plan type. We plan to merge these separate documents into one comprehensive guide that will allow people with Medicare to learn about and compare plans using one easy-to-read source.
- **Help Center at HealthCare.gov/help:** The Help Center provides details about information being asked in the Marketplace application to help consumers applying for coverage. User feedback tells us that the Help Center is a pain point for consumers. Prior to the next Open Enrollment, we intend to review the information architecture of these pages and make changes to provide a better user experience.