



SHIP

State Health Insurance
Assistance Program



SMP

Senior Medicare Patrol

Starting Strategies for Writing in Plain Language

This handout is based on the plain language webinar presented to the SMP, SHIP, and MIPPA networks on September 27, 2022. It is intended to help SMP and SHIP team members provide equitable and understandable one-on-one assistance and educational materials to Medicare beneficiaries by educating themselves about the importance of plain language and how to use it in their work.

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Plain Language

“A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended audience can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information.” (Plain Language Association International)

- Plain language is for an audience of average readers.
- Easy-to-read is for those with more limited reading skills.

To me, plain language is both a science (rules) and art (humanity). It includes many components to help make messages clear.

Here is a “before” version of flu vaccine information written when two flu shots were needed, not just one. From the CDC website, 2009.

What You Should Know and Do This Flu Season If You Are 65 Years and Older

The best way to prevent the flu is with a flu vaccine. People 65 years and older are recommended for annual seasonal flu vaccination. People 65 and older who have not yet gotten a seasonal flu vaccine should still seek vaccination, although supplies of seasonal flu vaccine are limited because of early availability of, and high interest in, seasonal flu vaccine this year.

People 65 years and older are now encouraged to seek vaccination against the 2009 H1N1 virus. Supplies of the vaccines to protect against the 2009 H1N1 virus have increased dramatically and most places have opened up vaccination to anyone who wants it. This vaccine is the best way to protect against the 2009 H1N1 pandemic virus. Those who have been patiently waiting to receive the 2009 H1N1 vaccine, including people 65 years and older, are now encouraged to get vaccinated.

I wrote the “after” as an example of what it might look like in plain language.

Know what to do about the flu

The best way you can help prevent the flu is by getting two flu shots. One is a shot to prevent the seasonal (winter) flu. The other is a shot to prevent a new flu called H1N1. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommends that people who are at least 65 years old get both shots. You may have heard a while ago that there was not enough flu vaccine. That has changed and there now is enough vaccine for everyone who wants flu shots.

There is no need to wait. Get your flu shots today.

Writing in Plain Language

Content and organization

- Differentiate between “need to know” and “nice to know” information
- Organize information from the reader’s point of view
- Provide ways to learn more including non-written options (hotlines, groups, and such)

Words

- Use common 1-2 syllable words
- Define unfamiliar, yet necessary, words/terms
- Be consistent, using the exact same wording each time
- Avoid or explain acronyms, jargon, idioms, and needlessly “stuffy” words

Sentences

- Write short sentences (up to 15 words, or so), each with only one idea
- Use an active voice, identifying who is doing the action
- As possible, avoid conditional if/then sentences

Numbers

- Appreciate that many people have difficulty with quantity, time, risk, and calculations
- Avoid numbers that are very big (over 100) or very small (less than 1)
- When possible, present data in absolute terms (5 out 10) v. relative (twice as many)
- Convey concepts using pictures, stories, metaphors, and other non-numeric ways

Tone

- Speak directly to the reader, using “you” and “your”
- Frame information in positive, yet honest, ways
- Consider your reader’s logic and life experience
- Give specific instructions, not assuming readers know exactly what to do

Format, Layout, and Graphics

- Use headers to identify new sections and topics
- Create short dotted lists, chunking similar items together
- Have “adequate” white space so pages do not look crowded
- Use at least 12-point type, with combined upper and lower case letters
- Line up (justify) the left margin, but not the right or center
- Include graphics to show key ideas or actions

Confirm Comprehension

- Appreciate the limitations of reading grade level assessment tools
- Get feedback at least twice from your intended audience
- Consider using checklists such as AHRQ’s [Patient Education Materials Assessment Tool \(PEMAT\)](#) and CDC’s [Clear Communication Index](#).

Simplifying Words and Terms

Use everyday words to explain these terms:

“Health equity”

“Beneficiary”

“Medicare statements”

“Medical identity”

“Fraud”

Simplifying Sentences

Restate these statements so that sentences:

- Include no more than about 12-15 words
- Have only one main idea
- Use everyday words

1. "Medigap plans sold to people new to Medicare can no longer cover the Part B deductible. Because of this, Plans C and F are no longer available to people new to Medicare on or after January 1, 2020. However, if you were eligible for Medicare before January 1, 2020, but not yet enrolled, you may be able to buy one of these plans that cover the Part B deductible (Plan C or F). If you already have or were covered by Plan C or F (or the Plan F high deductible version) before January 1, 2020, you can keep your plan."

2. "You have the right to voice grievances regarding treatment or care that is or that fails to be provided, or regarding the lack of respect for property by anyone who is furnishing services on behalf of the home health agency, without being subjected to discrimination or reprisal for doing so."

3. "You can compare hospices based on a national survey that rates family members' experiences with hospice care or on important indicators of quality, like the percentage of patients checked for pain or who are asked about their preferences for life-sustaining treatment."

4. "OIG found that COVID-19 tests drove an increase in total Medicare Part B spending on laboratory tests in 2020. At the same time, non-COVID-19 tests decreased significantly. Medicare Part B spent \$1.5 billion on COVID-19 tests in 2020, while spending on non-COVID-19 tests decreased by \$1.2 billion. In total, laboratory spending increased by 4 percent, but the decrease in utilization of non-COVID-19 tests raises concerns about potential impacts on beneficiary health."

Numeracy Tasks & Overall Strategies

What numeracy tasks do we expect that others can, and will, correctly do?

Mrs. Jones is on a modified diet and must restrict her intake of both sweet and salted foods. She takes six different medications, each with its own dosing schedule. She needs to monitor and record how she feels each day and notify her care providers when there are significant changes in her health. She also needs to make and keep numerous outpatient appointments and prepare for an ongoing battery of medical tests.

Overall strategies to improve understanding of numbers

Know your audience:

- Who they are (general public, professionals, policy makers, the press).
- How savvy, familiar, comfortable they are with numbers.
- What they already know or believe to be true.

Know why you are using numbers:

- As instructions to take action (such as measure, count, calculate)?
- As data to make reasoned choices (such as risks and benefits)?
- As motivation or encouragement for certain health behaviors?

Know the numbers:

- Use when science is strong and data is clear.
- Use when there is compelling reason for data.
- Present data in a balanced and fair way, not just the most compelling or persuasive.
- Acknowledge uncertainty.

Make it a habit to confirm understanding:

- Use the “teach-back” technique in person.
- Build “feed-back” into your writing process.

Make sure YOU understand numbers, too.

Tone

Restate this passage in as positive a way as possible.

“During plan-initiated provider activities, MA organizations must ensure that the provider:

- Does NOT accept or collect Scope of Appointment forms.
 - Does NOT accept Medicare enrollment applications.
 - Does NOT make phone calls or direct, urge, or attempt to persuade their patients to enroll in a specific plan based on financial or any other interests of the provider.
 - Does NOT mail marketing materials on behalf of the MA organization.
 - Does NOT offer inducements to persuade patients to enroll in a particular MA plan or organization.
 - Does NOT conduct health screenings as a marketing activity.
 - Does NOT distribute marketing materials or enrollment forms in areas where care is being delivered.
 - Does NOT offer anything of value to induce enrollees to select the provider.
 - Does NOT accept compensation from the MA organization for any marketing or enrollment activities performed on behalf of the MA organization.”
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Plain Language: Where to Learn More

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