

Maryland Clear Writing and Plain Language Checklist*

The Maryland Consumer Health Information Hub law requires state and local agencies to use plain language in public communications about health, safety, health insurance, and social services benefits information. Plain language is a set of techniques that help the audience understand the first time they read or hear the information.

This checklist will help you see if your content is written in plain language and presented in ways that are clear and actionable. You can use the checklist for any written content. Writing clearly will help the Maryland public understand what agencies are trying to communicate.

Who is the audience for this content? _____

When reviewing your content, take these three steps.

1. Look Carefully

- Read through the content and the checklist. The more items you can check, the more likely the audience will understand and take action on the content.
- Are there terms that readers don't typically use in every day speech? If so, try and replace these words with more common words.

2. Read it Aloud

- Does the content sound too formal? Adjust the wording to be friendly and conversational.
- Are the sentences long and hard to follow? Shorten the sentences so that only one thought is presented in each sentence.
- Does the writing flow smoothly?

3. Test It *(testing is a best practice and especially important for new content and in advance for emergency/time sensitive content that can't be tested in the moment)*

- Show the content to a few people who represent the audience you are writing for.
- After reading, can they tell you in their own words
 - what the content means?
 - the recommended action(s)?
 - the main message
- If not, re-write and test again.

Checklist: Use as a guide to be sure your content is clear and actionable for the intended audience.

Audience Focus

- ☐ Choose titles or visuals so readers know **what the content is about** at a first glance.
- ☐ Choose titles, visuals, and introductory words so the audience knows **who the content is for** at a first glance.
- ☐ Begin with the most important message and order topics in ways that make sense to the audience.

Literacy

- ☐ Write to convey a sense of audience that is inclusive
- ☐ Use personal pronouns to speak directly to the reader, such as “your benefits” rather than speaking about the reader in third person as in “the insured.”
- ☐ Use active voice and a friendly, conversational tone. Contractions are okay.
- ☐ Draft paragraphs with short, simple sentences.
- ☐ Avoid jargon and acronyms. Spell out unfamiliar acronyms and define or explain unfamiliar terms.

Calls to Action

- ☐ State one or more clear calls to action for the audience. This can include “learn more.”
- ☐ Describe why the action is important for the audience.
- ☐ Break down the action into simple, easy steps.
- ☐ Provide a phone number, website, and email address for more information or consumer assistance.

Design and Formatting

- ☐ Use simple (not fancy or unusual) fonts in at least 12 point.
- ☐ Present uncluttered pages with plenty of white space and dark type on a light background.
- ☐ Use italics or bold sparingly.
- ☐ Choose images that relate to the text and are culturally appropriate for the audience.
- ☐ Add descriptive headings so the audience can quickly skim.

Select Resources

CDC Clear Communication Index www.cdc.gov/ccindex

CDC Health Equity Guiding Principles for Inclusive Communication
https://www.cdc.gov/healthcommunication/Health_Equity.html

Federal Plain Language Guidelines www.plainlanguage.gov

Public Health Communications Collaborative Plain Language for Public Health Tool <https://publichealthcollaborative.org/resources/plain-language-for-public-health/>

User-centered design and usability www.usability.gov

*The Maryland Consumer Health Information Hub Workgroup revised this checklist initially developed by the Maryland Health Benefit Exchange. The UMD Horowitz Center for Health Literacy manages the Hub. Please contact the Center with questions or for more information, healthliteracy@umd.edu