

2019

>> Plain Language Toolkit

For the Oregon Health Plan audience



Oregon
Health
Authority
HEALTH SYSTEMS DIVISION

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Introduction

State law requires that we must write DHS and OHA client material in plain language. Plain language means using words that most people know and use. When we speak and write in plain language, nearly everyone can understand.

This toolkit helps people write in plain language when they create materials for Oregon Health Plan clients.

Tips for writing in plain language

Use as few words as possible. Just include the facts and ideas that get your point across. The goal is to make sure the reader knows exactly what to do.

Focus first on the main point.

The main point is what you most want the client to understand. It lets the reader know what is most important and creates a structure that leads the reader through the rest of the document.

Add points in logical order.

Following the main point, add sentences with supporting information in a logical order that helps the client use it. For example, the following paragraph leads a new OHP member through the basics of what to expect:

You now have the Oregon Health Plan (OHP). You can get health services covered by OHP starting Feb. 1, 2019. The health services you can get are at OHP.Oregon.gov. Every year, you will get a letter from the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) asking you to renew your OHP. This is to make sure that people on OHP meet income requirements.

Keep your points short and clear.

- Make no sentence longer than 20 words.
- To edit longer sentences, try putting a period where it makes sense between the 18th and 20th words; then start a new sentence.
- Each sentence should convey one simple thought.

Use simple words

- Use no more than two syllables in a word. The shorter the word, the easier it usually is to understand.
- Sometimes you can use a longer word if your readers know its meaning.
- Use words your audience understands. If you must use a technical term, define it. Try to stay away from abbreviations, acronyms and jargon.

Examples

Here are some examples of how to use simpler words.

Often hard to understand or overly long	Easy
assistance	help
contingent upon eligibility	you must still be on OHP
file a complaint or grievance	complain tell us about a problem
in order to	to
is in the process of doing	is doing

When it's the law

Are you legally required to use legal or technical jargon? If so, explain those words using one- and two-syllable words. You can use parentheses to do this if you want. Here are some examples:

- **Bad:** The Declaration for Mental Health Treatment is your legal right.
[The reader doesn't necessarily know the term's meaning.]
- **Good:** By law, you can write a declaration for mental health treatment. It is a legal paper that explains what kind of mental health treatment you want if you can't speak for yourself.
[The second sentence explains the technical term appearing in the first sentence.]
- **Or:** A legal paper (the declaration for mental health treatment) tells your doctors what treatment you want. You write it before you need that treatment.
[The technical term is in parentheses, but the main sentence explains it in plain language.]

Specific Oregon terms

Some words are unique to the Oregon Health Plan. If you choose to use them when writing to members, include the plain language explanation so readers understand.

- **“Prioritized List”** — A list showing treatments matched to health conditions. The Oregon Health Evidence Review Commission ranks the treatment and condition pairs from most effective (Line 1) to least effective (Line 699). The Oregon Legislature decides how many lines OHP covers (for now, Lines 1 through 498).
- **“Line number”** — A treatment/condition pair’s number on the Prioritized List.
- **“Below the line”** — A treatment/condition pair listed below line 498 on the Prioritized List. OHP does not usually cover treatment for conditions with a line number bigger than 498.
- **“Comorbidity,” “comorbid condition”** — A health problem that OHP covers that will get better if a “below the line” condition gets treatment.
- **“OAR”** — Oregon Administrative Rules. CCOs, doctors and the state must follow these rules.
- **“Contingent upon eligibility”** — You must be on OHP to use this card.

Use active voice and present tense

- Active voice describes who does what to whom. For example, active voice would say, “You must request an appeal within 120 days of the date on your denial letter.”
- Passive voice, which does not note the actor, would say, “Appeals must be submitted within 120 days of the denial letter.”

Chop your document into chunks

Use bullet points and paragraphs. This helps you parse points or steps rather than using long narratives that tend to lose the reader’s interest.

Resources

OHA/DHS Style Manual

The manual contains agency-wide guidelines on grammar, punctuation, word usage, style, spelling, etc.

Rules and laws

State law

Oregon Revised Statute (ORS) 183.750 requires all state agencies to prepare public communications in language that is as clear and simple as possible. This includes publications, forms and instructions, licenses, agency notices, and administrative rules.

ORS 411.967 requires OHA to produce plain language material for applicants, potential applicants or recipients of medical assistance. The law requires all state agencies to use:

- Everyday words that convey meanings clearly and directly
- Present tense and active voice
- Short, simple sentences
- Definitions for only those words that the text cannot properly explain or qualify
- Readable size type
- Layout and spacing that separate the paragraphs and sections of the document from each other.

Oregon Administrative Rules (OAR)

OAR 410-141-3280 and 410-141-3300 list OHA's requirements for member and applicant material produced by coordinated care organizations (CCOs).

Code of Federal Regulations

42 CFR §438.10(d)(6) lists federal requirements for member material produced by Medicaid managed care plans.

Plain language tools

Other words to use

<https://plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/words/use-simple-words-phrases/>

<https://www.cdc.gov/other/pdf/everydaywordsforpublichealthcommunication.pdf>

Reference material

<https://www.hhs.gov/open/plain-writing/index.html?language=es>

<http://www.plainlanguage.gov/>

<https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-111publ274/pdf/PLAW-111publ274.pdf>

Granicus Plain Language Playbook

<https://granicus.com/downloads/plain-language-playbook/>

Training

<http://www.federaltraining.com/classes/details.aspx?ClassId=126>

http://www.plainlanguage.gov/resources/take_training/index.cfm

Readability tools

<https://datayze.com/readability-analyzer.php>

Microsoft Word's automatic reading level measure

Find this tool under the Review tab, Spelling & Grammar button. To turn this function on in MS Word:

- Under the File tab, go to Options, then Proofing
- Scroll down to When correcting spelling and grammar in Word; mark Show readability statistics.

We strive for sixth grade reading level or lower.

Writing tools

Online writing and editing tools may help you with your documents. For example, the free Hemingway Editor gives you a real-time assessment of your writing sample and recalculates reading level and readability suggestions as you edit.

Need help?

You can ask the following people for help writing in plain language.

Publications and Creative Services Office

- Susan Stigers, susan.stigers@dhsoha.state.or.us
- Macy Guppy, PhD, macy.guppy@dhsoha.state.or.us

Health Systems Division

- Carol Simila, MEd, carol.simila@dhsoha.state.or.us, reviews OHP and CCO member materials for plain language.

External Relations Division

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