HHS Basic Writing Tips for Consumer Materials

These guidelines promote the use of plain, clear language in writing and creating informational materials.

These tips will not work in all situations but when they are used along with the documents, "HHS Preferred Terms and Phrases for Consumer Materials" (English and Spanish) and "HHS Style Guide," they help bring consistency to writing and editing for the Texas Medicaid audience.

Use plain language

- Be clear. Keep word choice and sentence structure as simple as possible. Use short sentences and one or two syllable words whenever possible. Avoid use of shorthand or acronyms.
- Be concise. Write only what you need the reader to know. Remove unnecessary words from sentences and unnecessary sentences from paragraphs.
- Be specific. Write exactly what you need the reader to know. Use words with precise meanings instead of words with multiple or vague meanings. Include only those details that are directly relevant to the main point.

Other writing guidelines

- Be consistent in style, language, and format. Inconsistency in these areas can create a stumbling block that disrupts clarity and understanding. Inconsistency can also create doubt in the reader's mind about the accuracy and reliability of the information.
- Use the active voice, the verb form in which the subject of the sentence performs or causes the action expressed by the verb. Examples: "Bring the documents we will need" or "Call 1-877-543-7669 (1-877-KIDS-NOW) to learn more." The passive voice can raise questions in the mind of the reader – who or what actually performs the action? Examples: "The child named above will be disenrolled from the program" or "You will be mailed a letter." The passive voice is usually wordier and less authoritative than the active voice.
- Use the present tense whenever possible. Make sure there are no shifts in tense unless you are writing about a real change in time.
- Write in the second person (directly addressing the reader). This style promotes the notion that the reader is responsible for the actions you are calling for in the letter or form.
- Use a positive tone whenever possible. Tell the reader what he or she can do or must do, instead of what they cannot or should not do.
- Avoid acronyms. Assume the reader is not familiar with agency or program shorthand. An acronym, for a reader who is not familiar with it, can abruptly stop the flow of communication and undermine understanding.
- Similarly, avoid jargon, figures of speech and humor.

Make the page more appealing to the reader

- Use short sentences as much as possible. This may increase the total amount of text on the page. More text written in shorter sentences is often easier to read than fewer, but longer sentences.
- Break up large paragraphs of text into smaller ones. This leads to more "white space" on a page, which makes information easier to understand.

- Use headings that highlight the action you want the reader to take or the most important information in the paragraph that follows the heading. Example: “Call us to learn more” or “What you need to do.”
- Use bulleted lists to present items or ideas with a common theme. Break up long lists into smaller groups using headings to identify the common theme. Try to keep the number of bulleted items in a list to 4 to 7 items.
- Where it’s appropriate, use simple graphics or icons to communicate ideas.

Our goal is to promote consistency in our communications with Texas families that depend on Medicaid. By using these guidelines and the style guide and preferred terms list, you are helping to achieve that goal.

If you have questions regarding this effort or ideas for improvement, please send an e-mail to hhs.communications@hhsc.state.tx.us with the subject line, “HHS Basic Writing Tips.”