

# WRITING FOR THE WEB



**Tips to help you  
improve online  
communications**

*Updated January 2023*

# Much of what we read online is poor

88.5% of web users believe they're served poor quality content on the web.

## Sound Familiar?

“Poor writing makes me question a website’s credibility”

“Confusing menus”

**“Too much writing that doesn’t interest or help me”**

# Why good web writing matters

- Helps users find what they need
- Helps you get better response
- Improves compliance with policies & regulations
- Helps you give better customer service
- Reduces errors on forms & applications
- Makes lawsuits less likely
- Saves everyone money, time & headaches

# Good web writing is a SCIENCE

- Effective writing is a research-based science
- Based on decades of research on how people process & use information
- Reality: we're all “cognitive misers”
- People don't read carefully **anywhere**
- Research-based best practices help us design communications that work within these limitations

# Good writing improves site usability

**USABILITY** = How well an audience can use a product to achieve their goals & how satisfied they are with the process

# First rule of web writing: Understand your reader (hint: it isn't you)

- Who's reading your content?
- What are their top tasks?
- What attitudes or concerns are they bringing?
- What questions are they likely to have?
- What action do you want from them?

# Content must be user-focused

People don't care about what your organization or program is doing...

they care about **what affects THEM.**

# 7 guidelines for web writing

1. Keep content meaningful
2. Write effective headings
3. Use pronouns
4. Use active voice
5. Keep it short
6. Design for easy reading
7. Use links

# 1. Keep content meaningful

- Content should be user-focused
- Start with the issue, not the background
- Anticipate questions & barriers
- Make actions explicit
- Make solutions easy

# Is this content saying something meaningful?

“The links provided below offer information to help you better understand Medicare claims.”

or

“In conjunction with the White House’s Open Government Initiative, CMS is proud to introduce several new media resources. These resources enable CMS to further the Agency mission by supplying our audience with current and timely educational information.”

# Keep content meaningful & user-focused

- Delete fluff
- Don't editorialize
- Show, don't tell
- Limit introductory text or instructions

# Example: which is more compelling?

## **This:**

CMS developed Medicare accounts to establish a secure place for people with Medicare to access their personal Medicare information online at no cost to them.

## **Or this?**

Get your personal Medicare information with a free, secure online account.

# Example: which is more compelling?

## **This:**

All people with Medicaid must be exempt from copayments for emergency services and family planning services.

## **Or this?**

If you have Medicaid, emergency and family planning services should always be free for you.

## 2. Write effective headings

- People don't read online – they scan
- Use headings for easy scanning
- Headings should be:
  - Strong, descriptive & clear
  - Independently meaningful
  - Loaded with keywords
- Avoid weak words
- Use numerals  
(“3 Steps to File a Claim”)

# Write effective headings

- Choose clear communication over creativity
- Use the keywords readers put into a search engine
- Use active voice
- Frame positively whenever possible

**Tip: Check your site analytics to see what keywords people are using to find & navigate your site**

# Headings are your chance to grab reader attention & convey information

## Weak headings:

- “Overview”
- “Welcome to our new site”
- “Project background”

## Stronger headings carry information:

- “3 ways to apply for health coverage”
- “Medicare is a health coverage program”
- “More coordination leads to better care”

# The Rule of 2s

**First 2 words** in a headline...

**First 2 lines** in a paragraph...

and

**First 2 paragraphs** on a page...

are what users look at first.

Often, these are the only things users see.

These are places to grab reader attention.

# EXAMPLE: original web content

## Reporting fraud and suspected fraud

The Medicaid program provides health benefits to low-income families who either have no medical insurance or have inadequate medical insurance. The federal government established the general Medicaid guidelines; however, the program requirements are established and monitored by each individual state.

Health care fraud, waste and abuse can involve physicians, pharmacists, beneficiaries and even medical equipment companies. Success in combating health care fraud, waste and abuse is measured not only by convictions, but also by effective deterrent efforts.

Anyone suspecting Medicaid fraud, waste or abuse is encouraged to report it. The first touchpoint would be the Program Integrity contact in the State Medicaid Agency for your individual state. The State by State Fraud and Abuse Reporting Contacts document includes the contact information for the State Medicaid Agencies (SMA) and the Medicaid Fraud Control Units (MFC). Lastly, the Office of Inspector General's (OIG) National Fraud Hotline is 1-800-HHS-TIPS (!-800-447-8477). Or, visit their website at [Office of Inspector General – Report Fraud](#).

To facilitate expeditious investigation of the alleged fraud, it's helpful to have as much information as possible. Pertinent information includes:

- Name of Medicaid client
- Client's Medicaid card number
- Name of doctor, hospital or other health care provider
- Date of services
- A description of the acts that you suspect involve fraud

# EXAMPLE: Web Rewrite

## How to report Medicaid fraud

Health care fraud, waste and abuse can involve physicians, pharmacists, and medical equipment companies. Anyone suspecting Medicaid fraud, waste or abuse is encouraged to report it.

## What to do if you suspect fraud

- Call the Office of Inspector General's (OIG) National Fraud Hotline at 1-800-HHS-TIPS (1-800-447-8477). Or, visit their website at [Office of Inspector General – Report Fraud](#).
- Contact your State Medicaid Agency Medicaid Fraud Unit. [Contact information for your state is here](#).

## What to include in your fraud report

When you make your report, give as much information as you can to help the investigation. Helpful information includes things like:

- Name of the person with Medicaid
- Medicaid card number
- Name of the doctor, hospital or other provider
- Date the person got services
- A description of the acts you suspect involve fraud

## 3. Use pronouns

- Pronouns pull the reader in
- Help your readers do less translation
- Get rid of unnecessary words
- Let you be more directive with instructions

# Do pronouns make this easier?

## **Without pronouns**

If applicant purports to represent an organization, a letter or other documentation that the applicant has authority to represent that organization is required to be submitted with this form.

## **With pronouns**

You must include a letter or other document from your organization that says you are allowed to represent them.

## 4. Use active voice

- Active voice makes it clear who does what
- It's more direct & less awkward
- Cuts down on the number of words

**Example:** Medicare covered the wheelchair.

Put the person doing the action & the action  
closer together...

PASSIVE

Eligibility will be determined by your state.

ACTIVE

Your state will determine eligibility.

# Tips to fix passive voice

It can help to look for a “by” phrase, and rewrite so the actor is first.

<b>Passive voice</b>	<b>Active voice</b>
The claim was sent to us by your provider.	Your provider sent us the claim.
Applications will be reviewed by the Marketplace.	The Marketplace will review applications.
The form must be completed by the applicant and received by Human Resources by June 1.	Complete the form and return it to us by June 1.

## 5. Keep it short

People rarely read dense text, **anywhere**

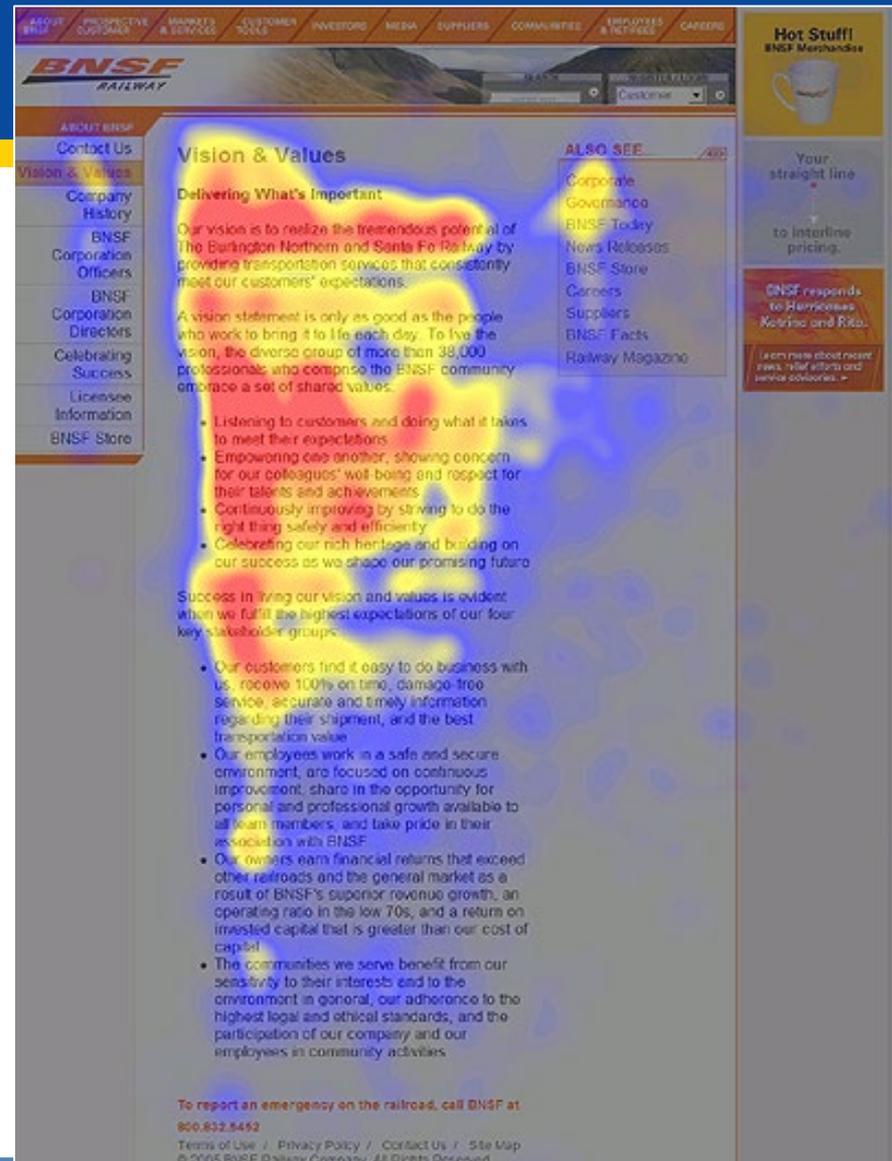
- Eye tracking research shows how people deal with a densely written page
- Heatmap on next slide is from usability guru Jakob Nielsen
- On average, users read only the first 2 words on each line

# Heatmap from a website

## "About us" page

Red shows where people looked longest on the page.

The heatmap shows user tendency to read in an "F" pattern & to focus on information in bulleted lists.



# Implications of the F Pattern

- **Users don't read - they scan**
  - People read an average of 18% of what's on a page
- Make sure critical tasks & information fall in the F pattern
- Load headings, paragraphs & bullets with information-carrying words
  - Readers look for keywords

# Keep it short

- Headings: 8 words max
- Sentences: 30 words max
  - 1 main point per sentence
- Paragraphs: 2–3 sentences max
  - 1 or 2 ideas per short paragraph
  - Start with a topic sentence or a conclusion
  - Put important information first
  - Use links to break up long information across multiple pages

## 6. Design for easy reading

- Put important content first
- Use visual cues to emphasize what's important
- Use “signposts” to guide users around the page
- Answer reader's questions
  - In the order & language they'll ask
  - By placing the text where it's needed

# Help readers scan

- Nobody likes a wall of text
- Keep paragraphs to 2-3 sentences max
- Add subheadings for more than 2 paragraphs in a row
- Use numbers for steps or a process
- Bullet lists with more than 2 items

# Example: conference announcement page

Announcing our upcoming Education Program conference! We are planning a very exciting panel discussion about how funds will be utilized by national partners at the local level to increase enrollment. In addition, this meeting will also include information about marketing surveillance and a special listening session to address open enrollment or other systemic concerns. We will also have experts walk you through recent changes to the website.

The National Medicare Education Program Partnership Alliance began as an educational effort as a result of the Balanced Budget Act of 1997, which expanded Medicare's health plan options by creating the Medicare+Choice program. A partnership soon developed between public and private organizations around a common goal: educating people with Medicare to make informed choices about their health care. NMEP continues its work under the Medicare Modernization Act of 2003. In addition to the National Partner Organizations, local partners from each Regional Office will be invited to participate in this meeting virtually via teleconference. This meeting will set the standard in bringing together our national and regional partners for a dialogue that is helpful and productive for all. The meeting agenda will be posted as soon as it becomes available. We hope you will be able to join us!

# Example rewrite: keeps focus on how to register

## Upcoming NMEP Conference

December 2, 2022

### Agenda

- A special session on recent grants
- Panel discussion on how partners plan to use funds to increase enrollment
- New information about marketing rules
- A special listening session with the Medicare Ombudsman
- Demonstration of recent changes to Medicare.gov

### [Register here](#)

The [National Medicare Education Program \(NMEP\) Partnership](#) meetings bring our national and regional partners together for a helpful and productive dialogue.

# Consider lists & tables

- Make it easy to take in complex information fast
- Help reader identify items or steps
- Save words
- Make your logic & structure clear

# Use bullets

- Use numbers to show steps or a process
- List most important items first
- If the list needs an introduction, use a sentence fragment or a sentence ending in a colon

# Can you put this into bullets?

As outlined in the manual, contact centers are required to submit a primary point of contact, a high level organization chart, disaster recovery/contingency plans, a list of all planned closures, and requests for additional closures if applicable.

# Previous slide formatted with bullets

Contact centers must send the following:

- A primary point of contact
- A high level organization chart
- Disaster recovery/contingency plans
- A list of all planned closures
- Requests for additional closures, if applicable

# Which is easier to understand?

We must receive your completed application form on or before the 25th day of the month if you submit your application electronically, or the 15th day of the month if you do not submit your application electronically.

Or this?

<b>IF YOU SUBMIT YOUR FORM...</b>	<b>WE MUST GET IT BY...</b>
Electronically	The 25 <sup>th</sup> of the month
By mail	The 15 <sup>th</sup> of the month

# Example: USCIS Form Updates

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) is expanding its Direct Mail Program to provide that filings of Form I-800A, Application for Determination of Suitability to Adopt a Child from a Convention Country, Form I-800A Supplement 1, Listing of Adult Member of the Household, Supplement 2, Consent to Disclose Information, Supplement 3, Request for Action on Approved Form I-800A, Form I-800, Petition to Classify Convention Adoptee as an Immediate Relative, Supplement 1, Consent to Disclose Information, for the Hague Adoption Convention be filed at a designated Chicago, Illinois lockbox facility for initial processing.

# EXAMPLE: Revised in a Table

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) is expanding its Direct Mail Program to include these forms:

Form Number	Form Name
Form I-800A	Application for Determination of Suitability to Adopt a Child from a Convention Country
Form I-800A Supplement 1	Listing of Adult Member of the Household
Form I-800A Supplement 2	Consent to Disclose Information
Form I-800A Supplement 3	Request for Action on Approved Form 1-800 A
Form I-800	Petition to Classify Convention Adoptee as an Immediate Relative
1-800 Supplement 1	Consent to Disclose Information

# 7. Use links

- If content isn't critical to understanding, consider linking out to it
- Links help streamline text to make content easier to read & navigate
- Keep focus on critical content
- Help search engines find your content

# Links should be MEANINGFUL

- “A link is a promise to your reader”
- Write short, meaningful hyperlink text
- Avoid generic text/instructions
- Highlight all hyperlinks
- Un-highlight everything else
- Use the URL **only** if you’re referencing a site’s address

# Examples of strong links

- Under a [new coverage decision](#), anyone who smokes or uses tobacco can get counseling from a doctor to help them quit.
- 6 Things You Should Know about the [“Welcome to Medicare Preventive Visit”](#)
- [Closing the Drug Coverage Gap](#) explains how the Part D coverage gap works.
- The new law expands financial help to pay for Marketplace plan costs. [Find out if you qualify for financial help.](#)

# General tips for writing online

- Use numerals instead of spelling out numbers
- Use contractions when they sound natural
- Use ampersands:
  - In headings, titles & labels
  - With parallel items, like these examples:
    - Eligibility & enrollment
    - Items & services
    - Publications & products
- Avoid italics
- Be sparing with bold

# Get more tips & resources for web writing

Plain Language Action & Information Network  
[www.plainlanguage.gov](http://www.plainlanguage.gov)