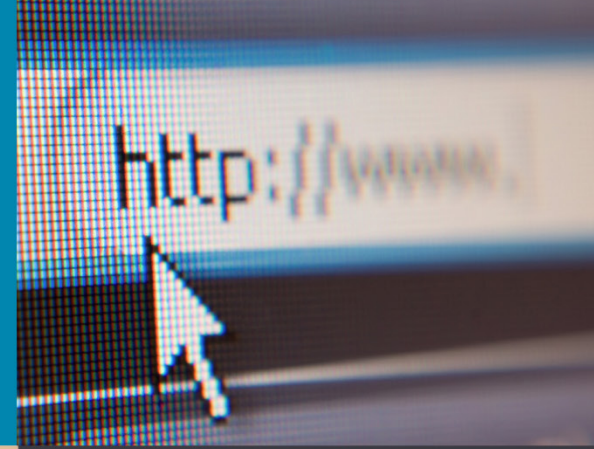


# WRITING FOR THE WEB



Helping you  
improve online  
communications



# Good Web Writing Helps *Everyone*

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

# Most Web Content Is Crap

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”

“It takes too long to find the information I’m looking for”

# Good Writing Improves Site USABILITY

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



# #1 Rule of Web Writing: Understand Your Reader (Hint: It isn't *you*.)

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

# Guidelines for Web Writing

1. Keep content meaningful
2. Write effective headlines
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

# Keep Content Meaningful & User-focused

People don't care  
about what  
Medicare or CMS is  
doing... they care  
about *what affects  
them.*







## 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:**

*Ask Medicare* is a CMS initiative designed to support and assist caregivers.

## **Or This?**

*Ask Medicare* is a one-stop source of information and support just for caregivers like you.

# Example: Which Is More Compelling?

## **This:**

All Medicaid beneficiaries 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 Headlines

- Use headlines to map pages so they're easy to scan
- Headlines should be:
  - Strong, descriptive & clear
  - Independently meaningful
  - Loaded with keywords
- Avoid weak words
- Use numerals  
(“3 Steps to File a Claim”)

# Write Effective Headlines

- Choose clear communication over creativity
- Use the keywords readers put in Google
- Use active voice
- Frame positively whenever possible



Does this headline make sense if it's all the user sees?

- Overview
- Introduction to Medicare
- Things to Do as a New Beneficiary
- Welcome to Medicare
- Eligibility Tool
- Background

# RULE:

## 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.**

*And often, the only thing users see!*



# EXAMPLE: Web Announcement

We are sending to you a 'Save-the-Date' notice of our upcoming National Medicare Education Program meeting. Please note that this meeting will feature a special session focused on the new CHIPRA grants recently awarded by CMS. We are planning a very exciting panel discussion about how CHIP 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 by CMS and a special listening session with the Medicare Ombudsman to address open enrollment or other systemic concerns. We will also have experts from our Office of Beneficiary Information Services walk you through recent changes to the Medicare.gov 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 and CMS 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. CMS traditionally holds this meeting in Washington, D.C., with National Partner Organizations. In addition to the National Partner Organizations, local partners from each CMS 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.

# EXAMPLE: Web Rewrite

## Save the Date!

### NMEP Meeting: December 2, 2010

Featuring a special session on recent CHIPRA grants

#### Other items on the agenda:

- Exciting panel discussion about how partners plan to use CHIP funds to increase enrollment
- New information about CMS marketing surveillance
- A special listening session with the Medicare Ombudsman
- An expert demonstration of recent changes to the Medicare.gov website

#### NMEP Brings Partners Together

The National Medicare Education Program (NMEP) Partnership meetings bring our national and regional partners together for a dialogue that's helpful and productive for all.

**Register now!**

# 3. Use Pronouns

- Pull the reader in
- Make your readers do less translation
- Get rid of unnecessary words



# Do pronouns make this easier?

WITHOUT PRONOUNS	WITH PRONOUNS
<p>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.</p>	<p>You must include a letter or other document from your organization that says you are allowed to represent them.</p>



## 4. Use Active Voice

- Makes it clear who does what
- Is more direct and less awkward
- Cuts down on the number of words

***Medicare covered the wheelchair.***

# Use Active Voice

(Hint: You need to fix the passive voice)

## How to spot passive voice:

- The person doing the action follows the verb
- Always uses a form of the verb “to be” (am, is, was, were, be, been, being, are)

*The wheelchair was covered by Medicare.*



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

Eligibility will be determined by your state.

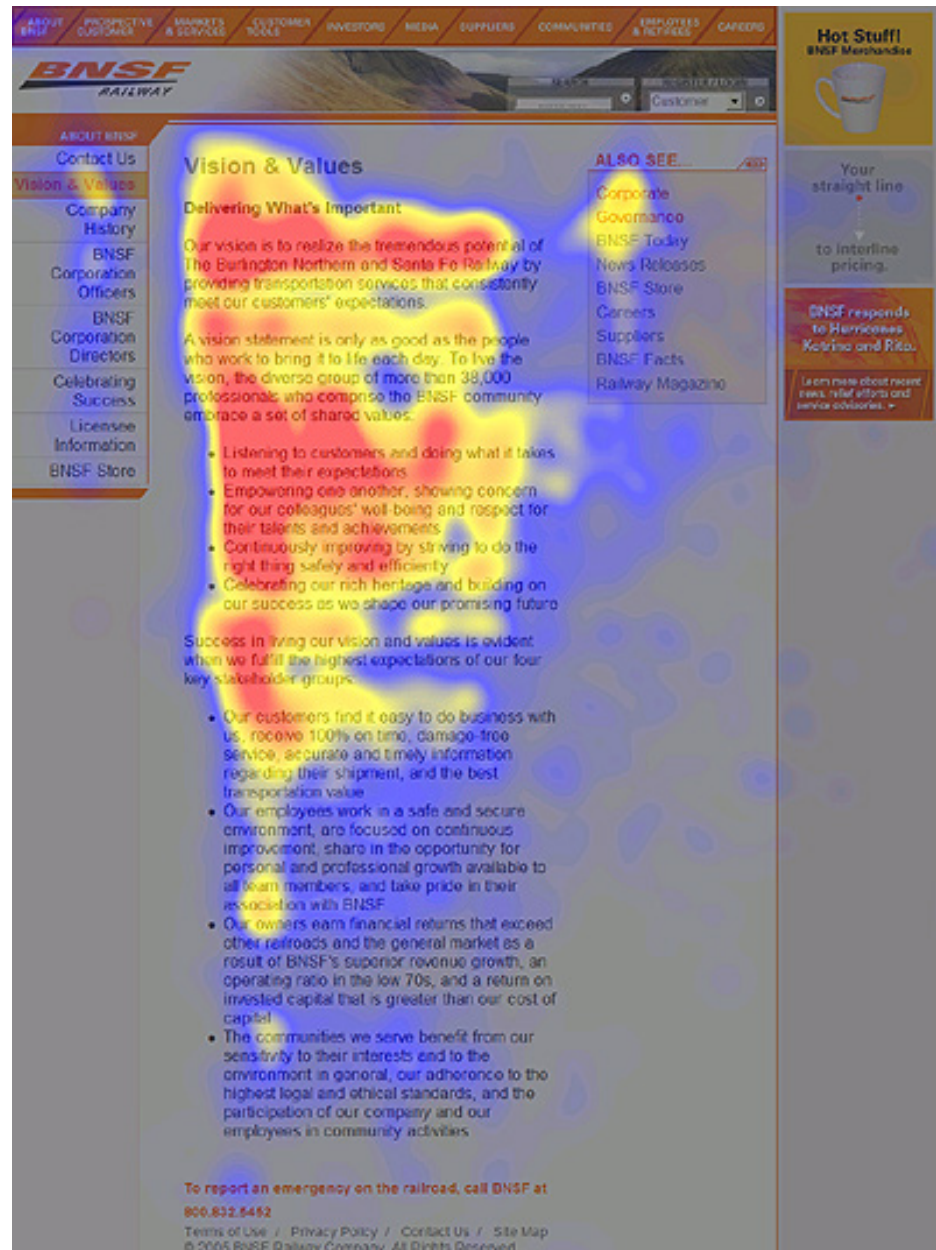
# 5. Keep It Short

- People rarely read dense text, **anywhere**
  - Eye tracking research shows how people deal with a densely written page
  - Map on next slide is from usability guru Jakob Nielsen
  - Red shows the most-read parts of the page
  - On average, users read only the first 2 words on each line



Example from a website's "About Us" pages.

The heat-map shows users' tendency to read in an "F" pattern, and their focus on information presented 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 and information falls in the F pattern
- Load subheads, paragraphs, and bullets with information-carrying words
  - Readers look for keywords



# Keep It Short

- Headlines: 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 (Got 3 seconds to spare?)

- Use **visual cues** to emphasize important content
- Answer reader's questions
  - In the order and language they will ask them
  - By placing the right text where they need it
- Use “signposts” to guide visitors
- Put important content first

# Help Your Reader Scan

- Break long paragraphs (2-3 sentences max)
- Add subheadings for more than 2 paragraphs in a row
- Use numbers for steps or a process
- Bullet lists with 2 or more items

# Example: CMS Email

See the attached flyer about upcoming training for Contracting Officers' Technical Representative (COTR) and Government Task Leaders. This training is presented by the Office of Acquisition & Grants Management (OAGM). It will take place from 1pm to 3pm on Wednesday, March 2, 2010. This is the second OAGM Contracting Officers' Technical Representative (COTR) Seminar II in FY 2011 training. Be sure that you sign-in on the date of the training to ensure you receive two hours of continuous learning points (CLPs).

The title of the course is: CMS OAGM COTR Seminar II FY 2011-Contract Funding. You must have prior supervisory approval to attend. You will be able to print your certificates from the HHSU once the training is completed in a timely fashion.

# Example: Email Rewrite

The Office of Acquisitions & Grants Management (OAGM) presents:

## **COTR Seminar II FY 2011: Contract Funding**

A seminar for Contracting Officers' Technical Representatives  
(COTR) & Government Task Leaders

**Wednesday, March 2, 2011**

**1 - 3 p.m.**

**CMS Auditorium**

**[REGISTER HERE](#)**

# Consider Lists & Tables

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





# Using Bullets

- Use numbers to describe steps or a process
- List most important items first
- If the list needs an intro, 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.



# Can you put this into 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

# Use Tables for Complex Relationships

- Tables can help users make sense of information
- Use small, compact tables that fit on the page
- Use short, descriptive headings
- Limit data tables to:
  - 4 columns
  - 6 rows
  - 500 words



# Which one is easier?

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.

## How to submit your form:

IF YOU SUBMIT YOUR FORM...	WE MUST GET IT BY...
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
<b>Form I-800A</b>	Application for Determination of Suitability to Adopt a Child from a Convention Country
<b>Form I-800A Supplement 1</b>	Listing of Adult Member of the Household
<b>Form I-800A Supplement 2</b>	Consent to Disclose Information
<b>Form I-800A Supplement 3</b>	Request for Action on Approved Form 1-800 A
<b>Form I-800</b>	Petition to Classify Convention Adoptee as an Immediate Relative
<b>1-800 Supplement 1</b>	Consent to Disclose Information



## 7. Use Links

- Make content easier to read and navigate
- Make content more accessible
- Help search engines find your content

If content is important but not critical to understanding, consider linking to it.



# Use Meaningful Links

*(only if they add value!)*

- “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

# Link Examples

- Visit [the Medicare Supplier Directory](#) to find the most up-to-date list of Medicare contract suppliers.
- Under a [new coverage decision](#), anyone who smokes or uses tobacco can get counseling from a doctor to help them quit.
- [6 Things to Know about the “Welcome to Medicare” Exam](#) — ~~this resource will help consumers understand the key elements of the “Welcome to Medicare” physical exam benefit. Download PDF. Since the title is descriptive, the explanation and instructions are redundant.~~
- [Closing the Prescription Drug Coverage Gap](#) tells you more about the one-time \$250 rebate check.

# We Do It Online

- Give web users web solutions
- Use numerals
- Use contractions when they sound natural
- Ampersands are okay (sometimes)
  - In headlines, titles and labels
  - With two parallel items in a series (think “apples & oranges”)
    - Eligibility & Enrollment
    - Items & Services
    - Publications & Products
- Avoid italics
- Be sparing with bold

# CMS Tone of Voice (TOV)

trustworthy & official

**Positive**

comprehensive & factual

conversational

Benevolent & Reassuring

Simple Warm & Friendly

declarative

**HUMAN**

Focused on health & benefits

**upbeat**

# CMS TOV Is NOT...

commanding

harsh

**patronizing**

overly excited

negative or judgmental

frivolous

jokey or trendy

**overly formal**

**unnecessarily complex**



# Writing in CMS TOV

DO	DON'T
Speak directly to readers	Use exclamation points
Sound conversational	Tell jokes
Use "you" and other personal pronouns	Use figures of speech (puns, similes or metaphors) or slang
Use "we," "our" and "us" when referring to Medicare	Use judgment language (good/better/best)
Use the present tense	Use weak words like please, shall, wish, assist, desire
Frame benefits and policies positively	Use jargon, medical terminology, acronyms, or CMS insider-speak
Uses suggestive language like "Make sure.." and "You may want to..."	Use imperatives like "You must..." and "You should..."

# Example: CMS TOV

**Poor:** Today, under a [new coverage decision](#), anyone who smokes or uses tobacco and is covered by Medicare will be able to receive tobacco cessation counseling from a qualified physician or other Medicare-recognized practitioner who can work with them to help them quit.

**Better:** If you smoke or use tobacco, now you can get counseling from a doctor to help you quit under a [new Medicare coverage decision](#).

# Example: CMS TOV

**Poor:** Here at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), we are working hard each and every day to ensure that Medicare stays strong, and that people with Medicare have access to quality, affordable care. We encourage all seniors and people with disabilities in the program to look at their current coverage, compare it to the options available, and decide which coverage best meets their needs during this Open Enrollment period.

**Better:** During Open Enrollment, you may want to look at your current coverage, compare it to the options available, and decide which coverage meets your needs.





# Learn More About the Science of Web Writing!

- **Jakob Nielsen** is a GREAT resource for web research & best practices [www.useit.com](http://www.useit.com)
- The **CMS Communications Portal** has plain language & web writing resources for CMS [cmsnet.cms.hhs.gov/commport.htm](http://cmsnet.cms.hhs.gov/commport.htm)
- **Plain Language Action & Information Network** [www.plainlanguage.gov](http://www.plainlanguage.gov)