



<https://dmas.virginia.gov/for-members/forum-on-language-and-disability-access/>



Say It Simply: Ensuring Language and Disability Access Through Plain Language

May 14, 2025 (1PM-3PM)



Logistics

- This presentation is being recorded and will be available for viewing on the [DMAS website](#) at a later time.
- This presentation is intended for informational purposes only and does not constitute legal advice.
- Add your name, job title and organization you represent in the chat
- Remote Conference Captioning (RCC) available through Virginia Relay. Find link in the chat
- American Sign Language Interpreters (ASL) available through the Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (VDDHH)
 - To Pin the ASL: Click on the ASL video feed and then select the three-dots menu icon on the feed. A drop-down menu appears. Select Pin for me.
- If you experience technical difficulties during this call, e-mail: civilrightscoordinator@dmass.virginia.gov
- If you have questions, please enter them in the chat and we will address them at the end of this presentation as time allows

Today's Agenda

1:00 P.M. – 1:05 P.M. Welcome and Introductions

1:05 P.M. – 1:10 P.M. Opening Keynote - Barbra Kingsley, PhD | President of Kingsley-Kleimann Group

1:10 P.M. – 1:30 P.M. Presentation – Understanding Plain Language Rules and Guidelines. By Montserrat Serra, DMAS Civil Rights Coordinator

1:30 P.M. – 2:45 P.M. Panel Discussion

- **Jessica Collette, VCA** | Director of Communications Office of Strategic Initiatives | Department for the Blind & Vision Impaired
- **Katie Morris, MS** | Quality & Service Integrity Manager | Division of High Needs Supports | Department of Medical Assistance Services
- **Deanna Parker, MPA** | Director, Community Network Supports | Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services
- **Anita Ayres** | Communications & Information Manager | Virginia Board for People with Disabilities

2:45 P.M. – 2:55 P.M. Q&A and Public Comments

2:55 P.M. – 3:00 P.M. Closing

Opening Keynote

Barbra Kingsley, PhD

President of Kingsley-Kleimann Group



Presentation

Understanding Plain Language Rules and Guidelines

By Montserrat Serra, DMAS Civil Rights Coordinator

Why Plain Language Matters

- Improves readability and comprehension
- Ensures accessibility for individuals with disabilities and limited English proficiency (LEP)
- Complies with the Plain Writing Act of 2010 and other legal requirements

Plain Language Materials – Key Planning Items

- Who is your primary audience?
- What is your communication objective?
- What is your main message?
- What are your calls to action?
- How will you organize the information?
 - What will your title be?
 - What headings will you use to chunk your content?

Standards for Public-Facing Written Communications

Visual Standards

- Use sans-serif fonts like Arial or Calibri
- Minimum font size: 12pt
- Accessible formats: .docx, .pptx, tagged PDFs
- Use accessibility checkers in Word and Adobe Acrobat Pro

Color and Contrast

- Ensure strong contrast (dark text on a light background)
- Avoid relying solely on color to convey information
- Use tools like the WebAIM Contrast Checker

Standards for Public-Facing Written Communications

Principles of Plain Language

- Be clear and direct
- Focus on essential information
- Avoid redundant or unnecessary details
- **Examples of Plain Language**
 - Instead of: "In the event that the form is not submitted within the specified timeframe, there could be a delay."
 - Use: "Submit the form on time to avoid delays."

Standards for Public-Facing Written Communications

Active vs. Passive Voice

- Active: "Submit the form by July 1."
- Passive: "The form must be submitted by July 1."
- Keep action clear and direct

Using Simple Vocabulary

- Use familiar words
- Avoid jargon and complex terms
- Define acronyms and abbreviations when first used
- Utilize [plainlanguage.gov](https://www.plainlanguage.gov) for guidance

Standards for Public-Facing Written Communications

- **Reading Level and Accessibility**
 - Aim for a 6th-8th grade reading level
 - Use tools like Hemingway Editor
 - Use everyday language
- **Formatting for Clarity**
 - Use bullet points and numbered lists
 - Keep sentences and paragraphs short
 - Ensure logical content flow

Plain Language Exercise – What Would You Change?

Important Information About Your Health Coverage

It is of utmost importance that all eligible individuals ensure they have submitted the necessary documentation within the allotted timeframe to avoid any potential disruption to their healthcare benefits. The provided health services encompass a broad spectrum of medical needs, ensuring comprehensive support for all enrollees.

Eligibility and Requirements: Individuals who meet the predetermined criteria for enrollment must provide documentation substantiating their qualifications. Failure to submit required documents within the established deadline may result in termination of benefits.

Steps to Maintain Coverage:

1. Ensure you have gathered all requisite paperwork pertaining to your financial status.
2. Submit the aforementioned documents to the appropriate agency before the designated cutoff date.
3. Should you have any inquiries, do not hesitate to establish contact with our administrative office.

Additional Assistance: If you require supplementary information, you may access our online portal or visit one of our regional service centers. Our representatives are available to provide elucidation regarding your healthcare options.

Plain Language Exercise – Improved Version

Keep Your Health Coverage – What You Need to Know

Make sure you send in the right documents on time to keep your health benefits. We offer many types of medical care to support your health needs.

Eligibility and Requirements: If you qualify for health coverage, you must send proof of eligibility. If you miss the deadline, you may lose your benefits.

Steps to Keep Your Coverage:

1. Collect the documents that show your income.
2. Send them to us before the deadline.
3. Need help? Call our office.

Get Help: For more details, visit our website or a service center. Our team is here to help you understand your options.

Plain Language Exercise – Recommended Changes

Unclear and Overly Complex Sentences:

- Issue: "It is of utmost importance that all eligible individuals ensure they have submitted the necessary documentation within the allotted timeframe..."
- Fix: "Make sure you send in the right documents on time."
- **Reasoning:** Shortens the sentence, removes unnecessary words, and makes it more direct.

Use of Jargon and Complex Vocabulary:

- Issue: "The provided health services encompass a broad spectrum of medical needs, ensuring comprehensive support for all enrollees."
- Fix: "We offer many types of medical care to support your health needs."
- **Reasoning:** Uses simpler, more familiar words for better understanding.

Plain Language Exercise - Recommended Changes

Passive Voice Instead of Active Voice:

- Issue: "Failure to submit required documents within the established deadline may result in termination of benefits."
- Fix: "If you miss the deadline, you may lose your benefits."
- **Reasoning:** Uses active voice to make the sentence clearer and more engaging.

Unnecessarily Formal Language:

- Issue: "Should you have any inquiries, do not hesitate to establish contact with our administrative office."
- Fix: "Need help? Call our office."
- **Reasoning:** Makes the language more conversational and easier to understand.

Plain Language Exercise - Recommended Changes

Lengthy and Complicated Instructions:

- Issue: "Ensure you have gathered all requisite paperwork pertaining to your financial status."
- Fix: "Collect the documents that show your income."
- **Reasoning:** Uses simpler, clearer instructions.

Unclear Call to Action:

- Issue: "Our representatives are available to provide elucidation regarding your healthcare options."
- Fix: "Our team is here to help you understand your options."
- **Reasoning:** Uses everyday words and a more direct message.

Panel Discussion:

- **Katie Morris, MS** | Quality & Service Integrity Manager | Division of High Needs Supports | Department of Medical Assistance Services
- **Deanna Parker, MPA** | Director, Community Network Supports | Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services
- **Anita Ayres** | Communications & Information Manager | Virginia Board for People with Disabilities

Panelists Questions

1. Why is plain language important in communications with the public, especially for individuals with disabilities and those with limited English proficiency?

Panelists Questions

2. Can you share an example of a document or communication your agency has recently rewritten in plain language? What changes did you make, and what was the impact?

Panelists Questions

3. What strategies do you use to test whether a document or message is clear and easy to understand for its intended audience?

Panelists Questions

4. What are some common challenges your agency has faced when implementing plain language practices, and how have you addressed them?

- How do you balance the need for legal or technical accuracy with the need for clarity in plain language communications?

Panelists Questions

5. What role does staff training play in ensuring plain language is consistently applied across your organization? Do you have any best practices to share?

Panelists Questions

6. Are there any tools or resources that your agency uses to simplify and improve the readability of communications?

Panelists Questions

7. Looking ahead, what are your agency's next steps or goals for improving plain language in communications?

Q&A and Public Comments

Questions and comments will be addressed during today's event as time allows.

- Type your question on the chat, or
- Email your question to civilrightscoordinator@dmass.virginia.gov

Unaddressed questions will be published on the [DMAS website](#)

Closing Remarks and Resources

- [DMAS Language & Disability Access Plan](#)
- [PlainLanguage.Gov](#)
- [Plain Writing Act of 2010](#)
- [Federal Plain Language Guidelines](#)
- [Plain Language and Easy Read Communication by Center on Disability](#)