



Administrative Policy No. 2.11

Subject:	Plain Language Writing and Design in DSHS Communications
Information Contact:	Office of Communications and Government Affairs MS: 45100, 360-902-7829
Authorizing Source:	Executive Order 23-02 Plain Language
Effective Date:	May 15, 2008
Revised:	December 13, 2024 ⁱ Housekeeping 3/26/25
Approved By:	<u>Original approved by Pearlette J. Ramos</u> Senior Director, Office of Justice and Civil Rights

Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to ensure Department of Social and Health Services employees prepare communications materials that are clear, concise, inclusive, accessible and easy to understand and culturally relevant for the intended audience.

[Executive order 23-02](#) requires executive cabinet agencies to produce clear communications that improve a person's ability to understand how to access services, comply with requirements and participate in state government.

Background

Plain language writing and design strategies improve communication and reduce misunderstandings and frustration. Benefits of plain language include:

- Achieving better services and results for clients, patients, residents, customers, and business partners.
- Improving understanding of and compliance with program requirements or action items for clients, patients, residents, and customers.
- Making DSHS operations more efficient and cost-effective.
- Improving DSHS' progress toward meeting accessibility standards.
- Providing culturally appropriate messages and translations.
- Advancing equity.

- Supporting transparency.

Plain language supports Washington state's pro-equity anti-racism efforts. It shows DSHS' commitment to ensuring all people in Washington state have equitable access to public information. It also helps people participate in state government. As much as possible, it applies to all internal and external communications, including the following topics:

- Procurement and contracting
- Employment
- Rule-making and public comment opportunities
- Grants
- Benefits programs

Plain language requires the use of simple and clear wording when communicating about DSHS' business as well as its mission, vision, and values. Plain language is about clear and easy-to-understand communications and is essential to good customer service.

Scope

This policy applies to all DSHS employees. It also applies to all DSHS printed, digital, and video content. This includes information or action items that need to be understood regardless of the audience's level of familiarity with the subject matter, cultural background, socioeconomic status, and other factors.

- Letters and emails
- Forms, instructions, and application materials
- Talking points, telephone and other scripts, key messages, and question-and-answer documents
- Reports
- Data visualization
- Publications
 - Brochures
 - Flyers
 - Fact sheets
 - One-pagers
 - Booklets
 - Posters
 - Announcements
 - News releases
 - Advertisements
 - Newsletters
- Webpages

- Blogs and social media posts
- Presentations and meeting materials
- Video and audio content
- All written, printed, and published content, including in Microsoft Teams chats and channels

This policy excludes Washington Administrative Code and Revised Codes of Washington per Office of the Code Reviser; however, DSHS should explain any referenced WACs or RCWs in plain language.

Additional Guidance and Resources

[Executive order 23-02](#)

[Plain language action and information network](#)

[DSHS Style Guide](#)

[DSHS Administrative policies](#)

- [AP 2.07, Visual Communications](#)
- [AP 2.08, Communications and Media Relations Policy](#)
- [7.21 Access to services for persons with limited English proficiency](#)
- [11.02 Forms management](#)
- [11.08 DSHS administrative policies](#)
- [14.18 Email and voicemail responses and Teams backgrounds](#)
- [15.18.01 Standards for internet websites and public-facing web applications](#)
- [15.24 Social media policy](#)

[WaTech accessibility policy number: USER-01 \(formerly 188\)](#)

[Web content accessibility guidelines version 2.2](#)

Definitions

Additional guidelines: Guidelines developed for specific types of writing, such as letters, instructions, manuals, forms, rules, policies, contracts, news releases, and webpages.

Audience: The intended recipients of a specific communication.

Culturally appropriate: Accounting for a set of values, beliefs, norms, perceptions, experiences, and customs that a group of people share.

Culturally sensitive: Being aware of people's lived experiences. Knowing that words can have different meanings for different audiences. Approaching the language, we use with care, humility, intention, and inclusiveness.

Customers: Users of the information, such as the public, DSHS clients, tribal governments, tribal organizations, DSHS employees, and any other individuals and organizations that work with or are served by DSHS.

DSHS employees: All employees, supervisors, and managers that DSHS employs directly.

Peer reviews: Activities enabling an author to ask for feedback from other employees on draft documents. Administration communications managers and division communication contacts can be helpful resources/reviewers for employees.

Plain language: Also known as “plain talk,” the result of a process that creates or revises content to reflect plain language writing and designing principles.

Policy Requirements

A. Clear communications

DSHS employees are expected to use plain language in all print, digital, and video communications with internal and external customers and partners. User testing, while not required, is encouraged where feasible, cost-effective, and sensible.

Plain language principles are general guidelines under [Executive order 23-02](#):

- Write for your audience, not for yourself. Organize information based on what your audience needs to know and the questions they are most likely to ask.
- Use common words, short sentences, and short paragraphs.
- State main points before details.
- Use bulleted or numbered lists.
- Use headings.
- Avoid jargon and legal or technical language.
- Use clear and precise language that is culturally appropriate for the intended audience.
- Use active voice writing to make it clear who is responsible for what.
 - Note: Some cultures prefer passive voice. It is important to understand the audience’s preference. However, research shows active voice is easier for most readers to understand.

B. Employee and management responsibilities

DSHS employees must create and organize internal and external communications.

1. Considering:

- a. Customers' needs, including [accessibility](#).
 - b. Plain language principles under [executive order 23-02](#).
 - c. [DSHS style guide](#).
 - d. Additional guidelines for specific types of content.
2. DSHS employees are encouraged to use layout and design principles that help the reader understand the meaning of a document on the first try. This includes adequate white space, bulleted lists, helpful headings and subheadings, and other techniques that lead the reader through the document.
 3. DSHS employees in the following roles are required to complete the Department of Enterprise Services-provided plain language training in accordance with [executive order 23-02](#):
 - a. Executive cabinet and subcabinet team members.
 - b. Administration executive leadership team members.
 - c. Legal counsel (does not apply to agency Assistant Attorneys General).
 - d. Procurement professionals.
 - e. Designated website contributors.
 - f. Employees whose position description includes preparing content for external audiences, including all employees with a communications consultant job class position, and other communications, visual design, and media employees.
 - g. Program managers.
 - h. Legislative liaisons.
 4. Supervisors and managers must support employees in writing clear, concise, and easy-to-understand information, especially any employee who helps with writing, designing, editing, or presenting the kinds of documents and content subject to this policy. This includes enabling employees, as needed, to:
 - Attend essential training related to clear written communication, including the DES plain language training.
 - Involve internal and external interested parties in writing projects.
 - Conduct peer reviews.
 - Conduct usability tests as appropriate and able.

C. Responsibilities of plain language lead

1. The office of communications and government affairs is the plain language office for DSHS. The DSHS plain language office:

Serves as DSHS' central contact for plain language and provides expertise

and technical assistance when requested.

- Shares resources and learning opportunities to help employees communicate clearly and effectively.
- Reviews DSHS administrative policies during the initial review to ensure plain language principles are used.
- Develops capacity with agency communications consultants to provide plain language consultation at the administration and division level.

2. The senior director of the office of communications and government affairs, or their designee, will serve as the agency's plain language lead. The senior director will create a plan to inventory agency content subject to this policy and the plain language executive order. They will ensure that:

- Agency content is updated on a biennial basis, verifying that the most used and most used and most-viewed materials reflect plain language principles.
- All agency content subject to this policy goes through a plain language review before being made final.

ⁱ Housekeeping to update links.