



Plain Language Guidelines

Improving Readability on the Pennsylvania Unemployment
Website Using Plain Language Guidelines

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Background & Context

The purpose of this document is to provide guidance and examples on how to better communicate unemployment benefits information to a wide range of readers' literacy skills. As part of the Pennsylvania Unemployment website initiative, USDR reviewed selected content to determine how to improve readability and comprehension.

Findings

Writing for a diverse audience is difficult. Understanding unemployment in itself is a challenge to most people. Communicating simply and clearly on how to acquire and maintain employment benefits is not easy for many state organizations.

The Pennsylvania Unemployment site does a good job using:

- personal pronouns to help connect to readers
- bulleted lists to increase scannability
- graphics to simplify complex concepts

There is opportunity to improve:

- non-descriptive headings
- lengthy paragraphs
- complex sentences
- government "policy speak"
- addressing multiple topics in a page

Similar findings have been observed in the user research performed by our USDR team. In both the online survey and claimant interviews, people were unfamiliar with unemployment terms and government jargon, and frustrated by the perceived lack of clarity on the web site.

Using Plain Language

By using more plain language guidelines, readability on the Pennsylvania Unemployment Website can be optimized.

According to Google, and others, the benefits to readers and organizations are many:

- Plain language gets your message across in the shortest time possible resulting in a less frustrated reader.
- Less reader frustration results in fewer calls and emails asking for clarification.
- Less reader confusion results in them trusting you instead of searching for answers elsewhere, which may be incorrect.
- Readers can correctly comply with your instructions when they understand them.

Summary of Recommendations

To help readers' overall experience using the Pennsylvania Unemployment website, we recommend the following, using plain language guidelines:

One Goal Per Page

To keep messaging and instructions clear, remember that each page should have a single goal. What single thing do you want your readers to know or do?

Speak the Language of Your Readers

Write how your readers might search for information using their keywords. This will not only help readers find your information it will also make better sense.

Use Headings That Create Interest and Help with Navigation

Effective headings help readers find more relevant information faster with less frustration.

Shorter Paragraphs, Shorter Sentences

Short paragraphs and sentences make it easier to read faster while maintaining comprehension.

Use More Bulleted Lists But Keep The Lists Short

Lists help readers identify the key points in a body of text. However, to maintain comprehension keep the lists short.

NOTE: The revised content examples are meant to be directional only.

At the end of this document you will find a list of plain language resources that you might find helpful.

Use descriptive page headings to summarize the main topic

Useful headings are specific. They provide facts or information that pique the readers' interest. Avoid broad and generic headings.

NNG, Headings Are Pick-Up Lines: 5 Tips for Writing Headlines That Convert

Before

After

Unemployment Compensation and Benefit Year Ending (BYE) Date

What Happens When Your Benefit Year Ends

Overpayment of Benefits

Making Payments On Benefit Overpayments

Unemployment Compensation Fraud

Protecting Yourself Against Unemployment Compensation Fraud

Questions often make great headings

Questions make good headings, they can catch the eye and arouse curiosity.

Kerry Radshaw, Content Matters

Before

After

Benefit Year

What is a Benefit Year?

DIRECT DEPOSIT

What Are The Benefits of Using Direct Deposit?

Things to remember when reopening an existing claim:

How Do I Reopen A Claim?

Present each topic separately, use descriptive headers

Short sections break up material so it appears easier to comprehend. Short sections give you the opportunity to add useful headings, which help the reader skim and scan the page.

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Before

Individuals receiving benefits through the Unemployment Compensation (UC) program and its two extensions, Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC) and Extended Benefits (EB), may need to re-file their UC claim at the end of their benefit year (BYE date), which falls exactly one year after they initially applied for UC benefits.

The “BYE date” is the date when an individual's unemployment compensation (UC) claim ends — after a claim's BYE date passes, you cannot collect any additional benefits on that claim.

Internally, when our UC team receives the application, they will review it to see if you are eligible for a new UC claim – some examples of when this occurs are if a person returned to work but was laid off again or worked part-time for part of the year.

Depending on the individual's circumstances, our staff may take time to research, so individuals should anticipate a potential delay in their weekly benefits when their benefit year ends.

For many individuals, there will be no delay in benefits. L&I has been preparing for the surge in benefit- year ends and is doing everything possible to keep these delays to a minimum.

Note: The benefit year begins on Sundays and ends on Saturdays.

After

Do I need to re-apply for benefits?

If you receive benefits through the following programs:

- Unemployment Compensation (UC)
- Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC)
- Extended Benefits (EB)

You may need to re-file your UC claim at the end of your benefit year (BYE Date). New claim applications will be the same as when you filed the previous year.

What is the BYE Date?

The “BYE date” is the date when your unemployment compensation (UC) claim ends. After your BYE date passes, you cannot collect any more benefits on that claim.

Note: Your benefit year begins on Sundays and ends on Saturdays

When can I expect to receive my benefits after re-applying?

When we receive your application, we will review it to see if you are eligible for extra UC benefits.

Depending on your circumstances, we may need time to research your application. For example, this might occur if you returned to work but were laid off again or worked part-time for part of the year.

You might experience a delay in your weekly benefits when your benefit year ends. For many, there will be no delay in benefits. We have been preparing for a surge in benefit-year ends and are doing everything possible to keep these delays to a minimum.

Use shorter paragraphs

Write short paragraphs and cover one topic per paragraph. Long paragraphs discourage users from even trying to understand your material. Short paragraphs are easier to read and understand.

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Before

Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC) has been extended with the enactment of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA) by increasing the number of weeks for which an individual may be eligible from 24 weeks up to 53 weeks. ARPA benefits are available beginning with the week ending March 20, 2021 and payable through September 4, 2021.

PEUC provides up to 53 weeks of additional unemployment benefits to individuals who previously collected state or federal unemployment compensation (UC) but exhausted those benefits.

Please read the following FAQs for information on whether there are any actions you need to take or whether you will be automatically enrolled. Additional information and how to apply online is available on the File for PEUC page.

After

The Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC) program now provides up to 53 weeks of benefits. The additional benefits begin March 20, 2021 and end September 4, 2021. If you have exhausted your UC benefits, you may be eligible to receive the additional benefits.

Please read the FAQs for information on whether there are any actions you need to take or whether you will be automatically enrolled. Information and how to apply online available on the File for PEUC page.

Before

Fault Overpayment

A "fault overpayment" will result when you receive benefits to which you are not entitled by reason of your fault, such as withholding or misrepresenting material facts to obtain UC. You must repay a fault overpayment.

In addition, you will be required to pay interest on any fault overpayment principal not paid within 15 days after the Notice of Overpayment determination is issued. Interest will continue to be assessed against the unpaid balance. A lien may be filed against you to recover the overpayment amount, the interest assessed and any fees and penalties. Recovery of the fault overpayment may also be deducted from future benefits during the benefit year when the overpayment was paid and the six-year period immediately following the end of that benefit year.

After

Fault Overpayment

A "fault overpayment" is when you receive benefits that you are not entitled to. This is due to withholding or misrepresenting information to get unemployment benefits. If we determine that it is a "fault overpayment", you will receive a letter notifying you. You must repay the overpayment within 15 days to avoid interest fees and other penalties including a possible reduction of benefits.

Use short sentences

Express only one idea in each sentence. Long, complicated sentences often mean that you aren't sure about what you want to say. Shorter sentences are also better for conveying complex information; they break the information up into smaller, easier-to-process units.

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Before

Benefits are paid to you by debit card or direct deposit. If you received UC benefits on a prior claim by direct deposit within a year before you filed your current application for benefits, and the bank account previously used for direct deposit is still active, direct deposit will carry over to your current UC claim. You may switch to a debit card if you prefer to receive your benefits in that way.

After

Benefits are paid to you by debit card or direct deposit. If you received benefits by direct deposit on a prior claim, it will carry over to your current claim. As long as you are using an active bank account, payments will be made to that same account. If you prefer, you may switch to a debit card to receive your benefits that way.

Before

If you opened an unemployment compensation (UC) claim within the past year, stopped filing for those benefits, but now need to file for benefits again, you will simply reopen your existing claim.

It doesn't matter if you're filing with the same employer or a new one, if you're filing for UC benefits within the 12 months that you opened your initial claim, you will reopen it to file for benefits.

After

If you stopped receiving benefits on an open claim, but now wish to restart your benefits, you can reopen a claim. As long as you opened the claim within the last year, you can reopen your claim to continue receiving benefits. It doesn't matter if you're filing with the same employer or a new one.

Before

Please note: If you choose to reopen your claim online, you will do so by using the "Reopen a Claim" button on the right tabs. The process to reopen a claim is exactly the same as the initial claim process and the entire form must be completed. When you submit the claim, it will be processed as a re-open application, not a new application, as long as you have a current claim in place, i.e. less than one year has passed from your Application for Benefits date. After you hit the submit button, you should print the confirmation page and retain it for your records.

After

Please note: If you choose to reopen your claim online, you can do so by using the "Reopen a Claim" link. You can reopen a claim as long as you applied for your initial claim within the past year. The process to reopen a claim is the same as the initial claim process. The entire form must be completed. After completing the online form, print the confirmation page and keep it for your records.

Be concise

Nothing is more confusing to the user than long, complex sentences containing multiple phrases and clauses. To address the problem, become more critical of your own writing, and consider whether you need every word. Challenge every word—do you need it?

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Before

Are you financially eligible for benefits? You must have enough wages and weeks of work in your employment history to qualify for UC. This is known as "financial eligibility." You will receive a **Notice of Financial Determination (Form UC-44F)** from the department that will state whether you are financially eligible and, if you are, the amount of benefits you may receive. Your Notice of Financial Determination will be accompanied by an insert that fully explains financial eligibility. **Read these documents carefully and follow all instructions that apply to you.**

After

Are you financially eligible for benefits? You must have enough income and employment history to qualify for unemployment. A determination letter mailed to you will let you know whether you are financially eligible. If you are eligible, the letter will provide the amount of benefits you may receive. The letter includes more information on financial eligibility. **Please read the documents and follow instructions that apply to you.**

Before

There may be times when a department representative will contact you and your employer to discuss the reason for your separation from your job. If you and your employer disagree on the reason for your unemployment, or any other issues arise that may affect your eligibility for benefits, you will be given a chance to provide information and explain your side of the story. For example, you may receive a questionnaire to complete and return. If benefits are denied, you will receive a written determination, which you can appeal.

After

An unemployment representative may contact you and your employer to discuss why you are no longer employed. If there is disagreement, or any other eligibility issues, you will be able to provide information and explain your side of the story. We will send you a questionnaire to complete and return to us. If benefits are denied, you will receive an explanation which you can appeal. (See Your Appeal Rights)

Before

Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC) has been extended with the enactment of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA) by increasing the number of weeks for which an individual may be eligible from 24 weeks up to 53 weeks. ARPA benefits are available beginning with the week ending March 20, 2021 and payable through September 4, 2021.

After

Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC) now provides up to 53 weeks of benefits, beginning March 20, 2021 and ending September 4, 2021. If you have exhausted your UC benefits, you may be eligible to receive the additional benefits.

PEUC provides up to 53 weeks of additional unemployment benefits to individuals who previously collected state or federal unemployment compensation (UC) but exhausted those benefits.

Please read the FAQs for information on whether there are any actions you need to take or whether you will be automatically enrolled. Information and how to apply online is available on the File for PEUC page.

Please read the following FAQs for information on whether there are any actions you need to take or whether you will be automatically enrolled.

Use bulleted lists, no lists within lists

Lists highlight a series of steps, requirements, or pieces of information in a visually clear way. Use lists to help your user focus on important material.

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Before

To receive an allowance for a dependent(s), you must have been wholly or chiefly supporting your dependent(s) at the time of your application for benefits. A "dependent spouse" is your lawful husband or wife living in your household. A "dependent child" is your unmarried child, stepchild or adopted child who is under 18 years of age. A dependent child is also any unmarried child 18 years of age or older, who cannot work because of a disability.

A person's "dependent" status for UC purposes is not determined by the person's status for tax purposes, or whether the person is attending school.

Note: If both spouses file claims with overlapping benefit years, one spouse may not claim the same child or children as the other spouse. However, each spouse may claim up to two different children.

After

Who is a dependent?

- A "dependent spouse" is your lawful husband or wife living in your household.
- A "dependent child" is your unmarried child, stepchild or adopted child who is under 18 years of age.
- A dependent child is also any unmarried child 18 years of age or older, who cannot work because of a disability.

A person's "dependent" status for UC purposes is not determined by the person's status for tax purposes, or whether the person is attending school.

Can both spouses claim their children as dependents?

- If both spouses file claims with overlapping benefit years, one spouse may not claim the same child or children as the other spouse.
- Each spouse may claim up to two different children.

Before

- Eligibility requirements for regular UC are the same for PEUC. For example, you must be
 - At least partially unemployed,
 - Able and available for suitable work,
 - Not disqualified for voluntarily leaving work, and
 - Not discharged for willful misconduct.
 - You must report all work performed and gross wages earned during weeks claimed

After

Am I Eligible for PEUC Benefits?

Eligibility requirements for regular UC are the same for PEUC. You must be:

- At least partially unemployed
- Able and available for suitable work
- Not disqualified for voluntarily leaving work
- Not discharged for willful misconduct
- Reporting all work performed and gross wages earned during weeks claimed

Selected Plain Language Resources

[Federal plain language guidelines](#)

[Checklist for Plain Language on the Web](#)

[Plain English: At a Glance](#)

[Plain Language Is for Everyone, Even Experts](#)

[How Testing Your Documents Can Improve Plain Language Compliance](#)

About U.S. Digital Response

U.S. Digital Response helps governments build responsive, people-centered services with modern and resilient technology that work at the speed of need.

U.S. Digital Response connects experienced volunteer technologists with public servants and organizations responding to crises. We're fast, and we're free.

Founded by former U.S. Deputy CTOs and seasoned tech industry veterans who led federal open data policies and digital government strategy, USDR is a nonpartisan effort that connects expert, volunteer technology teams to public servants responding to crisis.

Our pro bono volunteers work with government teams to understand their challenges and get them the right tools to deliver critical services to the people who need them — all within a few days to weeks. Our diverse volunteers have deep expertise spanning engineering, data science, content strategy, design, logistics and supply chain, and disaster response.

Often, the smartest solutions and most effective tools already exist — they just need to be identified, integrated, and implemented. Our volunteers survey the best of what's available, get systems up and running, and make sure government partners have the tools and training they need to operate smoothly and effectively.

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