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Veterans Benefits Administration

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**Reader-**



**F**ocused

**Writing**

*A Writer's Guide*

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# Overview of the Guide

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## Introduction

This writer's guide provides a quick reference for the *Reader-Focused Writing (RFW) Tools* course as well as for the standard practices that all VBA writers should use. The guide is organized according to the RFW Tools Job Aid which includes major concepts from the course.

This guide is by no means complete. It is a working, living document that VBA writers need to read and measure and change as they identify other issues and questions about how they can best apply RFW techniques to their work.

We prepared this guide using Microsoft Word 7.0 and the Information Mapping® template. We incorporated table of contents, tables, and headings into the design. We intentionally have left the style as simple as possible in order to accommodate future additions and revisions to the content and mission of the guide.

As the guide evolves, we'll try to build on the principles of RFW: provide the appropriate information to your audience in a way that is easy to find and understand.

This guide was developed jointly by VBA employees and the American Institutes for Research in the Behavioral Sciences. The copyright below applies to all training materials developed for the RFW Tools course. The materials are available within the government without restriction.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction to the Reader-Focused Writing Process

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### Introduction

The purpose of this guide is to provide tools that you, as a writer, can use to practice Reader-Focused Writing (RFW). This chapter will provide an overview of the RFW process.

One important aspect of the RFW courses and this handbook is that they explain the principles behind the rules. In music, you can't improvise until you learn the basics of music theory. Similarly, in writing you can't make good decisions if you don't understand the principles behind the rules.

---

### In This Chapter

This chapter contains the following topic:

| Topic        | See Page |
|--------------|----------|
| What is RFW? | 1-2      |

---

# What is RFW?

---

## Overview

RFW is based on an idea about writing that may be very different from what you learned in school. It's more than writing techniques, styles, and formats. Stated simply, RFW is a process and a way of thinking to equip you, as a writer, with ways to address the needs of your readers. It's based on a substantial body of research in the fields of technical writing, computer usability, and psychology. By following the RFW process, you become more of an expert on what your readers want and need.

**Note:** You will notice that throughout this guide we use both the singular word “reader” and the plural “readers.” This usage reflects one of our key challenges in using RFW: we have a wide range of readers for the various documents we produce. The challenge is to consider this wide audience and still focus on the very individual process of reading. We have to focus on how *individual* members within a large *group* of targeted readers will process information.

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## Analyzing Your Audience

To begin the process of learning what your readers want and need, you need to analyze your audience. An audience analysis consists of finding answers to the following questions:

- Who are your readers? Are there secondary readers?
- What are they supposed to do when they read your document?
- Do they have any special needs or considerations that might affect the way you present information to them?
- What questions are they likely to have as they read your document?
- What's the best outcome for the readers and VA?

Note: In considering their possible questions, remember that most readers are likely to have questions about technical information. This means that you often have to translate the technical information into the most appropriate and useful language for your readers.

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## What is RFW?, Continued

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### **Determining Readers’ Needs: Findings From Research**

To write with your readers in mind, analyzing your reading audience is essential. But, as common sense would tell you, the only way to know for sure what your readers want and need is to ask them. The principles of RFW have been derived from many years of research with intended readers.

This research has given us some overall answers to the questions of what readers want and need.

- Thanks to the research, we know that, for most people, the process of reading a business or technical document involves searching for *answers to their questions*. These answers will constitute the major part of the *message* of your document. You’ll find a lot more information on conveying your message in this guide.
  - Research has also identified certain questions readers almost always have when reading in a business context:
    - ◆ What do I need to do?
    - ◆ When do I need to do it?
    - ◆ How do I need to do it?
    - ◆ Why do I need to do it?
    - ◆ Who says I need to do it?
    - ◆ Where do I need to do it?
  - We also know that readers want and need the information that answers their questions to be *clear, easy to understand and easy to find*. These elements form the concept of readability as defined by RFW. Readability is a major topic throughout this guide.
- 

### **Determining Readers’ Needs Through Testing**

Answering readers’ questions and maximizing readability are critical elements, but there’s still one more necessary step. To ensure that a document is meeting the needs of its particular audience, RFW, following the principles of technical writing, requires periodic testing with representative members of the reading audience. This process is described in more detail on page 6-29.

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## What is RFW?, Continued

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### Summary

To summarize, following are key features of RFW:

- RFW is a process, a way of thinking about writing.
  - RFW is based on substantial research involving testing with readers from the intended audience.
  - The purpose of the process is to meet readers' needs. RFW addresses the needs of readers by
    - ◆ analyzing the reading audience
    - ◆ anticipating and attempting to answer the readers' questions
    - ◆ testing documents with intended readers
-

# Chapter 2

## Stages of the RFW Process

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### Introduction

The purpose of RFW is to meet the needs of your readers. Testing (as well as common sense) shows us that the primary need of readers is to be able to easily understand your message. Based on these findings, RFW has developed a definition of readability that is different from others you may find. The tools in this guide will help you improve readability as defined by RFW.

This chapter discusses the concept of readability in RFW and provides an overview of the RFW process you follow to improve readability. The overview is in the form of an outline of the stages of the RFW process. The next four chapters work through the outline, providing detailed information on each tool you will use in the process.

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### In This Chapter

This chapter contains the following topic:

| Topic   | See Page |
|---|----------|
| Readability in RFW                                  | 2-2      |
| How to Improve Readability: The RFW Process Outline | 2-4      |

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# Readability in RFW

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**Definition** Here's the definition of readability in RFW:

***Readability:***  
*the ease with which the reader understands the writer's intended message.*

Since RFW is primarily concerned with meeting readers' needs, this definition is somewhat different than most other definitions of readability you may have come across.

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**How Does RFW Relate to Standard Readability Indexes?**

Readability indexes such as the Flesch-Kincaid readability index, which is found in Microsoft Word's Grammar Tools command, evaluate the readability of a document through measures such as sentence length and use of passive voice. The index uses grade school level as the criterion for evaluation. Most organizations that use this index try to achieve an eighth grade level, which is considered the standard for ease of comprehension.

Why doesn't RFW simply rely on the pre-programmed readability indexes, or "checkers?" These checkers **can** be helpful in reviewing your writing. For example, they may point out a sentence or paragraph that is too long. However, these indicators don't always measure readers' understanding. You can still write a very short sentence that is utterly confusing. You can even alternatively write a sentence that measures too long on the readability checker, but is very easy to understand.

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## Readability in RFW, Continued

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**How Does  
RFW Relate to  
Standard  
Readability  
Indexes?  
(Cont.)**

Instead of such statistical indicators, RFW measures readability by testing with readers. As our definition indicates, our standard for readability is the ease readers experience in understanding our message. The only way to know for sure whether readers understand is to ask them.

Since it's not possible for you to ask every reader you are writing to, RFW follows a methodology for testing selected documents, generally the pattern letters that go out to the largest number of beneficiaries, with readers who are representative of the target audience. More information on testing is provided under the topic, "Protocol Testing," on pages 6-29 through 6-32.

RFW uses other tools for helping writers avoid the problems that the readability checkers indicate. This guide will provide detailed information on these tools.

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# How to Improve Readability: The RFW Process Outline

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## **Introduction**

The following outline presents a map of the writing process. Under each of the major stages are procedures that will help you create a clear message more efficiently. Following these guidelines will improve the readability of your documents.

### **Overall: Focus on the needs of your reader**

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## **Before You**

**Write:** Think About and Anticipate the Reader's Needs

### **Map Your Message**

- List the questions that are in the letter or should be in the letter.
- Decide on the main question.
- Consider the reader's feelings. Respond empathically.
- Know the main answer.
- Outline or list your message.

### **Organize Your Opening/Put the Message Up Front**

- Readers will hunt for the main message if you don't put it up front.
- Use a sympathetic opening, if appropriate.
- Create a first paragraph that provides an overview of what the letter covers. (This may not be necessary in a very short letter.)

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# How to Improve Readability: The RFW Process Outline, Continued

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**When You Write:** Help the Reader Find Everything

## **Use Helpful Headings**

- Chunk the letter into related sections.
- Label each section with a working heading.
- Decide what kind of heading to use. (Question headings are especially helpful.)
- Refine your headings.

## **Limit Information Under Your Heading to One Topic**

- Make sure the overview paragraph predicts the headings.
- Make sure the heading predicts the topic of the section.
- Make sure the first sentence of the section repeats the topic of the heading.
- Make sure each paragraph relates to the heading.
- Make sure the first sentence of each paragraph gives the main idea of each paragraph.
- Make sure each sentence of the paragraph relates to the main idea of the paragraph.

## **Keep Sections Short Using Only Needed Details**

- Each paragraph should be about 5-6 lines long.

## **Use Emphasis Techniques Like Bullets and Bolding**

- Limit emphasis techniques to important information.
- Use vertical (bulleted) lists.
- ALL CAPS or underlining are **not** good emphasis techniques.
- Put notes and reminders in ***bold and italics***.
- Use a standard round bullet. Generally, don't use more than two types.
- Don't center bullets.
- Always use a lead sentence before bullets.

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*Continued on next page*

# How to Improve Readability: The RFW Process Outline, Continued

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**When You Write:** Help the Reader See You as Helpful and Interested

## **Use a Conversational Tone and Empathic Style/ Write Clear and Concise Sentences**

- Use common vocabulary, the words you learned first.
- Eliminate excess words; try to keep sentences under 25 words.
- Keep the verbs active.
- Put action in verbs, not nouns.
- Use the customer-oriented “you” when appropriate.
- Apologize when we have done something wrong.
- Use terms like, “we regret” or “unfortunately” when delivering bad news.
- Use contractions when appropriate; they can be helpful to the reader.

## **Avoid Jargon**

- Translate or avoid jargon whenever possible.
  - Don’t use acronyms without defining them.
- 

**When You Review:** Help the Reader Have Confidence in You

## **Proofread for Proper Mechanics**

- Check for proper spelling, punctuation, and grammar.

## **Structured Review**

- Review documents in the order presented above for efficient editing.
  - Read aloud for tone and emphasis.
  - If your document will be used by many readers (example: pattern letters), then it should be protocol tested for clarity.
-

# Chapter 3

## Before You Write: Think About and Anticipate Your Reader's Needs

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**Introduction**      Before you sit down and write the actual letter or memo you'll need to think about what your readers need to know.

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**In This Chapter**      This chapter contains the following topics:

| Topic   | See Page |
|---|----------|
| Map Your Message                                | 3-2      |
| Organize Your Opening/Put Your Message Up Front | 3-5      |

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# Map Your Message

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**Principle: Map Your Message**

When you begin the RFW process, your first task is to figure out what you want to say. You should do this by thinking about who your readers are, what they know about the situation now, and what they will need to know. Then think about how to guide them from their current knowledge base to what you need them to know.

This step is very important and bears repeating:

*Take some time, before you start to write, to think about what your readers will need to know.*

Finally, you should think about the tone you should use.

Are you

- giving the reader bad news?
- responding to a complaint from an angry customer?
- resolving an error we made? or
- writing because of the death of a family member?

In each of these situations, you want to be careful to use a tone that is empathic, conversational, and professional. We discuss tone in more detail in Chapter 5, pages 5-2 through 5-13, under the topic “Use a Conversational Tone and Empathic Style” and in Chapter 6, pages 6-27 and 6-28, under the topic “Review for Appropriate Tone.”

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## Map Your Message, Continued

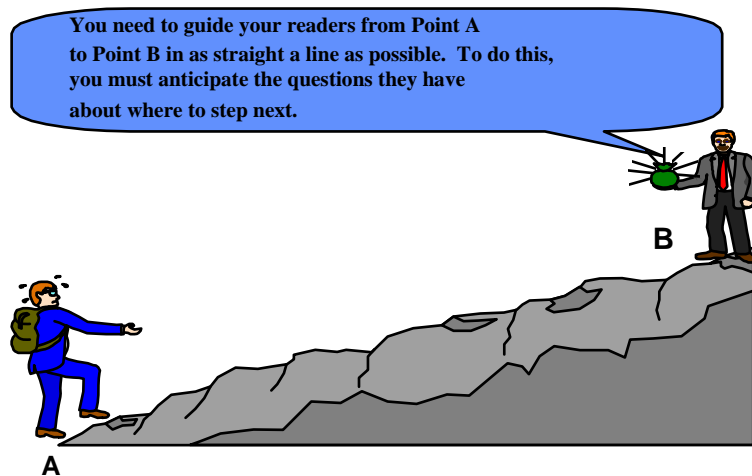
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**Principle: Map Your Message (Cont.)**

To summarize, to get the message straight, you must know four things:

- What is the subject/What am I writing about?
- What are my objectives?
- Who are my readers? What do they need to know about the subject?
- What tone should I adopt?

If you do not consider these four aspects, you can have problems guiding your readers to the appropriate message. If you don't guide them, readers will often find their own pattern, or order, in the facts and may miss the crucial information.



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## Map Your Message, Continued

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### **Tool: Map the Message Checklist**

This tool will help you create a written outline of your letter:

#### ***List the questions that are in the letter or should be.***

When you respond to an inquiry, make a list of the questions the reader is actually asking and a second list of inferred questions. When you initiate the letter, list the questions you anticipate readers will have.

#### ***Decide on the Main Message.***

Look through both lists to decide the main question(s).

#### ***Consider the reader's feelings.***

If the reader is frustrated or angry, you will have to address those feelings as part of your response. For instance: "We are sorry we didn't answer your questions before."

#### ***Know the Main Answer***

VA letters have four main answers:

- Yes/No
- Do something
- Here's the information you wanted
- Combination

#### ***Write Your Main Message.***

See the next topic and chapters 4-6 for details.

## Organize Your Opening/Put the Message Up Front

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**Principle:  
Importance of  
Organization**

Once you have determined your message, the next step is to decide on your organization. Good organization is critical, because without a logical order and flow, even the simplest message can be confusing. If you are not very careful with planning and following through on your organization, you can cloud the main points of the message. You can even unintentionally introduce new complexity to an already complex subject! It's hard to underestimate the impact of organization on readability.

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**Tool: Putting  
the Message  
Up Front**

One simple technique would increase the readability of most writing—**putting the message up front**. This kind of organization—bottom line first—is called *deductive structure*. You might think of it as a big **T**. The bar on top represents the main message.

Why is deductive structure important? Primarily because for most business writing, we should think of our readers as “busy readers.” They don't want to sift through all your information to get to the bottom line. If they want to read a good story, they'll get a mystery novel.

Unfortunately, most *writers* are used to telling stories—giving the background information or explaining all the details before coming to the point. This kind of writing—bottom line last—we call *inductive structure*. An inductively written message often gives readers little or no aid in determining the relative importance of various facts. Sometimes inductive structure is appropriate (for example, to delay bad news in a letter); however, you should generally use the deductive structure and get in the habit of using it in your writing on the job.

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## Organize Your Opening/Put the Message Up Front, Continued

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**Principle:  
Sympathetic  
Opening**

Although you should put the message up front in almost every situation, there are times when it is appropriate to postpone the main message. Knowing when to postpone the main message is important, especially given the nature of our jobs in VA. Often we have to write because of the death of a veteran or family member, or communicate bad news. For example, we may have to tell a veteran we have found him incapable of handling his finances. Or we may have to deny a claim for disability benefits based on a traumatic incident the veteran suffered.

Although we may not often stop to think about it, being sensitive to the impact of your writing on your reader in such circumstances is an important part of our jobs. Remember that our mission states we're to provide services in a "compassionate" manner.

So these are times we depart somewhat from the deductive structure. Using inductive structure, building up to the main message, helps soften the impact of our news when appropriate.

Additionally, research shows that the tone of a letter does affect how readable it is. A cold, mechanical tone, especially in the circumstances described above, can cause readers to turn off before they read your message.

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## Organize Your Opening/Put the Message Up Front, Continued

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**Tool:  
Sympathetic  
Opening**

Using a sympathetic opening does not mean that we write to a customer the same way we would write to a relative. But it does mean you should use compassion and common sense. For instance:

“We’re sorry to hear about the loss of your husband. Unfortunately, we must stop his checks...”

*Instead of*

“Since the veteran died, your checks will stop.

Using a sympathetic opening also means we don’t bluntly open our letter with potentially unpleasant news, as in, “Since we’ve found you can’t handle your finances any more, we’re appointing a guardian to take care of your VA benefits.”

It’s much more sympathetic and compassionate to say something like “We want to make sure that you make the best use possible of your VA benefits. After carefully reviewing information about your current situation, we believe that appointing a guardian to help manage your VA benefits would be best for you right now. We know this decision is important to you, and we want you to know we made this decision based on what we believe is in your best interests.”

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**Principle:  
Creating an  
Overview**

The overview is important because it helps busy readers quickly determine what the letter is about. It also helps us achieve clarity by clearly and simply identifying the main points of the message. And it helps reinforce the unity of the document by relating each part of the message to the whole. It’s important to follow through in your document with the structure you laid out in the overview.

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## Organize Your Opening/Put the Message Up-Front, Continued

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### **Tool: Creating an Overview**

The next step in organizing your letter is to create an opening paragraph that provides a brief overview of the entire letter. This is best done within the first two sentences. While the main message is about the subject of the letter, the overview is about the content. It's one or two sentences that act as a table of contents. For example, you might begin a letter with the following:

**Main Message:** “We are happy to tell you that your claim for disability benefits has been approved.

**Overview:** “This letter will provide information on the amount of your payments, when you can expect to receive payments, how we made our decision, and your right to appeal any part of our decision.”

Or you can write it in bulleted form:

“This letter will provide information on the following topics:

- amount of your payments,
- when you can expect to receive payments,
- how we made our decision, and
- your right to appeal any part of our decision.”

**Note:** *You should present the information in the letter in the same order as you show it in the overview.*

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## Organize Your Opening/Put the Message Up Front, Continued

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**Tool: Creating  
an Overview  
(Cont.)**

**Exceptions:** With most every rule or guideline, there are exceptions. Here are two for the guideline on using an overview paragraph:

- *Placement of the overview in a letter.* In extremely limited cases, you may need to postpone the main message with an entire sympathetic paragraph (see our example on the preceding page about the letter telling a veteran we must appoint a guardian for his VA benefits). In those cases, your overview won't be the opening paragraph, but will immediately follow. Common sense and compassion for the reader are perhaps the best guides in making this judgment.
  - *Overview paragraph not needed.* In a very short letter of three or four paragraphs, an overview paragraph may not be needed. For example, if you're writing a thank you for an employee's assistance, or simply writing to acknowledge receipt of a claim, an overview paragraph would be overkill.
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# Chapter 4

## When You Write: Help the Reader Find Everything

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### Introduction

Up to this point, you have decided on your message and determined what is the main message. You began to organize the information by putting the main message up front. In the case of conveying bad news, you've decided on an appropriate beginning that will help you work up to the main message. And, if appropriate, you've created an overview. Now you're ready to decide how the rest of the information will be organized.

If you've decided on all of the asked and unasked questions that you're going to answer, you're ready for the next step, chunking information and creating headings.

---

### In This Chapter

This chapter contains the following topics:

| Topics   | See Page |
|--|----------|
| Chunk Information/Use Helpful Headings             | 4-2      |
| Limit Information Under Heading to One Topic       | 4-11     |
| Keep Sections Short                                | 4-12     |
| Use Emphasis Techniques (like Bullets and Bolding) | 4-14     |

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## Chunk Information/Use Helpful Headings

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**Principle:  
Chunking  
Information**

What is “chunking?” It’s putting small pieces (or chunks) of information together so the reader can find and digest it easily. Why is chunking useful? Chunking helps you realize three important principles:

- **Clarity.** By outlining your message, breaking it into chunks of related information, your document is clearer because the reader is dealing with one piece of information at a time.
- **Unity.** Chunking helps unity because you’re putting related information together in the appropriate place, rather than scattering it throughout the letter or other document.
- **Ease of access.** Chunking the information with a meaningful label, or heading, provides ease of access. The reader can quickly scan the document to find the piece of information needed.

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## Chunk Information/Use Helpful Headings, Continued

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### **Tool: Chunk Information Into Related Sections**

Chunking your information will help you create your map. How do you chunk information? After stating your main message, think again about the reader's questions. The information you use to answer each of the reader's questions will constitute a "chunk" of information.

Which question about your message will be most important to the reader? The response to that question will be your first chunk of information. For example, when a claim for disability or education benefits has been approved, we've found in protocol testing that one of the first things most readers want to know is how much their payments will be and when will they start. Surely this is what most any of us would want to know first and up front.

Then think about what the reader wants to know next: perhaps how long will the benefits last? —are there any restrictions on the benefits?— is there any other information that would effect continued payments?

Next, the reader will most likely want to know how we made our decision. (Of course, we're also required by law to provide this information.) Each of these questions represents a chunk of information. So you can quickly map out the organization of your letter using the chunking technique.

Although most VBA letters answer pretty much the same questions, you must use your judgment in each case to decide the priority for organizing your chunks of information.

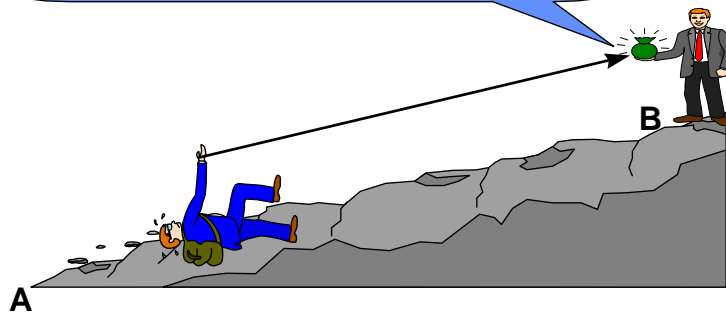
*Note: In answering the reader's questions, we're always mindful of satisfying legal requirements. If you must include a substantial amount of legal text verbatim, translate it in the body of your letter and include the verbatim text as an enclosure.*

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## Mixing Too Much Information Together Will Throw Your Readers Off Track

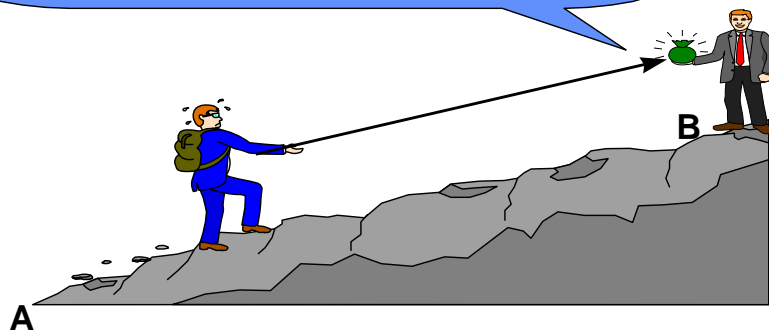
Now I'll tell you **How To Get To the Next Step.**  
Move to the right until you find Steps 2, 3 and 4.  
In Step 2 you'll have to climb over the box. If you don't want to go to Step 4 now, you'll need to move left. If you've got all that you can start.



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## Chunking Information Makes it Easier to Follow Directions

Now I'll tell you **How To Get To the Next Step.**  
Move to the right until you find Step 2.  
Watch carefully, you'll have to step over the box.



## Chunk Information/Use Helpful Headings, Continued

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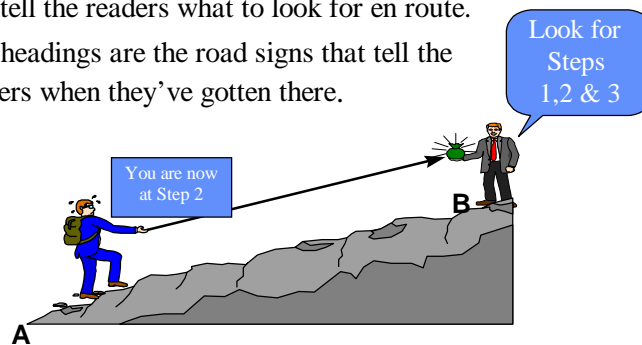
### Principle: Use Helpful Headings

An important technique for effective organization of your message is using headings. You use them to label the chunks of information you developed so the reader can see the bottom line at a glance. Headings in letters help guide your readers to the points that are relevant to them. They work in conjunction with your overview. The overview tells the readers what is coming, and the heading tells them when they get there.

## How Does the Overview Sentence Complement the Headings?

Think of your letter as guidance to get from Point A to Point B

- The overview sentence is like the directions that tell the readers what to look for en route.
- The headings are the road signs that tell the readers when they've gotten there.



To write headings effectively, you will probably have to start with “working headings” and continue to refine them as you work through your sections. The important thing is to ensure that the heading clearly expresses the message of the section—that it makes sense and that it follows the structure you’ve laid out in your opening paragraph.

Research tells us that some readers will read straight through a letter including the headings. Others look at the headings first, but then read through the letter ignoring the headings. That’s one reason why *it’s important to repeat the information in the heading in the first sentence of each section.*

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*Continued on next page*

## Chunk Information/Use Helpful Headings, Continued

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**Principle:  
Types of  
Headings**

There are three types of headings, but try to be consistent and use only one type (or two at the most) in your letters. Headings work much the same way as labels in a filing system. You don't want to change your method of labeling mid-way through or you will confuse the person looking for information.

---

**Tool: Types of  
Headings**

The three types of headings are: **question**, **sentence**, and **topic** headings. Below are examples of each type of heading:

| Type of heading | Example                  |
|-----------------|--------------------------|
| Question        | What Should You Do?      |
| Sentence        | We Need More Information |
| Topic           | How We Made Our Decision |

- **Question Headings** are the most useful because they mirror the RFW process we're following of anticipating the reader's questions. Headings are reader-friendly.

*Suggestion:* The current Plain Language movement is encouraging the technique of using question headings even in documents that have traditionally not used them, such as regulations.

- **Sentence (or Statement) Headings** (a heading in the form of a complete sentence) are often the next best choice because they are still very specific.
- **Topic Headings** can be the most formal. But sometimes they are too vague to be helpful.

*Note:* Although we encourage the use of question headings, sometimes topic or sentence headings are more appropriate. You shouldn't force a question heading when a topic heading makes more sense.

*And remember the other good rule of thumb:*

|  |
|--|
| <p><i>Be consistent with the types of headings used throughout your document. In a letter or other short document, you should generally not use more than two types.</i></p> |
|--|

*Continued on next page*

## Chunk Information/Use Helpful Headings, Continued

---

### **Tool: Insert Headings**

Following are the steps for inserting headings:

#### ***Label each section with a working heading***

To write headings effectively, you will probably have to start with “working headings” and continue to refine them as you work through your sections. The idea behind working headings is to get something on paper as a starting point to focus your thinking. But at this point, don’t worry about the type of heading or applying the rules for headings. (We discuss these rules right after this topic.)

In many cases the list of questions (asked and unasked) may be your working heading. If you put them in order as part of mapping the message, then you can insert them here as a working heading.

#### ***Decide the Kind of Heading***

Should you use a question, sentence, or topic heading? See page 4-6.

#### ***Refine Your Headings***

Make sure the headings are parallel and capitalization is correct. See the next three pages for details.

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*Continued on next page*

## Chunk Information/Use Helpful Headings, Continued

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### **Rules for Headings: Capitalization**

An additional point about headings: you should use a scheme of capitalization that is consistent throughout the document. In VBA, we use the following scheme:

Generally, capitalize all words except for:

- *a, an, the*
- short conjunctions such as *and, as, but, if, or, nor*
- short prepositions such as *for, in, of, to, at, by*
- *to* used in infinitives (example: You Need to Contact Us)

Exceptions to the above rule:

- Capitalize the first and last word of the heading, even if it is a short conjunction or preposition (example: What to Look For).
- Capitalize the first word after a dash or colon (example: Our Decision: An Overview).

Note: Always capitalize pronouns, even though they are short (example: Why We Need This Information).

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*Continued on next page*



## Chunk Information/Use Helpful Headings, Continued

### Rules for Headings: Parallel Structure

Headings are clearer and more effective if you keep their structure parallel. Parallel structure simply means using the same grammatical forms. But fortunately you don't have to do a complicated grammatical analysis to determine whether your headings are parallel. You can tell by the way they "sound." A heading that is not parallel with others in your letter will usually not sound natural. You can tell there's a "jarring note." Look at the examples below.

**Not Parallel.** The headings below, although they are all topic headings, do not have parallel structure. The first begins with a verb and the last two begin with modifiers (both adverbs) of the subject "We."

Filing Your Claim  
Why We Need This Information  
How We Make Our Decision

**Parallel.** Here's one way you could make the above headings parallel in structure.

How You File a Claim  
Why We Need This Information  
How We Make Our Decision

**Exception:** As we said under the section "Tool: Types of Headings," on page 4-6, using two different types of headings in a letter is acceptable. Sometimes using two different types, for example, a statement and a topic heading, will mean the structure is not parallel.

For example, in VBA letters, we might use headings such as "You Are Eligible For Benefits," and "You Will Receive Payment Soon" (both statement headings). We might close the letter with a standard heading for providing appeal rights: "If You Think We're Wrong," followed by a standard heading for providing contact information: "If You Need Help" (both topic headings). These four headings are not strictly grammatically parallel. However, they're acceptable because we've learned through testing with readers that these headings are clear and understandable.

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*Continued on next page*

## Chunk Information/Use Helpful Headings, Continued

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**Rules for  
Headings:  
Parallel  
Structure  
(Cont.)**

The bottom line: Generally use parallel structure in headings. If you believe that an exception to the rule is in order, use your best judgment and test with a representative reader (if not a customer, a colleague).

---

## Limit Info Under Your Heading to One Topic

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**Principle:**  
**Section X-Ray** Whether you are writing a regulation or a letter, the idea of limiting sections to one idea is an important key to clarity. Since many readers use the headings to find information, it's important that only the idea conveyed in the heading be in the section below it.

---

**Tool: Section X-Ray** This tool will help you make sure there is only one topic per heading and there is unity throughout your letter.

### *Check Your Heading*

Does the overview paragraph predict the heading?  
Does the heading predict the topic of the section (the chunk of information below a heading)?

### *Check Your Paragraphs*

Is each paragraph related to the heading?

### *Check Your Sentences*

Does the first sentence of each section reflect the heading?  
Does the first sentence of each paragraph give the main idea of the paragraph? Does each sentence in the paragraph relate to the heading of the section?

---

## Keep Sections Short

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**Principle:  
Divide Letter  
Into Short  
Sections**

Research shows that most people can only retain between five and nine pieces of information at a given time. (Think of your phone number. It's 10 digits long but chunked into three pieces of information.) The longer a sentence, or a section of information, the harder it is for readers to retain the whole message.

---

**Tool: Divide  
Letter Into  
Short Sections**

Each section should have no more than three to six paragraphs, and each paragraph should be no more than five to six lines long. Headings will help you keep your paragraphs short, especially if your headings are very specific. Look at your letter when it's complete. If you see sections that are too long, check to see if everything in that section belongs under your heading. If not, it usually means that either your heading is too general or you've included information that does not belong under that heading.

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*Continued on next page*

## Keep Sections Short, Continued

---

**Tool: Divide  
Letter into  
Short Sections  
(Cont.)**  
Example

Headings will help you keep your sections short, especially if your headings are very specific.

| <b>Headings Too General</b>   | <b>Break It Into Sections</b>   |
|---|---|
| <p><b>Helpful Headings</b></p> <p>Headings are helpful because they guide a reader to find information. They are also helpful because they help the writer to organize the message. Headings come in several types including question, statement, and topic. All of these headings help outline the document for both the reader and writer. An example of a topic heading is “Benefit Information.” An example of a statement heading is....</p> | <p><b>Why are Headings Helpful?</b></p> <p>Headings are helpful because they guide a reader to find information. They are also helpful because they help the writer to organize the message. Headings help outline the document for both the reader and writer.</p> <p><b>What are the Types of Headings?</b></p> <p>Headings come in several types including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• question</li><li>• statement</li><li>• topic</li></ul> <p>An example of a topic heading is “Benefit Information.” An example of....</p> |

---

## Use Emphasis Techniques

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### Principle: Emphasis Techniques

Emphasis techniques help bring out important points. They include

- Bulleted lists (vertical lists)
- Bold and italics
- Notes or Reminders

The most important rule to remember is to limit emphasis techniques to important information. For instance, putting *everything* in bold is like shouting all the time. It makes it impossible for the reader to know what is really important.

---

### Tool: Bulleted Lists (aka Vertical Lists)

This is the standard “bullet.” •

You may choose others, but be consistent. If you have more than one level of bulleted lists, make sure that the second-level bullet shows the appropriate relationship between items. For example, don’t make the second-level bullet larger or more prominent than the first level.

For instance, this is a good combination of bullets:

- This is for the first level of bullets
  - For the second level, use a smaller bullet, and
  - Always indent from the first bullet.

*Note: Don’t overuse lists or they will lose their effectiveness.* For instance, you may want to emphasize a list of what you want students to bring to class, rather than a list of what the teacher will supply.

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### Tool: Bold and Italics

**Bold** stands out visually like a raised voice [**emphasis**]. That’s why bold is effective in headings, where you want only a few words to stand out. *Italics* are a more subtle form of emphasis, like a whisper. They are useful for information that you want to stand out, but is not one of the most important points of your message. *Together bold and italics are effective at drawing the reader’s attention to a short, particularly important section.*

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*Continued on next page*

## Use Emphasis Techniques, Continued

### Tool: Notes and Reminders

Using “Notes” or “Reminders” in *bold and italics* is a very effective way to emphasize information. Keep in mind that you should only use “Reminders” to reinforce information that appeared earlier in your letter. You can use “Notes” for anything. See the sample below:

| Using <i>Reminders</i> for Emphasis   | Using <i>Notes</i> for Emphasis  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>How Do I Apply?</b></p> <p>Please do the following within 31 days:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete the application</li> <li>• Sign the application</li> <li>• Return the application to me</li> </ul> <p><i>Reminder: You must return the application within 31 days.</i></p> | <p><b>How Do I Apply?</b></p> <p>Please do the following within 31 days:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete the application</li> <li>• Sign the application</li> <li>• Return the application to me</li> </ul> <p><i>Note: The application is on the next page.</i></p> |

### Tool to Avoid

Some tools that we’ve used most of our lives are not the most effective.

#### *Don’t use these techniques:*

- Bolding an entire document
- Using capital letters for entire sentences
- Underlining long passages

Putting everything in **bold** is like shouting all the time. It makes it impossible for the reader to know what is really important. Putting everything in CAPITAL LETTERS may draw the reader’s attention to the section, but research shows that it makes it harder to read. Underlining makes it hard for the reader to see the context, especially when entire paragraphs are underlined. It’s too emphatic, like a loud, blaring radio.

# Chapter 5

## When You Write: Help the Reader See You As Helpful and Interested

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### Introduction

At this point you have developed and organized your message so that your readers can find everything easily. You're now ready to take another look at what you have written. In this stage you're refining your writing to ensure that it is responsive to your readers.

Presenting information readers need so that it is as clear as possible and easy to find is, of course, an intended result of the RFW process. However, this statement does not quite go far enough; a conversational tone and empathic style supply the missing elements.

Why do we need to worry about tone and an empathic style? VA exists to provide services to veterans and other customers. Remember that we defined RFW as a process to equip the writer with ways to meet the readers' wants and needs. One of the customers' primary needs is to know that the employees providing these services have the customers' best interests in mind.

---

### In This Chapter

This chapter contains the following topics:

| Topic  | See Page |
|--|----------|
| Use a Conversational Tone and Empathic Style | 5-2      |
| Write Clear and Concise Sentences            | 5-14     |
| Avoid Jargon                                 | 5-15     |

---



## Use a Conversational Tone and Empathic Style

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**Principle:**  
**Conversational**  
**Tone and**  
**Empathic Style**

Using a conversational tone doesn't mean you should write *exactly* the way you speak. When we speak we don't always use complete sentences and perfect grammar. But we can still communicate clearly through speaking, though, because we add gestures, tonal inflection, and body language—tools that aren't available to you in writing.

But we can and should avoid sounding impersonal and cold in our writing. The tone of your letter will project your attitude to the reader. Although you can't hear it, tone in a letter has much the same effect as it has when you speak to someone. What's your reaction when someone speaks to you in a cold tone? Do you tune out of the conversation, pay more attention to the tone than the content, or walk away? Readers do much the same thing. When the tone of a letter is cold or harsh, many times readers will put down the letter and pick up the telephone.

Of course, sometimes we do have to convey bad news. Empathy, the ability to put oneself in another's place, is important for business writers—and particularly for VBA writers. News about VA benefits can have significant impacts on the lives of veterans and their families.

Even when we as VBA writers have to convey negative information, such as denial of a claim, it's our job to communicate in a way that indicates we are responsive to our customers as fellow human beings. We're not just machines dispensing information.

As Omar Bradley reminded us,

*"We are dealing with veterans, not procedures; with their problems, not ours."*

Using an empathic style is important for writers of internal documents too, not just for letter writers. Writers of regulations, manuals, circulars, and other directives need to realize that in many cases their text will be used verbatim in documents that reach the public. In that sense, most of us are ultimately writers for the public.

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*Continued on next page*

## Use a Conversational Tone and Empathic Style, Continued

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**Principle:  
Using Common  
Vocabulary**

Using common vocabulary, or simplifying your language, doesn't mean you're "dumbing down" your writing; it just means you're avoiding obscuring the message. There's really no reason to impress the reader in a business context with your great vocabulary. The purpose of a business document is to convey information the reader needs.

---

**Tool: Using  
Common  
Vocabulary**

Simplify your language by using common, everyday terms, (generally the ones you learned first), instead of complex, technical ones. Think of the words you would use if you were speaking with the reader. For example, instead of "egress," you would probably say "exit." Here are other examples of simplified language:

| <b>Instead Of</b> | <b>Use</b>                                 |
|-------------------|--|
| prior to          | before                                     |
| terminate         | end, or expire,<br>depending on<br>context |
| finalize          | complete                                   |
| eradicate         | erase, or<br>remove, or<br>eliminate       |
| utilize           | use  |

For many more examples, see pages 5-19 through 5-25. These pages were adapted from the Federal Register's publication "Drafting Legal Documents, Appendix B, "Preferred Expressions." You can also access this documents at the Web Site

**<http://www.nara.gov/fedreg>.**

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## Use a Conversational Tone and Empathic Style, Continued

**Principle:**  
**Keep Verbs**  
**Active**

Active verbs convey information more clearly, strongly, and concisely than verbs in the passive voice. That’s why using active verbs helps your writing have a more conversational tone. Generally, when we’re speaking to someone, we all tend to use more active verbs than passive. We most likely will say, “It’s great to see you!” rather than “To have seen you is great.”

Active verbs also reduce wordiness and make your sentences clearer and more efficient. Consider these sentences:

|                |  |
|---|---|
| The following information must be included in the application for it to be considered complete. | You must include the following information in your complete application.            |
| The permit will be approved by the State office.  | Our State office must approve your permit.  |

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*Continued on next page*

## Use a Conversational Tone and Empathic Style, Continued

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### Tool: Keep Verbs Active

Keeping verbs active means using active rather than passive voice. To use this tool, first you must understand the difference between active and passive voice. Here are two ways you can tell the difference:

- Find the subject: is the subject acting or being acted upon?

In active sentences, the subject of the sentence is taking the action. Research tells us that this is the natural order for delivering information: *who did what to whom*. In a passive sentence, the subject is being acted upon: *what was done to whom*. Look at the following example (the subject in each sentence is italicized):

| Passive Sentence   | Active Sentence   |
|--|---|
| Your <i>claim</i> will be handled by the VA Regional Office in the state where you live. | The <i>VA Regional Office</i> in the state where you live will handle your claim. |

- Check the verb. Passive sentences always contain a “be” verb (a form of the verb “to be”) plus a past participle (generally with “ed” on the end). The “be” verbs are: “am,” “are,” “is,” “was,” “were,” “be,” and “been.”

| Passive Sentence   | Active Sentence                        |
|--|--|
| The claim <i>was processed</i> quickly.                                      | <i>We processed</i> the claim quickly. |
| Regulations <i>have been proposed</i> by the Department of Veterans Affairs. | <i>We have proposed</i> regulations.   |

- Check for the word “by.” In passive sentences “by” is physically present or is implied by the logic of the sentence: for example, in the sentence *Mistakes were made*, they were obviously made **by** someone, so the **by** is implied.

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## Use a Conversational Tone and Empathic Style, Continued

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**Principle:  
Know When to  
Use Passive  
Verbs**

You should strongly prefer to use active verbs. However, this does not mean that passive voice should be avoided entirely. Passive voice is very useful in its place and should actually be preferred in certain circumstances. Passive voice has a definite place in an effective writing style. Clear emphasis, matters of tact, and paragraph coherence sometimes call for passive voice.

Here's what the General Accounting Office writing guidance says about passive voice:

“Although shifting the ideas into passive voice does not change the essential meaning of the sentence, the shifting weakens it. Passive voice redirects the emphasis from the doer of the action to the receiver. **The doer is obscured in a prepositional phrase (or left out altogether)**. Passive voice encumbers a sentence with wordiness and unnecessary prepositions. In short, the passive voice is less emphatic, less direct, and less concise” (from the *GAO POWER* manual, January 1990).

The one passive voice sentence in the above quote is bolded to show that even those who claim to detest passive voice can't get away from using it. Common practice and common sense dictate that passive voice serves a definite purpose in writing—otherwise it would not have been invented. The following tool will help you use passive voice appropriately.

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*Continued on next page*

## Use a Conversational Tone and Empathic Style, Continued

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**Tool: Know  
When to Use  
Passive Voice**

All things being equal, it's probably good advice to prefer the active voice. In choosing which voice to use, decide whether you want to emphasize the doer or the receiver of the action. But you should use the passive voice in the following situations:

if the doer is unimportant

*Three million newsletters were published in the U.S. last year.*

if the doer is unknown

*Shots were fired.*

if you need to avoid "pointing the finger" at someone, especially the veteran

*The necessary medical evidence was not submitted.*

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*Continued on next page*



## Use a Conversational Tone and Empathic Style, Continued

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**Principle: Put Action in Verbs, Not Nouns**

Using nouns instead of verbs to state action is one of the main causes of that impersonal, “bureaucratic tone” we’re all so familiar with. Putting the main action in verbs generally makes your sentences clearer and less wordy.

Consider the following example:

|  |  |
|---|---|
| There are several points you must think about.                                    | Think about these points: . . .   |

---

**Tool: Put Action in Verbs, Not Nouns**

To make your writing clearer and more conversational in tone, put action in verbs not nouns. The sentence below illustrates four constructions that you should avoid as much as possible:

*There is an immediate need for an investigation of the school’s policy for enrolling veterans.*

- weak verb—any verb that does not name the main action of the sentence (in this case, *is*).
  - nominalization—verb turned into a noun (in this case, *investigation*)
  - too many prepositions—having three or more prepositions often indicates a weak sentence caused by weak verbs and nominalizations.
  - overuse of *There is/There are/It is*: these sentence openings are not bad in themselves, but their overuse can lead to weak verbs, nominalizations, and too many prepositions—in short, wordiness.
- 

*Continued on next page*

## Use a Conversational Tone and Empathic Style, Continued

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**Principle: Use the Customer-Oriented “You” When Appropriate**

One of the worst offenders against an appropriate tone in government writing is referring to readers as if they are inanimate objects or “just another number.” It follows that one of the most important techniques for using a conversational tone and empathic style is to address readers as “you.” “You” is known grammatically as the second person form of the pronoun.

Carrying this principle to its next logical conclusion, you would want to refer to VA as “we” (first person) whenever appropriate. Saying that “we made the decision” (not “VA,” the third person, “made the decision”) helps us to avoid the impersonal, all too familiar bureaucratic tone.

Using the first and second person pronouns whenever appropriate helps your writing by

- lending a more reader-friendly, conversational tone to your writing, and
- making the message clearer. (A letter referring to the reader as “the claimant” sounds as though it may not be referring directly to the reader’s particular situation.)

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*Continued on next page*





## Use a Conversational Tone and Empathic Style, Continued

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**Tool: Using the Customer-Oriented “You” When Appropriate**

Focus on the reader by using “you” to address her. Remember that you are trying for a more conversational tone. You would not address someone in person as “the veteran” or “the claimant.” (Both phrases are in the third person.)

The two examples below illustrate the difference in tone when you use the first and second person pronouns.

|  |      |
|---|---|
| The leg injury is disabling; therefore, the veteran is entitled to benefits.      | We found that you have a disabling leg injury; therefore, you are entitled to benefits. |
| VA requires new evidence.   | We need new evidence.   |

The exception to this guideline is that you would not want to use “you” to imply blame or criticism. For example, you would write, “The evidence was not received on time,” not “You didn’t get the evidence to us on time.” Or, in some situations you can avoid the passive voice and put the emphasis on VA by using “we.” For example,

|  |  |
|---|---|
| You were not very clear.  | We did not understand your message.   |
| You did not send a payment.   | We did not receive your payment.  |

*Continued on next page*

## Use a Conversational Tone and Empathic Style, Continued

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**Principle:  
Apologize  
When We Have  
Done  
Something  
Wrong**

Just as bad as an impersonal tone is the failure to apologize when we have made a mistake. This is a basic principle of decent behavior in a civilized society. Yet we often, unfortunately, see government letters going to great lengths to avoid accepting the blame for a mistake an agency has made and offering an apology.

---

**Tool:  
Apologize  
When We Have  
Done  
Something  
Wrong**

If you are writing to correct a mistake we (VA) have made, you should begin by apologizing for the error. Or at least acknowledge that a mistake was made. And please do it in active voice.

|  |  |
|---|---|
| An error was made in calculating your remaining entitlement.                      | We are sorry. We made a mistake when we calculated your remaining entitlement.      |

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*Continued on next page*

## Use a Conversational Tone and Empathic Style, Continued

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**Principle: Use Terms like “We Regret” When Delivering Bad News**

If there’s any time when we need to remember that we’re writing as human beings, not information-dispensing machines, it’s when we’re delivering bad news.

In fact, delivering bad news is one task that clearly calls for us to demonstrate that we are mindful of our mission:

“to provide benefits and services to the veterans and their families in a responsive, timely and *compassionate* manner in recognition of their service to the Nation.”

---

**Tool: Use Terms Like “We Regret” When Delivering Bad News**

We’re not calling for excessive sentimentality when delivering bad news; that would be inappropriate. But using a short sympathetic phrase like “we regret,” “we’re sorry,” or “unfortunately” helps us sound professional while avoiding a cold, impersonal tone.

Example: *We regret that we cannot approve your claim for vocational rehabilitation benefits.*

In some circumstances, for example when the impact of the news is particularly significant to a veteran, you may want to add a little more than a sympathetic phrase. It might take a sentence or two.

For example, you may have to inform a veteran that we must deny his claim for aid and attendance benefits (benefits based on a person’s inability to perform simple, everyday tasks of daily living). A sentence like “We know what this decision means to you, and we’re sorry that we can’t decide in your favor” is appropriate.

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*Continued on next page*

## Use a Conversational Tone and Empathic Style, Continued

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**Principle: Use Contractions When Appropriate**

Although most of us were taught to avoid using contractions in writing, contractions are appropriate in writing business letters. But they must be used with discretion.

How do contractions help readers? They can, in certain circumstances, do the following:

- *Speed reading.* Readers are used to hearing words in the contracted form. So when readers see “would not,” they turn it into “wouldn’t.” Using the contraction form speeds reading by saving them this step.
- *Improve accuracy.* Many readers often miss a “not” after a verb and take the exact opposite meaning. They read “would not” as “would.” That doesn’t happen when the word is “wouldn’t.”
- *Lend a more conversational tone.* Most people will agree that contractions are less formal, more conversational than writing out both words.
- *Soften the tone.* In a few cases, contractions soften the tone by making the *not* sound less emphatic.

| More Emphatic Message                                 | Softer Message                                       |
|---|--|
| You <i>cannot</i> come in now.                        | You <i>can't</i> come in now.                        |
| <i>Do not</i> enter this building without permission. | <i>Don't</i> enter this building without permission. |

**Tool: Use Contractions When Appropriate**

In most cases, using contractions in most types of documents is appropriate. However, as with any other RFW tools, it’s important to focus on your reader. If you are writing to someone with whom you would speak more formally, then you should probably write to them the same way. In those limited cases, contractions are not appropriate.

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*Continued on next page*

## Write Clear and Concise Sentences

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**Principle:  
Write Clear  
and Concise  
Sentences**



Complexity can be a major enemy of clear communication. Complex sentences loaded with dependent clauses and exceptions confuse readers by losing the main point in a forest of words. By eliminating excess words you can generally make your sentences clearer.

Shorter sentences can convey complex information more clearly because they break up the information into smaller, easier-to-process units.

---

**Tool: Write  
Clear and  
Concise  
Sentences**

To keep sentences short, resist the temptation to put everything in one sentence. Break up your idea into its various parts and make each one the subject of its own sentence. The following example compares two possible versions of a sentence in a hypothetical letter to a veteran’s child receiving Dependents’ Educational Assistance benefits:

|   |    |
|---|--|
| <p>Upon your request for good cause extension and information explaining why you could not send the evidence within the one-year time limitation, we will consider extending the time limit by which the evidence should have been received, if we receive your request and the explanation within one year from the date of this letter.</p> | <p>We can consider extending the time limit for receiving your evidence. We need the following to approve the extension:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• your request for extension for a good cause, <b>AND</b></li> <li>• an explanation of why you could not send the evidence within the one-year time limit.</li> </ul> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-top: 10px;"> <p><i>Please Note:</i> Your request and explanation must be received within one year from the date of this letter.</p> </div> |

---

## Avoid Jargon

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**Principle:  
Avoid or  
Translate  
Jargon  
Whenever  
Possible**

The word jargon means a specialized vocabulary used by a particular group. One of the worst sins in bureaucratic writing is using too much jargon without translating it. It's because of jargon that the term "Gobbledygook" came into being. Because we often must write about legal issues, we, like many government writers, fall into the habit of using too much legal jargon or our own jargon for technical procedures we have developed.

You may sometimes need to use a technical term to convey a precise meaning. But be careful not to be cowed into overusing technical terms. The argument that technical terms are "necessary" is greatly overused. Consider what Joseph Kimble, Professor of Law at Thomas Cooley Law School and one of the most active advocates for the Plain Language Movement, says on this subject:

"Real terms of art are a tiny part of any legal document. What's more, lawyers have an exaggerated notion of the extent to which legal terms are precise or are settled and unchangeable. I invite anyone to find a case saying that *give* won't do in a will — that it has to be *give, devise, and bequeath*."

(from "Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please," in *The Scribes Journal of Legal Writing*, by Joseph Kimble, 1998)

By avoiding or translating jargon, you can reduce confusion or misinterpretation for all your readers without sacrificing technical integrity.

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*Continued on next page*

## Avoid Jargon, Continued

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**Tool: Avoid or  
Translate  
Jargon  
Whenever  
Possible**

Try to substitute everyday language for jargon as often as possible. Use technical terms only when truly necessary. If your document is intended for both technical and non-technical readers, write for the non-technical readers.

Because we write about legal issues, we may not associate many of the terms that have become common in VA letters with legal jargon. But such terms as “aforesaid,” “pursuant,” and “expiration” are all terms that have passed into the lexicon of legal jargon. See also pages 5-18 through 5-25, adapted from Appendix A, “Words and Expressions to Avoid,” and Appendix B, “Preferred Expressions,” of the 1990 Federal Register publication, *Drafting Legal Documents*, for help with translating some of the more troublesome terms of jargon.

If legal sufficiency requires that you use a technical term, translate the term into plain language. If you must include a substantial amount of legal text, translate it in the body of your letter and include the verbatim text as an enclosure.

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*Continued on next page*

## Avoid Jargon, Continued

---

**Principle:  
Don't Use  
Acronyms  
Without  
Defining Them** Your letter (or any document you're writing) will be clearer if you avoid acronyms as much as possible.

---

**Tool: Don't  
Use Acronyms  
Without  
Defining Them** Define each abbreviation or acronym the first time you use it. In general, use abbreviations only to refer to terms that are central to the document. For example, if you are explaining provisions of the Government Results and Performance Act, you can refer to it as GPRA. But do not abbreviate terms that you use only once or a few times. Write them out each time.

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**Avoid Jargon, Continued**  
**National Archives and Records Administration**  
**Office of the Federal Register**

**Drafting Legal Documents**  
**Appendix A -- Words and Expressions to Avoid**

**abeyance**  
**above [as an adjective]**  
**above-mentioned**  
**afore-granted**  
**afore-mentioned**  
**aforesaid**  
**before-mentioned**  
**henceforward**  
**hereby**  
**herein**  
**hereinafter**  
**hereinbefore**  
**hereunto**  
**pursuant**  
**said [as a substitute for "the", "that", or "those"]**  
**same [as a substitute for "it", "he", "him", "she", or "her"]**  
**thenceforth**  
**thereunto**  
**therewith**  
**to wit**  
**under-mentioned**  
**unto**  
**whatsoever**  
**whensoever**  
**wheresoever**  
**whereas**  
**whereof**  
**whosoever**  
**within-named**  
**witnesseth**

This document has been slightly modified for VA training purposes.  
*Avoid Jargon* 5-18

**Avoid Jargon, Continued**  
**National Archives and Records Administration**  
**Office of the Federal Register**  
**Drafting Legal Documents, (PAGE 1 OF 7 PAGES)**

**Appendix B -- Preferred Expressions**

| <b>DON'T SAY</b>             | <b>SAY</b>                  |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <b>accorded</b>              | <b>given</b>                |
| <b>adequate number of</b>    | <b>enough</b>               |
| <b>afford an opportunity</b> | <b>allow, let</b>           |
| <b>afforded</b>              | <b>given</b>                |
| <b>all of the</b>            | <b>all the</b>              |
| <b>approximately</b>         | <b>about</b>                |
| <b>attains the age of</b>    | <b>become ... years old</b> |
| <b>at the time</b>           | <b>when</b>                 |
| <b>attempt [as a verb]</b>   | <b>try</b>                  |
| <b>by means of</b>           | <b>by</b>                   |
| <b>calculate</b>             | <b>compute</b>              |
| <b>category</b>              | <b>kind, class, group</b>   |
| <b>cease</b>                 | <b>stop</b>                 |
| <b>commence</b>              | <b>begin, start</b>         |
| <b>complete [as a verb]</b>  | <b>finish</b>               |
| <b>conceal</b>               | <b>hide</b>                 |

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**Avoid Jargon, Continued**  
**National Archives and Records Administration**  
**Office of the Federal Register**  
**Drafting Legal Documents, (PAGE 2 OF 7 PAGES)**  
**Appendix B -- Preferred Expressions**

| <b>DON'T SAY</b>                  | <b>SAY</b>              |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| <b>consequence</b>                | <b>result</b>           |
| <b>contiguous to</b>              | <b>next to</b>          |
| <b>deem</b>                       | <b>consider</b>         |
| <b>donate</b>                     | <b>give</b>             |
| <b>during such time as</b>        | <b>while</b>            |
| <b>during the course of</b>       | <b>during</b>           |
| <b>echelons</b>                   | <b>levels</b>           |
| <b>effectuate</b>                 | <b>carry out, try</b>   |
| <b>endeavor [as a verb]</b>       | <b>carry out, try</b>   |
| <b>enter into a contract with</b> | <b>contract with</b>    |
| <b>enumerate</b>                  | <b>count</b>            |
| <b>equitable</b>                  | <b>fair</b>             |
| <b>evince</b>                     | <b>show</b>             |
| <b>excessive number of</b>        | <b>too many</b>         |
| <b>expedite</b>                   | <b>hasten, speed up</b> |
| <b>expend</b>                     | <b>spend</b>            |

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When You Write: Help the Reader See You as Helpful and Interested 5-20  
*Avoid Jargon*

**Avoid Jargon, Continued**  
**National Archives and Records Administration**  
**Office of the Federal Register**  
**Drafting Legal Documents, (PAGE 3 OF 7 PAGES)**

**Appendix B -- Preferred Expressions**

| <b>DON'T SAY</b>                                    | <b>SAY</b>                              |
|---|---|
| <b>expiration</b>                                   | <b>end</b>                              |
| <b>feasible</b>                                     | <b>possible</b>                         |
| <b>for the duration of</b>                          | <b>during</b>                           |
| <b>for the purpose of holding [or other gerund]</b> | <b>to hold or comparable infinitive</b> |
| <b>for the reason that</b>                          | <b>because</b>                          |
| <b>forthwith</b>                                    | <b>immediately</b>                      |
| <b>frequently</b>                                   | <b>often</b>                            |
| <b>hereafter</b>                                    | <b>after this ... takes effect</b>      |
| <b>heretofore</b>                                   | <b>before this ... takes effect</b>     |
| <b>implement</b>                                    | <b>carry out, do follow</b>             |
| <b>portion</b>                                      | <b>part</b>                             |
| <b>possess</b>                                      | <b>have</b>                             |
| <b>preserve</b>                                     | <b>keep</b>                             |
| <b>prior</b>  | <b>earlier</b>                          |
| <b>prior to</b>                                     | <b>before</b>                           |
| <b>proceed</b>                                      | <b>go, go ahead</b>                     |

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**Avoid Jargon, Continued**  
**National Archives and Records Administration**  
**Office of the Federal Register**  
**Drafting Legal Documents, (PAGE 4 OF 7 PAGES)**

**Appendix B -- Preferred Expressions**

| <b>DON'T SAY</b>   | <b>SAY</b>                   |
|--|------------------------------|
| <b>procure</b>   | <b>obtain, get</b>           |
| <b>prosecute its business</b>  | <b>carry on its business</b> |
| <b>provides guidance for</b>   | <b>provides</b>              |
| <b>provision of law</b>  | <b>law</b>                   |
| <b>purchase [as a verb]</b>  | <b>buy</b>                   |
| <b>pursuant to</b>   | <b>under</b>                 |
| <b>remainder</b>   | <b>rest</b>                  |
| <b>render [in the sense of "cause to be"]</b>                        | <b>make</b>                  |
| <b>render [in the sense of "give"]</b>                               | <b>give</b>                  |
| <b>require [in the sense of "need"]</b>                              | <b>need</b>                  |
| <b>retain</b>  | <b>keep</b>                  |
| <b>specified [in the sense of "expressly mentioned" or "listed"]</b> | <b>named</b>                 |
| <b>State of Kansas</b>   | <b>Kansas</b>                |
| <b>subsequent to</b>   | <b>after</b>                 |
| <b>suffer [in the sense of "permit"]</b>                             | <b>permit</b>                |
| <b>sufficient number of</b>  | <b>enough</b>                |

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**Avoid Jargon, Continued**  
**National Archives and Records Administration**  
**Office of the Federal Register**  
**Drafting Legal Documents, (PAGE 5 OF 7 PAGES)**

**Appendix B -- Preferred Expressions**

| <b>DON'T SAY</b>  | <b>SAY</b>                               |
|---|--|
| <b>The Congress</b>                                     | <b>Congress</b>                          |
| <b>the manner in which</b>                              | <b>how</b>                               |
| <b>to the effect that</b>                               | <b>that</b>                              |
| <b>under the provisions of</b>                          | <b>under</b>                             |
| <b>until such time as</b>                               | <b>until</b>                             |
| <b>utilize, employ</b>                                  | <b>use</b>                               |
| <b>with reference to</b>                                | <b>for</b>                               |
| <b>in case</b>  | <b>if</b>                                |
| <b>indicate [in the sense of "show"]</b>                | <b>show</b>                              |
| <b>inform</b>   | <b>tell</b>                              |
| <b>in lieu of</b>                                       | <b>instead of, in place of</b>           |
| <b>in order to</b>                                      | <b>to</b>                                |
| <b>inquire</b>  | <b>ask</b>                               |
| <b>in sections 5101 to 5103, inclusive, of Title 38</b> | <b>in sections 5101-5103 of Title 38</b> |

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**Avoid Jargon, Continued**  
**National Archives and Records Administration**  
**Office of the Federal Register**  
**Drafting Legal Documents, (PAGE 6 OF 7 PAGES)**

**Appendix B -- Preferred Expressions**

| <b>DON'T SAY</b>                   | <b>SAY</b>                     |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <b>institute</b>                   | <b>begin, start</b>            |
| <b>interrogate</b>                 | <b>question</b>                |
| <b>in the event that</b>           | <b>if</b>                      |
| <b>in the interest of</b>          | <b>for</b>                     |
| <b>incumbent upon</b>              | <b>must</b>                    |
| <b>is able to</b>                  | <b>can</b>                     |
| <b>is authorized</b>               | <b>may</b>                     |
| <b>is binding upon</b>             | <b>binds</b>                   |
| <b>is empowered</b>                | <b>may</b>                     |
| <b>is unable to</b>                | <b>cannot</b>                  |
| <b>it shall be lawful</b>          | <b>may</b>                     |
| <b>manner</b>                      | <b>way</b>                     |
| <b>maximum</b>                     | <b>most, largest, greatest</b> |
| <b>minimum</b>                     | <b>least, smallest</b>         |
| <b>modify</b>                      | <b>change</b>                  |
| <b>necessitate</b>                 | <b>require</b>                 |
| <b>no later than June 30, 19__</b> | <b>before July 1, 19__</b>     |

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**Avoid Jargon, Continued**  
**National Archives and Records Administration**  
**Office of the Federal Register**  
**Drafting Legal Documents, (PAGE 7 OF 7 PAGES)**

**Appendix B -- Preferred Expressions**

| <b>DON'T SAY</b>   | <b>SAY</b>                    |
|--|-------------------------------|
| <b>obligate</b>  | <b>bind, compel</b>           |
| <b>obtain</b>  | <b>get</b>                    |
| <b>occasion [as a verb]</b>  | <b>cause</b>                  |
| <b>of a technical nature</b>   | <b>technical</b>              |
| <b>on and after July 1, 19 ____</b>  | <b>after June 30, 19 ____</b> |
| <b>on the part of</b>  | <b>by</b>                     |
| <b>or, in the alternative</b>  | <b>or</b>                     |
| <b>paragraph (1) of subsection (a) of section 3017 of Title 38 of the United States Code</b> | <b>5 U.S.C. 3017(a)(1)</b>    |
| <b>parameters</b>  | <b>limits</b>                 |
| <b>per annum, per day, per foot</b>  | <b>a year, a day, a foot</b>  |
| <b>per centum</b>  | <b>percent</b>                |
| <b>period of time</b>  | <b>period, time</b>           |

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# Chapter 6

## When You Review: Help the Reader Have Confidence in You

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### Introduction

This chapter covers the traditional ways of proofreading — looking for proper mechanics: correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation. It also covers a less traditional, but extremely important technique for reviewing your document. The second way assures not only that the mechanics are correct, but also that the message is clear.

This chapter will give some grammar and punctuation hints. It will also talk about two ways of reviewing:

- Structured Review
  - Protocol Testing
- 

### In This Chapter

This chapter contains the following topics:

| Topic   | See Page |
|---|----------|
| Use Correct Spelling, Grammar, and Punctuation    | 6-2      |
| Use Correct Spelling                              | 6-3      |
| Use Correct Grammar                               | 6-7      |
| Use Correct Punctuation                           | 6-10     |
| Use Structured-Review Techniques                  | 6-18     |
| Follow These Review Tips                          | 6-21     |
| Review for Appropriate Tone                       | 6-27     |
| Test Your Document With Readers: Protocol Testing | 6-29     |

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## Use Correct Spelling, Grammar, and Punctuation

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**Principle:  
Correct  
Spelling,  
Grammar, and  
Punctuation.**

Your message is clearly mapped. Your document is well organized, clear, conversational and empathic in tone. Now you are ready to make sure that all the words are spelled correctly, and grammar and punctuation are used appropriately. It is true that in most cases readers will probably get the message even if a word is spelled incorrectly here or there or a semicolon is out of place. But our credibility as a competent agency will come into question if we don't send out professional and mechanically accurate documents.

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## Use Correct Spelling

---

**Principle:  
Correct  
Spelling Basics**

Checking for correct spelling is not a new concept in writing. But with current computer technology it is certainly easier than in the old days. Yes, *Word for Windows* will spell check your documents for you, and in some versions even correct it. However, even *Word* still can't tell the difference between homonyms – words like, “there,” “they're,” and “their.” So it's important that you proofread your documents to make certain spelling is correct. “I used the spell checker” is not an acceptable excuse for sending out incorrect information.

The following pages contain some basic spelling rules to refresh your memory and a list of commonly misspelled words. But when in doubt, look it up in the dictionary. If you don't have one easily available, you can find Webster's on the Internet. The address is <http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/mweb>. If you'd like more help with spelling, there's a wonderful web site called *Guide to Grammar and Writing* that gives spelling and grammar rules and tests to help you improve your skills. The address is: <http://webster.comnet.edu/HP/pages/darling/grammar.htm>.

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## Use Correct Spelling, Continued

### Tool: Correct Spelling Rules

Below are a few very basic spelling rules. More detailed explanations of these rules (and others) can be found on the *Guide to Grammar and Writing* web site (<http://webster.commnet.edu/HP/pages/darling/grammar.htm>). But be careful, as often happens in the English language, there are exceptions.

| Rules   | Some Exceptions   |
|---|---|
| <b>1. Use “I” before “E” except after “C”</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Grieve, friend, pat<u>i</u>ence</li><li>• Rece<u>i</u>ve, ce<u>i</u>ling</li></ul>  | If the word is pronounced with an “ay” sound, then “E” comes before the “I” <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sle<u>i</u>gh, we<u>i</u>ght, ve<u>i</u>n</li></ul>                   |
| <b>2. Drop the final “E” when adding an ending to a word, if the “E” is silent and the ending starts with a vowel</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Advanc<u>e</u> becomes Advanc<u>i</u>ng,<br/><i>however</i></li><li>• Advanc<u>e</u> becomes Advanc<u>e</u>ment</li></ul> | The final “E” is kept when a soft “G” or “C” precedes it. This prevents mispronunciation. <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Mileage, manage<u>a</u>ble, notice<u>a</u>ble</li></ul> |
| <b>3. If you want to add an ending to a word that ends in “Y” and is preceded by a consonant, change the “Y” to an “I”</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Suppl<u>y</u> becomes suppl<u>i</u>es</li><li>• Hur<u>r</u>y becomes hur<u>r</u>ied</li></ul>                        | This does not apply to “ING” endings <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Stud<u>y</u> becomes stud<u>y</u>ing</li><li>• Hur<u>r</u>y becomes hur<u>r</u>y<u>i</u>ng</li></ul>         |

*Continued on next page*

## Use Correct SpellingContinued

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**Tool:  
Commonly  
Misspelled  
Words**

The following page contains a list of commonly misspelled words. It is by no means a complete list. If you don't find what you're looking for here and you don't have a dictionary easily accessible, you use the Webster Dictionary's web site at <http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/mweb>. The list has been adapted from the *Guide to Grammar and Writing* web site (<http://webster.commnet.edu/HP/pages/darling/grammar.htm>) to include words most commonly used in VA.

**Note:** The words in this list are not always the simplest way to communicate your message. Consider your audience. In some cases you might want to use a different word. For instance, instead of using the word "permissible," you might want to say, "We can't 'allow' you to take this class." Or, "We can't 'pay for' this class."

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*Continued on next page*

## Use Correct Spelling Continued

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|              |               |               |              |
|--------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|
| Accidentally | Effect        | Maneuver      | Prominent    |
| Accommodate  | Eligible      | Mysterious    | Quantity     |
| Accumulate   | Eliminate     | Necessary     | Quizzes      |
| Acquire      | Encouragement | Noticeable    | Receiving    |
| Advice       | Environment   | Occasionally  | Recommend    |
| Advise       | Equipped      | Occurred      | Reference    |
| Analysis     | Especially    | Occurrence    | Referring    |
| Attendance   | Existence     | Opportunity   | Salary       |
| Annual       | Explanation   | Optimistic    | Schedule     |
| Balance      | February      | Parallel      | Seize        |
| Battalion    | Foreign       | Paralyze      | Separate     |
| Beginning    | Government    | Paralysis     | Separation   |
| Beneficial   | Grammar       | Permissible   | Sergeant     |
| Benefited    | Grievous      | Personal      | Severely     |
| Calendar     | Height        | Personnel     | Technique    |
| Category     | Heroes        | Physical      | Tendency     |
| Cemetery     | Immediately   | Possibility   | Transferring |
| Changeable   | Incidentally  | Pronunciation | Unanimous    |
| Commission   | Inevitable    | Precedence    | Undoubtedly  |
| Conceivable  | Knowledge     | Preference    | Usually      |
| Definition   | Laboratory    | Preparation   | Vital        |
| Description  | Maintenance   | Procedure     | Weather      |

---

## Use Correct Grammar

---

**Principle:  
Correct  
Grammar**

Using correct grammar, like correct spelling and punctuation, is a matter of remembering the rules you learned in school. Below we have included several grammar rules we feel you'll find most useful. However, there are some grammar and punctuation rules that are interpreted differently by different writers, businesses, and even authors of style guides. For that reason, we suggest that you refer to The Gregg Reference Manual, Seventh Edition, by William A. Sabin, Macmillan/McGraw-Hill 1992, when you have grammar questions.

Again, the *Guide to Grammar and Writing* web site can help you with the basic rules. It includes both lessons and tests to strengthen your skills. The address is <http://webster.comnet.edu/HP/pages/darling/grammar.htm>.

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**Tool:  
Grammar  
Rules**

**Rule 1: Do not use adjectives for adverbs. Most adverbs end in “ly,” but not always: for example, “timely” is an adjective.**

**not this**     *She filed the record timely.*

**but this**     *She filed the record in a timely manner (telling how she filed it).*

**or this**     *His timely hit kept the rally going (telling what kind of hit).*

**Rule 2: Verbs must agree in number with their subjects, singular with singular and plural with plural.**

**not this**     *Expenditures (subject) for the necessary equipment, which the department needs so badly, was (verb) expected to decline.*

**but this**     *Expenditures for the necessary equipment, which the department needs so badly, were expected to decline.*

**Note:** This lack of agreement usually occurs because writers put too much information between the subject and verb, as in these examples. Try to keep that space between subject and verb from becoming cluttered with unnecessary words.

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*Continued on next page*

## Use Correct Grammar, Continued

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### Tool: Grammar Rules (Cont.)

**Rule 3: Avoid dangling modifiers (those that do not clearly modify a specific word.)** In general, readers assume that the modifier modifies the first noun that comes after the comma. Violating this rule can produce unintended humor: *Soaring off into the sky, portly Ned Standish flew his favorite kite, or Lying in the gutter, June found her mother's favorite pin.*)

**not these**      *Believing they would change their policies, findings were dismissed.*

*By working hard, your goal can be reached.*

*To succeed at this job, long hours must be worked.*

**but these**      *Believing they would change their policies, the audit agency dismissed its findings. (The agency is believing this, not the findings.)*

*By working hard, you can reach your goal. (You are working hard, not your goal.)*

*To succeed at this job, you must work long hours. (You want to succeed, not the job.)*

**Rule 4: A pronoun should refer clearly to the appropriate preceding word.**

**not this**      *When the president objected to Mr. Carter, he told him to mind his own business.*

**but this**      *When the president objected to Mr. Carter, Mr. Carter told him to mind his own business.*

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*Continued on next page*



## Use Correct Grammar Continued

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**Tool: Grammar Rules (Cont.)**    **Rule 5: Avoid using *which, that, and this* to refer to broad ideas, if possible.**

**not this**                      *Matters were discussed and policies changed, which made the new year something special indeed.*

**but this**                      *Matters were discussed and policies changed. All this work made the new year something special indeed.*

**Rule 6: Express equal thoughts in parallel (that is, the same) grammatical forms.**

**not this**                      *Our objectives for the year are to match last year's production, higher sales, and improving customer relations.*

**but this**                      *Our objectives for the year are to match last year's production, to increase sales, and to improve consumer relations.*

**not this**                      *The questionnaire asks for this information: number of employees, what our union status is, and how much we pay.*

**but this**                      *The questionnaire asks for this information: number of employees, union status, and pay scale.*

---

# Use Correct Punctuation

---

## Tool: Correct Punctuation

Using correct punctuation, like correct spelling and grammar, is a matter of remembering the rules you learned in school. Below we have included several punctuation rules we feel you'll find useful. However, there are some grammar and punctuation rules that are interpreted differently by different writers, businesses, and even style guide authors. For that reason, we suggest that you refer to The Gregg Reference Manual, Seventh Edition, by William A. Sabin, Macmillan/McGraw-Hill 1992, when you have grammar questions.

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## Punctuation Rules: Apostrophe

The following examples cover the most important standards for correctness in punctuation. We listed the marks of punctuation alphabetically.

### Use the apostrophe to show possession.

|                      |   |  |
|----------------------|---|--|
| <b>singular</b>      | <i>company</i><br><i>employee</i>                                     | <i>company's</i><br><i>employee's</i>  |
| <b>plural</b>        | <i>companies</i><br><i>employees</i>                                  | <i>companies'</i><br><i>employees'</i>   |
| <b>special cases</b> | <i>Texas</i><br><i>Jones</i><br><i>Joneses</i><br><br><i>countess</i> | <i>Texas' or Texas's</i><br><i>Jones' or Jones's</i><br><i>Joneses'</i> (when many members of the Jones family gather, there are many Joneses)<br><i>countess' or countess's</i> |

**Note:** *its, yours, theirs, ours, hers* are possessive but without the apostrophe.

### Mark omissions in contractions with the apostrophe.

|                |               |
|----------------|---------------|
| <i>has not</i> | <i>hasn't</i> |
| <i>cannot</i>  | <i>can't</i>  |
| <i>it is</i>   | <i>it's</i>   |

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*Continued on next page*

## Use Correct Punctuation, Continued

---

### Brackets

**Use brackets to set off words that you insert in a quotation.**

*“The use of this solution [the trained consultant] may still be increasing.”*

*“Direct supervision has increased during the past decade [the report was written in 1990], when 43 percent of the reporting business firms started using this technique.”*

---

### Colon

**Use the colon to introduce formal statements, explanations, enumerations, and numbered or bulleted lists.**

*President Jones had this to say: “This idea is great!”*

*At this time, the company was pioneering a new marketing idea: advertising through vending machines.*

*Working out of this office are three classes of electricians: apprentices, journeymen, and master electricians.*

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*Continued on next page*

## Use Correct Punctuation, Continued

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### Colon, Cont.

The rule about using a colon is currently a subject of debate. We present below both sides of the issue, the traditional rule and the more recent usage. In RFW, the more recent usage is acceptable when it helps readability—when it sounds natural and conversational, and the meaning is clear. Use your best judgment in each case. You can also test your usage with a “cold” reader.

The traditional rule: Do not use the colon when it breaks the flow of thought. What precedes the colon should be able to stand on its own as a sentence. Thus, a colon may be used to introduce a bulleted list only when what introduces the list is a complete sentence.

**Not this**            *Departments that have new accounting procedures in place are: Fort Smith, Baltimore, and Midvale.*

**But this**            *Departments that have new accounting procedures in place are Fort Smith, Baltimore, and Midvale.*

**Or this**             *Departments that have new accounting procedures in place are the following: Fort Smith, Baltimore, and Midvale.*

**Or this**             *Departments that have new accounting procedures in place are the following:*

- *Fort Smith*
- *Baltimore, and*
- *Midvale.*

**The more recent usage:** It is common practice now to use a colon to introduce a bulleted or numbered list whether or not what precedes it is a complete sentence. The rule is, again, to prefer the usage that helps readability in your particular sentence.

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*Continued on next page*

## Use Correct Punctuation, Continued

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### Comma

**Use the comma to separate clauses connected by *and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, *for*.**

*Only two components of the index declined, and these two account for only 12 percent of the total weight of the index.*

*New automobiles are moving at record volumes, but used-car sales are lagging behind the record pace set two years ago.*

**Use the comma to separate items in a series.**

*Good copy must cover the story with accuracy, sincerity, honesty, and conviction.*

*Direct advertising can be used to introduce salespeople, fill in between salespeople's calls, cover territory where salespeople cannot be maintained, and keep pertinent reference material in the hands of prospects.*

*A survey conducted at the 1997 automobile show indicated that black and cream, blue and gray, dark maroon, and black cars were favored.*

**Note:** In this last example, taking the last comma away changes the meaning: the car color becomes “dark maroon and black,” a two-tone color. Whether to add this last comma in all cases is a source of disagreement. Generally, journalists do not use this last comma, called the “serial comma,” but writers must use it if there is a chance of confusion, as in the last example above.

**Use the comma to separate coordinate adjectives (of the same rank) in a series.**

*Miss Jones has been a reliable, faithful, efficient auditor for 20 years.*

*We guarantee that this is a good, clean car.*

**But:** *A big crescent wrench was best for the job.*

**Note:** A good test to determine if adjectives are coordinate is to insert *and* between them. If the *and* does not change the meaning, as in “big and crescent wrench,” the adjectives are coordinate.

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*Continued on next page*

## Use Correct Punctuation, Continued

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**Comma (Cont.)** Use commas to set off **nonrestrictive modifiers** (those that could be left out without changing the meaning of the sentence).

**nonrestrictive**      *My car, which is clean and beautiful, is not for sale.*

**restrictive**         *The salesperson who sells the most cars gets a bonus. (“Who sells the most” restricts the meaning to a particular salesperson.)*

**Use commas to set off parenthetical expressions (comments “stuck in”).**

*This practice, it is believed, is illegal.*

*The office, so the rumor goes, must sharply reduce personnel.*

**Use commas to set off certain parenthetical words (therefore, however).**

*It is apparent, therefore, that all participants increased their skills.*

*The participants, however, would benefit from another course.*

**Use commas to set off apposition words (words explaining another word).**

*President Jones, a self-taught woman, is the leading advocate of education.*

*Baltimore, home of our main office, is the permanent site for all staff meetings.*

**Use the comma after subordinate clauses.**

*Although it is durable, this package does not have eye appeal.*

*Since there was little snow this winter, crops may fail.*

**Use the comma after introductory phrases.**

*Realizing his mistake, the instructor changed his answer.*

*After gaining the advantage, we failed to press on to victory.*

*In the event of a tie, the teams must replay the game.*

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*Continued on next page*

## Use Correct Punctuation, Continued

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**Comma (Cont.)** Use the comma wherever it helps clarity.

**change this** *Ever since she's been a model worker.*  
**to this** *Ever since, she's been a model worker.*

---

**Dash** Use the dash to show interruption or emphasis.

*Budgets for some years—1991, for example—were prepared without consulting the department heads.*

*Only one person—the person in charge—has authority to issue the order.*

*If you want a voice in government—vote.*

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*Continued on next page*

## Use Correct Punctuation, Continued

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### Hyphen

**Mark word divisions at the ends of lines with hyphens.**

*per-son, edi-tion, publi-cation*

**Place hyphens between the parts of some compound words to avoid confusion.**

*brother-in-law, cure-all, twenty-one  
anti-inflation (not antiinflation)*

**Or use hyphens when the entire phrase is acting as one adjective.**

*long-term contract, door-to-door selling, end-of-month report*

**Note:** To decide when to hyphenate, check a dictionary or note whether the phrase makes a single statement and is not two separate adjectives. In the example above, *long-term* is a phrase modifying *contract*. It is not a *long* and *term contract*.

---

### Quotation Marks With Other Punctuation

**Periods and commas always go inside quotation marks.**

*If he were “crazy,” he wouldn’t quit his job.*

*“If we are patient,” he said, “prosperity will arrive someday.”*

**Semicolons and colons always go outside closing quotation marks.**

*I conclude only this from the union’s promise to “force the hand of management”: violence will be its trump card.*

*He said, “I won’t put up with it”; he didn’t!*

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*Continued on next page*



## Use Correct Punctuation, Continued

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### Semicolon

Use the semicolon to separate independent clauses not connected by a conjunction. That is, use a semicolon where “and” or “but” could be inserted.

*Cork must be cut by hand; polyurethane may be poured into a mold.*

*The new contract offers pay increases; the old one offered shorter hours.*

**Use the semicolon to separate clauses before a conjunctive adverb such as *however, nevertheless, therefore, moreover, and besides*.**

*Surveys indicate a need for change; nevertheless, no change will happen.*

*We hate to study grammar; therefore, we never really learn it.*

**Use the semicolon to separate items in a list when items contain commas.**

*The teams included Mike, Bob, and Jim; Ruth, Joe, and George; and Jacob, Andrew, and Eileen.*

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## Use Structured-Review Techniques

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**Principle:  
Structured  
Review**

What is the first thing you do when co-workers ask you to review their work? Do you check the sentence-level issues, like “typos,” spelling, grammar, and punctuation? That’s what most people do. But if the message isn’t clear, you have to change how the message is presented. And chances are that sentence-level issues, like punctuation, will change as well. That means you have to review for sentence-level issues again anyway.

Worse than this scenario is one in which we only review for sentence-level issues and don’t ever check to make sure the message is clear. To be truly reader-focused, you must check to make sure you’ve mapped a clear message for your readers.

Following the structured-review method, described below, will guarantee an efficient way of reviewing for all the important issues.

---

**Tool:  
Structured  
Review**

To do a structured review, simply follow the RFW Tools Job Aid — the same one you used to write your document. This time you’re checking to make sure you did everything the job aid recommends. On the two next pages is the job aid in question form. Once you are familiar with it, you’ll probably find it easier to pull out the job aid and glance at it for reminders, rather than to review all the questions on the next pages.

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*Continued on next page*

## Use Structured-Review Techniques, Continued

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**Tool:**  
**Structured-**  
**Review**  
**Questions**

Whenever you review a document, be sure to do it systematically. Do not try to catch every mistake one time through. Do not begin editing at the sentence level. Instead, follow the guidelines for performing an effective structured review. Your review will be more thorough, and you will review more efficiently. The following shows how to do the six-step structured review.

1. Review the writing for message and content.
  - Is the main message up front?
  - Is the message clear?
  - Is there unnecessary information?
  - Are there places where there is not enough information?
2. Review the writing for effective organization.
  - Is the writing arranged in a logical order?
  - Is each section logically arranged?
  - Does the writing use headings effectively?
  - Is the length of the document and each section appropriate?
3. Review the document for effective format.
  - Does the writing use effective emphasis techniques?
  - Does the writing adhere to typographical guidance (fonts, margins etc.)?
4. Review the document for effective paragraphs.
  - Are individual paragraphs too long?
  - Do the paragraphs begin with a topic sentence?
  - Do the first paragraphs of the sections repeat the headings?
  - Do all the sentences in the paragraphs relate to the main idea?

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*Continued on next page*

## Use Structured-Review Techniques, Continued

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**Tool:  
Structured-  
Review  
Questions  
(Cont.)**

5. Review the document for effective sentences.
  - Do any sentences run on too long or pack in too much information?
  - Do the sentences maintain a strong sentence core with clear links between Subject-Verb-Object?
  - Are all sentences concise and clearly focused?
  - Does the sentence structure emphasize the most important information?
  - Do sentences use nouns in place of verbs (Example: “An examination will be done.” rather than “We will examine...”)?
  - Do the sentences use active voice whenever possible?
  - Do the sentences project the proper tone?
  - Are sentences free of unnecessary jargon?
  
6. Review the document for proper mechanics.
  - Have you checked spelling with more than a *Spell Check*?
  - Are all punctuation rules observed?
  - Are all grammatical rules observed?

## Follow These Review Tips

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### **Tool: General Review Tips**

In general, you can use the following tips to help you identify problems in your writing or in that of others. Some of these tips will also give you quick fixes to resolve your writing problems.

1. Ask a “cold reader” to read a section of your writing and briefly explain it back to you (protocol testing). If the reader cannot do so effectively, check to see if the topic sentences are clearly focused and adequately supported. Also look at the order of presentation. Is the emphasis appropriate?
2. Read the work out loud. If you can’t understand a sentence out loud, chances are very good that other readers will have problems reading it silently. This strategy works especially well if you suspect the writing is wordy. The time required to say the words will emphasize both the length and complexity of the paragraph and sentence structure.
3. Outline the draft if you suspect organizational problems. If a clear organizational pattern does not emerge, reorganize the draft. See if your document fulfills the “known/new contract.” (See pages 6-22 through 6-26.)
4. Read the topic sentences. If they do not refer to the main point of the paragraph, restate the sentences.
5. Line-edit random paragraphs for sentence and coherence problems. If they occur frequently in the sample, they probably occur throughout.
6. Look for your personal weak habits and patterns and revise them.

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*Continued on next page*

## Follow These Review Tips, Continued

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**Principle:**  
**“Known/New  
Contract”**

To help us achieve unity, paragraphs need coherence—defined as the smooth transition from sentence to sentence in a paragraph. In other words, they should follow the “known/new contract.” This contract was recently discovered by linguists. It’s something you should’ve learned in school, but many teachers don’t teach it. Yet it’s a powerful and quite simple tool for readability.

The “known/new contract” simply states that readers expect sentences to begin with “known,” already established information in the grammatical subject of the sentence, and move into new information in what is called the predicate of the sentence. When this contract is violated, coherence tends to break down.

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## Follow These Review Tips, Continued

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**Tool:**  
**“Known/New  
Contract”  
(Cont.)**

To find out if a given paragraph maintains or violates this contract, simply isolate the grammatical subject of every sentence in the paragraph. Then ask yourself if each grammatical subject presents information that is known to readers (an idea that’s already been established in the text) or is new to readers (an idea that has not already been established in the text). If a grammatical subject presents new information, revise the sentence so the new information comes after a known subject.

To see if this makes sense, let’s look at an example. The paragraph below was one item in a list of “school reporting errors.” Here’s the paragraph with the lead sentence that introduced the list:

Regional office personnel who discover school reporting errors should observe the following guidelines.

Serious reporting errors are those which cause a substantial overpayment of benefits. An example would be if a veteran reported a change in training time but the school did not report this event at all. Regulations require that the school report any such change within 30 days. A report which is a few days late would not be considered a serious reporting error.

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*Continued on next page*

## Follow These Review Tips, Continued

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**Tool:**  
**“Known/New  
Contract”  
(Cont.)**

Let’s look more closely at the first sentence.

**Subject**

**Predicate**

Serious reporting errors      are those which cause a substantial  
overpayment of benefits.

Is the subject “known” information?

Yes, the lead sentence established the idea of school reporting errors.

Does the predicate follow through with “new” information?

Yes, this is the first mention of overpayments.

So this sentence follows the “known/new contract.”

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*Continued on next page*



## Follow These Review Tips, Continued

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**Tool:**  
**“Known/New  
Contract”**  
**(Cont.)**

Now let’s consider how the sentence would have read if it had violated the “known/new contract.” To see how readability would be affected, let’s also include the lead sentence.

|| Regional office personnel who discover school reporting errors should observe the following guidelines.

|| A substantial amount of overpayments are caused by serious reporting errors.

**Subject**

**Predicate**

|| A substantial amount of overpayments      are caused by serious reporting errors.

The sentence has reversed the subject-predicate order. Although you can still probably understand the sentence, starting with the “new” information instead of the “known” is somewhat jarring. Readers may have to pause and rethink the sentence, looking again at the lead sentence to remember what the paragraph is supposed to be about.

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*Continued on next page*

## Follow These Review Tips, Continued

**Tool:** Let's analyze each sentence of the paragraph to see if they follow the  
**“Known/New Contract”** “known/new” contract:  
**(Cont.)**

Serious reporting errors are those which cause a substantial overpayment of benefits. An example would be if a veteran reported a change in training time but the school did not report this event at all. Regulations require that the school report any such change within 30 days. A report which is a few days late would not be considered a serious reporting error.

| Sent # | Subject                           | “Known” Information   | Predicate   | “New” Information   | Follows Contract |
|--------|-----------------------------------|---|---|---|------------------|
| 1      | Serious reporting errors          | ✓ established in lead sentence  | are those which cause a substantial overpayment.  | ✓   | ✓                |
| 2      | An example                        | ✓ an example of a <i>serious reporting error</i> , already established in previous text | would be if a veteran reported a change in training time but the school did not report this event at all. | ✓   | ✓                |
| 3      | Regulations                       | ✗ no reference earlier in text  | require that the school report any such change within 30 days.  | ✗ school reporting changes is “known” information from sent #2        | ✗                |
| 4      | A report which is a few days late | ✓ school reports have been established in text  | would not be considered a serious reporting error.  | ✓ gives an example of a serious reporting error (“known” information) | ✓                |

## Review for Appropriate Tone

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**Principle:  
Reviewing for  
Appropriate  
Tone**

*Tone* can be defined as the attitude the writer takes toward the subject and the reader. In all the documents you write you should strive for an empathic, professional tone. See also “Use a Conversational Tone and Empathic Style,” pages 5-2 through 5-13.

All writing has tone. That is, all writing contains clues about the writer’s attitude toward the subject, the reader, or even toward him or herself. No writing can be purely “neutral” in tone. Writing that betrays vested interest, emotional involvement, or fuzzy thinking conveys a tone that suggests the writer is biased or amateurish. By the same token, writing that is lackluster, leaden, or bureaucratic conveys a tone that is limp, labored, or arid.

Choosing language or structure that deflects readers and leads them to question the writing’s message can seriously impair its effectiveness. In other words, selecting the wrong tone can prevent your message from coming across to the reader—not because the message itself is unclear, but because you have effectively turned off the reader. In rhetoric, this corporate personality is called *ethos*, or the character of the writer. An agency that is evolving, such as VA, must refine and express clearly its corporate personality. Tone is not mere packaging or some type of public relations stunt: it proceeds from the true nature of VBA’s work and objectives.

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*Continued on next page*

## Review for Appropriate Tone, Continued

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**Tool:  
Reviewing for  
Appropriate  
Tone**

Reviewers frequently mention the following five qualities that affect tone: precision, knowledge, objectivity, constructiveness, and confidence. To some extent, these qualities are present in all writing, but under certain circumstances, they take on greater importance. The choice of correct emphasis in tone depends on how we answer the following questions:

- What is the nature of the **subject**? Is it controversial or noncontroversial, technical or general, inherently interesting or dull?
- What is the **objective/purpose** of the writing? Is it intended to answer or explain?
- Who are the **readers**? Are they knowledgeable or not, interested or not, biased or not?

Reader analysis is particularly important because the knowledge and attitude of the readers will largely determine the most appropriate approach to tone.

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## Test Your Document With Readers: Protocol Testing

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**Principle:  
Cued-Response  
Protocol  
Testing**

The methodology RFW uses for testing letters and other documents is derived from research in technical writing and computer usability testing. This testing is called cued-response protocol testing. Protocol testing is an additional step that you should take when you are sending a document to multiple readers. The term “protocol” in this context means a plan, or format, for conducting an experiment or procedure. We use this term because we follow a fairly rigorous format in the testing procedure.

Protocol testing is extremely valuable in determining if readers are interpreting your message in the manner you intended. This type of testing will save countless hours in phone calls from readers who did not understand what you might have thought was perfectly clear. So, the more readers you send a document to, the more important it is to protocol test.

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*Continued on next page*

## Test Your Document With Readers: Protocol Testing, Continued

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### Tool: Cued-Response Protocol Testing

Cued-response protocol testing is an interview technique that tests the usability of a document. Testing involves a one-on-one interview with a reader. The tester, in our case a VA employee who has been trained in protocol testing, reads from a script to the reader (a veteran, or VA stakeholder, who might receive the particular letter being tested). We use a script to minimize any influence the tester might have over what the reader says, and because we want to say the same thing to every reader tested.

The tester asks the reader to read to a specific cue (usually a dot identifying a stopping point). Each time the reader reaches the cue, he is to tell us in his own words what he thinks that section means. We specifically ask the reader to point out anything that is hard to understand.

During this part of the test, if at all possible, the tester does not speak, or speaks only minimally, in order to allow the reader free rein to express his thoughts and, again, to minimize the tester's influence over the reader's response.

Either the tester or another employee, who sits off to the side, takes careful notes. Additionally, with the reader's permission, it's a good idea to audiotape the session.

At the end of the letter, we ask additional questions, such as:

- What would you do if you got this letter? This is a **very important** question: the answer goes miles towards assuring that the letter accomplishes what the writer intended.
- Do you think the writer was trying to help you?

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*Continued on next page*

## Test Your Document With Readers: Protocol Testing, Continued

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**Tool: Cued-Response Protocol Testing (Cont.)**

After the reader has completed the document, we also ask for any other specific suggestions or other comments the reader may have, and allow the reader freely to ask questions related to the document or the testing procedure. Of course, we always express our thanks to the readers and explain that their comments will ultimately help veterans and their families nationwide to have a better understanding of important information on their VA benefits.

Employees use the notes and recording from the session to revise the document. Members of RFW teams collaborate in reviewing and polishing the final document. If significant changes are made during this process, it may be necessary to test a second time.

It's a good idea to follow through by testing periodically to ensure that we're still "getting through" to the readers with the message we intended.

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*Continued on next page*

## Test Your Document With Readers: Protocol Testing, Continued

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**Tool: Protocol  
Test With  
Observations**

Another type of protocol testing is recommended when evaluating long documents, like booklets and regulations. In this type of protocol test, not only are you testing for comprehension, but you are also making notes about the way the reader uses the document. For instance you would note how often a reader has to flip from page to page to find references. In other words, you are testing the document as a whole, not just individual paragraphs.

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**For Further  
Information**

*Note:* This is a very brief description of protocol testing. Our intention is to make you aware of the tool. Separate training and training material is available if you are interested. You can e-mail Cheryl Waldow for more information. You can also get more information about document testing on NPR's Plain Language web site. The address is <[www.plainlanguage.gov](http://www.plainlanguage.gov)>.

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**DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**  
**Regional Office and Insurance Center**  
**Vocational Rehabilitation and Counseling**  
**Wissahickon Avenue and Manheim Street**  
**P.O. Box 42954**  
**Philadelphia, PA 19101**

May 23, 2013

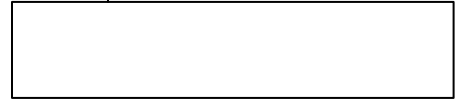
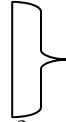
**Model Letter**

Mr. Weldon Test  
 123 Main Street  
 Anywhere, PA 99999  
 Dear Mr. Test:



We are sorry that we can't approve your request for job training to become a construction worker. However, we may be able to help you get training for other kinds of work. This letter will answer the following questions:

- Why did we make this decision?
- Could we help you get a different job?
- What should you do if you disagree with our decision?



**Why Did We Make This Decision?**

When you asked for training to become a construction worker, one of our counselors talked with you about your present disabilities. Both of you looked at whether you would be able to successfully do the kind of work you want to do without making your disability worse. Based on medical information from your doctor and the evaluation by Moss Rehab, your back condition would keep you from successfully working as a construction worker.

However, we do feel that there are other jobs you could do successfully. We would like to talk with you about the ways we can help you to get one of these jobs.

**Could We Help You Get a Different Job?**

If you are interested in talking about other job opportunities, please call Lou Namm at 215-842-2000, extension 4111.

**What If You Disagree With Our Decision?**

You have the right to appeal our decision if you disagree with it. The next page explains how to make an appeal.

Sincerely,



John Jones  
Vocational Rehabilitation and Counseling Officer

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When You Review: Help the Reader Have Confidence in You  
*Protocol Testing*

A-1

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When You Review: Help the Reader Have Confidence in You  
*Protocol Testing*

6-34

## How to Appeal Our Decision

If you disagree with our decision either you or your accredited representative (for example a veterans service organization representative) can appeal our decision. There are two ways of appealing:

1. Administrative review

2. Formal appeal

### Administrative Review

If you disagree with our decision, you can request an administrative review by writing us about the reasons you disagree. In an administrative review, a Vocational Rehabilitation Program manager will look at your records to see if there are errors in the decision your VA counselor made on your claim.

This is the least formal way of appealing a decision. Simply send your letter requesting a review to

VAROIC-Philadelphia  
Vocational Rehabilitation and Counseling  
P.O. Box 42954  
Philadelphia, PA 19101

### Formal Appeal

Your other option is to request a formal appeal of this decision. The Board of Veterans Appeals will make the final ruling as to whether your counselor's decision was correct.

***Please keep in mind that once you make a formal appeal, you cannot request an administrative review.*** If you want to file a formal appeal, please read the attached Form 4107, Notice of Procedural and Appellate Rights.