

Section 16

Findings of Quality in RFW Training

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Starting with the issues identified in Section 4 and continuing with summaries of data presented in subsequent sections and with help from the meta-evaluation described in Section 15, we arrived at the following findings of quality.

Quality of RFW Training. The RFW Tools Course training was well done. Working with the American Institutes for Research, a team of experienced VBA staff members long-involved in efforts to improve letter-writing designed, articulated and piloted a training package of high quality. The projected image and voice of Reader Focused Writing was Melodee Mercer, an insurance specialist in the Philadelphia Regional Office. On-site instructors, although called “master communicators” in the plan, had some responsibility for arrangements but, except in a few sites, were not prepared for or engaged much in the instruction. In groups of eight or ten, interacting with Mercer (at the studio in Washington) and with other Regional Office groups, each trainee spent seven half-days examining the benefits and obstacles to writing comprehensible letters to veterans. The quality of teaching was high; the quality of participation was high.

The Tools course modules provided a standard package to be delivered at each training. The modules covered a seven lesson set based upon Broadcast Instructor RFW Tools Course materials, the On-Site Instructor RFW Tools Course broadcast scripts, and the Student RFW Tools Course Workbook. A page by page review by Stephen Gynn found the latter two documents to be well matched, requiring only minor adaptation for subsequent presentations. Broadcast presentations also included brief videos, “on-air” interactive activities/discussions, and “off-air” tasks. These materials were well developed and appropriate for the intended purpose.

Trainees reported satisfaction with the materials used in the RFW training sessions. None reported having seen the training goals, tasks, and subtasks although the promotional statements distributed gave an outlook. Some trainees attempted to develop their own learning outline, a task that would have been easier had they received all the materials at the beginning of the in-service. These trainees said that they had only the Participant Manual, a collection of worksheets. No reference or style manual was available. Nor was there a manual for the on-site instructors. Broadcast studio and on-site instructors used a typed copy of the initial scripts for reference purposes. When asked, no-one mentioned that the instructor script book might have been available to trainees during their training sessions. They were satisfied with the limited materials provided.

Later in their workplaces, the trainees were apparently not asked by their supervisors to refer to resource materials in the preparation of better letters. Some of them told us they kept their Participant Manuals for reminders of class topic discussions, instructor explanations, and for clarification of their own marginal notes.

Trainees had no copy of the RFW Tools Course materials's instructional strategy design which, had it been available, could have shown whether particular components of the strategy were present, and if present, whether they had the potential for gaining and maintaining learner's attention. Trainees said that had such materials been available, they could have made more informed evaluation statements. Several trainees commented on placement of major evaluation responses only at the end of training, making it hard to remember all the topics about on which they wished to comment.

RFW participants said that instructional strategies were used that supported learning and satisfaction with the settings of their training. They liked the combination of on-site (live, face-to-face) instructor and the broadcast (live, televised) instructor. Also, they liked the instructor asking questions to check for student understanding, communicating specific instructional goals and providing well-sequenced presentations of ideas. Interactions were meaningful to their work settings (if supported in the work setting). They were pleased with informal interactions among and between

students, facilitators, and instructors. It was good to have a chance to get together on the job and discuss shared letter-writing problems. They remember nearly a year later that the instructor had called individuals by name, made use of humor, and personalized comments during live assignments. Feedback, in such a setting was immediate and appreciated.

Effects on Trainees. The principles on which the training was built have been outlined here in Section 2. Those concepts were clearly and persuasively presented early in the program. The trainees more or less expected that the program would be hortatory, an exercise in consciousness-raising, an advocacy of better letter-writing. It was that but most of them also found a substantive and formatting approach beyond anything they had previously considered. They were newly exposed to unforeseen problems in letter writing, largely because they were specialized themselves and most of the illustrative letters to be answered in training pursued claims outside their line. They discussed responses to these claims with their group and continued through the seven sessions to be challenged and involved. The experience was one that most participants continued to appreciate a year later. One said,

RFB is one of the best initiatives which we could immediately put into practice to improve customer service.

But few of them were able to put their learnings directly into practice. For most of the trainees, letter-writing to veterans was not their job. And those who responded daily by letter to veterans' claims were using, and were obligated to use, PCGL letter forms, many of which were already in a RFB-like format. The trainees did not see lots of opportunities for putting RFB training to use because the orientation had been to composition of letters whereas common practice in the Regional Offices was to modify existing forms. The trainees could have changed those letters more than they did but they had not been trained to do so and were not encouraged by their division chiefs to spend the time that it would take.

Interruption in Training. After intensive training sessions scheduled from September to November of 1996, RFB training stopped, foregoing even the intended follow-up

for the over 700 trainees. Non-RFW training in letter-writing continued in some places such as Jackson and New York City and versions of RFW were offered at Philadelphia, Wichita, and St. Louis, but with little explanation, further satellite interactive workshops were discontinued. No announcement was given as to possible resumption. The anticipated evaluation project was not funded and the need for evaluation was apparent. It was not until the summer of 1997 that this evaluation was funded as part of a five-project RFW evaluation effort.

It is the dream of training specialists that instruction will be so compelling that some continuation of study, practice, and interaction will move on spontaneously. It seldom happens and, as best we could determine, did not happen here. Further activity awaited a coordinated effort from the Central Office. Stations could of course have initiated continuation efforts on their own, but the RFW initiative was clearly a national effort and ways and means of continuing the training were not forthcoming.

Training Mismatched to Function. The designers of the Tools course were not of one mind about whether or not the course was to train all VBA personnel. In the manual it said the course would be appropriate for 90% of them. Under Secretary for Benefits R. J. Vogel indicated that the training would be part of reengineering to improve all VBA communication. With good reason, the designers believed the RFW principles were appropriate to a wide range of communication, and so spoke, but their Tools course concentrated on letter writing to veterans. Hearing strong advocacy of the principles and sizing up the investment being made in the training, the Directors of many Regional Offices announced that all staff members, at least sooner or later, would be enrolled. Thus, letter writing skill development was undertaken by many staff members who had little occasion to write to veterans. Almost exactly half of the trainees responding to our survey indicated that they spent less than 20% of their time letter writing to veterans.

Thus there was mismatch in two ways, most of the trainees were not highly involved with letters to veterans and those who were were completing form letters rather than composing originals. Although the Boise Service Center officer

(see Section 12) and many of the mandated trainees mentioned this mismatch between training and their duties, they acknowledged that they were responsible for other communications within the station or elsewhere, and that they could apply RFB there too. And they further countered the mismatch notion by expressing appreciation for an increased understanding of the general responsibilities of the station. Specialists with an ever-full in-basket, they had had very little acquaintance with the work in other benefit divisions. Previous formal in-service training had consisted largely of technical training and updating of legal interpretations within their specialty. The 21 hours of RFB training gave them important interaction with their RO colleagues and some contact with staff members at other stations. The overview of some of the most important work of their Regional Office had a positive effect on many of the trainees.

Thus, the training could be applauded both as generic communication training and generic institutional training. On the other hand, its concentration on letter-writing failed to provide direct help to those serving veterans via telephone and face-to-face counseling. And RFB training acknowledged too little that persons "writing" VBA letters usually are modifying PCGL computer letters rather than composing them from scratch. Rather than leaving it to the participants to adapt RFB communication principles to other tasks, the Tools course concentrated on letters to veterans. Among those who questioned the match, the block of time set aside for the Tools course--originally 30 hours, in actuality 21 hours--appeared too long. And having too narrow a focus as well. The focus and time allocation needs rethinking. It could be that some of the 14 hours of video satellite presentation should address other special skills needed for communication with veterans with some time allotted to training in communication with parties other than veterans.

The training did nothing to diminish an already heightened concern for good communications with veterans. Over the years, RO staffers had become sensitive to criticism from veterans, politicians and the public. By their own eyes they knew that many letters sent out were impersonal, obscure, and legalistic. They were aware that efforts to improve letter writing had been underway throughout the '90s and that, partly with computerization, letter writing had improved. Still there was considerable room for improvement

and generally they felt that RFW was a big step in the right direction.

The Training Strategy. As indicated in Section 2, a great deal of thought went into the preparation of the RFW training. The outstanding complaint facing VBA had been the low quality of letters to veterans--so that was the focus of RFW Tools training. It was recognized there were non-letter communication lines with veterans and that there were communications with non-veterans and agencies needing improvement. The training model called for two additional tiers after Tools, dealing first with collaborative team writing and later with forms design and preparation of reference materials. After orientation to communication principles, the RFW Tools Course would deal broadly with letter writing and directly with letters to veterans. From this course, it should be easy to generalize to other written communications. But in the actual instruction, little assistance was given trainees for so doing and the practice and discussion materials were focused on composing letters to veterans. The course turned out to be more specialized than it should have been for many trainees.

In terms of strategic planning, more than training had to be considered. The investment in course development and in trainee time for instruction was expensive, an amount since 1994 we have roughly estimated at between 10 and 15 person-years. Was making letters more comprehensible and less irritating the most important issue? Indianapolis RO Director Dennis Wyant told us that the validity of decisions about veterans benefits was an issue needing more attention than the communication. Our evaluation did not study other possible strategies but those who read this report need to continue to consider them. The importance of RFW is partly a matter of the publicity generated by occasional letters. Although few letters become public and few are meaningful to the public, a very few bad ones become public, indeed sufficiently bad to warrant public indignation. Such publicity is an important matter for public servants, sometimes drawing the Agency toward a strategy that merely makes it look attentive and responsible. For all its good reasoning and personnel involvement, without greater commitment from the Central Office, RFW could be such a strategy.

Designing the Course to Scale. But creating RFB could be seen as one trainee described it, "a sledgehammer to kill an ant." The number of bad letters annually leaving the mailroom is proportionately very small. Still, because the traffic nationwide is so large, the total runs into thousands in a year. Any bad letters at all is not acceptable but, no matter what is done, there will continue to be bad letters. The agency must ever try to do better, and RFB was the strategy of choice in 1996.

An alternative strategy would be to work to find the source of the most egregious letters and to take bold steps to change things. Presently, there seems to be no knowledge as to which Regional Offices have the poorest records (and we did not look into that). There is some knowledge as to which business lines send the worst letters because only a few send a high volume of customized letters to veterans. With Compensation and Pensions leading the list, they also are the divisions which deal with the highest volume of complicated claims. The division chiefs and colleagues have some idea, they told us, as to which letter-writers most need help, but, as far as we could tell, there was little effort to assure that these persons took the training. In fact, in order to avoid the stigma of remediation of weakness, and probably in order to avoid confrontation with the Union, the training was treated as something everyone needed and that, sooner or later, everyone would get.

Of course, the truth is that every staff member above a certain GS level does need such training as RFB. They need to know better the conditions and content of letter writing at their station. They need to know and to put into practice the principles of good communication. They need to participate in professional development that brings matters of VBA strategy as well as skill remediation and enhancement into play. Were RFB training simply a matter of improving letter writing, then the 1996 strategy was imperfect and the application blindly assigned. But an opportunity was seized to teach principles of communication in an experiential and interactive fashion and to advance the sense of membership in VBA operations. In spite of some flaws, the RFB training has to receive high marks.

Complexity of Communication. One of the issues we studied was the possibility that in the effort to make letters more comprehensible, letter writers would find it easier to skip complex matters. We worried that some variations in eligibility for benefits were so complex that it would not be possible to express it simply. Most VBA personnel we talked to were confident that their legal experts had devised a classificatory system that would resolve all possible claims--although some were not. We failed to come up with an example of a claim that called for subjective interpretation, once the criteria had been applied. Nobody denied that some explanations, however objective the resolution, would be hard to understand.

We also looked into the possibility that the pressure for comprehensibility might cause some letter writers to actually avoid raising issues difficult to explain. This would be more likely a problem for PCGL authorship, which we did not study. The senior adjudicators we talked to indicated that they were not aware of instances in which complex issues were omitted from the attachments prepared by rating specialists. But some did say that they did not try to deal with everything in the attachment.

Acquisition or Reference Focus. Every textbook, every instructional package, makes some compromise between providing access to new ideas or skills and providing a subsequent reference file for later retrieval. Instructional writing maximizing assistance to the trainee to acquire new understanding will not provide an optimum resource for troubleshooting later. A troubleshooting manual or reference work is not well organized for guiding the novice or for upgrading advanced skills. Old textbooks are not good handbooks. Good encyclopedias are good for referencing and browsing but not good for acquiring expertise in a complicated field. The RFW course was designed for acquisition rather than for referencing. At present, it leaves the trainee with very little in the way of summary or compendium. For future RFW training, reference works, particularly a style manual, should be created to provide users easy access to solutions to particular problems of letter writing, dealing with such matters as personalization, length of lists, enclosures, acknowledgment of complexity, etc. We were informed that RFW plans existed for such works.

Support from the Regional Offices. For good and bad, sometimes good and sometimes bad, the Regional Offices are different. They try to provide a standard resolution of a claim and to communicate in a rather standard fashion, but they are different mixes of people serving different mixes of people. The Directors of the Regional Offices responded favorably to the RFW initiative. Even as they claimed considerable improvements in letter writing in recent years, they recognized the need for more. They recognized the political necessity and opportunity. They saw themselves as more supportive than the Central Office. They pointed to examples of poor communication coming from CO, lack of repeated endorsement of letter quality, to the discontinuation of training, and a consistent emphasis on productivity without corresponding emphasis on comprehensibility. We did not include examination of the role of CO as part of our evaluation work (although we did include CO trainees in our survey of RFW trainees). We noted that regional staffers referred to the Central Office with some disdain, implying that federal offices were too political. To our question of what is the biggest obstacle to increased use of RFW, some respondents emphatically answered, "The Central Office."

One of our initial evaluation questions was "What are the effects of the RFW training on the Regional Offices?" In spite of the generally positive reception of the trainees, the fact that the practice of few individuals changed much and the fact that the Central Office did not appear to the trainees to be fully committed limited the effects of the training on the organization. Improvement of communication and the principles of RFW are recognizable in the culture of the Regional Offices but we did not conclude that the Fall, 1996 training had an important effect on infrastructure.

Changing Infrastructure to Support RFW. Much of the professional development literature (both research and advocacy based) indicates that innovation in work habits is unlikely without a strong supportive environment. In institutions where workers have a considerable autonomy, planned institutional change is rare. We looked for indications that Regional Offices were undergoing changes to support

RFW or that RFW was causing changes. We did not find much.

According to the manual (RFW Task Force, August, 1995, p 21) rewarding the new behavior was one of the six levers of intended organizational change. We explicitly asked about rewards or recognition given to those who endorsed or practiced RFW. We heard only a few mentions of rewards. The Training Officer at Indianapolis said that regardless of training and rewards, RFW would not happen until the careers of managers could be hurt by inattention to the quality of letter writing. That would be a far greater change than time off or citation of good practice. Awards tend to go to those already doing very well, not to the people who are struggling to overcome old behaviors to take on a few new ones. Honorifics are almost an incidental part of the organizational infrastructure. Not much will happen if institutional standards remain largely unchanged.

One of the logical changes in infrastructure would be to increase group responsibility for letter writing or to increase supervision of it. Neither is given explicit attention in the manual. From their workplace experience, RFW trainees suggested four levels of supervision of letter writing:

Self supervision:

"I save good letter samples, then I refer to them when the same idea comes up again."

"I know what a good letter looks like now."

"I know what kind of a letter that my boss requires."

Peer supervision:

"I ask the person who sits in the desk next to me."

Leader supervision:

"I ask my authorizer to look at my letters."

Supervisor supervision:

"My letters go to my supervisor's desk for review."

"I ask my supervisor for letter review."

"My supervisor spot-checks our letters."

"My supervisor circulates through the unit so often that he has already seen the letters as he helps us work on them. He knows when I am working on a difficult inquiry response."

Customer understanding of what VBA staffers write is a major RFW goal. It is the aim of supervisors to have their employees communicate in language and format easily understood by all customers. As indicated below, the National Performance Review initiative has focused on improved communication between federal workforce employees and their customers.

Vice President Al Gore's initiative to reinvent the federal government has called for dramatic culture change in the public organization, from an "inefficient, outdated" bureaucracy focusing on inputs, to an "innovative, entrepreneurial" organization, focusing on customers. In order to succeed in this effort, the principles underlying the envisioned change must be clearly articulated throughout the federal workforce, from senior management to front line workers delivering products and services to citizens. (Moscoso, 1994, p 11-14)

Ed Bailey (1996, p 120), a Plain English advocate, offered four suggestions for writer's supervisors to get the most from their people: "Get computers for your people, tell your people what you want, show them examples of good writing, and tell them when they write well for you or badly." He added, "Management at all levels will have to work together on behalf of federal workers in a timely manner to have available both up-to-date computer capabilities and trained supervisory staff modeling both the spirit and principles of reader-focused writing."

As a group, nearly 100% of RFW trainees surveyed reported that a "customer first" and "better quality letters to veterans" approach is important. However, as Moscoso reminded us, it will take positive action by individual employees to successfully implement this new "spirit of

change" public service ethic. According to comment volunteered on a large portion of the trainee surveys, the best way that the Central Office could accentuate the RFW commitment would be to make all PCGL and other computerized material embodiments of RFW priorities.

Institutionalized Staff Development. Although this called for more knowledge of VBA than we have, as we saw it, the Agency needed more of a professional development ethic. Both ROs and CO needed changes in infrastructure to make in-service education a workday routine. Presently, training has been seen as adjustment to technical advances and as change in the organization to satisfy views of top administrators. The satellite broadcasts for September, 1997, for example, were on the following topics:

9/10	2 hours	Eligibility Reform (VA-wide)
9/15	3 hours	GPRA (Academy/EAO)
9/22	2 hours	Spina Bifida (C&P)
9/24	2.5 hours	1997 Wrap Up (Federal HR Forum, OPM)
9/26	2 hours	Rating Exam Training (C&P/VHA)
9/30	3 hours	GPRA (Academy/EAO)

This effort to utilize the satellite facilities is commendable but the expectation has not been raised in at least some Regional Offices that training also needs to be for the growth and development of each staff member toward becoming a more professional worker.

A few administrators and workers spoke to us about the needed ethic but were not optimistic about VBA moving far in this direction. Need for further training, however, was often expressed, with urgings particularly for better training of supervisors. Of course, as some trainees pointed out, training opportunities should include high school refresher courses in basic English, proofreading, and general communications--not necessarily provided by VBA but endorsed and partially paid. The New York Regional Office had created a model for such basics in its "Reinvention" program.

Productivity and Letter Quality. The overriding standard for work within VBA is productivity. Especially with station down-sizing, the workload is heavy. In the RFW

context, productivity is often referred to as “timeliness,” a specified time limit for writing each letter. On the table behind the Adjudicator writing PCGL letters is a stack of reddish-brown files awaiting their turn. The stack is ever present, even as the writer faces her computer screen.

With computer letters and choice menus, even a long and complex letter gets written expeditiously, providing amplification by attachments and enclosures. Finishing a letter, the Adjudicator prints it out, sometimes going immediately to the printer to examine the printed copy. Or on to the next letter until a number of print-outs are picked up. There seldom is enough time for thorough proof-reading, to check the quality of the letters, their comprehensibility or content relevance.

We saw these stacks of files at many stations. Here piled on top of file cabinets. There on a rack against the wall. At one spot, the files were topped with a hand-written, bold marker sign reading, “Six months old!” The backlog was a source of stress, often noted by trainees responding to our survey.¹ One trainee wrote:

In the past several years, time spent in non-adjudicative functions has increased (computer keyboarding, software education and related skills) while the pressures for timeliness and production have risen. This poses a direct conflict with current goals directed at better serving the veteran . . . RFB is a prime example of such conflict.

Another trainee’s comment on productivity was:

The emphasis is on paying the right person the right amount at the right time and all else is fixable down the road. It’s all production.

Rosemary Tunnell of the CO Education Office and others told us that they make the argument that productivity is calculated wrong, failing to take into account the follow-up letter-writing required by ineffective responses to claims and

¹ Most objections to the emphasis on productivity appeared genuine but it is important to note that workers reluctant to carry their share of the workload will be among those protesting the emphasis.

inquiries. We were unable to find any good estimates of the extra letters needed because Reader Focused Writing was not being followed. Barry Barker of Boise and other Regional Office directors had become persuaded that productivity and comprehensibility could go hand in hand, but not with productivity of letter writing being measured as it was.

The need for “timeliness” and the need for “comprehensibility” were real. And they worked against each other. It is possible for those opposing forces to be used to advantage if it could be accepted that both standards are of high importance and that neither should dominate the other. In some circumstances, timeliness will prevail but, in other circumstances, it must be subordinate to comprehensibility, and vice versa. Can a climate of mutual respect for high productivity and high quality communication be created? As the Indianapolis Training Officer said, “Not unless top management wills it.”

Conventional and Distance Instructional Delivery. RFW trainees told us that the instructional strategies supported their learning and were suitable for the setting in which training occurred. These settings included an on-site, face to face instructor and the live, broadcast instructor. The trainees spoke of the qualities identified in research by Egan and Sebastian,² namely, instruction, interactions, teaching behaviors, and feedback. The trainees we interviewed said that collectively these were experientially engaging and relevant to their needs. They spoke of specific instructional goals, well-sequenced presentation of ideas, questioning to clarify understandings, meaningful informal interactions among students, facilitators, and instructors; a personal approach to individual trainees with humor and good spirit, and timely and relevant feedback. The usual complaints of distance education: “talking heads,” authoritarian attitudes, and insensitivity to the learner’s reality, were not mentioned in our hearing.

² M. Winston Egan and Joan Sebastian, Teaching strategies for conventional and television instruction: Which ones contribute to positive outcomes for college students? *Proceedings of the 11th Annual Conference on Distance Teaching and Learning*, August 9-11, 1995, Madison, Wisconsin, p 63-71.

The simultaneous use of a broadcast and on-site instructor was a positive feature. Their combined presence drew from the strength of tele-instruction's large audience production and from the interest generated by face-to-face events. As noted by professional developer Linda Wolcott, continuing education has a special burden in "maintaining information and rapport" due to proximity, "the gestures and facial expressions of the participants and one's surroundings." Wolcott, like others,³ cautioned instructors to be reflective practitioners, planning courseware and delivery to assure "interpersonality when the participants cannot see one another or respond in real time." That emphasis on interaction and feedback, Wolcott emphasized, is at least as important as the formal information delivered. Teaching in this fashion was well developed in the RFW satellite programming.

Exportability to Other Agencies. The question has been raised as to suitability of RFW for use in other federal agencies. The answer is quite clear. The course as developed is based on general principles but emphasizes the application of those principles in a highly contextualized fashion. This practicality enhances the engagement of trainees and the usefulness to trainees actually engaged in composing letters. The course (as examined in this evaluation) has only been carried out with one lead instructor (She was an extremely able instructor.) and with a particular interactive satellite system. It is reasonable to suppose that the electronics are not critical but the interactivity is. It is reasonable to suppose that many lead instructors would be much less successful. But the main consideration is that the course would need to be considerably redeveloped for any new user, adapted to the styles and content of letter writing there. The principles can be expected to generalize but the actual instruction of RFW at VBA can be a model for other developers to follow, but new material, a new design, and a re-examination of strategy would be essential.

³ See Linda L. Wolcott, The distance teacher as reflective practitioner, *Educational Technology*, January-February, 1995, p 39-43; James D. Laney, Going the distance: Effective instruction using distance learning technology, *Educational Technology*, March-April, 1996, p 51-53; Jeremy Galbraith, Interactive television: The state of the industry, *Educational Technology*, March-April, 1996, p 24-35.

Meeting Veterans' Needs. Reader Focused Writing is a broad strategy for improved communication. As taught in the Tools Course, RFW attends to communication with veterans via letters. Emphasis on the individual veteran's needs is prominent and consistent. When we asked the trainees what that emphasis meant, we heard most often that it referred to needs within the scope of the claim, rather than their needs more generally. Occasionally someone raised the possibility that it also had to do with literacy and ability to comprehend official communication. (Even in New York City and the Southwest, we did not identify situations in which the correspondence should have been prepared in a language other than English.) Some trainees were resistant to thinking they had an obligation to consider the range of needs the veteran might have. The concept of needs needs further development, both for the training protocols and in the individual thinking of trainees.

We found the trainees pretty well acquainted with the people they were writing to. In conversation, they treated the veterans with respect, with an urgency to communicate effectively. To find out for ourselves more about the veterans, we arranged a brief telephone survey. Our sample was small and the veterans not randomly selected. We talked almost entirely with veterans recently receiving letters. They reminded us of the importance of the VBA mission. We found them a moody constituency, causing us to pause to reflect: We citizens who benefited from the risks they took and the prices paid owe them a share of our peace and prosperity. Although the memories of war fade further and further into the past, our obligations remain. The VBA is the agent of our obligation.

Our calls reminded us of the moods of these former servicemen and women: appreciation, anger, humor, derision. Whether supporting or protesting the efforts of Veterans Affairs, most conveyed a summary judgment of it. Few responded to our brief inquiry in ways directly illuminating our training issues; most had a verdict to impart, quickly casting their VBA letter writers as: self-protective, cold, vague, impersonal, intimidating, careless, and mysterious, on the one hand--and, on the other hand: informative, focused, apologetic, responsive, articulate, personable. To add detail, here are comments of three veterans we called:

Very intimidating: If you don't do this in a particular way, we'll deny your claim. . . . You have 60 days; *they* take two years. . . . VA asks veteran for proof, for documentation, for "stressors," but they have all the records. . . . When you do provide information, they don't change their records, so you have to do it all over again with the next contact. . . . Not very human. . . .

They always kept me informed about what they were doing. . . . If I could understand them, anyone could. . . . I got letters from several different people and they were all consistent.

Comparatively easy to understand. I have a formal education and I have to think about what they're saying. Others might have problems. . . . First rejection letter spelled out everything clearly. . . . Boilerplate letters with "cover your backside" sort of stuff in it. . . . Not a real cold letter. Doesn't have the tone that you're just trying to get money from them. . . . their English could be better. . . . They want you to submit information they should already have.

Whether 20% or 80% of the total, a great many veterans have a very negative view of the VA system. It is not enough for VBA to have a satisfactory median; all veterans should be well served. The distraught sometimes speak badly of the letters, sometimes presume the writers malevolent. In this brief study, we found nothing to warrant that perception. Agency personnel were well intentioned, compassionate, ethical, both in a personal and institutional sense. They welcomed the upgraded priorities of Reader Focused Writing, putting the needs of the veteran first and the meaning of the letter up front. Yet a perception of antipathy continues--and surely will increase as long as productivity is more important an institutional criterion than personal service.

