

Section 1.

The Need for Improved Letter Writing

In the early 1950's, according to Coronet magazine¹, a veteran received the following letter, in its entirety, from what is now the Department of Veterans Affairs:

The non-compensable evaluation heretofore assigned you for your service-connected disability is confirmed and continued.

This message that his eligibility for benefits had not changed has been, across the years, one of many stimuli to the writing of more comprehensible letters. A 112-page manual was prepared in the '50s by Mona Shepard but its effects were neither universal nor permanent. In '97, the following letter was one of several that, without special search, popped from VBA files:

We have made a decision on your claim for benefits. The decision document called a rating is attached. Please read it through completely. The rating explains why we reached the decision that we did.

If You Disagree With The Decision:

You may appeal the decision we have made. A notice explaining your appeal rights is attached

If you applied for more than one benefit, it would be helpful for you to tell us exactly what part of our decision you want to appeal.

If you have any questions about our decision, you can call us at 1-800-827-1000.

Dependents' Educational Assistance (Chapter 35)

Your daughter Maureen is eligible for Dependents' Educational Assistance. We are enclosing a pamphlet,

¹ From "She hates gobbledygook" by Peter Wyden, Coronet, March, 1956.

“Summary of Education Benefits,” which explains the program.

To make a claim, just complete the “Application for Survivors’ and Dependents’ Educational Assistance” and send it back to us.

The writer apparently considered this to be a cover letter for the attachment which included, amid other things, the critical information explaining the decision:

1. Evaluation of posttraumatic stress disorder, which is currently 100 percent disabling, is continued.
2. Basic eligibility to Dependents’ Educational Assistance is established from May 9, 1997.

But does a reader expect to find the key information in an attachment? The problems faced by the designers of Reader Focused Writing were not those of doing better than the 1950s letter. Very few VBA letters are bad enough to stir the indignation. But many continue to be impersonal and hard to understand. For political reasons, for compassionate reasons, RFW was designed to produce letters which honor the veteran, which make the veteran feel good about having the correspondence. And it was designed to convey information comprehensibly. That is not always easy because many of the eligibility situations for benefits are complex. We gathered many views. They agreed. The need for better letters, better communication, existed.