

## Section 9.

# Evidence of Improved Letter Writing

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As part of the evaluation of RFW training, we analyzed letters written by trainees, both from the files and new letters written in a standardized performance situation. The letters were analyzed against 15 criteria oriented to Reader Focused Writing. In addition, in a holistic sense, the overall merit of the letters was judged by several writing specialists. For both holistic and analytic rating, we had file letters, letters once sent and now drawn from the files, written prior to and after training to compare. For the performance analysis, also rated holistically and analytically, responding to one of four fictitious inquiries, the letters were written by trainees almost a year after training.

Analysis of letter-quality criteria for both sets of letters revealed a strong adherence to RFW principles. 74% of the post-training file letters and 69% of the performance task letters were rated as meeting 13 or more of the 15 criteria listed below. In addition, both sets of letters were rated on responsiveness to the veteran's needs. Each letter attended to at least some of the veteran's needs but the rating panelists also reported inattentiveness to some of the needs. In reviewing the file letters which usually was not accompanied by the veteran's correspondence, the panelists were handicapped by unfamiliarity with the veteran's case. With the performance task, the fictional letter from the veteran provided grounds for assessing veteran needs. In summarizing their overall judgment of the letters, the panelists were much less satisfied than their ratings indicated. But even with these reservations, the letters pulled from the files and written for our evaluation study reflected widespread application of RFW principles.

**The Design.** Our study of file letters (we copied a few from the RO files) and performance task letters underwent changes as we became better acquainted with the workings of VBA. The performance task required a 45 minute response to one of four fictitious letters provided. Three of the four letters

were tailored to benefit divisions and the fourth was a long letter asking about many possible benefits. We had originally intended to have 125 trainees at visited sites complete the performance task but managed to get only 42, partly because the limited number of willing, trained “frequent letter writers” at Denver, St. Petersburg, Boise and Indianapolis Regional Offices. We were unable to get any performance letters at Baltimore.

The analysis of real letters from RO files also changed during the course of the study. We had intended to collect letters, one pre-training and one post-training, written by our trainee interviewees at the visited sites. Once in the field, we collected letters from the files that were available, more post- than pre-, and mostly authored by trainees we did not interview. We collected 76 letters written to veterans from the Denver, St. Petersburg, Boise, New York and Indianapolis Regional Offices. Twenty-eight of those letters had the veteran’s request, often a submitted VBA form. Twenty-two of the letters were written before training and 5 of the post-training letters were written by a non-trainees. The pre-training and non-trainee letters were considered as “not influenced by the RFW training” and grouped together for comparison with the trainees’ letters.

Fifteen Criteria

<b>Format</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Style</b>	<b>Grammar &amp; Mechanics</b>	<b>Content</b>
Headings	Up Front Message	Tone	Wording	Internal Consistency
Bullets	One Idea per Paragraph	Direct and comprehensible sentences	Mechanics	Statement of Rationale for VA decisions
White space	Apparent Sequence	Active voice	Grammar	Clear Specification of Action

Our analysis of letters, both performance task and real letters, was conducted by a panel of four raters.<sup>1</sup> The panel met on October 24 for orientation to the rating task and as a group discussed the rating process and rated one letter. The letters were rated on the fifteen criteria shown above.

These criteria were identified in our readings of RFW materials. Each letter was judged as to the presence of each criterion, with appropriateness of the use of headings, bullets, and white space included in its rating. Additionally, the performance task letters and the 28 real letters having a veteran originating letter or form were judged by the panel for responsiveness to the veteran's needs.

Each letter was rated by three independent raters. Two members of the panel reviewed the entire set of letters. The other two members each review 50% of the letters with the division of their responsibility assigned so that their 50% contained a sampling of letters from all the Regional Offices in the set, from performance task and real letters, from pre- and post- training and from file letters with and without originating veteran correspondence. The panelists submitted their ratings and a summary statement of the letters as a set plus an overview of the task by October 28.

**Analysis.** We counted the criteria identified in the panelists' judgments into a summary score for each letter, file or performance, then compared the pre-training to post-training scores. First we present the comparison of pre- and post- file letters to veterans from the RO files, then the comparison of performance task letters.

The set of real letters was reduced from 76 to 68 when it was discovered that the training status of five letter-writers was uncertain and three had only two ratings. Of those

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<sup>1</sup> The panelist were: Norman Stenzel, a retired staffer at the Illinois State Board of Education and long time specialist in school-based writing projects and state mandated achievement testing; Seamus Reilly, a professor of Business and Technical Writing and acting head of the department; Barbara Metcalf, an editor and advocate of critical writing; and Christopher Migotsky, an professional training specialist at the University of Illinois' Office of Instructional Resources and a writer and teacher of program evaluation.

Number of File Letters Rated from 3 Criteria Present Up to 15 Criteria Present

Number of criteria	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
25 pre-training letters	1	0	1	3	4	1	1	2	2	3	2	3	2
43 post-training letters	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	6	2	1	4	12	16

remaining, 25 were classified as pre-training or non-trainee authored and 43 as post-training letters. A criteria score of 15 indicates that each of the 15 criteria were found. The median number of criteria rated for post-training letters was 14. For pre-training letters the median was 10. The RFW letters were significantly better than the pre-RFW letters on the criteria taught in RFW training.

Realizing that many of the pre-training letters would not have headings, bullets and white space, format features of RFW, we looked closely at their scores. Of those 25 letters, 17 were not checked as having headings, 15 were not checked as having bullets and 8 were not checked as allowing for white space. The median difference of 4 between pre- and post-letters cannot be explained away by attributing it to format differences alone.

**Performance Task Criteria.** The panelists reported that the performance task letters attended to many of the criteria. The median score for both the Loan Guaranty letter and the Disability letter was 14 out of 15 criteria.

On our ten minute questionnaire, many of the letter writers participating in the performance task identified their division and percentage of time spent preparing letters to veterans. As anticipated, the eight Loan Guaranty writers undertaking this task chose to respond to the loan letter. No

other division member chose the loan letter. Twenty-three of

**Number of Criteria Observed in  
Each of Four Performance Task Letters**

<b>Number of Criteria</b>	<b>General Letter</b>	<b>Loan Guaranty Letter</b>	<b>Disability Letter</b>	<b>Vocational Rehabilitation Letter</b>
15		2	6	1
14	1	3	11	
13		1	4	
12			2	
11	1	1	1	1
10		1	1	
9				
8			2	1
7				
6				
5			1	
4				1
3				
2				
1				

the staffer in C & P responded to the disability letter and two staffers chose the general letter. Four staff members in Veterans Services Division chose the disability letter and three responded to the vocational rehabilitation letter. One participant from a RO Director's office responded to the disability letter and the Vocational Rehabilitation staff member answered the vocational rehabilitation letter. Letter choices by division were in line with expectations.

Thirty-four performance task participants provided the percentage of time they spend preparing letters to veterans. In looking at the summary score of the letters by the percentage of time, we saw nothing to indicate that the more active letter writers were attending more to RFW criteria in their letters.

**Number of Criteria for 34 Letters by Percentage of Time the Author Was Spending Writing Letters to Veterans**

<b>Number of Criteria</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>1-10%</b>	<b>11-39%</b>	<b>40-60%</b>	<b>61-80%</b>
15	1	1	3	1	1
14	1	4	3	3	3
13		2	1		1
12					1
11		2	1	1	
10	1				
9					
8		2			
7					
6					
5					
4			1		
3					
2					
1					

**Responsiveness.** The panel also rated the letter sets on their responsiveness to the veteran’s needs.

The panelists assessed the responsiveness of the VBA letter writer to the veteran’s needs with both performance task letters and file letters. At that stage, our panel was reduced to three raters with two of them taking half the stack of letters. Thus each letter received just two ratings. We asked the panelists to judge if “All, Some, or None” of the veteran’s needs were addressed in the letters.

For the 42 performance task letters, we were able to define the veteran’s needs from our fictional letters. The panel generally found the letters to respond to the veteran’s needs. Of the 42 performance letters, 12 letters were marked “all” by both panelists. Six letters were marked “All” by one panelist and “Some” by the other. Twenty-three letters were marked “Some” by both panelists. And one letter was marked

“Some” by one panelist and “None” by the other. Judgments of the two raters were consistent 35 times out of 42.

As stated earlier, the panelists found it difficult to assess responsiveness to the veterans’ needs for the 28 file letters having an originating veteran request or form. Most of the letters were judged to respond to “All” or “Some” of the veteran’s needs. For many of these letters, a panelist or two was not confident about marking them as responding to the needs. Ten of the letters received only one rating and 12 letters received two ratings. In asking our panel to look at responsiveness of these file letters, we were aware that it was beyond the scope of our study--and the panelists convinced us that they did not have enough information to make good decisions about responsiveness to content.

Two panelists conducted a second task for our evaluation team. Stenzel and Reilly compared the performance task letters. They assessed the similarity of forms, actions described for veterans to perform and reasons given for those actions in the letters. They found a wide range of components. Their comments in the following sections do address the variance of the letters between the authors responding to the different fictional letters.

### **Panelist Comments on the Rating Assignment**

One panelist, Norman Stenzel, made the following comments regarding the rating that he and other panelists did for the evaluation study.

**Protocol.** General traits of a composition are often used to characterize execution. Each trait has a descriptive spectrum of characteristics showing more of something at one end and less at the other. A panelist then, estimates the proportion contained in a document. Our approach was a bit different. We were using general categories that are very like the general traits in common use. In place of a proportionate spectrum, panelists looked for the presence or absence of features emphasized in the RFW training.

**Anchor Papers.** Panelists were briefly trained in a consensus building process. A paper was read and discussed for each of the features of interest. The paper used was an

actual item of interest. The consensus reached was used to identify an anchor paper for reference purposes. The anchor paper was then reread during the scoring as a way to prevent drift in scoring.

**Rating.** Each paper was read by multiple panelists and agreement checked against a specified criteria. Agreement was examined for each of the features. The two closest ratings were used to characterize a letter. Not all feature criteria were scored in the same manner.

### **Reflections on the Panelist Experience**

We expended considerable effort in examining the letters written by VA staff members. We believe that being able to have some numerical description of common features of letters written to veterans or in response to our constructed prompts has allowed us some insights to pass along in this report.

Yet the experience of doing the analysis itself is of even more import. We were an audience. We were engaged in an experience, an experience that in some ways approximates the experience of veterans seeking assistance from the VA. Although the evaluation study did not include a study of the content of letter writing, we panelists attempted to understand that content. We sometimes were puzzled. At other times we became frustrated in the effort. There were also ahs and even ahas. We reacted.

In reflecting upon our experiences we have suggested possibilities and perhaps even probabilities about the letters as communication. We include some of those reflections here.

### **Learning to Read**

We engaged in a process designed to bring the panelists into agreement about what they saw in a VBA letter. While a letter writer may be satisfied with the product of his/her labors, we found troublesome differences in our interpretations of the content of the letters. It required considerable time, more than three quarters of an hour in one instance, to reach some sort of agreement. While we were working in

collaboration to resolve our differences, we imagined that many veterans would be alone in confronting the text. There are a number of scenarios that we imagined:

- The veteran might give up any attempt to understand a letter.
- The veteran may simply adopt an understanding that may or may not be correct.
- The veteran might go to someone locally for assistance in understanding.
- The veteran might use the 800 number assistance number.

While we do not have particular evidence, we do not feel comfortable in assuming that any one of these strategies will be able to provide a sound interpretation of a letter. While someone at the 800 number should have a better chance than the others, we suggest that the variability we found in the advice provided in comparable letters might be indicative of different viewpoints among VA staff that could allow differing interpretations of VA letters.

### **Learning to Write**

In order for us to read letters well we needed to develop a sense of the strategies being used by writers. We understand that the VA is interested in creating sets of topical paragraphs to use in constructing responses to letters from veterans. The goal is to have a well developed pool of approved materials for use in response to veterans. We have heard that VA authors can be quite proficient in finding prepared paragraphs to include in letters in response to veterans. In our readings, we have come to recognize many of those prepared paragraphs.

But writing is more than selecting paragraphs to string together into a letter. Where does the letter begin and how does it proceed to the end? That is a strategic matter. The whys for the string of paragraphs include judgments by the writer that we wondered about

- Beginnings were quite different.
- We saw letters that began with just a brief statement about responding to a request.
- We saw letters that started immediately with matters at hand.

- A smaller number of letters included a more elaborate introduction.
- Some of those gave an overview of the letter as whole.
- Some focused on a single up-front message.
- We even saw several that included some of the didactic messages that were at the ends of other letters.
- There were just a few strategic patterns to the bodies of letters.
- Authors use one approach to respond to items in an inquiry one after the other.
- Another strategy used is to respond to some sub-set of items.

Our attempt to understand the reasons for less than complete responses gave us a number of suppositions to consider. At times there seems to be a triage. Some authors selected a starting point--a form or an action that would set things in motion. All other items of inquiry would eventually follow from that. Other authors responded to some items and ignored others. Our thought is that some of those responses are deliberate--based on attention to appropriate matters, and ignoring inappropriate items. And we think that other responses are simple the product of inattention in reading to all of the details in inquiries.

**Form Versus Substance.** We have seen letters that have been constructed to include many of the features coached in the training of VA letter writers. We saw headings, bullets, and white space. There were examples of letters that appeared to be quite concerned with helping a veteran. However, some of those features were implemented in dysfunctional ways:

- Headings highlighted a confusing sequence in some letters.
- Some headings were apparently constructed because headings were part of the training, rather than because of a need to announce sequence, sections, or major elements of text.
- Some bullets were used for purposes that were not clear while in other places bullets were missing where they could have highlighted a list, or a set of required actions.
- White space became a negative feature in some letters, particularly longer ones, where coherence was lost by separating headings too far from text and spreading ideas over a greater distance in letters.

Beyond that, we were not satisfied that the letters accomplished all that needed to be accomplished. We puzzled about what "Vet centered" meant to authors. The vast majority of letters we read did not seem to be carrying on a conversation with anyone. There was no acknowledgment in many letters that a real person had made a request.

A Vet could pick up a letter and legitimately say, "Didn't they even read what I wrote to them? There is nothing here that responds to me."

In comparing letters responding to the same prompt we worried that there was variation in what our fictional vets were directed to do--different stock paragraphs were included; different forms were suggested; and some built in issues at times were ignored. If this happened in our contrived exercise, how can we have confidence that a good looking letter is not flawed? We panelists wondered about the impact of policy and procedure on the nature of letters in response to vets.

In one case this wondering began with reflection upon multiple letters of response to a single letter of inquiry. We can understand that the request included questions that required the expertise of a number of different authors. It might even be the case that attempting to construct a single letter in reply could delay a response or cause confusion if a vet wanted additional information. Yet, if client centeredness is desirable, we could not understand why a "case manager" could not serve as a mediator for all of the different sources of information within the agency in order to reduce the need for multiple letters of response.

And then we wondered if the Agency strategy in this instance required multiple replies could there be other Agency policies and practices that are unduly complicated in the impression it provides to veteran clients.

### **Further Panelist Remarks**

Christopher Migotsky, instructional technologist, added the following comments regarding the 55 letters he examined. "I have chosen to include my thoughts on the VBA letters as well as those on the rating process itself."

**The VBA Letters.** The *tone* of the letters varied widely, but remained largely respectful and courteous. Some were clearly outstanding and personal, but most remained just “respectful.” A few (those not receiving a mark) were deemed too form-like or slightly disrespectful. In general, the letters “felt” a bit too standard for my liking.

The *plan of action* for the receiving veteran was often weak. At times no clear plan of action was stated, at other times the needed action was present but buried within several paragraphs throughout the letter.

The *extra information sheets* included with some letters could create an excessive burden on the recipient. Several letters had informational pamphlets and forms to fill out with only minor accompanying guidance. At times, additional documents were mentioned but the actual documents were not attached. In these cases the subsequent rating of the letter was made with leniency.

While most of the letters themselves were free from *legalistic jargon*, many of the “Statements of the Case” or “Ratings Decisions” were difficult to follow due to excessive jargon and legalese. In rating these letters with accompanying “legal” documents, I concentrated solely on the letter and not the attached statements.

I found it hard to believe that some of the letters were written by the *signed author*. In the case of Guy Sakamoto,<sup>2</sup> the style of signed letters varied from succinct, well laid out, personal letters to standard form letters with little formatting to assist the reader. Are these written by the same person over time, or are they simply “signed” by one individual at the field office but written by various members of staff? If veterans follow-up over the phone or in person and expect to have contact with the “letter writer,” this could be cause for concern.

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<sup>2</sup> The file letters from Boise were equally divided between pre- and post-training letters. This may account for the differences Migotsky noted.

**The Rating Process.** I found it extremely difficult to remain *consistent* over the letter-rating task. After viewing some letters that were clearly superior to previous ones, my standard for certain traits changed. Part of this inconsistency may be related to the rating training--we didn't receive a comprehensive sampling to anchor our responses on some of the traits. Fortunately, phone calls to Rita Davis proved very valuable in reconciling some rating confusion. I have serious doubts that the internal reliability of my ratings would satisfy rigorous research standards. I have even greater concern that inter-rater reliability may be lower than desired. I would like to be informed of the results of any reliability analyses the evaluators conduct.

Related to the above concern, I have a *validity issue* that may need to be addressed. I found few instances of passive voice in the VBA letters. This rarity may be attributable to my preferences. First, I tend to employ passive voice in my own writing and thus have a difficult time targeting a letter for instances of passive voice--it simply doesn't become a concern for me in most instances. Second, passive voice is not necessarily a negative characteristic of written communication. Overuse of the passive voice can lead to dense reading and subsequent reduction in the quality of writing, but there are cases where the passive expression is appropriate. Third, the passive voice is often associated with marginalized groups in society. Women and minorities often utilize this writing style and I find the rigorous opposition to this form disconcerting. If you would like to retrain me on the detection of passive voice, I would be willing to review my decisions on this trait and resubmit my ratings.

I rated the *comprehensibility* of most of the letters as adequate, but I have concerns whether a "real" recipient would feel the same way. As an advanced graduate student, I am probably not the best representative to determine the comprehensibility of a document intended for a more general audience. Being more familiar with academic prose, I found most of these sample letters refreshingly simple and straightforward.

Barbara Metcalf, editor, turned over the following notes she made regarding the 60 letters she examined.

As I read the letters I thought “I am happy that I do not work there,” but also, “I am glad I am not a veteran with a problem that has to be resolved.” None of the letters seemed friendly and several were not even respectful. A general overview revealed a range in tone from neutral to negative. An example of this was a letter sent to a veteran about what benefits he might receive. The letter began by saying “You are not entitled to \_\_\_\_\_.” followed by a chart with all zeros (talk about busy work). Upon reading this, the veteran might well feel defeated. The next sentence read “You are entitled to \_\_\_\_\_.” Reading this would probably invoke a negative sense immediately. The letter could have been phrased in a much more positive way, such as “You are entitled to \_\_\_\_\_,” at the beginning of the letter.

The letters often contained more information than veterans needed or wanted. Related to this was an issue of letter format. A majority of the letters and the sections within them did not require headings. Letter style regarding white space in letters did not create a problem. The letters did get the “message” across, but what message? After establishing, the “message,” the letters frequently reverted to legal and bureaucratic issues. Few letters were clear regarding the message intended.

While often, the letters contained a plethora of information, there were problems with giving insufficient information regarding the specific case. For example, one veteran sent a letter providing information on his case to the VBA in response to a request they had sent. He was under the impression that the information he had sent would satisfy the VBA’s requirements and that his claim could be addressed. The veteran then received another letter in which he was told he had to send further information. Much time and frustration could have been eliminated if the initial VBA request had included all of the necessary information. Additionally, the same information was required from veterans repeatedly.

Regarding the performance task, the letters were not always responsive. The veteran never got a definitive

answer immediately. The VBA responses often contained confusing messages about what was required. For example, they wrote “You must give us medical information” or “we will do it for you.” I wondered “if they can do it better, why put this burden on the client.” It is good to note that the real letters I reviewed were much better.

Would the average veteran would understand the letters from the VA? It appeared that they would most of the time. I know that we should not underestimate people. Most are smarter than we think.

On some of the letters I marked many of the criteria but they were not good letters. They appeared to reveal a non-veteran oriented focus. There are many veterans who could use help from the VA but will never get it because they are unwilling to go through all the invasions of privacy and complicated steps to get the help they need.

Seamus Reilly, business writing specialist, provided the following comments regarding the letters he examined.

In general, the letters we read met general expectations of bureaucratic prose. Some of the letters made conscious attempts to be reader-friendly by using bullets, white space, and headings. However, many of the letters failed to provide information which the average reader could understand or omitted information altogether. Although there was a conscious effort on the part of many of the letter writers to make the information appear simple, much information was omitted or made confusing.

The single most interesting aspect of the letters was the variation to a set stimulus even when the letters originated from the same office. Some letters implied that the veteran had merely to fill out a single form, while others insisted that the veteran provide basic service records, medical records, discharge records, and family testimonials. Some letters tried to be succinct and left out vital steps in the process of applying for benefits. Almost all of the letters included standard formulaic disclaimers which often proved distracting or even contradictory. One letter even offered the veteran the chance to appeal a newly awarded benefit.

What the letters lacked overall, however, was a simple cause and effect chain which clearly set out the actions required of the veteran. This was most commonly seen in the request for medical records. The veteran was told to provide the complete medical records for review in one paragraph, while the VBA offered to collect the documents if the veteran filled out a form. Surely, the most logical, not to mention most efficient, method would be for the VA to collect records given its databases. Also, why should a veteran be expected to provide family testimonials concerning an illness or disability when medical evidence is also requested. The overall effect suggested an attempt to communicate clearly, but with little sense of exactly what was to be communicated.

The tone of the letters was fairly positive except for the passages concerning appeals which were full of jargon and threatening. The correlation between the original veteran letter and the response was sometimes hard to gauge although this might be expected if the correspondence was protracted. Most of the letters provided places (and real people) for further information and contact.

There were some letters which were uninformative and seemed hurried or form-responses to a myriad of veteran inquires. These letters largely ignored the questions the veteran posed or provided data which seemed unclear and confusing. (For example, the charts which explained the percentages of disability or the tables of withholding allowances.) One writer responded in block capital to letter #2 and thereby accentuated the latent hostility towards homosexual relationships.

My overall impression was that letters appeared more reader-friendly, but often left the reader unsure as to the exact message. What is missing is a clear logical process which will provide the veteran with specific, straightforward directions. However, such directions can only be communicated if there is a standard set of guidelines and reactions to the needs of the veterans.

## Summary

The panelists independently rated 68 real letters from Regional Office files and 42 performance task letters on the 15 criteria identified from RFW training. The median number of criteria attended to for both the post-training file letters and performance letters was 14. This considerably exceeded the criteria attended to in the pre-training and non-training letters that we observed. We were fully persuaded that trained RO staff members had the ability to apply the training to the writing of letters. However, as noted, the panelists expressed concern about both the file and performance task letters still lacking a desired effectiveness as communications to veterans. Were this only true of file letters, we might conclude that there had not been ample time to write the best letter of which they were capable. The performance task letters had time limits too, but since the writers were aware of the scrutiny and still did not satisfy the panelists, it might best be concluded that on-the-job training, carefully supervised, is still needed.

