

The new VA.gov content style guide went live
May 3, 2019, as part of the Design System.
(We kicked off the working group in December 2018.)

VA.gov content style guide
design.va.gov/content-style-guide/

Special thanks go to these regular, stalwart working group contributors

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Summary of new or changed guidance

May 21, 2019

Site updates

- Removed examples of alert boxes with expandable content.

Content style guide updates

Summary of new guidance or change in guidance (either from the vets.gov or OPIA style guides):

- [Sentence casing](#), except for “Veterans,” global header, global footer, global top nav labels, and proper nouns
- [Service member](#) spelling change, per latest OPIA and DOD style guides.
- [Times and time zones](#): Omit daylight savings/standard reference; use ET, MT, CT, PT without parentheses; an style updates.
- [Phone numbers and vanity numbers](#) style change.
- Use “select” instead of “press” for phone menu options. It’s more 508-friendly.
- Numbers: When to use 1, when to spell out “one.”
- Use we, us, you when talking with Veterans.
- Use they and their as gender-neutral pronouns.
- Changes to [how we display links](#) and use embedded links.
- Guidance and tips for [writing health content](#).
- Writing for SEO: format and character count updates for [title tags and meta descriptions](#).
- [Bulleted lists](#): Clarification on punctuating; on when multiple lists on the same page.
- Clarification on [contractions](#). (Contractions are conversational. We use them.)
- Change of house reference from Chicago Manual to AP Style. This aligns with OPIA house reference.

List of updates/changes
can always be found
here, for both design and
content.

<https://design.va.gov/documentation/whats-new.html>

What this is *NOT*

- Governance
- Policies
- Procedures
- 6102
- CMS
- Visual brand, graphics, logos
- Print standards & guidelines
- Agency house guidelines

What this *is*

Usage style guide totally for VA.gov—including:

- Nomenclature
- Voice, tone
- First person, second person
- Capitalization
- Word list
- Contractions
- CTA and SEO best practices
- And yes, commas, too

Existing content/editorial guidelines - in-progress list (11/3/2018)					
SOURCE	TITLE	URL/PAPER DOC (PDF LINK?)	ORGANIZATION/TEAM	POINT OF CONTACT	NOTES
Vets.gov	Vets.gov Playbook > Editorial	https://www.vets.gov/playbook/editorial/	USDS	?	Broad principles, rather than style guide of how-to's, examples, granular content types (ec parameters around how to write button CTA's vs headlines vs body copy, etc.)
Vets.gov	Vets.gov Playbook > Components	https://www.vets.gov/playbook/design/components/	USDS	?	Design components but include what types of content each should be used for -- 50/50 design/content
Vets.gov	Vets.gov Playbook > Templates	https://www.vets.gov/playbook/design/templates/	USDS	?	Content guidelines but include what types of content each should be used for -- 50/50 design/content
Vets.gov on GitHub	Formation	https://department-of-veterans-affairs.github.io/design-system/index.html	USDS	Jared Cunha	Formation design system - not content per se, but it does have SOME content guidelines For example on error message content - see below. It says, "Formation is a single source of documentation and truth for people looking to use the Vets.gov components."
Vets.gov Design System on GitHub		https://department-of-veterans-affairs.github.io/design-system/docs/messaging-and-error-handling/error-message-standards-on-content-style-guide.html	Jared Cunha/USDS		Very detailed but overly complex to digest best guidelines for error message texts. Compare to error message guidelines below, another guideline
Vets.gov Design System on GitHub		https://github.com/department-of-veterans-affairs/vets.gov-va/tree/master/Products/Design%20System/04stylelines/Error%20Handling	DSVA	Beth Potts or Danielle Thierry (DS Company)	Style guide specific to error messages (Note: I would like to add an update re: adding subheads to longer error messages based on recent user research)
Vets.gov on GitHub		https://github.com/department-of-veterans-affairs/vets.gov-content-style-guide/blob/master/public-of-contents.md	DSVA	Beth Potts (DS Company)	Not sure if this is same/different from the web vets.gov editorial playbook above. Appears more detailed - word list, so on.
Vets.gov on GitHub		https://github.com/department-of-veterans-affairs/vets.gov-content-style-guide/blob/master/templates-and-guides/checklists/plain-language-checklist.md	DSVA	Beth Potts or Danielle Thierry (DS Company)	Plain language checklist
Vets.gov on GitHub	SEO Writing	https://github.com/department-of-veterans-affairs/vets.gov-va/blob/master/Products/Content/Content%20Strategy/SEO%20Writing.md	DSVA	Danielle Thierry or Melissa Schuff	WIP SEO writing style guide

“We have 43 because we didn’t have 1.”

—Steve Walker, CH

VA.gov Web Governance	Content Management	https://www.va.gov/			Content: Basic, common sense web content principles, no examples of ing content re design of content as vs. link CTA's, per/alert messages. PRODUCE search snippet says, "The web is the official directive and - the VA. This site will change - as the content for the Governance Board? The 6302 DOB versions. If contact offices, the site itself as the contact for the Governance Board? The 6302 DOB version. Other sources. Seems more so. Last pub June 2013.
VA Web Governance site	6302 Handbook	https://www.va.gov/			Above site links to this, top says, "The Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN) is a community of federal employees dedicated to the idea that citizens deserve clear communications from government. We believe that using plain language - a language that everyone understands and provides better service to the American public." Has a link to sign up - requires online registration and submitting a form to subscribe. Form link goes to a page with a link to https://www.va.gov/ - so must be owned/maintained by GSA??
VA.gov Web Governance site	6302 Directive	https://www.va.gov/			Linked to from site - goes to the Gov Publishing Office website. Being retired (Dec 2018). This doc is linked to also from the Web Governance site. - points to the Gov Publishing Office website. Branded "Plainlanguage.gov" on cover page. 118 pages - PDF/Word download, linked to from "plainlanguage.gov" site. Last updated May 2013.
digitalgov.gov	DigitalGov Writing	https://digital.gov/			4 ppl are listed on About: https://plainlanguage.gov/ About/
plainlanguage.gov/	Federal plain language guide	https://plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/	[Across agencies/GSA??] Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN)		
VA Web Governance	Content - Plain Language	https://www.va.gov/web/management/content-plain-language.cfm			
gpo.gov	US Govt Publishing Office	https://www.gpo.gov/dsp/v/ppl/PUBW-13/pub1274/content-de-sal.html	GPO Feders	?	
plainlanguage.gov/	Plainlanguage.gov	Federal Plain Language Guidelines	Across agencies/GSA?	?	
VSA content style guide(s)	Public Affairs Guidelines	https://www.va.gov/vsa/internal/PAGuidelines/PA-Guidelines-FINAL-082018-508.pdf	OPA		Misty shared this guide as one of the primary sources for VSA + AP Style.
VHA MyHealthNet style guide (PDF)	VHA Graphics Style Guide (PDF)	https://github.com/department-of-veterans-affairs/vets.gov-va/blob/master/Products/Design%20System/04stylelines/04%20Style%20Guide.docx	VHA Office of Communications	Jeff Gradon	Graphics style guide - nothing on text/language/voice or tone. The guide also lives on the VA Intranet at: https://www.va.gov/webcom/style.asp (3-pp "cheat sheet" like doc, seems similar to the PDF doc "Link Style Guide 508," but totally different content; the PDF is a graphics style guide./3)
VHA MyHealthNet style guide	Missing or not available				
NCA content style guide	No one source	Combination 6302 Handbook, AP Style, https://www.va.gov/web/standards/index.cfm , and OPA Guidelines (see below)			
Net VA - HRIS	Usability.gov > Content Strategy Basics	https://www.usability.gov/what-and-why/content-strategy.html	Footer says U.S. Department of Health & Human Services		
Net VA - GSA	USA.gov Writing for the Web	https://www.usa.gov/style-guide/writing-for-web	Technology & Transformation Service		Appears to be house style only for USA.gov site. From site: "USA.gov is an interagency product administered by USA.gov (formerly the Federal Citizen Information Center), a division of the U.S. General Services Administration's Technology Transformation Service."
Vets.gov - USDS	Formation	https://department-of-veterans-affairs.github.io/design-system/index.html	Jared Cunha/USDS		Formation design system - not content per se, but it does have SOME content guidelines. For example on error message content, it says, "Formation is a single source of documentation and truth for people looking to use the Vets.gov components."
Vets.gov - USDS	Formation > Error Message Standardization Content Style Guide	https://department-of-veterans-affairs.github.io/design-system/docs/messaging-and-error-handling/error-message-standards-on-content-style-guide.html	Jared Cunha/USDS		Very detailed and complex to digest best guidelines for error message texts 2/3 pp PDF on Intranet for all "veterans affairs practitioners." Last updated 11/1/2018. Includes a link to the Vets.gov editorial playbook above. Includes non-verbal guidelines - planning, branding, events, press relations, marketing, legal. "Thinking Like PM People" is a chapter. Not too much concrete best practices for web or us. P. 8: "OPIA is responsible for oversight and compliance of VA branding and web design standards." / Digital Media Engagement "DME" manages the department's 15-member Web Governance Board (WGB) which is charged with content guidelines. WGB members include representatives from VA's web on Intranet, for Internet & Intranet content, social; links to internal "digital media" training for new web managers; links to resources like the VHA Digital Media site.
Office of Public Affairs Guidelines - VA	Public Affairs Guidelines	https://www.va.gov/vsa/internal/PAGuidelines/PA-Guidelines-FINAL-082018-508.pdf	VA - OPA		Intranet page - points to 2008 PDF (page is linked as a resource from the VHA Digital Media site)
VHA	VHA Digital Media Home Intranet site	www.va.gov/webcom/	VHA Digital Media (1082C)		More web/digital oriented, but not solely for content creators; audience seems to be a mix of content ppl, developers, designers - link appearance, page width, document phageins... not what in UK would consider a content style guide.
VA	6302 Handbook	https://www.va.gov/6302/04WebBestPracticesGuide.pdf	VA (DPSA??) - Web Governance Board?	Web Governance Board?	Reviewed/Updated/Date: June 28, 2018. Includes usage list on branded terms, spelling, abbreviations. Page has links to docs pertaining to content of VHA Style Guide (Graphics one) and branding exceptions process.
VA	VHA Web Best Practices Guide	https://www.va.gov/6302/04WebBestPracticesGuide.pdf			
VHA	VHA Style and Usage Intranet	https://www.va.gov/webcom/style.asp	VHA		

None focused solely on VA.gov as a product

- Concerned with communications of all kinds
- Or communications for one particular agency
- Or anything broadly digital, from blogs to tweets
- Or with administrative governance

Hard to remember, keep track of, maintain ... everywhere, somewhere, nowhere, still current?



We've made it really easy to access and use. It's for everyone who writes, edits, or manages people who create content on the VA.gov website and subdomains.

- Public URL
- Part of the larger digital toolkit, [design.va.gov](#)
- Cross-linked to governance site
- Living and evolving online
- Practical, snackable information chunks
- Most common problems on VA.gov
- Single source of truth that's totally focused on VA.gov verbal identity

Our content principles

Person-to-person

Empathetic

Clear and helpful

Consistent

By consistently practicing language in an intentional way, we can create certain feelings, qualities, impressions in Veterans, like confidence, security, and trust.

Veterans use the Internet just like we do.

And expect the same level of customer service, clarity, and ease of use that they find on the web from major brands.

Veterans and Service Members expect the same level of customer service from VA as they receive elsewhere - they want to be treated like a customer, not a Veteran.

Content style guide

Sign up for updates

This style guide is a living document and will change over time, based on user research and feedback. Sign up and we'll email you when we have updates or important changes to the VA.gov content style guide.

Sign up for VA.gov content style guide updates

Email address

Sign up

The VA.gov content style guide is a living document, and will evolve based on user research and real content problems.

Stay up to date here:

<https://design.va.gov/content-style-guide/sign-up-for-updates>

Next steps

- Internally communicate to content teams in VA.
- Socialize through workshops, Q&A sessions, presentations.
- Establish support process for maintaining and updating. (We currently have an inbox and a support email alias.)

word.