

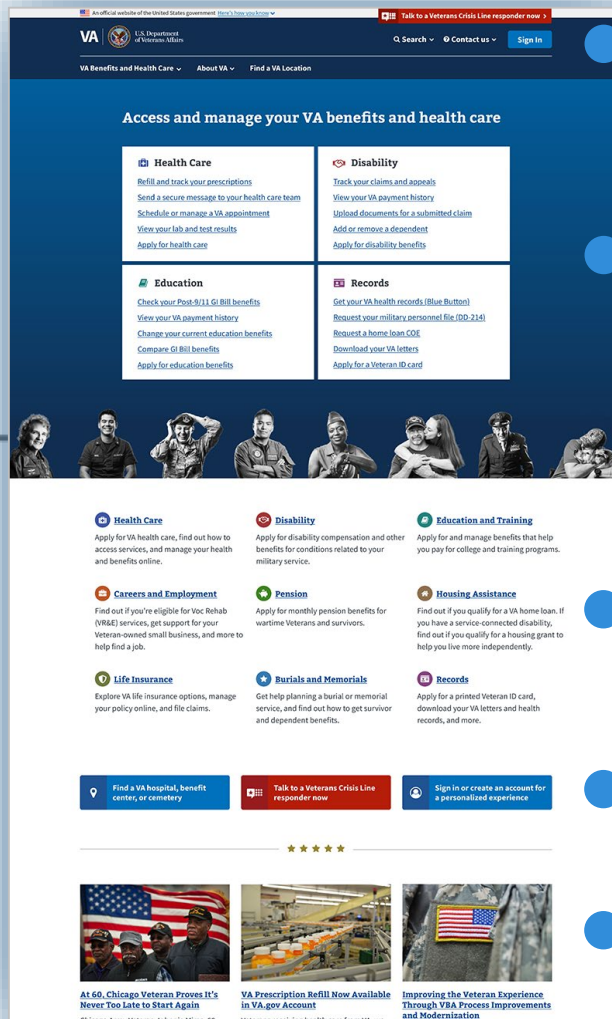
New VA.gov: How do we talk with one voice, as one VA?

December 6, 2018

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words matter

From program-first website... to a **user-first** **unified** **web platform**



Global navigation w/
login and search

Top tasks that Veterans
told us were most
important to them

Other benefits

In-body access points to
login, crisis line, facilities

News, stories, blogs

**Content needs
a unified user
experience,
too**

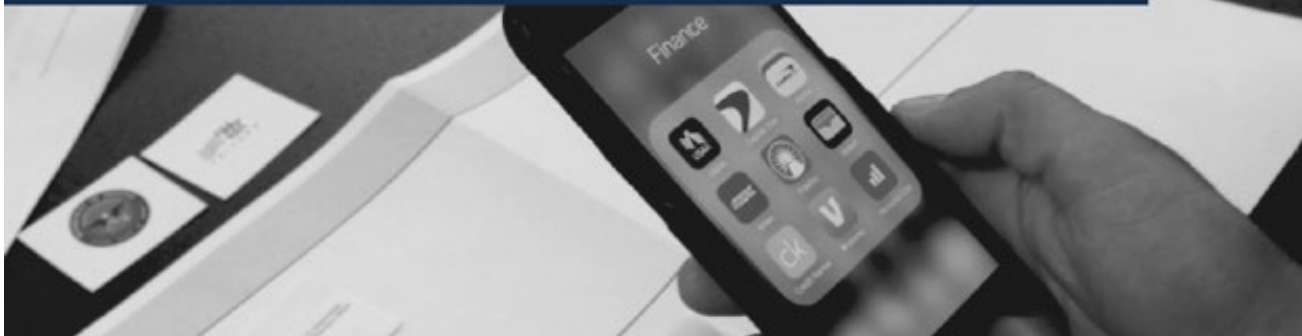
OPPORTUNITY 2

**Inform Veterans of where they
are and who they are interacting
with, using consistent,
consolidated nomenclature.**

Veterans told us...

INSIGHT 6

**Veterans expect to find information
about VA benefits & services in one
intuitive place that organizes the
information in a consumable way.**



Veterans told us...

Clear, not redundant,
not misleading,
transparent, and
empathetic

INSIGHT 3

Veterans are unaware of most of the sites available to them, and feel the names are redundant and don't help them figure out where to go.

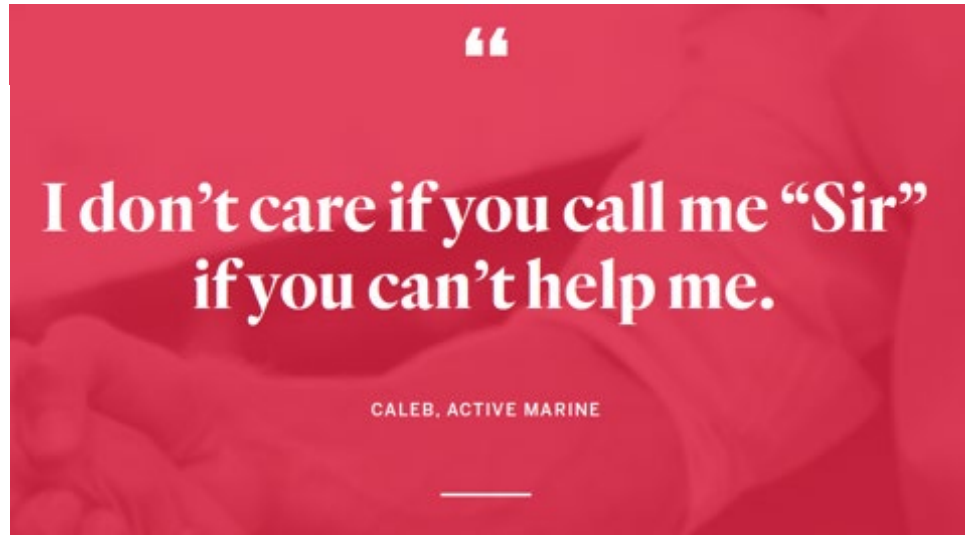
Veterans and Service Members feel that VA owes them empathy and quality care in exchange for their service and sacrifice.

Not false politeness or formality

OPPORTUNITY 3

Respect the term “Veteran,” but do not employ it beyond its label of recognition.

Veterans are proud of their earned title, but acknowledge that it is a loaded, politicized term.



It's about customer service

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.

Veterans recognize when companies have clear values and take action on them through their products, services, and customer service.

INSIGHT 5

While Veteran perks are appreciated, ultimately Veterans just want good, customer-focused service.

Our Veteran customers expect VA.gov to feel like they're talking **person to person...not as if they're talking to 200+ subdomains, 3 separate agencies...**

How do we create these feelings and qualities through content for our customers?

- Person-to-person
- Empathetic
- Clear and helpful
- Trust
- Customer focused

By consistently practicing language in an intentional way, we can create certain feelings, qualities, impressions...

A coherent brand verbal identity for VA.gov.

A shared, unified VA.gov content style guide to support a unified web platform

What this is *NOT*

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

What this *will be*

Usage style guide totally for VA.gov—including:

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

But don't we already have this?

Web standards – but which one?

 An official website of the United States government

[Home](#)[Law and requirements](#)[Plain language guidelines](#)[Examples](#)[Training](#)[Resources](#)[About](#)


IN THIS SECTION

[Write for your audience](#)[Organize the information](#)[Choose your words carefully](#)[Be concise](#)[Keep it conversational](#)

Follow web standards

To effectively communicate online, you need to follow web standards, design for reading, and repurpose print materials for the web.

Expect users to skim and scan

Users can decide in as little as five seconds whether your site is useful to them. Users often [scan pages in an F pattern](#)  focusing on the top left side of the page, headings, and the first few words of a sentence or list. On average, users only read the first two

Pre-Decisional / For Internal Discussion Only

Existing content/editorial guidelines - in-progress list (11/07/18)						
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	2	Broad principles, rather than style guide of how-to's, examples, granular content types (ex: parameters around how to write button CTAs vs headlines vs body copy, etc.)	
Vets.gov	Vets.gov Playbook > Components	https://www.vets.gov/playbook/design/components/	USDS	2		
Vets.gov	Vets.gov Playbook > Templates	https://www.vets.gov/playbook/design/templates/	USDS	2		
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 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-standardization-content-style-guide.html	Jared Cunha/USDS		Very detailed but overly complex to digest text guidelines for error message texts. Compare to error message guidelines below, another GitHub source.	
Vets.gov Design System on GitHub		https://github.com/department-of-veterans-affairs/vets.gov-templates/master/Products/Design%20System/Guidelines/Error%20Handling	DSVA	Beth Potts or Danielle Thierry (Do 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/table-of-contents.md	DSVA	Beth Potts (Socompany)	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/blob/master/templates-and-guides/checklists/plain-language-checklist.md	DSVA	Beth Potts or Danielle Thierry (Do Company)	Plain language checklist	
Vets.gov on GitHub	SEO Writing	https://github.com/department-of-veterans-affairs/vets.gov-templates/master/Products/Content/Content%20Strategy/SEO%20Writing.md	DSVA	Danielle Thierry or Melissa Schuff	WIP SEO writing style guide	
Vets.gov						
digitalgov						
digitalgov 1.87						
ODIG						

30+ content/editorial style guides

VA.gov Web Governance	Content Management	https://www.va.gov/web/management/content.cfm	Web Governance Board?? Across agencies?	Contacts page lists numerous offices.	types/elements - headers vs. button CTAs vs. link CTAs, instructional/Intro text, vs. error messages/alert messages. PRODUCE content vs. "about us" content. Google search snippet says, "The Web Governance website is an extension of the official directive and handbook for managing websites within the VA. The use and change of the 6102 Advisory Group separately as the contact for the government site, is the same as the Web Governance Board? The 6102 Handbook and Directive it links to are 2008 versions.	
VA.gov Web Governance site	6102 Handbook	https://www.va.gov/web/standards/va-fed-policies.cfm	VA 6102 Advisory Group	va6102advisorygroup@va.gov	Above site links to this, esp 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 makes Federal government more accessible and provides better service to the American public." Has a sidebar sign up - requires online registration and submitting a form to subscribe. Form link goes to a page with a link to LISTSERV.GSA.GOV - so must be owned/maintained by GSA??	
VA.gov Web Governance site	6102 Directive	https://www.va.gov/web/standards/va-fed-policies.cfm	VA 6102 Advisory Group	va6102advisorygroup@va.gov	Linked to from a site - goes to the Gov Publishing Office website (Being retired Dec 2018). This doc is linked to also from the VA Web Governance site.	
digitalgov.gov	DigitalGov Writing	https://digital.gov/categories/writing/	GSA (On the Border)	2	Branded "Plainlanguage.gov" on cover page. 118 pages - PDF/Word download, linked to from "plainlanguage.gov" site. Last updated May 2013.	
plainlanguage.gov/	Federal plain language guide	https://plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/	[Across agencies/GSA??] Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN)	4 ppl are listed on About: https://plainlanguage.gov/about/	Misty shared this guide as one of the primary sources for VBA - AP Style, 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-pg "cheat sheet" link doc; seems similar to the PDF doc - link style guide 508 - but totally different content; the PDF is a graphics style guide./?)	
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/ptg/PLAW-113pub274/content-detail.html	GPO Edsys	2		
plainlanguage.gov/	Plainlanguage.gov	Federal Plain Language Guidelines	Across agencies/GSA?	2		
VBA content style guide(s)	Public Affairs Guidelines	https://www.va.gov/opa/interal/PAGuidelines/PAGuidelines-FINAL-082018-508.pdf	OPIA			
VHA myread/mvnet style guide	VHA Graphics Style Guide (PDF)	https://github.com/department-of-veterans-affairs/vets.gov-content/blob/master/templates-and-guides/Guidelines/VA%20Style%20Guide.docx	VHA Office of Communications	Jeff Gradon		
VA myread/mvnet style guide	Missing or not available.					
NCA content style guide	Missing or not available.					
Not VA - HHS	No one source. Usability.gov > Content Strategy Basics	https://www.va.gov/web/standards/index.cfm , and OPIA Guidelines (see below)	Footer says: U.S. Department of Health & Human Services			
Not VA - GSA	USA.gov Writing for the Web	https://www.usa.gov/style-guide/writing-for-web	Technology & Transformation Service			
Vets.gov - USDS	Formation	https://department-of-veterans-affairs.github.io/design-system/index.html	Jared Cunha/USDS			
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-standardization-content-style-guide.html	Jared Cunha/USDS			
Office of Public Affairs Guidelines - VA	Public Affairs Guidelines	https://www.va.gov/opa/interal/PAGuidelines/PAGuidelines-FINAL-082018-508.pdf	VA - OPIA			
VHA	VHA Digital Media Home Intranet site	https://www.va.gov/webcom/	VHA Digital Media (1082C)			
VA	6102 Handbook	6102 Handbook	VA (OPIA??) - Web Governance Board?	Web Governance Board?		
VA	VA Web Best Practices Guide	https://www.va.gov/6102/VAWebBestPracticesGuide.pdf	Not listed on doc or who to contact for it?/updates/comments.			
VHA	VHA Style and Usage Intranet	https://www.va.gov/webcom/style.asp	VHA			

PUBLIC AND INTERGOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS INTRANET

Public Affairs Guidelines

These Public Affairs Guidelines provide a comprehensive guide to effectively plan for crises and events that could serve as a desk reference — a handy resource for all challenges.

If you need software to view these files, you can find it here.

Click on image to view document:

Click on image to view individual sections:

	Preface
	Crisis Communications

VA Style and Usage

When the Veterans Administration was elevated to Cabinet status March 15, 1989, many questions arose about proper style and usage of the new name: Department of Veterans Affairs. Style and usage standards for the department's internal written communications are found in the VA Correspondence Handbook, Chapter 14. As a ready reference, here are some basic rules to keep in mind:

- **What is the correct title for the department?** The full title is the "Department of Veterans Affairs" (no apostrophe). It should be used whenever a first reference to the department is made. Subsequent references can be either to "the Department" or "VA." The abbreviation "DVA" is not authorized for any use under any circumstances. This practice takes advantage of popular acceptance of "VA" as a reference to the federal activity devoted to veterans benefits and services, and is consistent with the style adopted for the two other Cabinet departments having multiword titles: "HUD" for the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and "HHS" for the Department of Health and

Many style guides, but not 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're going to make it really easy to access and use.
It will be for everyone who writes, edits, or manages
people who create content on VA.gov.**

- 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 totally focused on VA.gov editorial

Does this really matter?

Sometimes...

"Reverse 911" vs. "Nixle" = minutes lost, lives lost



By consistently practicing language in an intentional way, we can create certain feelings, qualities, impressions...

Person-to-person, empathetic, clear and helpful, trust, customer focused

Person-to-person

Conversational tone, everyday words, first- and second-person, short sentences

Like this:

If you limit consent, it may take us longer to get your records. Your doctor will follow the limits you specify.

Not this:

The attending physician will abide by the limitation the Veteran specifies. If the Veteran opts to limit consent, please note it may take longer for VA to receive the Veteran's records.

Empathetic

Conversational tone; putting the person first, not the condition; everyday words

Like this:

Veteran with disabilities...

Or Veteran who has a disability...

Or Veteran living with a disability...

Not this:

Disabled Veteran...

Clear and helpful

Everyday words; using words consistently; short sentences

Like this:

Accept the terms of use to sign in.

Not this:

Unless you accept the terms of use,
you will not be able to sign in.

Trust

Everyday words, using words consistently

Like this:

...service member

Not this:

...Service member

...Service Member

...Servicemember

...service member

Customer focused

Everyday words, short sentences, consistency

Like this:

Permission to share your medical records

Not this:

Patient Authorization To Disclose
Information to the Department of
Veterans Affairs

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.

VA.gov Content Style Guide Working Group

word.