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

Jeff Grandon, VHA Michelle Ranes, OIT Meredith Weberg, OIG Joshua Tuscher, OPIA Steve Walker, OIT Misty Sweet, VBA Sandy Tadeo, VBA Donna Rodriguez, OIA Clare Martorana, OMB Danielle Thierry, VA.gov Content Randi Hecht, VA.gov Content Beth Potts, VA.gov Content Jared Cunha, DSVA (Design System)

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; and 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/docume ntation/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

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The second continue of	OURCE	TITLE	URL/PAPER DOC (PDF LINK?)	ORGANIZATION/TEAM	POINT OF CONTACT	NOTES
The second continue of						Broad principles, rather than style guide of how-to's, examples.
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The search of the control of the con	rts.gov Design System on thub		https://department-of-veterans-affairs.github.io/design-system/ docs/messaging-and-error-handling/error-message-standardizat- ion-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 dithuls source.
The state of the s	ets.gov Design System on ithub		https://github.com/department-of-veterans-affairs/vets.gov-tea m/tree/master/Products/Design%20System/Guidelines/Error%2 Ohandling	DSVA	Beth Potts or Danielle Thierry (So 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)
The state of the s	ets.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.
Analysis on columnia and the columnia an	rts.gov on Github		https://github.com/department-of-veterans-affairs/vets.gov-co- ntent/blob/master/templates-and-guides/checklists/plain-langu- age-checklist_md	DSVA	Beth Potts or Danielle Thierry (So Company)	Pfain language checklist
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OURCE	TITLE	URL/PAPER DOC (PDF LINK?)	ORGANIZATION/TEAM	POINT OF CONTACT	NOTES
	Vets.gov Playbook >				Broad principles, rather than style guide of how-to's, examples, granular content types (ex: parameters around how to write button
ets.gov	Editorial	https://www.vets.gov/playbook/editorial/	USDS	7	CTAs vs headlines vs body copy, etc.)
s.gov	Vets.gov Playbook > Components	https://www.vets.gov/playbook/design/components/	USDS	2	Design components but include what types of content each should bused for — 50/50 design/content
	Vets-gov Playbook >			10	Templates - content components but orga into pages but seems like
rts.gov	Templates	https://www.vets.gov/playbook/design/templates/	usbs	1	you can mix and match into a single page?? Combo design/content
ets.gov on Github	Formation	https://department-of-veterans-affairs.github.io/design-system/ index.html	USDS	Jared Cumba	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."
ets.gov Design System on ithub		https://department-of-veterans-affairs.github.io/design-system/ docs/messaging-and-error-handling/error-message-standardizat ion-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 cithus source.
rts.gov Design System on thub		https://github.com/department-of-veterans-affairs/vets.gov-tea nater/hroducts/Design%203ystem/Guidelines/Error%2 Ohandling	DSVA	Beth Potts or Danielle Thierry (So Company)	Style guide specific to error messages (Note: I would like to add an update the adding subheads to longer error messages based on recent upon research)
rts.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.
ets.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 (So Company)	Plain language checklist
ts.gov on Github	SEO Writing	https://github.com/department-of-veterans-affairs/vets.gov-tea m/blob/master/Products/Content/Content%20Strategy/SE0%2 0Writins.md	DSVA	Danielle Thierry or Melissa Schaff	WIP SEO writing style guide

"We have 43 because we didn't have 1."

VA.gov Web Governance VA.gov Web Governance site	Content Management	https://www.na.go	ve Wa	Ike	pervalent messages. PRODUCT carch anipper styre. The carch anipper styre. The wide like official difference and reconstant offices, the site fixed of a site contact for the College of a site contact for the College of the contact for the College of the College
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digitalgov.gov	DigitalGov Writing	https://digital.gov/c			ds. Last post June 2017.
plainlanguage.gov/	Federal plain language guide	hetps://plainfanguage.gov/guidelines/	[Across agencies/GSA77] Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN)	4 ppl are listed on About: https://plainlanguage.gov/a bout/	LISTSERV.GSA.GOV — so must be owned/maintained by GSA??? VA's version of plain language guidelines. Links to both
VA Web Governance	Content - Plain Language	https://www.va.gov/web/management/content-plain-language. cfm			plainlanguage.gov & digital.gov's plain language stuff, as well as plain language law.
		Public Law 111 - 274 - Plain Writing Act of 2010 [https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-111publ274/content-de			Linked to from * site goes to the Govt Publishing Office website (being retired Dec 2018). This doc is linked to also from the VA Web
gpo-gov	US Govt Publishing Office	tail.html]	GPO Fdsys	7	Governance site.
plainlanguage.gov/	Plainlanguage.gov	Federal Plain Language Guidelines	Across agencies/GSA?	>	Branded "Plainlanguage.gov" on cover page. 118 pages - PDF/Word download, linked to from *plainlanguage.gov site. Last updated May 2011.
VBA content style guide(s)	Public Affairs Guidelines	https://www.va.gov/opa/internal/PAGuidelines/PA-Guidelines- FINAL-082018-508.pdf	OPIA		Misty shared this guide as one of the primary sources for VBA + AP Style Crepe also tayle guide - nothing on text/language/voice or tone. The Crepe also lives on the VA instruction
VHA MyHealtheVet style guide	VHA Graphics Style Guide (POF) Missing or not available	https://felthub.com/department-of-veterans-affairs/vets.gov.co ntent/felolo/master/templates-and-guides/guides/V:6A%20Style %20Guide.docx	VHA Office of Communications	Jeff Gradon	https://venw.vo.gov/webcom/style.asp (3-pg 'cheat sheet' like doc. Filename similar to the PDF doc "VHA Style Guide 508," but totally different content; the PDF is a graphics style guide./JL)
elbenefits content style					
guide	Missing or not available	Combination 6102 Handbook, AP Style,			
		https://www.va.gov/web/standards/index.cfm, and OPA			
NCA content style guide	No one source Usability.gov >Content	Guidelines (see below)	Footer says U.S. Department of Health &		
Not VA - HHS	Strategy Basics	https://www.usability.gov/what-and-why/content-strategy.html	Human Services		Appears to be house style only for USA gov site. From site: "USA gov is
Not VA - GSA	USA gov> Writing for the	https://www.usa.gov/style-guide/writing-for-web	Technology & Transformation Service		Appears to a nouse style only for USA, gov size. From size: "USA, gov size an interagency product administered by USAGov (formerly the Federal Citizen Information Center), a division of the U.S. General Services Administration's Technology Transformation Service;
Wets.gov - USDS	Formation	hutps://department-of-veterans-affairs.github.io/design-system/ Indep.html	Jared Cunha/USDS		Formation design system - not content per se, but it does have \$50ME content guidelines. For example on error measuage content, it says for the system of th
	Formation > Error Message Standardization	https://department-of-veterans-affairs.github.io/design-system/ docs/messaging-and-error-handling/error-message-standardizat			
Vets.gov - USDS	Content Style Guide	ion-content-style-guide.html	Jared Cunha/USDS		Very detailed and complex to digest text guidelines for error message texts
Office of Public Affairs Guidelines - W.	Public Affairs Guidelines	https://www.wa.gov/spa/internal/PAGuidelines/PA-Guidelines	VA - OPIA		173 pp PDF on intranse for all "public affairs practioners." Last section monowriting juddelines — glandning, brandings, events, press relations, marketing, legal. "Thinking Like PR Headle" is a chapter. Not too much oversight and complained of VA branding and web design standards, "/ coversight and complained of VA branding and web design standards," / Samenber Web Governance Board (WGB) which is charged with standards and enforcement oversight and VA see the presser-wide web web complained on and enforcement oversight of VA's enterprise-wide web
		. mare contract success			on intranet; for internet & intranet content, social; links to internal
VHA	VHA Digital Media Home Intranet site	vaww.va.gov/webcom/	VHA Digital Media (1082C)	(202) 461-0333, VHADigitalMedia@va.gov	'digital media' training for new web managers; links to resources like 6102 Handbook (but intranet pg that points to 2008 PDF) Intranet page - points to 2008 PDF (page is linked as a resource from
VA.	5102 Handbook	6102 Handbook	VA (OPIA??) + Web Governance Board?	Web Governance Board?	the VHA Digital Media site)
VA.	VA Web Best Practices Guide	https://www.va.sov/6102/VAWsbBestPracticesGuide.edf	Not listed on doc or who to contact for q's/updates/comments		Dated March 2011; 'to be used in conjustion with 6102 Handbook.' More webyldigital oriented, but not solely for content creators; experience or solely and the solely orient plug-ins not what in UX would consider a corrient style guide.
VHA	VHA Style and Usage Intranet	https://vaww.va.gov/webcom/style.asp	VHA		Reviewed/Updated Date: June 28, 2018. Includes usage list on branded terms, spelling, abbreviations. Page has links to does pertaining to retirement of VHA Style Guide (graphics one) and branding exceptions process.

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/contentstyle-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.