# vets.gov Content Strategy — Draft 2.0

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Developed by CommunicateHealth, Inc.

## Why Content Strategy?

This content strategy will guide the creation, delivery, and governance of content on vets.gov. It’s a living, evolving plan that:

* Describes vets.gov vision and goals
* Maps out how vets.gov will use content to meet user needs
* Identifies the types of content needed
* Defines how the content will be organized, formatted, displayed, and delivered
* Identifies the processes used to create and maintain content
* Describes future considerations for content governance

## vets.gov: Mission & Goals

#### Mission

Vets.gov enables Veterans to discover, apply for, track, and manage the benefits they have earned.

#### Product Goals

* Unifying and simplifying VA’s digital touch points, dramatically improving customer experience
* Meeting customer need on the first try, on any device
* Creating a mobile-first platform
* Retooling existing applications and designing new end-to-end experiences, in partnership with business owners across VA
* Providing transparency about our methods and processes

### Core Content Strategy

Curate an easy-to-use, easy-to-understand, interactive website that supports Veterans through the process of discovering, applying for, tracking, and managing their benefits.

Explanation:

* It’s not about VA; it’s about Veterans.
* VA content, vets.gov context. We’ll bring over actionable content that supports Veterans’ top tasks.
* At the end of the day, it’s transactional. Vets don’t want to sort through content that doesn’t help them reach their goals; we won’t waste their time.
* Benefits with a “lowercase b” – includes official benefits and other resources and services available to Veterans.

\* Guiding principle for all vets.gov content is that “doing” is better than “explaining.”

## User Needs: Discovery & Analysis

Discovery: Veterans’ Content Needs(Key Findings)

Vets want a content experience that:

* Is supportive and personal
* Uses clear and simple language
* Acknowledges their service and sacrifice
* Helps them understand the benefit claims process and their position in it
* Makes them feel visible and heard
* Celebrates camaraderie and a sense of community

Discovery: Veterans’ Journey(condensed)

1. Starting up and taking care of myself
2. Building a career and putting down roots
3. Retiring and aging

#### Analysis: Top Tasks

1. How do I enroll in Disability Benefits?
2. How do I enroll in Dependent and Caretaker benefits?
3. How do I use the GI Bill?
4. What Education benefits are available?
5. How do I enroll in VA Healthcare?
6. How do I arrange travel reimbursement for a VA medical appointment?
7. What sources does VA have for employment?
8. What resources does VA have for mental health?
9. What resources does VA provide for the loss of a family member?
10. What resources does VA provide for the homeless?
11. How do I access my VA medical records?
12. How do I access my military records?

Taken together, these findings will inform the site’s substance and structure. For example, can we map content and delivery channels to the Veteran’s journey — from enlistment through retirement?

*Reference Docs:*

* 2016 Frog User Research
* 2016 Journey of a Veteran
* 2016 Personas Veteran Experience
* 2014 Profile of Unique Veteran Users
* 2014 Voices of Veterans

## Content Substance (What content do we need?)

Each piece of content on vets.gov has a purpose. It should:

* **Inform**: provide the user with information on the specific benefit and eligibility criteria
* **Instruct**: tell the user how to complete a task step-by-step (this may be a referral to another site or it may be a “self-serve” task that can be completed on vets.gov)
* **Support and validate**: give the user access to status updates, answers to questions, next steps, and options to appeal

vets.gov is a transactional site. This means content is designed to support user tasks. The process for identifying new content should look like:

* What is the task that users need to complete?
* Is there content elsewhere on the site that instructs/supports this task?
  + If YES, crosslink and/or re-purpose
  + If NO, create new content (following workflow detailed below)

We will link to high-quality, accurate content that exists on other websites – rather than duplicating that content on vets.gov.

* Steer users toward related information that supports their task
* Encourage users to seek additional support and/or services
* See Linking Policy and Quality Guidelines for more information

**Health Content**

Health content on vets.gov is for Veterans and their family members. This means that it:

* Supports Veteran health-related transactions on [vets.gov](http://vets.gov/) (for example, applying for VA health care, refilling a prescription, or downloading health records)
* Provides information written for a Veteran audience about common conditions, treatments, medical tests, mental health, and prevention and wellness, with a focus on conditions and issues specific to Veterans
* Provides information on VA health services, including recommended services and where and how Veterans can access health care both within VA and elsewhere

vets.gov content does **not** include:

* Content written for VA staff or medical personnel, health professionals, and other service providers
* Descriptions of VA health policies or VA programs

#### Voice & Tone

The user tasks will determine *what* we communicate.

The voice and tone guidelines will determine *how* we communicate.

To date, voice and tone of vets.gov has been described as clear and direct, engaging, caring, respectful of military service — delivered with a warm and quiet tone. We build on those qualities and provide additional clarification.

#### Voice — refined:

The voice of vets.gov is direct, transparent, dedicated, and human. It’s that of a trusted advocate — ready with information, advice, and updates.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Voice | Is… | Is not… |
| Direct | Confident, decisive, honest, pragmatic, not extraneous | Abrupt, arrogant, bossy, cold, critical, condescending |
| Transparent | Clear, open, informed, trustworthy, forthcoming | Overly complex, in the weeds, too much information, technical |
| Dedicated | Consistent, supportive, undaunted, driven by a purpose, ready to serve, tireless | Obligated, demanding, relentless |
| Human | Accessible, friendly, genuine, inclusive, conversational, caring | Superficial, gimmicky, overly casual |

**Tone — refined:**

The tone of vets.gov will vary depending on the content. Each of its voice attributes (direct, transparent, dedicated, human) can be dialed up or down to align with 1) the audience’s likely emotional state and/or context and 2) the topic.

We’ll capture the right tone for each piece of content. For example:

* Information on burial and memorials: step-by-step, respectful (emphasize Direct and Human)
* Ready to begin application process: empowering and supportive (emphasize Dedicated)
* Application submitted successfully: congratulatory and positive (emphasize Human)
* Error message (user or system): clear and direct (emphasize Transparent)

**Micro and inline copy**

Micro copy should keep in the voice of vets.gov and be used to support users inline with their workflow — offering tips, explanations, encouragement, and/or warnings. Micro copy includes:

* Menus
* Form fields
* Prompts and instructions
* Error alerts

**Style guide** [see separate document]

*Reference Docs:*

* *Style Guide v 0.2*
* *Playbook:* [*https://www.vets.gov/playbook/editorial/*](https://www.vets.gov/playbook/editorial/)

## Content Structure (How will content be organized, formatted, and displayed?)

Considerations for each piece of content:

* Does the content need to be something you can search and sort by?
* Is the content related to other content?
* Does content need to be extracted to display elsewhere? Will it travel? (Future API development?)

Navigation and Nomenclature

* Make labels intuitive and action-oriented
* Ensure consistency across sections

**Metadata**

To be added at a later date

## Content Workflow (How is content created and managed?)

1. Identify task/task flow (in collaboration with VA)
2. Identify source content (in collaboration with VA)
3. Fill out Content Planning Cover Sheet (or equivalent planning, for very brief content (e.g. adding a paragraph to an existing page))
4. Write new content
5. Apply Content Scorecard (and revise as needed to improve score)
6. Copyedit
7. Submit copy to concurrence
8. Finalize and copyedit content (if there are substantial edits from concurrence, re-edit and re-concur)
9. Re-apply Content Scorecard
10. Input into Github
11. Perform quality assurance
12. Review on staging
13. Final concurrence review
14. Move to production and publish
15. Maintain and evaluate

For each page of the site, the content team will identify the following information. The product team will weigh-in on objective and message.

* Page Title
* Page Objective (what do we want vets to *DO*) — (note: this is new)
* Primary message — (note: this is new)
* Suggested URL
* Source Content
* SME/Content Owner(s)

[See attached **Content Planning Cover Sheet**]

*Reference Docs:*

* Flow of content creation by position (So Company)
* Content production process flow (So Company)

## Content Standards (How will we measure success?)

**Content Scorecard**

The vets.gov Content Scorecard is a set of research-informed criteria to develop and assess vets.gov content. It’s focused on criteria (“items”) that enhance clarity and aid understanding, particularly for audiences who may have limited literacy skills or struggle with complex information.

The Scorecard supports the VA’s effort to comply with the Plain Writing Act of 2010 and meet the needs of diverse Veterans. All content on the site will score at least 85% on the vets.gov Content Scorecard.

We strive to use the clearest language possible. However, we don’t use readability formulas to evaluate vets.gov content. These formulas don’t consider audience, purpose, or many other communication factors that contribute to clarity and comprehension.

The vets.gov Content Scorecard can be used:

* By vets.gov content creators during the development process to confirm that new content is in-line with best practices in clear communication
* To help justify content and word-choice decisions to VA subject matter experts and other stakeholders

[See attached **Content Scorecard**]

**Quality Guidelines and Linking Policy** [new]

The goal of vets.gov is to provide easy-to-understand information and tools to help Veterans discover, apply for, track, and manage the benefits they have earned. To achieve this mission, we apply the following quality guidelines when developing original content on vets.gov. When selecting the organizations and resources we link to, the vets.gov team reviews and considers resources that, at a minimum, meet the required quality guidelines. (Adapted from: <https://healthfinder.gov/aboutus/QualityGuidelines.aspx>)

* The names of the site developers, sponsors, partners, and funding sources are clearly noted.
* The purpose of the site and its intended audiences are clearly stated.
* “Advertisement” labels clearly identify and separate ads from other information.
* Information is reliable and current. This means “Last updated” and/or “last reviewed” date stamps are posted on the homepage, major entry points, and individual documents. [confirm]

In addition, we are required to honor the rules that govern all of our Internet activities; those activities include posting links to specific types of information as required by law and posting other links on VA web pages that are deemed appropriate because they serve the mission of VA and are relevant and useful to VA's website visitors. See more here: <http://www.va.gov/webpolicylinks.asp>

## Content Governance (How will content be maintained?)

To be added at a later date

Considerations:

* Will there be regularly scheduled content updates? How often?
* How are live content errors tracked and corrected?
* What are the steps for publishing edits?
* How will we know when it’s time for content to be archived or deleted?