

HOW TO WRITE CLEAR AND CONCISE RATING DECISIONS
INSTRUCTOR LESSON PLAN
TIME REQUIRED: 3 HOURS

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LESSON DESCRIPTION

The information below provides the instructor with an overview of the lesson and the materials that are required to effectively present this instruction.

TMS # 1202942

PREREQUISITES Prior to this lesson, the Rating Veteran Service Representative (RVSR) should have 24 months experience. Trainees should also have completed RVSR Challenge and the Reader Focused Writing Tools course (found in the VSR curriculum under Orientation).

TARGET AUDIENCE The target audience for How to Write Clear and Concise Rating Decisions is, RVSR Intermediate Level.

TIME REQUIRED 3 hours

**MATERIALS/
TRAINING AIDS**

Classroom materials:

- Private area with chairs
- Large writing surface (easel pad, chalkboard, dry erase board, overhead projector, etc.) with appropriate writing materials
- Computer with projection equipment and PowerPoint software

Lesson materials:

- How to Write Clear and Concise Rating Decisions PowerPoint Presentation
- How to Write Clear and Concise Rating Decisions Trainee Handouts
- How to Write Clear and Concise Rating Decisions Job Aid

PRE-PLANNING

- ☐ Become familiar with all training materials by reading the Instructor Lesson Plan while simultaneously reviewing the corresponding PowerPoint slides. This will provide you the opportunity to see the connection between the Lesson Plan and the slides, which will allow for a more structured presentation during the training session.
- ☐ Become familiar with the content of the trainee handouts and their association to the Lesson Plan.
- ☐ Practice is the best guarantee of providing a quality presentation. At a minimum, do a complete walkthrough of the presentation to practice coordination between this Lesson Plan, the trainee handouts, and the PowerPoint slides and ensures your timing is on track with the length of the lesson.
- ☐ Ensure that there are copies of all handouts before the training session.
- ☐ When required, reserve the training room.
- ☐ Arrange for equipment such as flip charts, an overhead projector, and any other equipment (as needed).
- ☐ Talk to people in your office who are most familiar with this topic to collect experiences that you can include as examples in the lesson.
- ☐ This lesson plan belongs to you. Feel free to highlight headings, key phrases, or other information to help the instruction flow smoothly. Feel free to add any notes or information that you need in the margins.

TRAINING DAY

- ☐ Arrive as early as possible to ensure access to the facility and computers.
- ☐ Become familiar with the location of restrooms and other facilities that the trainees will require.
- ☐ Test the computer and projector to ensure they are working properly.
- ☐ Before class begins, open the PowerPoint presentation to the first slide. This will help to ensure the presentation is functioning properly.
- ☐ Make sure that a whiteboard or flip chart and the associated markers are available.
- ☐ Provide a sign in sheet and at the conclusion of the session, ensure that all trainees sign in.

INTRODUCTION TO WRITING CLEAR AND CONCISE RATING DECISIONS

**INSTRUCTOR
INTRODUCTION**

Complete the following:

- Introduce yourself
- Orient learners to the facilities
- Ensure that all learners have the required handouts

TIME REQUIRED

.25 hours

**PURPOSE OF
LESSON**

This lesson is intended to refine the writing and editing skills required of RSVRs in the development of clear and concise rating decisions that better communicate to VBA claimants the elements of a fair and equitable decision. This lesson will contain discussions and exercises that will allow you to gain a better understanding of:

Explain the following:

- Components of a Rating Decision
- Rating Narrative Flow
- Clear and Concise Writing Techniques

**LESSON
OBJECTIVES**

In order to accomplish the purpose of this lesson, the RVSR will be required to accomplish the following lesson objectives.

Discuss the following:

The RVSR will be able to:

Slide 2

Handout 2

- Using CFR 4.23, M21-1 MR III, iv.6.C, and the trainee handout packet as references, identify the basic format of a rating decision including the sections and typed of information, with 85% accuracy.
- Using CFR 4.23, M21-1 MR III, iv.6.C, and the trainee handout packet as references, identify the elements of equitable decisions, with 85% accuracy.
- Using CFR 4.23, M21-1 MR III, iv.6.C, and the trainee handout packet as references, identify the flow of information and organization of the Rating Narrative that grants a benefit, with 85% accuracy.
- Using CFR 4.23, M21-1 MR III, iv.6.C, and the trainee handout packet as references, identify the flow of information and organization of the Rating Narrative that denies a benefit, with 85% accuracy.
- Using CFR 4.23, M21-1 MR III, iv.6.C, and the trainee handout packet as references, identify best practices for developing well-written Rating Narratives, with 85% accuracy.
- Using CFR 4.23, M21-1 MR III, iv.6.C, and the trainee handout packet as references, identify techniques that increase the clarity and decrease the length of a sentence, with 85% accuracy.
- Using CFR 4.23, M21-1 MR III, iv.6.C, and the trainee handout packet as references, identify methods that increase proficiency when editing a rating decision, with 85% accuracy.

Explain the following:

Each learning objective is covered in the associated topic. At the conclusion of the lesson, the learning objectives will be reviewed.

MOTIVATION

Articulating rating decision information in a clear and concise manner reduces the length of the document, provides the claimant with an understandable decision, and decreases the level of effort required by the RSVR. Additionally, a poorly written rating decision may cause a claimant to file an appeal or inquiry causing unnecessary expense and time.

**STAR ERROR
CODE(S)**

The Systematic Technical Accuracy Review (STAR) Program reviews cases and considers them either “accurate” or “in error” for the purpose of measuring technical accuracy.

Discuss STAR Error Codes related to How to Write Clear and Concise Rating Decisions with the trainees.

REFERENCES

Explain where these references are located in the workplace.

Slide 3

Handout 3

- 38 CFR, Part 3
- 38 CFR 4.23
- M21-1MR III.ii.2.B
- M21-1 MR III, iv.6.C
- Training Letter (TL) 02-02

TOPIC 1: COMPONENTS OF A RATING DECISION

INTRODUCTION This topic will allow the trainee to gain a better understanding of the rating decision, including the basic format of a rating decision, the types of information that form the narrative and code sheet sections, and the importance of applying the elements of equitable decisions.

TIME REQUIRED .5 hours

OBJECTIVES/ Topic objectives:

TEACHING POINTS

- Using CFR 4.23, M21-1 MR III, iv.6.C, and the trainee handout packet as references, identify the basic format of a rating decision including the sections and types of information, with 85% accuracy.
- Using CFR 4.23, M21-1 MR III, iv.6.C, and the trainee handout packet as references, identify the elements of equitable decisions, with 85% accuracy.

The following topic teaching points support the topic objectives:

- Basic rating decision format
- Contents of a narrative
- Reasons for a decision
- Elements of equitable decisions

Basic Rating Decision Format

The two sections of a rating decision are:

- Narrative – introduction, decision evidence, and reasons for decision
- Code sheet – data table, jurisdiction, coded conclusion, and signature(s)

Slide 4

Handout 4

A copy of the narrative section is provided to the claimant and his or her representative to communicate the rating decision.

NOTE(S)

Explain the following:

The code sheet is primarily an internal document that is retained in the Veteran's claims folder. This instruction focuses on the narrative section of the rating decision. Specifically, methods for improving how the 'reasons for the decision' is communicated to the claimant are covered in this document.

Although all parts of a rating decision are important, the following discussion will primarily focus on the role of the RVSR in writing the Reasons for Decision.

Contents of a Narrative

Slide 5

Handout 4

A narrative can contain the following types of information:

1. **Introduction** – identifies who and where the claimant is and the type of claim being considered
2. **Decision** – lists the issues being considered and is organized according to the principle of “Good News First”
3. **Evidence** – lists the documents that have been received and will be considered in the decision
4. **Reasons for Decision** – summarizes pertinent facts and clearly explains their relevance to the decision

Check comprehension

Ask the following questions:

- The basic format of a rating decision is comprised of what two sections?
Response: Narrative and Code sheet
- Which types of information should be included in the narrative of a rating decision and in what order should this information appear?
Response: Introduction, Decision, Evidence, Reasons for Decision
- What is the purpose of the Reasons for Decision section of the narrative?
Response: Summarizes pertinent facts and clearly explains their relevance to the decision

Reasons for Decision

The rating narrative should provide the reasons for a decision, to grant or deny, in a clear and succinct manner, using common terms.

Slide 6

Handout 4

Remember the following points when composing a rating narrative:

- **Should not** attempt to capture entire deliberative process
- Evidence should not be discussed at length
- Include only information that is critical to the decision
- Legal citations, medical terminology and profession jargon confuse the claimant

Characteristics

Characteristics of a clear and concise “reasons for the decision” narrative include:

- Limited description of deliberative process
- Brief discussion of evidence
- Critical information only
- Narrative is understandable in laypeople terms (Legal citations, medical terminology and profession jargon is confusing)

Elements of Equitable Decisions

When writing rating decisions, RVSRs should understand and apply the following elements of equitable decisions:

Slide 7

- Evidence is considered without prejudice
- Laws are applied fairly
- Reasoning is sound
- Presentation is clear, complete, and concise
- Tone is courteous

Handout 4

NOTE(S)

Stress to trainees that successful communication of the “reasons for the decision” is critical to the process of improving the written narrative.

Check comprehension

Ask the trainees:

What are some elements of a well-written, clear and concise “reasons for the decision” portion of a rating narrative?

Response:

- Limited description of deliberative process
- Brief discussion of evidence
- Critical information only
- Narrative is understandable in laypeople terms
- Application of the elements of equitable decisions

EXERCISE

Handout 13

Refer trainees to the trainee handout packet, Attachment A: Exercise – The Rating Decision. Allow the trainees 5 minutes to answer the questions and then discuss the correct answers.

TOPIC 2: RATING NARRATIVE FLOW

INTRODUCTION

This topic will allow the trainee to gain a better understanding of the logical and orderly flow of information contained in a typical rating narrative that grants or denies a benefit. This topic will also provide the trainee with a list of “best practices” that will help to improve rating narratives.

TIME REQUIRED

.5 hours

OBJECTIVES/ TEACHING POINTS

Topic objectives:

- Using CFR 4.23, M21-1 MR III, iv.6.C, and the trainee handout packet as references, identify the flow of information and organization of the rating narrative that grants a benefit, with 85% accuracy.
- Using CFR 4.23, M21-1 MR III, iv.6.C, and the trainee handout packet as references, identify the flow of information and organization of the rating narrative that denies a benefit, with 85% accuracy.
- Using CFR 4.23, M21-1 MR III, iv.6.C, and the trainee handout packet as references, identify best practices for developing well-written rating narratives, with 85% accuracy.

The following topic teaching points support the topic objectives:

- Rating narrative organization: Granting benefits
- Rating narrative organization: Denial of benefits
- Considerations for service-connected disabilities
- Best practices

Rating Narrative Organization: Granting Benefits

Well-written rating narratives follow a logical and orderly flow. Rating narratives that grant benefits should be organized in the following manner:

Slide 8

1. State the benefit being granted
2. Provide the basis for granting service connection
3. Provide the basis for the evaluation
4. State the requirements for a higher evaluation
5. Explain the factual basis for the effective date

Handout 6

Basis for Granting Service Connection

State the reasons for granting the service connection; focus on the “service event” (*disease, injury, exposure*).

Slide 9

Handout 6

Include a brief discussion of the origin of the condition (*trauma, onset of symptoms*) and subsequent development to demonstrate any necessary continuity or chronicity (*linkage to current disability*).

Basis for the
Evaluation

When considering a claim for increase, summarize the complaints the Veteran made to the examiner.

Avoid including unnecessary factual content and lengthy analysis.

Slide 10

Handout 6

NOTE(S)

Chronicity is characterized by long duration; state of being chronic.

Check comprehension

Ask the trainees the following questions:

1. How should rating narratives that grant benefits be organized (flow of information and organization)?

Response:

- Benefit being granted
- Basis for granting service connection
- Basis for the evaluation
- Requirements for a higher evaluation
- Explain the factual basis for the effective date

2. When writing the basis for “granting service connection” where should the narrative focus?

Response: “Service event” (*disease, injury, exposure*)

3. What should be avoided when writing the basis for evaluation?

Response: Unnecessary factual content and lengthy analysis

**Rating Narrative
Organization: Denial
of Benefits**

A denial of benefits is based on a review of the available facts and how they relate to the statutory and regulatory requirements for the benefit sought.

The organization of denial of benefits is shown below:

Slide 11

- Specifically state what is needed to establish the claimed benefit
- State the basis for the denial of service
- Discuss the evidence considered and the factual conclusions
- Address contentions

Handout 6

DISCUSSION

Discuss writing examples of “statements to establish the claimed benefit” for the following:

Handout 6-7

- Service connection on a presumptive basis
- Presumptive conditions, such as those related to herbicide exposure
- PTSD claims or other non-presumptive conditions
- Claim for secondary service connection
- Claim for aggravation

Basis for Denial of
Service (Core
Principles)

When stating the basis for the denial of service, describe **exactly what core principle was not met**. Core principles may change, but the basic construction pattern will remain the same for:

- Service connection
- Aggravation
- Presumption
- Secondary service connection

Slide 12

Handout 7

Discuss Evidence

Specifically, state what evidence is present or is not (but should be) that formed the reason for the denial.

Slide 13

Even if the claim is not for direct service connection, but is for a presumptive condition or aggravation, a brief explanation, that the claim is denied on a direct basis and why, must be provided.

Address Contentions

Correctly weighing evidence is more critical in a denial because claimants rarely question why a benefit was granted. The key factors in denial of benefits include:

Slide 14

Handout 7

- Claimant's stated belief or contentions
- Pertinent facts (condition or circumstances claimed)
- Succinct reasoning explaining the required elements which are *not* present

Sufficient detail is needed to clearly identify to the claimant how the evidence was viewed in the decision to deny.

DISCUSSION

In instances where the evidence is inconsistent or contradictory, discuss how the discrepancy should be resolved.

Check comprehension Ask the trainees the following questions:

1. How should rating narratives that deny benefits be organized (flow of information and organization)?

Response:

1. Specifically state what is needed to establish the claimed benefit.
 2. State the basis for the denial of service.
 3. Discuss the evidence considered and the factual conclusions
 4. Address contentions
2. What is important to remember when stating what is needed to establish the claimed benefit (denying benefits)?

Response: Statement should be brief and specific.

3. What are the key factors to consider when addressing contentions for denial of benefits?

Response: Claimant's stated belief or contentions, pertinent facts (condition or circumstances claimed), and reasoning explaining the required elements which are *not* present

Considerations for Service-Connected Disabilities

When disabilities are already service-connected, the rating narrative addressing subsequent evaluations should consider the following:

- If an RVSR is increasing or establishing a percentage, then the narrative should cite only the facts that are pertinent to the assignment of that evaluation.
- The narrative should clearly state why the Veteran is receiving a particular evaluation.

Slide 15

Handout 8

NOTE(S)

Stress the following:

It is *not* necessary to recite the rating schedule criteria verbatim for the evaluation that has already been assigned, but it *is* necessary to accurately state what would be needed for a higher evaluation and augment the criteria with specific facts of the claim, clarifying medical terms, when needed.

Best Practices

Discuss best practices for developing well-written rating narratives.

Handout 8

Do:

- Carefully review all evidence before beginning to write a rating decision
- Reach a decision before beginning to write a rating decision
- Note the claimant's contentions and concisely summarize all relevant facts
- Incorporate the pertinent evidence directly into your statement explaining your decision
- Write in active voice, using lay language whenever possible (in parenthesis behind medical terms, when necessary)

Don'ts

- Use VA jargon or insider language such as "neither incurred nor aggravated" or "nexus"
- Copy lengthy passages from medical books or websites or cut and paste VA examination reports, treatment records, or private physicians' statements
- Discuss in detail all elements or theories of possible service connection (instead, focus on the specific reasons(s) for the decision)
- Discuss extra scheduler evaluation criteria unless specifically raised or entitlement is suggested by the evidence
- Copy entire regulations/ Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims (CAVC) decisions or use "canned text" from glossaries if they don't add value to the decision.

EXERCISE

Refer trainees to the trainee handout packet, Attachment B: Exercise – Rating Narrative Flow. Allow the trainees 5 minutes to answer the questions and then discuss the correct answers.

Handout 14

TOPIC 3: CLEAR AND CONCISE WRITING TECHNIQUES

INTRODUCTION This topic will provide the trainees with the framework necessary to develop clear, concise narratives through the application of writing and self-editing techniques.

TIME REQUIRED .75 hours

**OBJECTIVES/
TEACHING POINTS** Topic objectives:

- Using CFR 4.23, M21-1 MR III, iv.6.C, and the trainee handout packet as references, identify techniques that increase the clarity and decrease the length of a sentence, with 85% accuracy.
- Using CFR 4.23, M21-1 MR III, iv.6.C, and the trainee handout packet as references, identify methods that increase proficiency when editing a rating decision, with 85% accuracy.

The following topic teaching points support the topic objectives:

- Eliminating prepositions/unnecessary words
- Using active voice
- Writing tips
- Editing your writing

**Eliminating
Prepositions and
Unnecessary Words**

Excessive use of prepositions or the inclusion of unnecessary words in the narrative can often confuse the reader. Use the following techniques to eliminate:

- Avoid opening sentences with unnecessary phrases.
- Avoid using several words when one will do.
- Do not combine words that mean the same thing.
- Remove wordy expressions that do not add to the message being conveyed.

Slide 16

Handout 9

DISCUSSION

Discuss best practices for developing concisely written rating narratives.

Review examples of shorter versions of phrases, eliminating repetitive phrases and wordy expressions.

Handout 9-10

Check comprehension

Ask the trainees the following question:

What techniques can be used to reduce the length and increase the clarity of the narrative?

Response:

- Avoid opening sentences with unnecessary phrases.
- Avoid using several words when one will do.
- Do not combine words that mean the same thing.
- Remove wordy expressions that do not add to the message being conveyed

Using Active Voice

Slide 17

Training Letter 02-02 introduced a Rating Improvement Concept that requires decision documents to focus on the Veteran. As a result, RVSRs are instructed to write in the active voice, “directly *to* and *for* the claimant.”

Handout 10

Use the following techniques to ensure that each narrative promotes active voice:

- Too many prepositions reduce the action out of a sentence. Remove the prepositions and incorporate strong active verbs to make the sentence direct.
- Using "is" in a sentence gets it off to a slow start, and causes the sentence to be weak. When possible replace "to be" verbs with action verbs. Change all passive voice (“is defended by”) to an active voice (“defends”).
- Ensure that the narrative is direct by using a simple active verb.
- Ensure that sentences are active. Avoid passive sentences by applying the rule of “Who does what to whom?”

NOTE(S)

Continue using the handout to discuss the examples of active voice sentences.

Writing Tips

The narrative will be clearer if the sentences are structured as subject-verb-object; show action rather than describing situations.

Slide 18

Handout 11

Incorporate the following writing techniques when communicating with the Veteran:

- Search for words ending in “ed” – if the word is preceded by “is” or “was” (or similar verbs) consider revising the phrase.
- Search for the word "there" followed by “is” or “are” (or similar verbs) and consider revising.
- Keep related words together – adjectives next to their nouns.
- Place important words at the end of the sentence.
- Place important sentences at the end of the paragraph.

Avoid using the word “not.” A sentence is stronger when phrased as a positive.

Avoid using the following negative words when possible:

- Terminal
- Hopeless
- Incurable
- Blind
- Crippled
- Dumb

Editing Your Writing

Slide 19

Self-editing allows the RVSR an opportunity to review their work for readability and content. The objective of editing and revision is to review the work and re-work sentences that are long or unclear. During the editing process, check for:

- Accuracy
- Grammar
- Wordiness and usage problems (redundancies/mixed tenses)
- Punctuation

NOTE(S)

Reading every word of the narrative aloud and pausing for commas may give the writer a different perspective as to whether the narrative is meeting the goal of a clear and concise message.

DISCUSSION

Handout 12

Use the “Job Aid – Editing Your Writing (Narrative Self-Editing Checklist)” to discuss the different self-editing areas for accuracy, grammar, wordiness/usage problems, and punctuation.

Check comprehension

Ask the trainees the following questions:

1. What are techniques for writing in active voice?

Response:

- Remove prepositions
 - Use strong active verb
 - Replace "to be" verbs with action verbs
 - Apply the rule of "Who does what to whom?"
2. What are common writing tips for improving the written narrative?

Response:

- Structure as subject-verb-object; tell action rather than describing situations.
 - Keep related words together – adjectives next to their nouns.
 - Place important words at the end of the sentence.
 - Place important sentences at the end of the paragraph.
 - Avoid using negative phrases.
3. What areas of the writing narrative should be reviewed when performing a self-edit?

Response:

- Accuracy
- Grammar
- Wordiness and usage problems
- Punctuation

EXERCISE

Handout 15

Refer trainees to the trainee handout packet, Attachment C: Exercise – Clear and Concise Writing Techniques and allow the trainees 15 minutes to edit the rating narrative provided so that the result is a more clear and concise rating decision.

After completion, provide the trainees with examples of the revised narrative.

Discuss the exercise including best practices and common practices when completing a rating narrative.

**REGIONAL OFFICE
SPECIFIC TOPICS**

At this time, add any information pertaining to:

- Station quality issues with this lesson
- Additional state-specific programs/guidance on this lesson

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

TIME REQUIRED .75 hours

EXERCISE This exercise will require that the trainees work with a partner. Have trainees identify a partner before the exercise begins.

Handout 16 Refer trainees to the Practical Exercise on page 16 of the Trainee Handout.

Instructions:

Allow the trainees 30 minutes to complete the following:

1. Review and revise the narratives in the Practical Exercise.
2. Meet with their partner and perform a peer review.
3. Discuss what went well and what could be improved in the editing steps that were modeled.

LESSON REVIEW, ASSESSMENT, AND WRAP-UP

INTRODUCTION

Discuss the following:

The How to Write Clear and Concise Rating Decisions lesson is complete.

Review each lesson objective and ask the trainees for any questions or comments.

TIME REQUIRED

.15 hours

LESSON OBJECTIVES

You have completed the How to Write Clear and Concise Rating Decisions lesson.

The trainee should be able to:

- Using CFR 4.23, M21-1 MR III, iv.6.C, and the trainee handout packet as references, identify the basic format of a rating decision including the sections and typed of information, with 85% accuracy.
- Using CFR 4.23, M21-1 MR III, iv.6.C, and the trainee handout packet as references, identify the elements of equitable decisions, with 85% accuracy.
- Using CFR 4.23, M21-1 MR III, iv.6.C, and the trainee handout packet as references, identify the flow of information and organization of the Rating Narrative that grants a benefit, with 85% accuracy.
- Using CFR 4.23, M21-1 MR III, iv.6.C, and the trainee handout packet as references, identify the flow of information and organization of the Rating Narrative that denies a benefit, with 85% accuracy.
- Using CFR 4.23, M21-1 MR III, iv.6.C, and the trainee handout packet as references, identify best practices for developing well-written Rating Narratives, with 85% accuracy.
- Using CFR 4.23, M21-1 MR III, iv.6.C, and the trainee handout packet as references, identify techniques that increase the clarity and decrease the length of a sentence, with 85% accuracy.
- Using CFR 4.23, M21-1 MR III, iv.6.C, and the trainee handout packet as references, identify methods that increase proficiency when editing a Rating Decision, with 85% accuracy.

ASSESSMENT

The assessment will allow the participants to demonstrate their understanding of the information presented in this lesson.

Inform the trainees that they must complete the Level 1 and Level 2 assessments, located in the VA TMS, to receive credit for the lesson.

Sample