

**Report to the Under Secretary  
for Benefits**

**Reader-Focused**

**Writing**

**Task Force on  
Simplified Communication  
August 29, 1995**

Department of  
Veterans Affairs

# Memorandum

Date: OCT 05 1995  
From: Under Secretary for Benefits (20)  
Subj: *Reader-Focused Writing*: VBA Reengineering  
To: All Service, Office, Area, and RO Directors

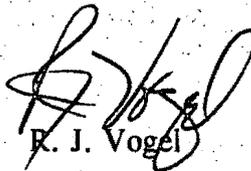
I believe we need to write more clearly and more compassionately to our veterans. I'm also convinced that our internal documents — especially manuals and other reference materials — need improvement. They *must* be clearer and easier to use so that readers can find and digest the information they need in the shortest possible time.

Last winter, I appointed a task force made up of representatives from the field and Central Office to:

- investigate the current state of writing in VBA,
- assess the effectiveness of existing improvement programs (such as *Writing for Real People* and *Communicating More Clearly in Writing*), and
- propose a plan for agency-wide improvement.

The task force's recommendation, an initiative called *Reader-Focused Writing (RFW)*, will reengineer all of VBA's written communication. Their report is attached. Please read it thoughtfully and share it with your staff. Shortly, you will receive more detailed information about the RFW training program and implementation plan.

I fully support this reengineering effort. It's long overdue. I'm asking that you, your managers, your supervisors, and your team leaders become familiar with all phases of *Reader-Focused Writing* and actively support this new way of doing business. If we all work together, we can revitalize VBA's writing, increase efficiency, and communicate our compassion. In other words, we can help ensure that veterans receive the quality of service they deserve.

  
R. J. Vogel

### **Introduction: The Role of Writing in VBA**

VBA's business is serving veterans. VBA's business *systems* mostly involve processing information. We run those systems by writing and reading: We request facts, evidence, and opinions in writing, whether by form or letter. When we get the information, we make decisions following our own written guidelines and using computer screens composed of our own text. Then we write letters to explain what we've done. Finally, we guide people through the appeal process—in writing.

Writing is "the invisible process" in all our systems. It's rarely thought of as a process in our work systems—indeed, it's rarely thought of at all—*yet everything else we do depends on it.*

All of our writing costs money to produce. Much of it costs money twice, either because it costs too much for other employees to read, or because customers who don't understand it create unnecessary work for us. If we're going to satisfy our customers, if we're going to give more value to the taxpayer, we must reinvent our writing.

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# Executive Summary

## The Problem

VBA's writing is failing its customers, its stakeholders, its employees. Focus groups, surveys and controlled studies show we're not communicating adequately with clients *or* employees.

Our letters are taking a toll on our efficiency by generating unnecessary calls to our offices and unnecessary work on claims. Our reference materials are costing employees too much time. Simply stated, we could satisfy customers and save money if we could find a better way to write.

## The Solution: Technical Communication Methods

A better way to write has actually been invented. Over the past thirty years, the discipline of technical communication has been developing research-based techniques which can revolutionize our writing. For poor readers who are struggling with our letters, we can double comprehension. For our employees, who are struggling with complicated reference materials, we can cut reading time by 50 percent.

## Reader-Focused Writing: Its Elements

*Reader-Focused Writing* is an initiative applying the research-based methods of technical communication to all of VBA's writing, from letters to forms to on-line manuals. It features audience analysis, a broad repertoire of tested techniques for writing and design, document testing with representative readers, and collaborative writing. See *Figure 1*.

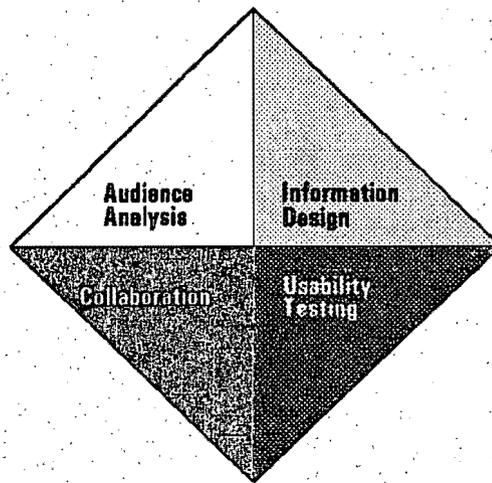


Figure 1. Elements of *Reader-Focused Writing*

## What Reader-Focused Writing Can Do

When applied throughout VBA, Reader-Focused Writing can:

- Increase customer satisfaction
- Improve processing timeliness
- Improve payment accuracy
- Reduce interviews and calls
- Shorten training periods
- Decrease time devoted to researching manuals and circulars
- Deliver value to the taxpayer

Among these seven potential benefits, we already have hard evidence of three:

1. Focus groups and interviews show that veterans like the new letters.
2. A revised letter appeared to reduce the total number of calls from customers in a survey of veterans benefits counselors.
3. A revised manual passage has dramatically improved comprehension for employees who participated in a controlled study.

## Reader-Focused Writing Supports VBA's Strategic Goals

Put another way, *Reader-Focused Writing (RFW)* can help us achieve all four of VBA's strategic goals:

- *RFW improves responsiveness to customer needs and expectations* because it gives veterans the kind of clear communication they've told us they want.
- *RFW improves service delivery and claims processing* by enabling customers to give us all the information we need the first time we ask for it.
- *RFW delivers maximum benefit to the taxpayer* because it helps us do things right the first time.
- *RFW promotes a more satisfying work environment* because, when applied to manuals and circulars, it reduces training time and "research" time.

## Reengineering Organizational Change

VBA will have to make significant changes in order to register these gains. Nothing less than a reengineering project will do the job. Fortunately, such an initiative would pay for itself quickly.

*Reader-Focused Writing* does face barriers:

- Organizational inertia
- Resistance to change
- Concerns about legal sufficiency
- Fear of mandated uniformity
- Performance criteria which support a "get-it-off-the-desk" mentality

We'll need all the help we can get to effect this evolution. Six levers of organizational change can help us. They are:

- Promoting the new values
- Teaching the requisite skills
- Redefining quality and standards of performance
- Modeling the new behavior
- Rewarding the new behavior
- Providing tools to facilitate the new behavior

We can systematically pull each of these levers to help ensure that the new writing methods become a way of life for VBA employees.

## Training: A Tiered Approach

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We propose to train all VBA writers in proportion to their needs. *Everyone* will need a brief orientation to the principles of *Reader-Focused Writing*. All employees who write as a part of their jobs will need basic technical communications training. Perhaps 10 percent of our writers will need advanced training in technical writing skills, collaborative writing, and usability testing. A considerably smaller number will need to learn how to design forms and write reference materials. We can think of this hierarchy as a pyramid. See *Figure 2*.

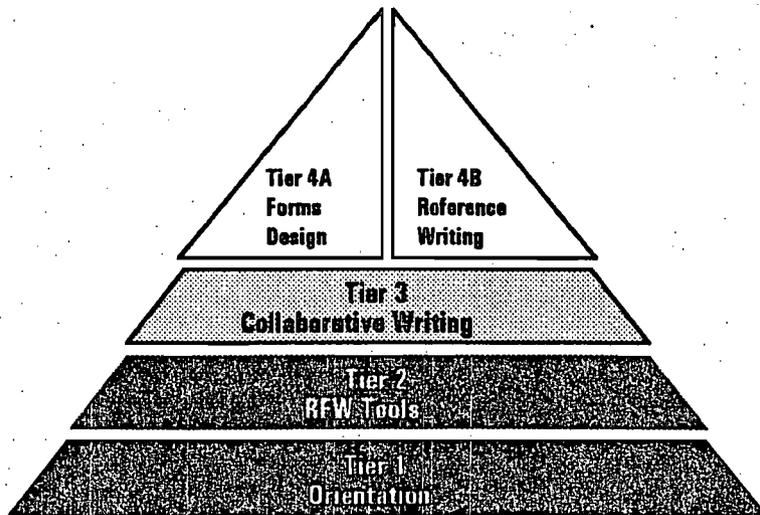


Figure 2: Reader-Focused Writing Training Model

**Measurement**

Measurement will be essential. We've established some baselines, and we'll take periodic measurements to know whether we're headed in the right direction. The resources needed for these measurements will be minimal.

**Coordination**

The coordination of this project, we believe, will require:

- A *Reader-Focused Writing* point of contact in VBA
- Ongoing support from a professional technical communicator
- An Implementation Team composed of employees from CO and the four Areas
- "Master Communicators" in each Regional Office, Service and Office

We envision that the Implementation Team will meet three or four times a year and communicate between meetings via conference calls. The Master Communicators will be the liaison between the Implementation Team and the regional offices. In addition, they will provide leadership for the critical mass of employees who have received advanced training in technical communication and who are responsible for revising VBA's standardized documents and creating new ones.

## Results

The *Reader-Focused Writing* project is an ambitious one. We expect it will take several years to implement. When implementation is complete, we should have a better-trained workforce and a new library of forms, reference materials, and standard letters which can substantially improve our effectiveness.

But we'll profit from the initiative in other ways, too:

- Document-testing with veterans will make us more customer-centered
- Contact with the technical communication field will make us more research-oriented
- The innovative activities of collaborative writing teams will facilitate our efforts to re-invent VBA

# Recommendations for Implementing Reader-Focused Writing

General	Approved
<p>1. <i>Reader-Focused Writing (RFW)</i>, a method for creating readable texts based on technical communications principles, should be adopted by the Veterans Benefits Administration.</p> <p>2. <i>Reader-Focused Writing</i> should be designated as a reengineering initiative assigned to the Office of Executive Management and Communications for implementation within two years.</p> <p>3. <i>Reader-Focused Writing</i> should encompass all external and internal communications of the Veterans Benefits Administration.</p>	  
<p><b>Coordination</b></p> <p>4. A core group of three to five members of the Simplified Communications Task Force should be established to coordinate the many <i>RFW</i> implementation activities; communicate <i>RFW</i> updates to Central Office and the field; measure and track the progress of the initiative; and provide a consistency to implementation. This Implementation Team should be chaired by the Office of Executive Management and Communications.</p> <p>5. A <i>Reader-Focused Writing</i> "Master Communicator" should be appointed at each Regional Office and Center to serve as assistant faculty to facilitate the off-satellite course instruction needed to make the <i>RFW</i> Tools course highly interactive. In addition, a point of contact should be identified to serve as liaison on <i>RFW</i> issues.</p> <p>6. Each Service, Office, Regional Office, and Center should have access to a collaborative writing team. The teams will use <i>RFW</i> techniques to draft and validate multiple use documents. Members will also serve as subject matter experts to their Service, Office or Station(s).</p>	  

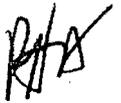
## Coordination

Approved

7. VBA should contract the services of a professional technical communicator. This person will serve as a consultant to the organization as we implement *Reader-Focused Writing*, and should report to the Office of Executive Management and Communications.



8. VBA should link *Reader-Focused Writing* with other initiatives to simplify communications and/or meet customer expectations (e.g., decentralization of correspondence control, development of status/expectation letters and VETSNET) in a comprehensive plan to reinvent our writing.



## Implementation

9. *Reader-Focused Writing* should be implemented incrementally in all Services, Offices (staffs), Areas, Regional Offices, and Centers. Services, Offices, and Areas should develop proposed implementation plans for their respective domains identifying milestones, dates, and resources required to support the initiative.



10. *Reader-Focused Writing* training should be accomplished using a tiered model incorporating:

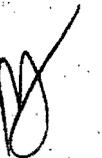
- Orientation
- RFW* Tools
- Collaborative Writing
- Reference Writing
- Forms Design



11. The *Orientation* module (1.5 hours) should be incorporated whenever possible into existing courseware including technical training sponsored by the Services when appropriate. The purpose of this module is to orient the student to the concept of *reader focus* and why it's effective.



12. The *RFW Tools* course should be designed as the pilot course for delivery over VBA's satellite network. This will enable us to provide a consistent course of study to a maximum audience with minimum disruption to their work and minimal travel costs. The "Master Communicators" at each station should receive the specialized course of study (including the *Orientation*, *Tools* and *Collaborative Writing*) prior to delivery of the satellite course to enable them to serve as station subject matter experts should students have questions.



**Implementation**

Approved

13. An intensive course for the "Master Communicators" should be developed for central delivery at the Veterans Benefits Academy prior to the implementation of the satellite *RFW Tools* course. This course should be offered just before the *RFW Tools* course commences.



14. The *Collaborative Writing* course should be developed to build on the skills taught in the *RFW Tools* course. Since this course involves some team interaction skills and intensive practice learning, this course should be delivered on-site to intact work teams. Once writing teams have been trained at each office, the course could be offered periodically at the Veterans Benefits Academy to train new/replacement team members.



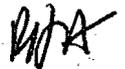
15. VBA should appoint research teams for a limited term to investigate best practices for forms design and for presentation of reference materials in an on-line environment, utilizing technical communications principles. These teams should submit recommendations for revising our forms and reference materials with a reader focus, including training options.



16. To begin the forms and reference material redesign processes, VBA should procure intensive technical communications expertise. This contractor would support the research teams and help us define strategies for reinventing our forms design and reference writing processes.



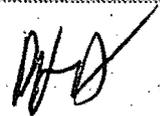
17. VBA should brief all interested parties and stakeholders outside of VBA to garner their support for the *Reader-Focused Writing* initiative.



18. VBA should use all available publicity media to explain and market the *Reader-Focused Writing* initiative.



19. Each Service, Office and Area should work through the Implementation Team to structure a reinforcement system that rewards employees for using *Reader-Focused Writing* principles to improve (simplify) communications.



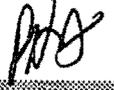
20. Each Service, Office and Area should work through the Implementation Team to develop measurement systems to track the success of *Reader-Focused Writing*.



**Clearing the Way**

Approved

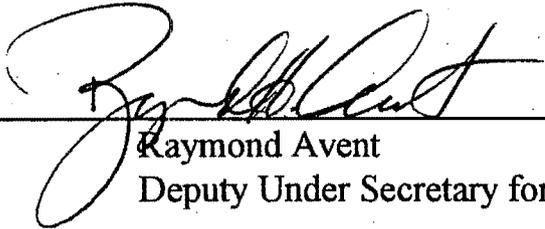
21. VBA should request a waiver from existing VA Correspondence Handbook, and other handbooks that conflict with *Reader-Focused Writing*.



22. Member(s) of the *Reader-Focused Writing* Implementation Team should participate in drafting the new Correspondence Handbook for VA-specific style issues, to ensure that the handbook supports the principles of *Reader-Focused Writing*.



23. VBA should insure that the Microsoft templates in all user locations meet VBA style requirements and support the *Reader-Focused Writing* initiative.



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Raymond Avent  
Deputy Under Secretary for Benefits



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Date

# 1. A Chronic Problem, A Comprehensive Solution

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## The Problem

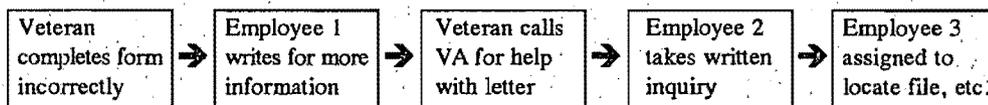
VBA's writing needs to be more readable; it needs to be designed for customers. Veterans have been telling us in focus groups that our letters are impersonal and exasperatingly unclear. Many widows have given up trying to fill out our forms; they regularly go to our offices or to service organizations for help. In fact, thousands of people make a part of their living helping clients cope with our correspondence. Within the organization, employees are also struggling with difficult texts as they try to decipher their manuals and circulars.

**Letters** are our primary means of communicating with veterans and their families. Poor letters can taint their future interactions with us and provoke them to share their bad experiences with others. For some clients, we're represented exclusively by our writing: To those veterans whose claims are denied, the only tangible product we provide is a letter.

But it's not just the unfavorable impression we sometimes leave that makes bad writing so destructive. Poor communication often results in delayed decisions, causing anxiety and economic hardship for our clients.

We in VBA also pay an economic price. We spend a lot of money writing; in a brief study of three regional offices, we found that 25% of adjudicators' time was spent creating documents. Poor writing costs money twice: A single unclear pattern letter sent to ten thousand veterans can result in hundreds of staff-hours of extra processing. Veterans Benefits Counselors tell us that many overpayments could be avoided if we could clearly explain to claimants their responsibilities. If we add the cost of claims denied for inadequate evidence and then resubmitted, of duplicate claims, and of telephone requests for clarification, we begin to see what poor letters are costing us.

**Forms** are often so hard to fill out that clients return them incomplete or come to our offices for help. A veteran who fills out a form wrong often upsets a whole row of dominoes:



**Manuals** and other internal communications are obstructing our ability to do our jobs. Manuals and circulars should be roadmaps; instead, they're often roadblocks. Employees read passages two, three, or four times to be sure of the meaning. They waste over a thousand hours *per week*, puzzling over manuals and circulars.<sup>1</sup> And they lose even more time discussing unclear passages with other employees. Worse, field stations sometimes implement policies incorrectly because of unclear language in manuals. Right now, we're paying people to laboriously read references that we paid other people to write *badly*.

## **The Solution: *Reader-Focused Writing***

We've tried to solve this problem before. VBA has been running letter-writing courses for decades. Is there really a new solution available?

There is. The discipline of technical communication offers research-based methods which can dramatically improve our letters. This is good news for VBA because:

- Standards of clarity now exist which are based on research and therefore can't be dismissed as arbitrary or as matters of taste.
- New methods have been developed that enable writers to make text more understandable than ever before. In combination with current word processing equipment, these techniques are powerful tools for improving written communication.

Jackson Regional Office's *Writing for Real People* adapted technical communication methods to VBA communications. The letters created in that initiative demonstrated, via interviews with veterans and focus groups, that technical communication methods can improve readability and customer satisfaction. The Office of Information Technology has also used technical writing practices in their new directives and handbooks, and their innovations have been warmly received. We think it's become clear that technical communication methods should be applied, as appropriate, to all forms of VBA writing.

Furthermore, to these advancements in information design should be added the important work done in the Central Area's initiative, *Communicating More Clearly in Writing*, regarding tone in letters to the public. Our communication problems, focus groups show, are not limited to clarity. Veterans feel our letters are cold and impersonal. They often complain that the people who write to them about their claims don't treat them with courtesy.

We recommend, therefore, that the contributions of the Central Area, of the Office of Information Technology, of Jackson VA Regional Office, and of the other regional offices which have inaugurated writing improvement programs be rolled into one initiative, named *Reader-Focused Writing*.

### **Why Technical Communication?**

For the past thirty years, researchers in neurolinguistics, cognitive psychology, technical communication, and allied fields have been studying how the human brain takes in written information and how text can be structured to improve usability. The result is a growing repertoire of techniques for communicating on paper and on computer screens. These methods are now being taught in university departments of technical communication and, to a lesser extent, in departments of business communication.

The most reliable source of these methods is the discipline of technical communication. Technical communicators have more complex information to communicate than other writers and therefore have had to develop the most sophisticated techniques. Although technical communication experts are responsible for only a portion of the research being done in the area of information design, they monitor *all* of the research because of their need to find newer and better ways to design documents and on-line information systems.

More than twenty years ago, technical communicators began offering their services to "non-technical" organizations. They began consulting with insurance firms and banks in the mid-1970s and with Federal agencies in the early 1980s. Social Security and the IRS have been working with technical communication consultants for a number of years.

## What *Reader-Focused Writing* Is

*Reader-Focused Writing* is a method for creating readable texts which is based on research in technical communication and related fields. Writers systematically analyze their readers' needs in order to choose appropriate:

- Words
- Sentence length and syntax
- Style
- Tone
- Organization
- Formatting

Authors of multiple-use documents like pattern letters, forms, manuals, and circulars, often test them with representative readers. In fact, testing is an essential part of the writers' training. Before they can be competent designers of multiple-use documents, they have to learn how their readers comprehend and use the texts. To do this, they must test some documents themselves.

*Reader-Focused Writing* encourages collaborative writing because multiple viewpoints usually enhance clarity and usability.

*Reader-Focused Writing*, when it involves multiple-use documents consists of four activities:

1. Audience analysis, in which the needs of all the parties to the communication are assessed
2. Information design, that is, the actual composing of the paper or on-line "document"
3. Usability testing, that is, the consultation with representatives of the audience
4. Collaboration between writers

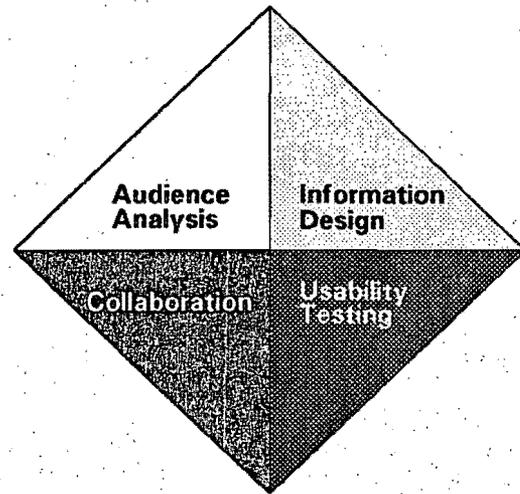


Figure 1: Elements of Reader-Focused Writing

See *Figure 1*.

When *Reader-Focused Writing* is applied to the creation of everyday single-use documents such as free text letters to veterans, usability testing and collaboration are usually omitted, of course.

The *Reader-Focused Writing* initiative will adapt the techniques of technical communication to *all* of the agency's written communication, including letters to veterans, forms, memos, handbooks, circulars, and on-line manuals.

## 2. The Value of the Solution: What *Reader-Focused Writing* Can Do

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*Reader-Focused Writing* will enhance customer satisfaction; veterans have already told us in focus groups and protocol interviews that they like the letters created in the *Writing for Real People* project. But customer satisfaction is only one of VBA's four strategic goals. Here's the entire list:

1. Improve responsiveness to customer needs and expectations.
2. Improve service delivery and benefits claims processing.
3. Ensure maximum value for the taxpayer's dollar.
4. Ensure a satisfying and rewarding work environment.

How will *Reader-Focused Writing* support all of the strategic goals? In sum, the new writing methods will:

- |                                       |  |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| <b>Increase customer satisfaction</b> | by creating letters, pamphlets, and forms that are easy to use. (Strategic Goal #1)<br><br><i>Evidence:</i> Our focus groups showed that customers prefer letters simplified with technical writing methods over traditional letters. <sup>2</sup>   |
| <b>Improve processing timeliness</b>  | by enabling veterans to supply all the information we need the first time we ask. (Strategic Goal #2)<br><br><i>Evidence:</i> Informal VBA studies suggest clients who receive plain English requests are more likely to respond with complete information. <sup>3</sup>   |
| <b>Improve payment accuracy</b>       | by helping claimants understand the rules for reporting important information. (Strategic Goal #3)<br><br><i>Evidence:</i> Veterans Benefits Counselors and Waivers and Compromises Committee members tell us that many veterans are getting overpaid because they don't understand our letters. A poll conducted by <i>Modern Maturity</i> magazine points in the same direction. 47% of the 4,000 respondents had trouble understanding and using government forms. <sup>4</sup> |
| <b>Reduce interviews &amp; calls</b>  | by creating letters, pamphlets, and forms that are easy to use. (Strategic Goals #2 & #3)<br><br><i>Evidence:</i> A VBA study found evidence that rewriting a letter in plain English had reduced the number of telephone inquiries from veterans. <sup>5</sup>  |

**Shorten training periods**

by creating more usable manuals and circulars.  
(Strategic Goals #3 & #4)

*Evidence:* In a controlled study, readers of a revised VBA manual passage finished in 25% less time than similar readers who used the original. *Twice as many people* in the test group understood the passage as in the control group.<sup>6</sup>

VBA employees agree that our manuals need to be reinvented. In focus groups they've described the current manuals as "hard to read," "confusing," and "mumbo jumbo."<sup>7</sup>

**Decrease research time**

by creating more usable manuals and circulars. By *research*, we mean time spent looking up issues in manuals and circulars. (Strategic Goals #2 & #3)

*Evidence:* Simplifying complex text, as we mentioned in the section on shortening training periods, helps readers understand it faster. In an Australian study, lawyers and law students understood portions of statutes written in plain English twice as fast as they understood the original statutes.<sup>8</sup>

**Deliver value to the taxpayer**

by reducing re-work, avoiding overpayments, shortening training periods, and decreasing research time. (Strategic Goal #3)

*Evidence:* The FCC increased its efficiency by rewriting regulations for citizen band radios. Fewer people were needed to interpret regulations to the public.<sup>9</sup> The British government saved \$2.9 million annually in staff time by redesigning legal aid forms.<sup>10</sup> The Australian government saved \$400,000 per year by rewriting a single document.<sup>11</sup>

In the previous paragraphs, we discussed the tangible achievements we can expect of this initiative from the standpoint of VBA's Strategic Goals. We think it's also useful to consider the ways in which the methods of *Reader-Focused Writing* align with the VBA Strategies. The new writing initiative supports all six VBA Strategies.

**Strategy 1: Customer.** *Reader-Focused Writing* addresses customer needs in the most direct way because it shows writers how to consult with readers in designing multiple use documents. The initiative also supports VBA's Customer Service Plan, which calls for standards of courtesy and respect, clearer communication, and improved responsiveness.

**Strategy 2: Employees.** In an era when resources have been declining and service expectations have been rising, VBA has had a harder time providing two of the hallmark benefits of Federal service: security and stability. One way we've started to compensate for this loss, and

simultaneously close the growing resource gap, is to give employees better tools, more skills, and greater autonomy.

*Reader-Focused Writing* will provide all three of these benefits.

- *Tools.* New pattern letters will help employees get faster and more complete responses from veterans while they reduce the number of inquiries from confused readers.
- *Skills.* The new writing skills will help employees communicate more effectively in those difficult situations where pattern letters don't fit the bill.
- *Autonomy.* The new method will enable teams of employees to discover for themselves what's wrong with our communication vehicles and to reinvent those vehicles in consultation with customers.

Managers, who will also be trained, can reinforce employees' use of the methods through recognition of their efforts and reward of their accomplishments.

**Strategy 3: *Reengineering.*** In VBA's business processes, only *part* of the work is done by employees. The rest of the work is done by customers and other people who receive letters from us. Thus, communication with the veteran (which often takes place several times during the process) is not an ancillary activity; it's as central to the process as deciding a claim or making an award.

To these processes *Reader-Focused Writing* brings systematic reexamination and reinvention. Writers study each communication context and ask, "What's the ideal outcome for each participant in this situation? What would help us avoid rework?" *Reader-Focused Writing* increases the efficiency of processes by eliminating steps that don't add value.

**Strategy 4: *Technology.*** Computer hardware and software facilitate the use of *Reader-Focused Writing* techniques: Computers enable writers to create improved information designs. And the writers, in turn, improve computer software: Technical writers, for instance, help design on-line information systems by organizing the information and formatting the screens. Clearly, then, there's a kind of symbiotic relationship between information technology and *Reader-Focused Writing*.

But there's another, more comprehensive way in which technical communication methods are essential to technology. Just as we need computers to manage information, we need technical communication to *organize* information so it can be used efficiently, whether its outputs are on screen, on paper, or verbal.

Because we can now process more information, we have to manage more information. Information is being presented to VBA managers and employees at an alarming speed. We no longer have time to read ordinary bureaucratic writing. Without the advantages of technical communication methods, we simply won't be able to keep up. So *Reader-Focused Writing*, while it's not *part* of technology, is a tool on a *par* with technology. It's part of the "intellectual equipment" we need to meet clients' and taxpayers' requirements.

**Strategy 5: Organization.** As Strategy 4 points out, VBA must evolve toward a flexible, cross-functional organization. *Reader-Focused Writing* supports this evolution. Its methods, from the beginning, have been cross-functional. It brings together writers and subject matter experts from various divisions and Services to share their perspectives on the readers'—and the organization's—needs. It also emphasizes partnerships between the program staffs in Central Office (CO) and field employees for the creation of pattern letters, manuals, and circulars. The initiative has already provided positive experiences in interdisciplinary collaboration for more than 150 employees in CO and in the field.

**Strategy 6: Training.** Technical communication methods help trainers produce training aids and reference materials that enable students to learn faster. In fact, many of the training materials used in the private sector are created by technical writers.<sup>12</sup> Program manuals and circulars are particularly important in this regard. Because so much basic instruction in VBA relies on manuals and circulars, redesigning them can significantly improve training.

To summarize, *Reader-Focused Writing* offers increased customer satisfaction, better value to the taxpayer, and decreased frustration for our employees. It serves hand-in-hand with technology to ensure that information is not only managed, but imparted to clients and staff in the most efficient way. It improves training and shortens training time. And it works as a tool for reengineering our processes, eliminating steps that don't add value.

### 3. The Radical Nature of the Solution: *Reader-Focused Writing as Reengineering*

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*Reader-Focused Writing* represents a change in the way we do business. Its focus is the creation of written communication vehicles in consultation with customers, and its method includes systematic review and reinvention of processes. As we noted before, only *part* of the work in a typical VBA work process is done by employees. The rest of the work is done by customers and other people who receive letters from us. Communication with the veteran is not an ancillary activity; it's as central to the process as deciding a claim or making an award.

When they use the new methods, as we said, writers study each communication context and ask, "What's the ideal outcome for each participant in this situation? What would help us avoid rework?" Communication processes are made more efficient, and non value-added steps are often eliminated.

So *Reader-Focused Writing* is, at least in its early stages, a kind of reengineering. But it also needs to be recognized as a reengineering initiative. That is, converting the organization to this new method of communication is itself a reengineering project.

Following are discussions of each of the seven reengineering principles cited in the *VBA Business Process Reengineering Report to the Under Secretary for Benefits*.

1. "Customer focus guides the organization." We have already discussed how central the customer is to this initiative. Consultation with the intended users of documents is a standard practice in the technical communication discipline, and audience analysis is a fundamental principle of *Reader-Focused Writing*.
2. "Data is necessary for success." In *Reader-Focused Writing*, we collect data constantly so that we can optimize communication with our customers. Protocol testing, the premier data collection method of technical communication, is essential to our initiative. We lead our readers through an interview protocol, recording every misunderstanding or difficulty they experience. We also study our readers' expectations by means of focus groups. Then we use what we've learned in these data-gathering efforts to design texts which meet the customers' needs.
3. "Unnecessary hand-offs need to be eliminated." The reinvention of our letters and reference materials will begin to eliminate "rework loops" in our work processes. In some cases, teams of writers have already eliminated steps in processes which were previously thought to be necessary.
4. "Measures are focused on outcomes and results." *Reader-Focused Writing* enables us to set performance objectives for our letters and manuals for the first time. The initiative has developed several yardsticks for measuring performance, some of them *process criteria* and some of them *results criteria*. They include: (1) Percentage of information points understood in protocol interviews (a standard technical communication measurement), (2) Percentage of information points understood from

manuals, as reflected in group examinations of employees, (3) Percentage of complete replies to development letters, (4) Number of telephone calls requesting help with VBA letters and forms, and (5) Percentage of veterans who return postcards indicating our letters were confusing.

5. **"Employees are empowered by the organization."** As we noted above, *Reader-Focused Writing* enables employee teams to identify opportunities for improvement and to reinvent communication vehicles. Employees are encouraged to be bold and innovative and to employ all the information management resources available.
6. **"Look at the 'big picture.'"** The initiative is a systemic solution to some major VBA performance problems. These are the problems:
  - We can't communicate adequately with customers. Everybody is saying it: veterans, service organizations, our own Veterans Benefits Counselors, and GAO.
  - We can't communicate adequately with each other. Trainees waste too much time coming "on-line" because our manuals are so hard to learn from. Journey-level employees waste too much time deciphering their manuals and circulars and arguing with each other about what's right. Everybody makes too many mistakes and generates too much rework because of problems interpreting our written guidelines.

This is the two-fold solution:

- A state-of-the-art method to "fix" our broken standardized documents and to create new ones. This method involves:
    - Reexamining letters, forms, and reference materials within the contexts of our work processes and reviewing/reformulating the goals of each document
    - Reinventing each communication vehicle using research-based techniques and a collaborative, cross-functional approach
    - Testing the document, as necessary, with representatives of the intended audience
  - A set of techniques which can enhance the effectiveness of every writer in VBA.
7. **"Tools for change are readily available."** The advent of VBA workstations opens a realm of creativity in letter format and style heretofore unknown in VBA. Armed with *Reader-Focused Writing* techniques, skilled writers will be limited only by their imagination. The training resources exist to deploy this method, and a preliminary training outline has already been created.

In the Appendix we'll discuss, point by point, the several questions in the Evaluation Matrix which is contained in *Appendix B* of the *VBA Business Process Reengineering Report*.

## 4. The Shape of the Solution: How *Reader-Focused Writing* Can Work in VBA

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In this chapter and the one following, we'll discuss what must be done to adapt *Reader-Focused Writing* to VBA. The issues addressed and the activities described in these two chapters overlap somewhat. In the present chapter, we'll examine some barriers the initiative faces and present antidotes. In so doing, we'll be outlining some of the basic features of the initiative. In Chapter 5, we'll discuss six activities which are central to our attempt to permanently change VBA's culture.

### Some Barriers to the Solution: Cultural Resistance

As we examined VBA's problems with written communication, we found layer upon layer of contributing factors which must be addressed if any meaningful, long-term change is to occur. Following is a brief list of some barriers we face. Some of them contribute to the problem; others simply provide resistance to the solution.

**Resistance to change.** Many of us have used the "bureaucratic" writing style for so long that nothing else looks right to us. Those who do deviate from that style are not encouraged; in fact, they're sometimes punished. "Best correspondence" awards often go to authors of long, convoluted letters with copious citations from the regulations. In the *Writing for Real People* (WRP) training conducted at the ten pilot stations, employees routinely said, "They'll *never* let us write this way!" Follow-up training evaluations showed their fears were justified. (We've included a synopsis of the WRP followup training evaluation in the Appendix to this report.)

**Intellectual objections.** Application of the new techniques often yields shorter sentences and simpler words, especially when the audience includes poor readers. Some VBA employees are offended by the new writing: They see it as "dumbing down;" and they think clients will be insulted.

**Concerns about legal sufficiency.** Some VBA employees have asked whether the letters we rewrite with technical communication methods can pass legal muster. They wonder whether the concepts encoded in our regulations can be explained in simple sentences and simple words.

**Fear of mandated uniformity.** If a solution is to be adopted nationwide, will everyone, every regional office and every service staff, have to speak with the same voice? The various services and field stations don't want to be forced together into the same mold, and since they have different customers, they probably shouldn't be.

### More Barriers to the Solution: Institutional Resistance

We face other problems, too. The structure, size, and complexity of our agency make it difficult to change our writing style.

**Rewards/reinforcement system.** The current performance standards in most offices place little emphasis on the *clarity* of correspondence. Moreover, because those standards tend to emphasize productivity, most employees feel they can't take the time to focus on their customers' readability needs when they write letters.

**The inertia of a large, complex organization.** One reason there's never been a system-wide, *intensive* effort to fix VBA writing is that the task is so daunting. Revising letters, forms, manuals, and circulars for all the program areas and retraining 13,000 employees is a massive project. It looks about as easy as building a cathedral by hand.

## **The Shape of the Solution: Some Essential Elements**

According to policy analysis experts, the shape of a problem very often suggests the shape of the solution. Considering the nature and extent of the problem, we concluded that our effort must encompass the whole organization and include all internal and external written material.

How can we insure clear, customer-centered writing at all levels of the organization? What are the essential features of such an effort? Of course, training is central. We'll discuss that shortly. First, let's look at some solutions to the barriers we noted above:

### *A foundation of research and testing*

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**Barrier:**

*Inertia of a large,  
complex organization*

**Solution:** *Reader-Focused Writing* will take years to implement, so it must be built on something unshakable. We believe research (the ongoing research of technical communication experts and specialists in related fields) and document testing provide the right foundation.

### *A highly visible person to "champion" the project*

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**Barrier:**

*Inertia of a large,  
complex organization*

**Solution:** The initiative will need a highly-placed champion so that it can compete with other agency projects and become institutionalized. Assigning it permanently to the Office of Executive Management and Communications should accomplish this.

### *A strategy for garnering broad support*

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**Barrier:**

*Inertia of a large,  
complex organization*

**Solution:** *Reader-Focused Writing* needs ongoing support at all levels. Integrating it with the initiatives shown on Page 15 will help us get that support. We should also issue regular bulletins to publicize our progress.

### A focus on the customer

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**Barrier:**

*Intellectual objections*

**Solution:** The customer orientation of *Reader-Focused Writing* will be the antidote for those who have intellectual differences with the project. We're making the *customer* the arbiter of questions of tone and clarity. In fact, *Reader-Focused Writing* will help VBA in its effort to re-orient itself toward customer service.

But looking to the customer first, when so many tasks are waiting on our desks, won't be easy. So we'll provide practical tools to help employees make customer-based decisions.

### A method for realigning our reward mechanisms

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**Barriers:**

(1) *Rewards/reinforcement system;*

(2) *Resistance to change*

**Solution:** We'll have to act on the organization's reinforcement mechanisms, directly and indirectly. It doesn't help to train people in a new behavior if the reward system still encourages the old behavior. Ultimately, *the people who reward the people who write* are the ones we must convince. This includes supervisors and managers at regional offices and centers, CO analysts who do surveys and statistical quality control reviews (SQC's) for the field stations, and—most importantly—policy makers. Then we'll need to examine the reward system itself and see how it can be realigned. (The section entitled *The Development of a New Culture: Six Levers of Organizational Change* discusses these issues in more detail.)

### An effective means of evaluation

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**Barriers:**

(1) *Resistance to change*

(2) *Intellectual objections*

**Solution:** We'll create markers of effectiveness (Does the document accomplish what we want it to?) and customer satisfaction (Does the customer like it?). We've already started testing via interviews and focus groups, and we've done some preliminary controlled studies. Regular measurement of *several* indices will be necessary, not only for the duration of the initiative, but so long as VBA uses language to communicate. (The *Measurement* section contains a more complete discussion.)

*A policy of flexible implementation*

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**Barrier:**

*Fear of mandated  
uniformity*

**Solution:** VBA is a complex and diverse agency. Any plan for agency-wide change must allow for variations of implementation corresponding to the needs of our various constituencies. A rigid mandate won't work. We must remember: *Reader-Focused Writing* is a method, not a style or format.

*An incremental approach*

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**Barrier:**

*Inertia of a large,  
complex organization*

**Solution:** Our task is so big we *must* take an incremental approach. We're proposing a fundamental change in thinking about the way we do business; we can only change deeply-rooted assumptions and beliefs a little at a time.

We can begin with pattern letters and move on to system-generated generated letters. We may rewrite internal documents in installments, with the next manual change, with the next VA form due for a re-approval. Or we can begin by writing new circulars using the new methods and revise manuals only as we upgrade our on-line systems. We'll have to prioritize, and then begin concentrating on areas where we can achieve some quick successes and some measurable gains. Aligning with the initiatives shown on Page 15 will help.

*A practice of consultation to assure legal sufficiency*

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**Barrier:**

*Concerns about legal  
sufficiency*

**Solution:** *Reader-Focused Writing* is a method, not a vocabulary. Twenty years' experience with "plain English" law in the private sector (mandated by the state legislatures) has already shown that legal sufficiency can be achieved without using legalese.<sup>13</sup> *Reader-Focused Writing* teams will routinely consult with program experts to ensure legal sufficiency in their documents.

## Summary

What we are envisioning is a comprehensive, fundamental change in our organization. We are proposing to reinvent the whole process of writing in VBA. Recognizing the enormity of the challenge, we see the ideal solution as a long-term, incremental approach, with flexibility enough to accommodate necessary variations, with emphasis on quick successes, and with regular evaluation over time using valid measurement tools. We must include in our framework ways of maintaining legal sufficiency while reinforcing the change in organizational culture, with the focus always on the customer.

### Related Initiatives

We are fortunate to be launching Reader-Focused Writing at a time when many tools are available to serve our purpose. Following are some current related initiatives:

- Several writing improvement efforts have been undertaken and are ongoing in the field, as well as in Central Office.
- There are numerous emerging technologies such as *ARMS* (Automated Reference Manuals System), VBA's on-line reference materials; *VA On-Line*, veterans benefits information which can be accessed by veterans from home or office computers; and the *PCGL* (Personal Computer Generated Letters) initiative, which will create a variety of opportunities to make *Reader-Focused Writing* a fact of everyday life in VBA.
- The Office of Executive Management and Communications is working with the Department to revise and streamline the VA Correspondence Manual.
- The Office of Information Technology (OIT) Forms and Publications staff is mounting an extensive effort to improve and simplify the whole process of forms and publications design.
- OIT has developed a dramatically new approach for their manuals.
- The Office of Resource Management's Customer Service/Performance Measurement staff is looking at improving customer surveys and other customer service measures.
- The Compensation and Pension Service is creating the Claims Processing System (CPS). This initiative is almost ready to test an automated, simplified claims development process.
- The Employee Development and Training Office's exciting initiative on distance learning, utilizing satellite broadcasting technology, offers an invaluable opportunity to test a prototype for national training of *Reader-Focused Writing*.

## 5. A Comprehensive Approach: Six Levers of Organizational Change

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We've defined *Reader-Focused Writing* as a method for substantially improving written communication throughout VBA. We've said the method needs to be applied to all our written products because it will improve efficiency and reduce costs as well as satisfy customers. We've tried to show that *Reader-Focused Writing* should be recognized as a reengineering initiative. And, in *The Shape of the Solution*, we've sketched out some of the intangible characteristics of the initiative.

We have also admitted that the project looks like a tall order. It's a new idea to most VBA employees, and many will initially resist it. Further, in the early stages of deployment, the mastering of these skills will conflict with other urgent priorities related to job performance. When employees are worried simply about how to get the work out, they're likely to look for the quickest ways to get things off their desks. *The truth is, we could initiate a comprehensive training initiative and a competent "marketing" plan and still fail to get Reader-Focused Writing to take root.*

We need, therefore, to apply every kind of leverage available to us. We need a comprehensive approach to organizational change.

### The Six Levers

What can leaders do to establish the new writing methods and thereby permanently change the way VBA does business? We'll suggest six "levers" which organizations can use to change the behavior of their employees. There are, of course other strategies organizations use to effect change, but these six seem particularly relevant to our situation. Here they are:

- Promoting the new values
- Teaching the requisite skills
- Redefining quality and standards of performance
- Modeling the new behavior
- Rewarding the new behavior
- Providing tools to facilitate the new behavior

Not one of these levers is sufficient in itself. We think VBA's strategy for reinventing writing must incorporate all six. (See *Figure 2*)

## Promoting the New Value

We need to establish as an organization that clarity in written communication is essential to the way we do business. We need to say this clearly and often. Saying it in the Customer Service Standards was a good first step, but we'll need to find other occasions—and other ways—to say it. Discussion of the new method in *Vanguard*, promotion in memos, and briefings at conferences will also encourage people to think about *Reader-Focused Writing*.

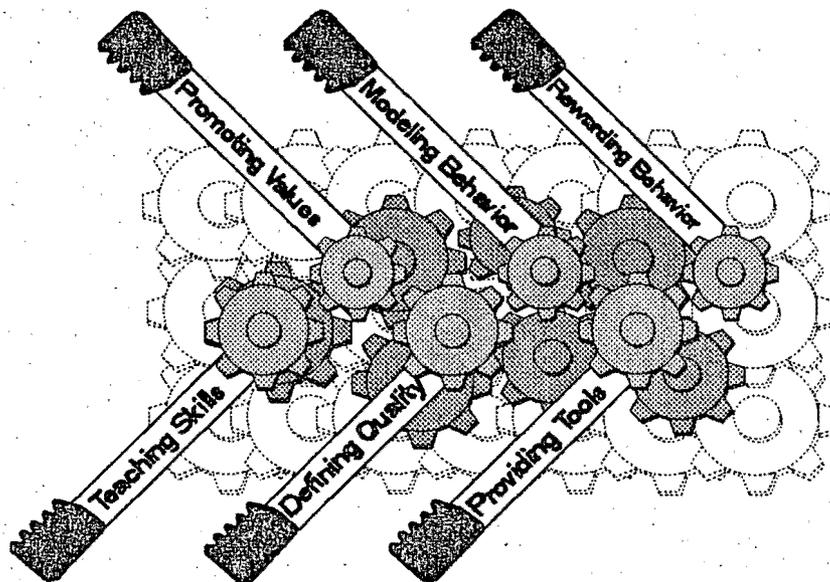


Figure 2. Six Levers of Organizational Change

Of course, every employee knows that organizations like to post inspiring slogans on their walls. But many employees suspect that what the organization really wants is somewhat different from those ideals. So we'll need to do more than post customer service standards and talk up *Reader-Focused Writing* in messages to the field. We'll also have to model the behavior. More on that below.

### Teaching the Skills

We will propose an ambitious program of training for Central Office and the field. Everyone who writes as a part of his or her job should, we believe, be included.

But the training, no matter how good it is, will not have a significant impact on the behavior of employees and managers unless it's coordinated with the five other levers of change, particularly *defining quality* and *modeling behavior*. For instance, if the training is provided to the field before the Services and Offices have demonstrated that they're behind it, large numbers of employees—and more than a few division chiefs—will probably greet the course with cynicism. If they don't recognize the importance of learning the new methods, they simply won't learn the skills.

Consider, for instance, the narrow issue of disability ratings. Currently, adjudicators excerpt portions of the ratings for their letters to veterans. The ratings are not usually written with the veteran reader in mind. If rating specialists attend the training without first having been provided a new rating format to emulate or assurances that a new model is forthcoming, they're likely to treat the training as irrelevant to their jobs.

## Redefining Quality and Standards of Performance

Where do employees look when they want to know what's really important to the organization? Many turn to the organization's standards of acceptable quality and performance.

When we evaluate our work to see if it measures up, what do we look for? Typically and laudably, we want the I's dotted and the T's crossed. We want the correct benefit information and the complete explanation of rights and procedures. Perhaps we check for courtesy. We may even look for clarity of writing. But when we get to clarity, how do we make our decisions? Until now, we've never had an objective standard of clarity. *Reader-Focused Writing* provides two such standards. They are:

- Whether readers can understand what's written (in actual document testing)
- Whether the writing meets the current research-based criteria of technical communication.

**Statistical Quality Control.** Perhaps our most important standards are those we employ in statistical quality control (SQC). They affect performance of individual employees and of entire field stations. We think that the quality standards of the Services and Offices should incorporate new definitions of writing clarity.

Before we can enact standards like these, of course, we'll need some consensus within Central Office about clear writing. This will require training and exposure to the results of research. Such training can be accomplished in a matter of months. Once it's completed, we can arrive at a common understanding of what quality means in written communication. Then we can create objective standards of writing clarity, building in sufficient flexibility for each Service and Office to shape its SQC measures according to its needs.

**Performance Standards.** Sometimes, performance standards seem to work against each other. This is a common occurrence in today's high-pressure work environment. Many employees' performance appraisals contain quality and production elements which seem to them to be at odds with each other. They often raise this issue in discussions on performance standards. "You say you want quality, but then you push me for the numbers. I can't give you both. Which one do you want?" Of course, we do want both, to the maximum extent possible. But it's not easy to strike a balance.

The present initiative poses the same kind of dilemma. Employees have already told us they find it difficult to apply the principles of *Reader-Focused Writing* on a daily basis because of pressure to get the work out quickly. Their performance standards usually emphasize productivity and timeliness, and they feel they don't have the time to perfect letters to claimants. In fact, the new methods would help them achieve timeliness and productivity in the long-run. (For instance, if fewer cases are closed for insufficient response, there will be

fewer cases to work a second time and thus less rework.) But employees find it hard to take the long view when their supervisors are more interested in the week's widget count.

Changing the definition of quality for purposes of quality assurance (proposed under the heading, *Statistical Quality Control*, above) should help counterbalance employees' current perception that they don't have time to write clearly.

Is there a remedy for these problems? One possibility is to revise performance standards to include the use of *Reader-Focused Writing*. We think this issue ought to be studied. However, we aren't prepared to make a recommendation for two reasons:

- The appraisal of individuals' performance is currently a matter of considerable debate within the Federal community. Agencies are experimenting with group standards, and OPM is proposing a dramatic liberalization of the regulations affecting performance appraisals.
- To insert a quality of writing element in employees' performance standards at the wrong time (e.g., before all pattern letters had been revised and training had been supplied) could actually create resentment toward the *Reader-Focused Writing* initiative.

## Modeling the New Behavior

Gandhi once said, "Your actions are so loud that I can't hear what you're saying." Leaders, more than anyone else, can have a powerful effect on an organization when they demonstrate through their actions the behavior they're trying to encourage. Conversely, they tend to extinguish behaviors which they do *not* exhibit. Chief executives who "kill the messenger," for instance, may sustain a climate of fear throughout their organizations, even while they're setting up participative management programs. In the present instance, employees are more likely to adopt *Reader-Focused Writing* if they see their leaders using it.

The organization needs an *ethic* of clear communication. For decades, VBA has written manuals and circulars and other internal communications in quasi-legalese. We've hired people who were generally educated enough to understand these texts, but we've seldom stopped to think about the inordinate amounts of time they spend doing it. In a recent controlled study comparing a manual passage revised using *Reader-Focused Writing* and the original passage, a participant in the test group commented:

"I knew right away that I had the 'new improved' version because I was racing through it. I'm used to these manuals here (he pointed at his own manuals), where I have to read a passage four times before I'm sure what it means. Dexter brought his *old* version downstairs and I was just amazed [at the difference]."

Nor have we worried very much about the likelihood that employees would *misinterpret* our instructions. Members of the task force have observed several occasions when Central Office's instructions were misunderstood by employees or *entire field stations*. On one occasion, we found

two different interpretations in the field and a third one in Central Office. The Central Office interpretation, incidentally, turned out to be wrong; the people responsible for interpreting the regulations no longer understood the meaning of their own manual.

Sometimes it seems that authors of manuals and circulars and bulletins feel that "If I'm smart enough to write it like this, you should be smart enough to understand it." Writers must learn that if readers don't understand them, *they have failed* as writers.

When memos, directives, "sample letters," manuals, and circulars are written in plain English and designed for their users, employees will see that the organization really wants clear communication. We recommend that all the authors of Central Office's communications with the field be trained in *Reader-Focused Writing* at the earliest opportunity, and that they be encouraged to use their training immediately.

## Rewarding the New Behavior

If our actions are not to drown out our words, we must *align* them with the words. Many field stations have rewarded individuals for writing well with "best letter" awards and the like, but our greatest rewards have usually been given to those employees who were turning out the most work. Too often, those employees were known to take shortcuts in order to increase their production. Is there a way to tip the scales somewhat toward *Reader-Focused Writing*?

Probably the most common and most important form of reward in our organization is the performance award. Part of its importance stems from the fact that it's the only award we give employees which reflects how they're doing in a comprehensive way. Usually it's the performance award which employees view as most indicative of the kind of behavior management is looking for. Thus, if a good employee can't enhance her performance rating and her chances of getting an award by writing clear, helpful letters, she's likely to think the quality of letters doesn't matter. If, as we've proposed above, quality standards are changed to encourage the use of *Reader-Focused Writing*, employees should be able to improve their chances for getting performance awards by using the new methods.

Other kinds of awards can also be effective in encouraging the new writing method. Special act awards focus attention on very specific behaviors. Because of this, they're a good way to convey the message, early in the life of the initiative, that *Reader-Focused Writing* is an organizational priority. We believe award programs of this kind ought to be encouraged.

Awards might include:

- Time off
- Cash
- Certificates of Appreciation
- Letters of Commendation
- Trophies, plaques, merchandise, or tickets to movies and sporting events
- Opportunities for cross-training or attractive special projects

It's important, however, that people who've been thoroughly trained in the new writing methods be involved in selecting the recipients of special awards. Otherwise, employees may be rewarded for writing that bears only a superficial resemblance to *Reader-Focused Writing*. Were this to happen, bad writing techniques, rather than good ones, might be encouraged.

## Providing Tools to Facilitate the New Behavior

On a grand scale, tools have changed human behavior and shaped cultures in profound ways. On a smaller scale, tools are constantly changing the way we work in business and government. The photocopier, an important invention which flourished toward the end of "the paper age," helped managers and employees see new advantages to sharing information on a spontaneous basis. Once photocopiers became affordable, managers were more likely to tell subordinates, for instance, "Oh, and make sure each member of the team gets a copy too." Information was shared more widely because the tools to share it were available. Computers, of course, have had similar but more profound effects.

*Reader-Focused Writing* is itself a tool. But other tools, some of them created using *Reader-Focused Writing*, will be essential elements of our strategy to reinvent writing in VBA. We can identify two fundamental roles of tools which will help us facilitate the new behavior: (1) Tools which facilitate the actual practice of the new behavior. (2) Tools which enable leaders and staff organizations to model the new behavior. Some tools both model and facilitate the new behavior.

Here are six tools which will help change our culture:

- **State-of-the-art Word Processing Software** will be necessary to make full use of contemporary information designs. Some *Reader-Focused Writing* formats require graphics capabilities which WANG WP (Word Processing system) doesn't possess. Some pattern letters require programming which automatically inserts personalized details in several parts of a large document. IRM modernization, then, is critical to the spread of *Reader-Focused Writing*.
- **Computer Hardware**, of course, is necessary to support the latest word processing programs. The deployment of PCs throughout VBA is of the utmost importance for the dissemination of technical communications methods. Some of our new formats, pattern letters, and forms demand considerable memory and speed. We will need to continue to make investments to acquire state-of-the-art hardware and software to provide optimum processing support for these formats and pattern letters.
- **Revised Manuals and Circulars** provide the leaders of VBA an opportunity to *model* the new behavior, as we noted above. The new manuals and circulars are a tool, a "lever," then, for this modeling behavior. But they amount to tools in two other ways, as well.

First, the new reference materials will give employees a new way of thinking and writing about the regulations and policies they work with. The way employees describe VBA rules and practices to veterans is profoundly affected by the texts from which they work. *Employees often think of benefits concepts using the actual language of manuals and regulations.* Because of this, they routinely find it necessary to translate these ideas into the language of their customers. In too many cases, however, employees don't take the

time to translate. The truth is, it's very difficult to convert VBA benefits rules from our language into lay persons' language. That's why *our* language has to change.

Second, the manuals and circulars will provide examples of *how* plain English can be used to talk about VBA benefits, decisions, and procedures.

- **Revised Pattern Letters and System-Generated Letters** will serve as models for the free-text letters employees write. Once we've rewritten all of these letters, we'll begin to see a change in employees' writing, simply as a result of their attempts to emulate the style we've modeled. Together with the training we're providing, pattern letters will "leverage" the skills of employees to a new level.

It's critical that we recognize, however, that being exposed to revised pattern letters won't by itself show people how to use the new method. We've already seen evidence that people who try to imitate *Reader-Focused Writing* without being trained are likely to create poorly-organized documents. They tend to mistake form for substance. Indeed, format, the most obvious novelty in the original *Writing for Real People* letters, was not a very large contributor to their intelligibility. Researchers say that only 10% to 15% of readability derives from formatting and style. The remaining 85% to 90% of readability results from the writer's *analysis of the information and organization of the ideas being conveyed*.

- **Revised Forms** will also help employees begin to see ways of communicating more effectively. The language on these documents will be organized and clarified in ways which employees will gradually notice and emulate.
- **Document Testing** is, of course, a part of *Reader-Focused Writing*. It properly belongs in our discussion of the *nature* of the new method. But because we've noticed that employees often resist using it for fear that it will slow down the writing process, we feel document testing needs to be highlighted as a primary tool for changing the culture.

It provides four benefits:

1. It validates the readability of a document.
2. It helps writing teams determine what kinds of words, sentences, and other document design elements are useful to their intended readers.
3. It gives teams—and, to the extent that the members publicize their findings, other employees and managers—a new understanding of the readability needs of external and internal customers.
4. It helps everyone become more customer-focused.

Employees and managers who have conducted document testing with readers have almost always been powerfully affected by it. We believe every Service, every Office, and every field station needs to learn to do document testing. Our experience has shown, for instance, that even when we depart from the standard method by using employees rather

than veterans to test benefits letters, we get unreliable results. The only way to be sure of the usability of a document or a group of documents is to test it with its *intended readers*. And the only way for authors of multiple-use documents to learn to write for their audience is to test documents with representatives of that audience.

## 6. Equipping Employees: A Tiered Approach to Training

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The Simplified Communications Task Force was convened to develop a viable training plan for *Reader-Focused Writing*. We have taken pains to make the point thus far in this report that training in and of itself will not change the way VBA communicates. The degree to which VBA implements the non-training recommendations will directly impact training effectiveness, that is, the degree to which behavior changes as a result of the training. However, the implementation of the training recommendations will ensure that training is delivered effectively to the appropriate VBA staff to ensure that all employees have the skills they need to communicate more effectively in their jobs.

An effective *Reader-Focused Writing* training plan is needed to:

- Overcome the bureaucratic writing style that permeates our organization
- Deploy the new technical communication methodology throughout VBA
- Establish broad support of the *Reader-Focused Writing* initiative to ensure its success

The task force used the Instructional Systems Design (ISD) methodology to analyze our training requirements and design our proposed training plan. The ISD model gave our analysis structure and focus. Our group utilized the expertise of Sabrina Christian, an Instructional Systems Specialist from the Veterans Benefits Academy, at critical points in our analysis. The ISD model incorporates five critical phases of instruction: *analysis* of training requirement (need), *design* of the training framework, *development* of the training curricula, *implementation* or delivery of the training program, and *evaluation* of the program's effectiveness.

To this point, we have:

- Completed the curricula and delivered the Orientation module
- Completed the *analysis* phase and much of the *design* phase for the RFW Tools and Collaborative Writing courses
- Identified the training requirement for the Forms Design and Reference Writing courses

Learning maps for the Orientation, RFW Tools, and Collaborative Writing courses are included as *Appendix B* of this report. We did not feel we should go beyond this point until the training framework was approved.

### Analysis

We feel a tiered approach to training will ensure that all of our employees get only the training they need to do their jobs. In the tiered approach, each level of training builds on skills learned in the previous levels (see *Figure 3*). In this model, skills that have been learned in

previous courses are refreshed at subsequent levels of training, but not repeated in great detail. For example, we expect students attending the Collaborative Writing course to have mastered the skills taught in the RFW Tools course. In this way, we can minimize time spent away from work for training by not repeating material that the students have already learned in lower level courses.

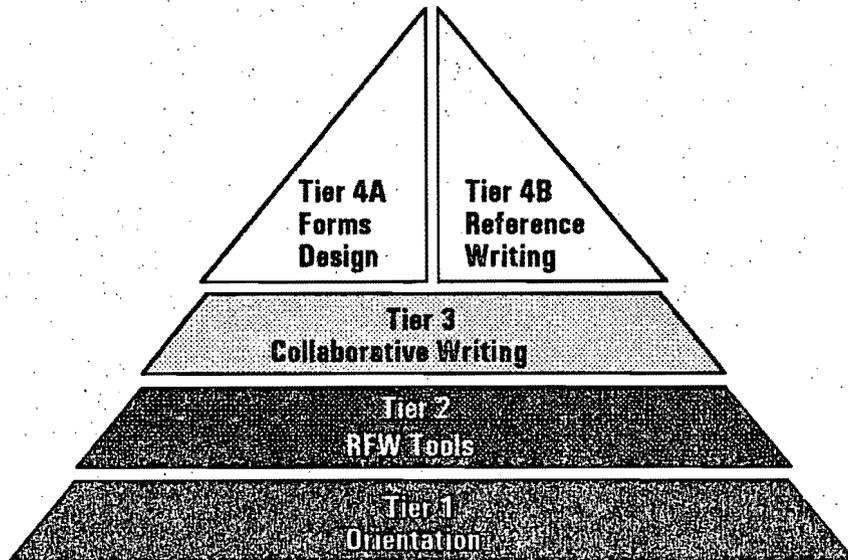


Figure 3. Training Model

We hope the training will result in improved intellectual skills (the student will apply the principles and rules taught to his/her writing); and an attitudinal shift (the student chooses to write using the skills learned in class). We identified several different target audiences with differing training needs:

Course	Description	Target Audience
Orientation [Tier 1]	short introduction to philosophy of "reader focus"	<i>all employees</i>
RFW Tools [Tier 2]	technical communications principles	<i>all pattern letter users and employees who write as part of their job</i>
Collaborative Writing [Tier 3]	collaborative writing skills and reader validation techniques	<i>employees who prepare multi-use (pattern) letters for wide audiences</i>
Forms Design [Tier 4A]	effective forms design (to elicit maximum response rate from reader)	<i>employees who design VBA forms</i>
Reference Writing [Tier 4B]	effective design of reference materials (to ensure quick and accurate information retrieval)	<i>employees who draft VBA directives (manuals, directives, handbooks, circulars, etc.)</i>

## Orientation

This module is designed for all VBA employees, whether or not they do a significant amount of writing as part of their jobs. It will ensure that all VBA employees are introduced to *Reader-Focused Writing* and that they understand the value of this new writing style.

Given the *Reader-Focused Writing* Orientation, the students will identify and explain *Reader-Focused Writing* principles and choose to use them in written communications. The course will:

- Define *Reader-Focused Writing*
- State the philosophy
- Outline *Reader-Focused Writing* techniques
- Answer "What's in it for me?"
- Provide background and history
- Convey top-level commitment

In designing the *Reader-Focused Writing* Orientation module, we identified a need to train all employees in the philosophy of customer/reader focus in VBA writing. We could identify no VBA employees who would not benefit from the Orientation module, since virtually all employees read, write, or review written material in their daily work (although it need not involve an external customer). People who do not regularly draft their own correspondence or use pattern letters with free-text inserts would not need extensive training in how to utilize technical communications principles, but they would benefit from understanding the importance of reader focus. Therefore, we felt that this module would appropriately stand apart from the RFW Tools course.

We felt that the Orientation actually dealt more with the philosophy of why we should write differently (reader focus) rather than how to do it - a function of customer service. After gaining consensus from the Area Directors about this, we approached Central Area about incorporating our module into VBA's Customer Service course. We have designed a lesson which has been added to this course. The course is being piloted by Central Area.

We have also provided a different version of the Orientation to the Compensation and Pension (C&P) and Education Services for use in their technical training courses. C&P successfully integrated the lesson into their March class for journeyman adjudicators.

## RFW Tools

This course will target all VBA employees who write sentences or paragraphs from scratch as part of their jobs. This includes anyone who simply adds inserts to pattern letters, as well as employees who draft whole letters. This course is also designed for employees who review other people's writing.

Utilizing technical communications principles, the students will write clear, simple and effective correspondence to VBA's internal and external readers.

In this course, employees will learn to:

- Analyze the needs of the audience
- Identify ideal outcomes for reader(s) and VA
- Organize information
- Select words and sentences that are appropriate for the reader(s)
- Use appropriate tone
- Use VBA formats and style
- Edit and proofread letters

In selecting the training mode, we considered our target audience characteristics, instructional setting, and performance task. We determined that:

- The course content will not require much human interaction.
- The subject matter is relatively stable.
- The target audience will be large and geographically diverse.
- Travel resources may be limited.
- There will be sufficient time, skills, and resources for planning and development of the course.

All of these characteristics support the use of the distance learning mode for this training package. Using the Reiser-Gagne' Media Selection Model recommended in the ISD methodology, we determined that broadcast would be an appropriate delivery medium for this course.

The Office of Employee Development and Training (20T) has recently submitted a proposal that VBA acquire satellite technology. The general applicability of *Reader-Focused Writing* to all facets of VBA business, the significant up-front training requirement, and the ongoing need to train new VBA employees make it an ideal subject for training through this technology. We feel *Reader-Focused Writing* would be an appropriate course to pilot on the satellite system.

If there will be a significant delay (in excess of 15 months) in installing the satellite system, we recommend exploring alternative modes of delivering this course. The most promising alternative delivery method would likely be computer-assisted instruction. This is not the ideal solution due to the difficulty of changing the instructional material on a regular basis. We've already made the case that the field of technical communications is evolving and, as more research is conducted on readability, we expect to have to alter our training materials from time to time.

## **Collaborative Writing**

This course will be designed for employees who draft multiple-use documents, such as pattern paragraphs and letters. Using collaborative writing and reader validation techniques, the

student will design clear, simple and effective pattern letters and paragraphs. The up-front time commitment involved in using collaborative (team) writing techniques and assessing letters using queued response protocol interviewing and other validation techniques prior to deploying them for general use is significant. However, ensuring the documents are readily understandable to the readers will pay dividends in terms of customer satisfaction and improved work processes once they are widely used. Students selected for this class should be aware of the considerable time involved in drafting these documents prior to taking the course. In addition, students selected for this course will need to demonstrate mastery of the skills taught in the RFW Tools course, a prerequisite for attendance in the Collaborative Writing course.

This course will teach students to:

- Use team skills
- Define data collection and feedback mechanisms
- Select and use appropriate data collections techniques
- Analyze data
- Revise letters based on feedback

To maximize use of VBA resources, we should take advantage of available tools and initiatives wherever possible. If VBA develops a VBA Team Dynamics training program, it should fold in the team skills required to support the *Reader-Focused Writing Collaborative Writing* course. These skills are:

- Demonstrate positive social interaction skills
- Give/receive constructive feedback
- Practice good listening skills
- Use conflict resolution techniques
- Contribute ideas willingly
- Demonstrate respect for team members and their views

The characteristics of this audience and training are:

- There will be less variation among individual learners.
- The content of the course will require human interaction.
- The target audience will be smaller and less geographically diverse; ideally, we would be training intact work teams (training all members of a collaborative writing team together).
- Precise reproduction of the instruction is not critical.
- The course will have a short lifetime, i.e., once the immediate need to train pattern letter designers is satisfied, there will be an infrequent need for this course.

These characteristics point toward the use of an instructor-led mode of instruction. The instructor can be supported by a variety of media, including charts, motion pictures, video, overheads, slides, printed text, and training aids. This can be accomplished through centralized training at the Veterans Benefits Academy or, preferably, at local regional offices if we are training an entire writing team at that site.

## Forms Design and Reference Writing

We recognize that *forms design* and *reference writing* are two additional areas that require a reader focus. However, all of the research VBA has done to date concerns improving the readability of *correspondence*. Until we research these two key areas, we are unable to address training requirements, except in the broadest terms. Once VBA researches these two critical areas and proposes *Reader-Focused Writing* solutions, training proposals can be completed.

## Where We Go From Here

Once the modes of training delivery are approved, we need to develop the RFW Tools and the Collaborative Writing courses. We will most assuredly require the assistance of a trained technical communicator to accomplish this. In addition, the delivery mode of the RFW Tools course may necessitate additional contractor support. If we elect to develop the course for satellite delivery, we'll need expertise in developing distance learning scripts. If we elect to develop the course for delivery through computer-assisted instruction, we'll need help in programming the lessons. The costs associated with the course development will vary based on the delivery mode(s) selected. The *development* costs for satellite or computer delivery will be higher than if the course were developed for classroom delivery. However, the cost of *delivering* the RFW Tools course to virtually all VBA employees in a classroom setting would be prohibitive because of the travel expense (either for the students or for the instructor(s)). The additional development costs for the distance learning alternatives would be more than made up in savings in course delivery expenses.

Until the RFW Tools and Collaborative Writing courses are developed, we suggest VBA continue to utilize the current vendor to provide those training classes that are immediately necessary to support existing *Reader-Focused Writing* efforts.

Once the research teams investigating how best to design forms and how to effectively present reference materials in an on-line environment determine how we should organize and format these media, the Forms Design and Reference Writing courses can be developed and delivered. If off-the-shelf training programs exist that address either of these areas, we should seriously consider them. As long as they meet our requirements for improved readability of forms and/or references, using available off-the-shelf training materials for delivery of these courses might assist us in quickly implementing changes in these key areas. We feel that rapid implementation of training programs in these areas would facilitate improvements in forms and reference design which would be readily apparent to field employees. This would send a message of top-management (CO) support that would be invaluable as we commence the large-scale training of all VBA employees.

## 7. A Look at Measurement: Process and Results

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**Data; measurement; standards...** words that breathe, uh... boredom... into the hearts of men and women alike. Let's face it, it's a subject most people relish as much as a visit to the dentist. So, why should you read the next four chapters?

Data in today's world is more than just number crunching. Measures prove whether what you "think and feel" is actually happening. In reality, there's nothing more exciting than having facts to prove that what you "knew" intuitively turns out to be right. More importantly, if you feel you have to change the status quo and upset everybody, you'd better have some facts at hand.

These chapters will deal with measurements for several purposes. Some will help get the facts needed to support the *Reader-Focused Writing* initiative and help us diagnose our current needs. Some will help us assess our successes and failures and show where corrective action is necessary. Others will help us measure the performance of individual employees and work teams. We can group these measures into three broad categories:

- Measures for proving the need for the program
- Measures for determining the success of the program
- Standards we can use to separate good writing from not-so-good writing

To get down to brass tacks and start measuring *Reader-Focused Writing*, we'll need to grapple with the concepts of *process criteria* and *results criteria*. *Process criteria* help us figure out, within the work process itself, whether our service or product is likely to bring the desired results. These measures might include assessments of the need to make changes in the initiative, assessments of the quality of instruction, and collection of information for use in marketing the program. We take these measurements within the process so that we can better isolate the cause of a failure or a success. *Results criteria*, just as their name implies, point to outcomes.

All of the process criteria can be measured. The means of measurement include:

- Reader-Testing of documents
- Focus Groups
- Surveys
- Counting successful/unsuccessful outcomes, e.g., success of development letters
- Counting customer complaints and requests for help
- Timed tests of employee performance with old and new references

Sometimes we'll find it difficult to measure results criteria. For instance, the *net cost savings to VBA* is a bottom-line figure we'd very much like to have. It would be a credit to *Reader-Focused Writing* if we could prove that we'd actually saved \$10 million by implementing it. But how will we ever prove such a figure? If the cost of operations goes down, a variety of factors probably will have contributed. What we can do is measure cost avoidances within the process. If we receive fewer calls asking for help with our letters, for instance, that will suggest we're saving money.

Timeliness presents a similar problem. If timeliness improves, we may not be able to demonstrate that our new letters were the cause. Preliminary studies don't show that clients respond to the new letters faster, although it appears they respond more completely. The impact of the new letters will be felt somewhat indirectly: if they reduce second-time requests for evidence, they ought to improve timeliness. And if they reduce rework, they'll free up employees who'll be able to get to other cases faster. This should also help timeliness.

On the other hand, of the five results criteria we've listed in *Table 1*, two can be measured directly, if not very precisely. *Customer satisfaction* and *employee satisfaction* can be assessed in surveys and focus groups.

<i>Process Criteria</i>	<i>Results Criteria</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Clarity (as tested with representative customers)</li> <li>2. Completeness (as assessed in SQC and by customers)</li> <li>3. Compassionate tone (as assessed by customers)</li> <li>4. Facilitation of response (If letter requested information, did it provide easy-to-use reply form?)</li> <li>5. Intermediate Costs:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Reading/comprehension time of employees (manuals, circulars, etc.)</li> <li>■ Cases where customers' failures to respond to correspondence result in rework</li> <li>■ Cases where customers' failures to fully understand correspondence result in rework</li> <li>■ Cases where customers' failures to fully understand letters or forms result in calls and interviews</li> </ul> </li> <li>6. Effectiveness of <i>Reader-Focused Writing</i> training</li> <li>7. Rate of deployment of <i>Reader-Focused Writing</i> (number of field stations, number of Services, number of letters rewritten, number of employees trained, etc.)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Customer satisfaction</li> <li>2. Net cost savings to VBA</li> <li>3. Affect on timeliness of processing</li> <li>4. Employee satisfaction</li> <li>5. Affect on public image</li> </ol>

Table 1. Process and Results Criteria for Measuring Success of *Reader-Focused Writing*.

## 8. Data on the Current Situation: The Need for Change

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Data gathered from surveys of the current situation reveal to us where we are and why we need to change the current method of writing letters. This type of data gives us a baseline for judging the success or failure of our efforts. This is the one category where we have already collected sufficient data to validate the need for a change in the way we write letters and manuals.

We have already reaped a considerable harvest of data on problems with our current writing methods. You may recall that we cited several studies and focus groups in the section entitled *The Value of the Solution: What Reader-Focused Writing Can Do*. The studies included:

- Focus groups of veterans
- Studies of the rate and quality of responses to VA letters
- A national survey of users of government forms
- A study of phone calls received regarding a traditional letter and its *Reader-Focused Writing* counterpart
- A comparison study of employee performance with traditional and revised manual passages
- Focus groups of employees
- A comparison study in which lawyers and law students read portions of statutes written in plain English and in the original versions
- Statistics from the FCC showing that rewriting regulations reduced the number of people needed to interpret regulations to the public.
- Statistics from the British and the Australian governments showing savings from the redesigning of forms.

Here are some more details about the data we've collected within VBA.

- **National Surveys.** VBA's National Customer-Based-Measures Survey indicated that our customers consider clear communications to be a high priority. It also indicated our letters weren't meeting their expectations.
- **Unsolicited Customer Complaints.** In Jackson and Portland, surveys were conducted by VBCs to determine if we get unsolicited complaints about the letters that VA currently releases.

In Portland, VBCs tracked 1,526 calls over a 3 day period. The results show that 5.4% of the people called because they couldn't understand all or part of a traditional letter. In addition, .03% of the callers found our traditional letters offensive enough to call a VBC.

#### Traditional Letters

<u>Unclear</u>	<u>Offensive</u>
83	5

In Jackson's survey of 2,031 veterans, the numbers were slightly lower (sixty-seven people (3.3%) over a 5 day period). However, Jackson reports that they have done similar surveys in the past and found they their complaint rate was closer to 7%. They speculated that the lower rate of 3.3% might stem from the fact that their survey was done during the Christmas holidays. (Portland's survey was done in January, 1995.) Jackson's results are shown below:

#### Traditional Letters

<u>Unclear</u>	<u>Offensive</u>
67	5

Using Portland's numbers (which are a middle ground between the 3.3% that Jackson found in this survey and Jackson's usual figure of 7%), we can assume that about 5% of a VBC's telephone calls are devoted to helping clients understand our letters. If this bears out for interviews, as we believe it will, then we could say that about one in twenty VBCs devote their time to bad letters.

But the situation is worse than that, because the time required to answer a call on a bad letter is considerably longer than the time it takes to answer an average call. Jackson's average call length runs slightly over 3 minutes. We believe that calls on difficult letters, however, average twice as long.

- **Focus Groups of Veterans.** A focus group conducted with veterans in Philadelphia on the subject of the Adjudication process gave us some good insight into how the veterans feel about Adjudication letters. This report confirms that veterans find our letters unclear and confusing. Veterans in this focus group had the following comments:

"You learn to decipher. You look on the second page; you find the part that says you had 20% and then you jump down the bottom where it says you still get 20% and then you know you were denied."

"They [the letters] are all worded in such a way that each one is phrased differently so that you really can't compare notes. All I ever do is look at the bottom for the line that says, 'Your request for an increase in compensation is rejected.' The rest of the letter doesn't make any sense."

Quotes from other veterans indicate that unclear letters are bad from a business point of view and bad for public relations as well.

"They [VA letters] are worded in such a way that it's 'doublespeak.' They are not intended to be clear."

"If they gave you a clear explanation up front of what they needed, they wouldn't have to send you the additional letters."

- **Unsolicited Employee Complaints.** A recent PC-Letters survey conducted in the Philadelphia Insurance Center indicates that the employees are not satisfied with the quality of letters we now release. The study was intended to assess the *mechanics* of the PC-Letters systems. Yet, 10% of the respondents commented that the worst part of PC-Letters is the *quality of the letters* in the system. This is especially significant since this issue was not mentioned in the survey, so respondents had to write in these comments on their own.
- **Focus Groups of Employees (As Internal Customers).** A Focus Group concerning On-Line Manuals was conducted in the Philadelphia Insurance Center in 1994. The purpose was to determine how the employees used their manuals and how the manuals could best be transferred for use in the ARMS system. The focus group participants indicated that most employees used the manual as little as possible because they needed interpretation after reading it. Much of what the participants said supports the team's feeling that the manuals must be included in the *Reader-Focused Writing* project:

"The answers are only clear sometimes. Simplify it [the manual]... cut down the wording. All we need is the facts."

"There's too much information to sift through. Look at each job -- what they do the most and put that information in one place."

Participants made one other thing clear: technology alone will not fix the problems. In order to fix the problem, technology must work hand-in-hand with new methods of writing the manual. One participant summed it up this way:

"I hope when they transfer the manuals over to the computer they don't just put it in verbatim -- just throw it in the computer -- or nobody will use it."

- **Protocol Interviews Combined with Statistical Analysis of the Results.** The Jackson office used protocol testing to compare the comprehensibility of traditional and new style letters. In this small study they found that "poor readers" tended to understand less than 40% of a typical traditional C&P letter. Of course, many of our readers could have done better. But the elderly tend to be poorer readers than the rest of the population, and VBA has many elderly readers. Incidentally, readers from the same population understood more than 80% of a *Reader-Focused Writing* letter."
- **Comparison Studies of Employee Performance with Traditional and Revised Manual Passages.** A survey was conducted in the Jackson office. A control group and a test group were used to determine whether the traditional or new style of writing

was easier to comprehend. The groups were carefully selected so that neither group was familiar with the subject matter. Then, each group was given the same background information at the same time. The results, below, clearly support the new style of writing:

<b>Issues</b>	<b>Results: Traditional Passage</b>	<b>Results: New Passage</b>
<b>Time to Complete Exercise</b>	8 minutes, 3 seconds	6 minutes, 9 seconds
<b>Accuracy of Response</b>	22% Understood Completely 22% Understood Partially 56% Failed to Understand	45% Understood Completely 44% Understood Partially 11% Failed to Understand
<b>Ease of Reading</b>	0% Easy 56% Somewhat Easy 44% Somewhat Difficult	89% Easy 11% Somewhat Easy 0% Somewhat Difficult

The most striking result of this study was the fact that most people who read the traditional manual passage didn't appear to understand it. They were allowed as much time as they wanted, but they simply could not answer the test question (they were asked to provide a written description of the procedure shown in the manual passage). It was an "open book test," but it turned out to be too hard for people who had read the traditional passage. The two groups were carefully balanced in terms of salary grade and demographics.

## 9. The Measures of Success: Quick Successes and Long-Range Performance

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As we look beyond measuring the current situation, we need to monitor the effectiveness of the Reader-Focused Writing program. To simplify the way we look at measuring the success of the program, we have identified three categories:

1. **“Quick Success” Data from Early Projects**, which can give us an early feel for whether we’re headed in the right direction and—if we *are* on the right track—help us market the *Reader-Focused Writing* project.
2. **Interim Measurements of Progress**, which enable us to make mid-course corrections. They’ll also help identify promising new approaches which have emerged from the many organizational elements involved in the initiative.
3. **Long Range Performance Measurements**, which continue after the initiative has been fully implemented. *Reader-Focused Writing* is an evolutionary process; VBA will always need to measure the success of its written communication and to benchmark with other organizations to stay on course.

### Quick Success Data

Quick success *qualitative* data is easy to come by from those offices that are protocol testing. Protocol tests give us the veteran’s perspective on the readability of letters. They tell us which parts of a letter, for instance, are easy to read. They alert us to phrases and words and formats which are hard to read. Such qualitative data is very useful to our writers. However, it’s not much of a marketing tool. For many people, numbers are still the measure of success. At this time, only three offices have some quantitative data, Philadelphia, Jackson and Little Rock. In all of these offices, presenting numbers indicative of success helped convince many employees that *Reader-Focused Writing* is a valuable tool.

Following are some examples of quantitative measures we can use:

- **Comparison Studies of Responses to Letters.** The Philadelphia office used both the traditional and new style to write an invitation to a focus group. The response rate to the invitation letter shows the remarkable success of the new method of writing. Below is an excerpt from Philadelphia’s report:

“The letter that we sent out was written in the new *Reader-Focused Writing* style. We have every reason to believe that this format is a significant part of the success of this (the invitation) process. We generally considered a 10% response rate to be good; this letter got a 25% response rate with the Adjudication’s Focus Group and

almost a 50% response rate when VR&C used it. The VR&C experience is especially significant because they had tried a traditional style letter the first time and got a 0% response rate in the same area of the state.”

The Little Rock, Arkansas, Regional Office conducted a controlled study to test the responses they received to development letters released over the course of 2 1/2 months. During this time they monitored all development letters released. One claims unit released traditional letters, while the other unit released “new style” letters. Some C-files were unavailable for the review, so not all cases were reviewed. In tallying and interpreting the data, we assumed that the unavailable C-files represented cases which were being worked on specifically because the claimant’s response was received. (This assumption gives the most conservative interpretation of the difference between the response rate for the new letters and the old letters.) Below are the results of Little Rock’s Study:

Issues	Traditional Letter	New Letter
Response Rate for all files located	22 (29%) n = 75	32 (45%) n=71
Response Rate assuming all files not located received replies.	97 (65%) n = 150	111 (74%) n = 150
Completeness of Response	82% n = 22	100% n = 32

- **Protocol Interviews Combined with Statistical Analysis of the Results.** In *Data on the Current Situation: The Need for Change*, we discussed the Jackson office’s use of protocol testing to compare the comprehensibility of traditional and *Reader-Focused Writing* letters. Similar studies could be conducted to determine whether our revisions of letters and manuals are significantly improving comprehension.
- **Comparison Studies of Employee Performance with Traditional and Revised Manual Passages.** We discussed Jackson’s test of the readability of parallel traditional and revised manual passages in *Data on the Current Situation: The Need for Change*. We think it will be helpful to conduct more extensive studies of this kind.

The task force sees several opportunities to collect additional “quick success” data. The beauty of some of the items is that they piggyback on projects and initiatives currently underway. Following is a list of our suggestions:

- **For Forms:** Conduct protocol interviews and focus groups to test the usability of the Compensation and Pension Application, VA Form 21-526 (test); and the Education Application, VA Form 22-1990.
- **For New Style Memos:** Conduct a follow-up survey of Division Chiefs (memo recipients) via E-Mail.
- **For New Benefits Information Packet:** Conduct a postcard survey of recipients.
- **For Letters:** Evaluate the difference in readability between traditional and *Reader-Focused Writing* letters via protocol testing. (As we mentioned in *Data on the Current Situation: The Need for Change*, VARO Jackson has already used protocol tests to compare the readability of traditional letters and *Reader-Focused Writing* letters. Their tests included only a small sample of poor readers, however, and more studies of this type might be conducted.)
- **For New Insurance Letter going out as part of the Limited Pay Automation:** Ask the Insurance Phone Section to track the number of calls received.
- **For Revised Manuals:** Conduct an internal focus group of those who have used both the traditional and new manuals.

## Interim Measures of Progress

It seems clear that the implementation of the *Reader-Focused Writing* initiative will take a few years to complete. And throughout the life of the project, we'll need to take measurements. In the following paragraphs we'll suggest several data collection methods, most of which can be used locally or nationally. We recommend that the *Reader-Focused Writing* Implementation Team serve as a clearinghouse to compare the results of different offices. By studying this data, the Team may be able to identify valuable new methods being developed in individual offices.

**Methods for Collection of Qualitative Data.** There are two kinds of qualitative measurements available to us:

- Protocol Testing of individual letters
- Focus Group Testing of groups of letters

Protocol testing and focus groups can both test for comprehension and tone. In general, protocol tests will give more in-depth information about the degree to which someone understands a letter, while focus groups will give more information as to the impression (tone) that the letter leaves with the veteran.

Using these tools, we can not only test the readability or tone of the letters, but we can study how our own home-grown terminology is perceived or understood by the reader. This issue was recently brought to light when the Vocational Rehabilitation and Counseling Service tested some of their letters in Philadelphia. During one protocol test a veteran seemed to understand

the letter until he was asked what he would do after receiving this letter: He would not have taken the action hoped for because he did not know what we meant by the term "service connected." In several succeeding tests, veterans' answers to the question, "What is your definition of service-connected?" ranged from, "Injured on my job" to "I'm not sure if it counts if I'm injured while in the service, but off duty." This is not an aberration; Education Service had a similar experience with the term "accredited service organization." One of the most helpful surveys we can conduct is one which asks our customers about their definitions of VA-home-grown terms (jargon). Once we've established which terms are confusing, we can test new user-friendly terms which may replace our current jargon.

**Methods for Collection of Quantitative Data.** We have found a number of methods to measure the success of the initiative quantitatively:

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**Send post card surveys with new letters**

Post cards surveys are an easy way to get recipients' reactions to the new letters.

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**Review the results of letters**

Interpreting the results of letters may be our greatest challenge because the measurement of success will vary from letter to letter. For some letters, an increase in the response rate may indicate that more veterans are understanding what we write. In other situations, however, a decrease in responses may indicate success. We propose that written guidance be given to the ROs and Services as to how to determine the success of a letter.

Consider the following example from the Philadelphia Insurance Center. For several years the Center sent out a letter to people who requested tracers for missing checks. The letter asked the claimants to certify that they had looked for the check in several places. This poorly written letter was considered to be a success because very few people wrote back. Everyone assumed that the veterans had found their checks, *not that they couldn't understand the letters*. Now that a *Reader-Focused Writing* letter has been written, the Center expects the response rate for the new letter to increase because the instructions are clearer.

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**Invite employees to critique *Reader-Focused Writing* letters**

Employee critiques could be solicited using mechanisms as simple as old-fashioned comment boxes, or as elaborate as an on-line response system.

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**Centralize the evaluation of employee critiques of *Reader-Focused Writing* training**

Assigning a centralized coordinator or the Implementation Team to monitor training critiques will help ensure a consistent level of training quality. It will also enable us to identify areas where different types of training are needed. For instance, if one Service finds the training to be excellent and another doesn't like it, we may find that the second Service has needs that aren't being met.

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**Track the response to VA forms**

The basis of this tracking should be the volume of responses and the appropriateness and completeness of the answers. With forms as with every other kind of business writing, technical communicators tell us the ultimate measure of quality is results. Many of us used to believe "the fewer the pages, the better the form." Now we know that a form shouldn't be judged by the number of its pages, but by the ease of completing it correctly.

## **Long Range Performance Measurement**

In addition to data which we can collect now, there are a variety of measures which we can plan to track on a long-range basis. Most of the ideas we'll discuss below would need to be initiated by a central group in VBA, rather than by individual ROs or Services. Only benchmarking could be done by individual offices within VBA. Some of these measures would be taken on an ongoing basis, while others would involve periodic "snapshots" of our performance. Some could be implemented in the near future; others would require new technology to implement. In some cases, a cultural change may be needed before we see significant change in the data. And still other cases, tracking should not begin until a large percentage of our customer population has seen the new style letters. Our suggestions:

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**Create an automatic response button at the bottom of VETSNET and CPS letter screens.**

The button would allow users (VA employees) to say if a letter is exceptionally good or if it needs specific changes.

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**Use the new "VA On-Line" system to test letters.**

At this time "VA On-Line" does not allow for responses from Internet users. However, it will in the future. When using this system to elicit *RFW* feedback, careful consideration should be given to the fact that VA On-Line users may have a higher reading level than others in the veteran population.

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**Change the SQC system so that reviewers check for the tone and ease of reading**

Tone and ease of reading should be added to the current SQC standards which, in most cases, check only for the accuracy of the information released. (The section entitled *A Comprehensive Approach: Six Levers of Organizational Change* discusses this issue in more detail.)

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**Add some questions to the Customer-Based Measures Survey regarding the clarity and tone of our letters.**

Because the questions in this survey have to be very general, it's unlikely that we'll see a significant change until the new letters have been widely used for a substantial amount of time.

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**Include correspondence questions in the Annual Customer Satisfaction Survey.**

Since technical communications is an evolving field, we expect that we'll have to change some of our techniques as new ideas are tested and validated. This survey will give us an opportunity to "take the pulse" of the *RFW* program on an annual basis.

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**Benchmark against other agencies who have revised their writing methods.**

We also suggest that Services, wherever possible, benchmark against each other. Since our current situation data already show the need to improve the quality of our written communications, we don't feel that it's necessary to benchmark at this time. Benchmarking will be more meaningful when the substantial improvements have been made.

## 10. Standards for Evaluating Good Writing

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We've discussed methods of measuring the success of *Reader-Focused Writing* as an initiative. If we're going to have any success to measure, however, we must establish standards of writing that employees can aim at. Can we do that without resorting to rigid formulas?

We'll have to set up guidelines; without them, there can't be any measurement. But we don't necessarily have to stipulate that the average sentence be 13.2 words long; that no sentence exceed 32 words; and, that fewer than five four-syllable words be found in every fifty. The brief publication, *Guidelines for Document Designers*, by Felker, Pickering, Charrow, Holland, and Redish (published by the American Institutes for Research, Washington, D.C.), provides an example of a list of technical communication principles which writers can follow.

How can we communicate these standards to our employees? We have several documents which define writing standards. The most significant of these is the VA Correspondence Handbook. Others include the Services' and Offices' directives for manuals, circulars and memos. All such documents need to be amended to reflect *Reader-Focused Writing* principles.

**The VA Correspondence Handbook.** The current correspondence handbook doesn't incorporate the principles of *Reader-Focused Writing*, especially those which emphasize customer focus, reader analysis, tone, and validation techniques. In a review of the draft VA Correspondence Handbook, we found thirteen (13) areas which were in direct conflict with technical communication principles. (See *Appendix C* for a list of the conflicts.)

Our standards should be based on the findings of technical writing experts which present the clearest communication to readers. The content of the handbook is critical, of course. But it's also important that the book be *designed* using *Reader-Focused Writing* principles. As Mark Twain said, "Few things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example." Those who look to the Correspondence Handbook for guidance will, no doubt, also look to it as a model of good writing. We've researched correspondence handbooks of other government agencies and private sector companies and found that technical communication principles are often used in the writing of such reference books. Because we feel so strongly that the handbook is a key element to the implementation of this initiative, we recommend that the *Reader-Focused Writing* Implementation Team, if one is created, participate in the rewriting of the handbook.

Further, we suggest that, where possible, we utilize existing published standards and guidelines, such as the Gregg Style Manual, to define the parameters of basic English and technical communications principles. The VA Correspondence Handbook, then, would be limited only to those style and format issues peculiar to VA. This will benefit us not only in time spent preparing the handbook, but also in employee time spent researching style issues.

Until the updated Correspondence Handbook is issued, an exemption from using the existing Correspondence Manual is needed in order to allow VBA to use *Reader-Focused Writing*

principles. If approval is granted, special attention must be paid to those offices that have both a hospital and regional office under one director (VAMROCs). Since only VBA will be exempt from VA correspondence manual procedures, those directors of VAMROCs will have to be made aware of the difference between VBA and VHA correspondence guidelines.

**Guidelines for Manuals, Circulars, and Memos.** Our current guidelines for drafting reference documentation fail to consider readability factors. Therefore, while our existing manuals and circulars fall within the definition of "proper English," they are not good examples of Reader-Focused Writing. These problems are worse now that we've put our manuals on-line. Readability, organization, and information design issues are critical when transferring complex ideas to a computer screen.

We must consider the guidelines established by Central Office (CO) for how manuals, circulars, and memos are to be written. These documents should be revised to include *Reader-Focused Writing* principles. We can use CO's vehicles for issuing policy and procedural guidance as an additional means of illustrating to the field that we're changing the way we communicate.

**SQC.** Finally, the new guidelines should also be incorporated into the statistical quality control (SQC) standards. We discussed this in *A Comprehensive Approach: Six Levers of Organizational Change*. As we noted there, it's important that we redefine quality to include *Reader-Focused Writing* principles and practices. We think the small amount of time and effort needed to add a few categories of SQC exceptions would yield many positive results. The new standards would reinforce the cultural change we're trying to bring about, and they'd help us assure customer satisfaction. If we don't reinforce *Reader-Focused Writing* principles in our review process, employees may not see a need to practice them in everyday work.

# 11. Some Final Thoughts on Measurement

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## Measures Meet Strategic Goals

When we think about measures of success, we need to ask what we mean by the word *success*. In evaluating success, we must consider how *Reader-Focused Writing* relates to our strategic goals and services our customers. Probably we can agree that there are four perspectives from which to view the performance of *Reader-Focused Writing*:

- **The Veterans' Perspective.** What would veterans like to get out of *Reader-Focused Writing*? Our evidence indicates that they want (1) Clarity in our letters and forms, (2) Completeness in our explanations, and (3) Compassionate tone, the sense that VBA cares about their needs. We have some evidence that they'd also like (4) Convenience of response, e.g., helpful reply forms. The veterans' perspective is reflected in VBA's *Strategic Goal #1*, "Improve responsiveness to customer needs and expectations."
- **The Taxpayers' Perspective.** Taxpayers want us to deliver services with maximum efficiency. So we need to know whether the new methods are saving us money or costing us money. The answer will help us determine whether we're contributing to VBA's *Strategic Goal #3*, "Ensure maximum value for the taxpayer's dollar."
- **The Government's Perspective.** In general, Congress and the White House want us to address the customers' and the taxpayers' needs. In the short term, however, they want us to improve service delivery, a concern that's reflected in VBA's *Strategic Goal #2*. Our measurements ought to include, if possible, the effect of *Reader-Focused Writing* on timeliness.
- **The Agency's Perspective.** Our own perspective must encompass all the concerns of customers, taxpayers, and government oversight committees. But, in addition, we're interested in providing a more satisfying and rewarding work environment for our employees, as demonstrated in *Strategic Goal #4*. So we'll want to track employee satisfaction.

## A Final Word About Measurement

You will note that nowhere in this chapter do we discuss measuring the success of this method by the reduction in reading levels. Flesch and Flesch-Kincaid reading levels count words and syllables. They do not account for the ease of use of stacked lists, which may be construed by the computer as a very long sentence. Nor do they take into account that many times a poor reader will understand compound words (made up of smaller familiar words) more easily than unfamiliar words of the same number of syllables. For instance, VA's Flesch Kincaid levels

show "diatribe" to be an easier word than "everything." Surely your average reader would have the opposite opinion.

There are, no doubt, many additional ways to measure the success of *Reader-Focused Writing* beyond those covered in these chapters. But, when deciding on measurement techniques the most important issue is highlighted in the name of the initiative itself, "Reader-Focused." Any data collected to measure the success of this initiative must be designed by focusing on what the reader sees as good writing.

## 12. A Comprehensive Implementation: Pulling it All Together

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We have now examined all the various components of the *Reader-Focused Writing* initiative. We've discussed the importance of training, measurement, reward and reinforcement, and the marketing of the program inside and outside the organization.

We've also conceded that none of these elements, in and of itself, can change the way VBA writes. It follows that without thoughtful, assertive coordination of these activities, even our best efforts may be insufficient.

### A View of the Current Situation: Why Coordination is Needed

The history of the *Writing for Real People* "pilot" efforts amply demonstrates the need for coordination. The teams which were trained in 1994 have been left pretty much without direction. There has been no coordinator to ensure that teams are on course or to redirect them when they stray, nor has there been a central "clearinghouse" to field technical and policy questions. Team members have told us they aren't sure whether the program is a "flavor of the month" or a serious initiative to change VBA. They've felt, as one team leader put it, "out of the loop." It's no wonder that teams at three of the ten pilot sites have stopped meeting altogether and that some of the others have been struggling.

In fact, the contractor has provided much of what little coordination there has been among the teams. While everything she has done has been in the best interest of VBA and the successful implementation of this project, an argument might be made that she has exceeded her contractual role of providing technical communications training to VBA collaborative writing teams. However, the *Writing for Real People* initiative could not have achieved the successes it has, had she not been willing to step into the void left by VA.

Nor have all offices which trained employees in *Writing for Real People* managed to capitalize on their investments. After sacrificing valuable "production" time to train their employees, some organizations inactivated the teams as soon as the C&P letter assignments were complete rather than identifying opportunities for improvement in their own correspondence libraries. Others never gave their graduates any technical writing projects to tackle.

In many cases, team members were expected to complete *all* of their routine work assignments in addition to participating in the letter-writing teams. Producing polished letters using technical communication methods is a time-consuming task, especially for beginners. Some team members, seeing that their supervisors—and their performance standards—made no allowances for their efforts in *Writing for Real People*, became confused and disheartened.

## Coordinating Activities: What We Need To Do

We've touched on some of the areas where coordination needs to occur. The hard part is to decide how to do it—how to achieve and maintain such coordination throughout the organization. In the chapter entitled *A Comprehensive Approach: Six Levers of Organizational Change*, we discussed some ways leaders can bring about change in a large organization. Figure 2 from that chapter is reproduced below. We think these six “levers” reflect the primary activities which must work together for this initiative to succeed.

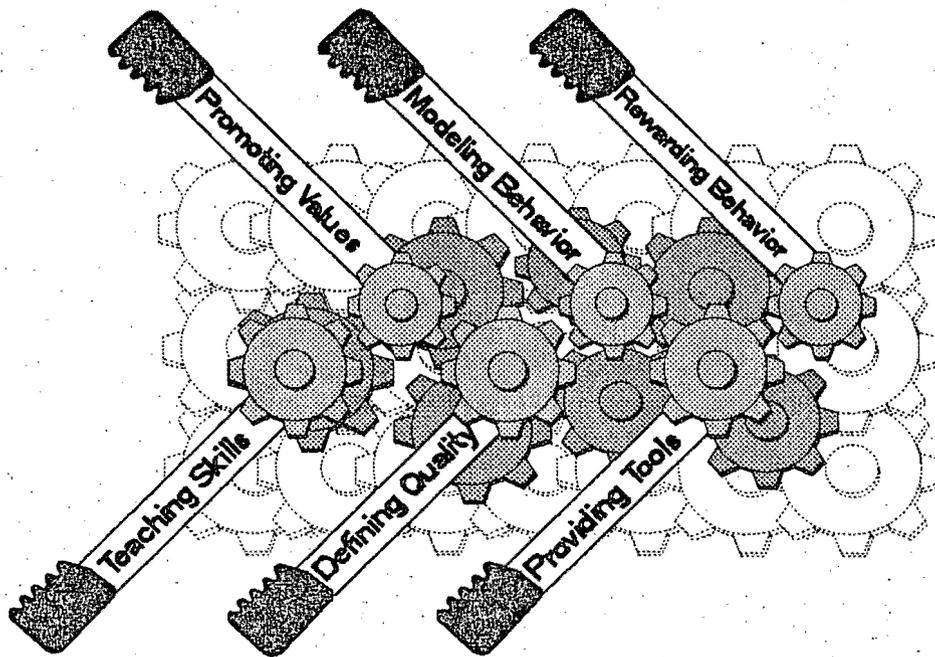


Figure 2. Six Levers of Organizational Change

But coordination of *Reader-Focused Writing* will not be limited to the six levers themselves. We'll also discuss three overarching coordination activities:

- Coordinating the six levers with each other
- Coordinating actual deployment of *Reader-Focused Writing*
- Measuring and monitoring the success of the initiative

The schematic in *Figure 4* summarizes these nine activities and their interrelationships.

**Promoting the new values.** We discussed, in the earlier chapter, several methods of promoting the new values, including articles on *Reader-Focused Writing* in *Vanguard* and other VA publications, promotion of the project in memos, and briefings on the progress of the initiative at conferences. We have also discussed earlier the employee orientation lesson about *Reader-Focused Writing* which could be supplemented by a video featuring the Under

Secretary for Veterans Benefits or the Secretary for Veterans Affairs to convey top level support for the initiative.

These promotions must be tailored to the needs and the perceptions of each audience. For instance, there are a good many employees in the Services and Offices who don't think we can maintain legal sufficiency if we write to claimants in plain English. These employees doubtless have the best interests of the agency at heart. It won't be enough to tell them that veterans don't understand legalese if they feel legal ideas can't be captured in "non-legal" language. We'll have to teach them about the plain English movement in law and commerce. We'll have to show them plain English contracts and insurance policies and point out the existence of Plain English Committees in a number of state bar associations. We can even give them copies of books on plain English for lawyers.

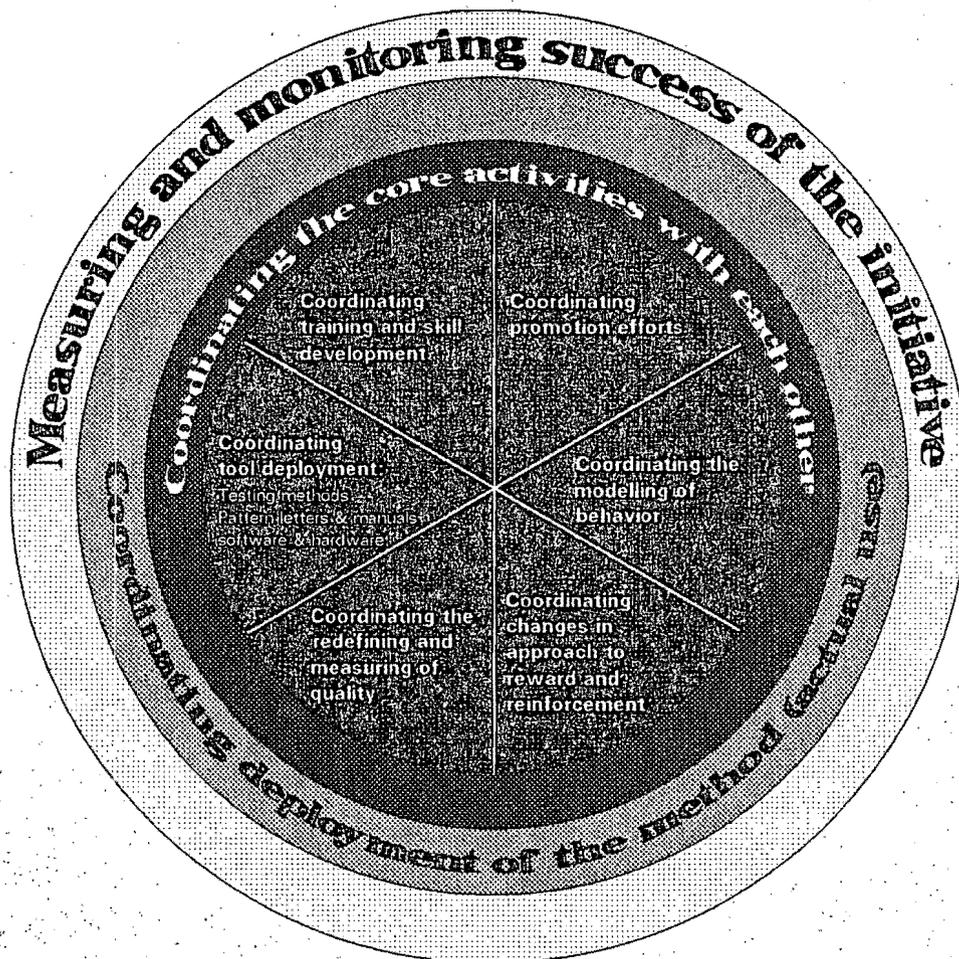


Figure 4. Coordinating Activities of Reader-Focused Writing

But who will insure that these things are done? Someone must be in a position to coordinate the "marketing plan," thus ensuring that *Reader-Focused Writing* is brought to the attention of managers and employees at the right times, with the right "spin," and with the right intensity.

**Modeling the new behavior.** The axiom: "Do as I say, not as I do" needs to be overturned. We need to reconcile our actions with our words. We can do that by using plain English to communicate and by using technical writing techniques in the drafting of important documents

intended for a wide readership within the agency. The VBA Bulletins and Info-Grams are a good start; they're written in a very accessible style.

Of course, our forms, directives, and circulars must be redesigned, both because they need to be more usable and because their redesign will show employees that the Agency is intent on changing the way it does business. This won't be an easy job, nor will it yield quick results. But as each segment of the work is completed and released to the field, it will serve as another reinforcement of *Reader-Focused Writing* in our culture.

To ensure that opportunities for modeling *Reader-Focused Writing* don't slip away, someone who has the ear of the Policy Board and who follows the activities of the Services, Offices, and Areas should coordinate and facilitate these efforts.

**Providing tools to facilitate the new behavior.** We'll have to coordinate the dissemination of tools, too. What kinds of tools? Here's the list we used in the chapter on organizational change:

- State-of-the-art *word processing software*, without which we couldn't produce many of the information designs we've been pioneering in *Reader-Focused Writing*.
- *Computer hardware*, which is necessary to support the latest word processing programs. As we noted in the chapter entitled *A Comprehensive Approach: Six Levers of Organizational Change*, state-of-the-art hardware and software are needed for optimal operation of some of the new *Reader-Focused Writing-PCGL* letters.
- *Revised manuals and circulars*, which provide "conceptual tools" for employees to use in thinking and writing about VA benefits.
- *Revised pattern letters and system-generated letters*, which provide models for employees to emulate.
- *Revised forms*, which provide additional models of clear writing.
- The procedures of *document testing*, which demonstrate that we need to consult customers when we create products for their use. Everyone in the organization must come to understand that without periodic reader testing, we can't create multiple-use documents which truly satisfy our readers'—and our own—needs.

Successful coordination of the deployment of *Reader-Focused Writing's* tools will demand an extremely wide range of activities and influences. For instance, we must ensure that the initiative's computer hardware and software needs are identified and incorporated in VBA's budget process. We must also find a way to persuade every Office, Service, and Area that document testing can help them optimize their effectiveness. And we must help the various components of VBA to create and deploy new manuals and circulars.

**Teaching the skills.** Training is another activity where tools are important. *Every* tool that can help us with the problem of coordinating training across the wide span of VBA, and which is within our means to acquire, ought to be used. Recently, the Office of Employee

Development and Training (EDT) has been investigating the use of satellite technology to conduct nationwide training. Training people nationwide is one of the things we need to do, and satellite technology looks very promising. And working with the Employee Development and Training Office can help us in another way: it can help us get *Reader-Focused Writing* on the national training agenda.

As with other areas we've discussed, the need exists for someone to monitor training needs and training effectiveness, communicate routinely with managers and trainers, and coordinate *Reader-Focused Writing* training throughout the organization for the life of the project.

**Rewarding the new behavior.** In our chapter entitled *A Comprehensive Approach: Six Levers of Organizational Change*, we noted two traditional methods of rewarding behaviors: performance appraisals and special act awards. These kinds of rewards are, of course, within the sole control of line managers. Coordination of them by a central committee or coordinator may be unrealistic. On the other hand, only such a central person or committee could realistically be expected to bring these priorities to the attention of line managers year in and year out. Moreover, a *Reader-Focused Writing* coordinator at each station, Office, and Service might be able to work with managers to revise reward systems so that the new writing methods are encouraged.

While we may not be able to coordinate the organization's rewarding of the new behaviors very directly, we *can* coordinate activities which *influence* supervisors and managers to reward them. Because the philosophy and the behavior of managers have a powerful impact on the attitudes of subordinates, we need to train all managers early in the implementation of this initiative. We must show them what *Reader-Focused Writing* can do for *them*. And we must urge them to recognize and reward employees' efforts to use *Reader-Focused Writing*.

**Defining quality.** We discussed the need to redefine quality in terms of *Reader-Focused Writing* in Chapter 5. We think it's clear that the quality standards of the Services and Offices should include elements concerning the clarity of writing. The coordinator(s) should begin by bringing all the Services and Offices to consensus on some common definitions of writing quality. This won't be an easy undertaking. The participants in this effort will need to have technical communication training. They'll need to understand the significance and the intent of the *Reader-Focused Writing* initiative. Ideally, they would undergo some training *as a group*. They will also need to consult regularly with a technical communication expert. Ultimately, substantive definitions of quality can be created. These definitions should probably include some rough guidelines on style and syntax elements for diverse kinds of writing. They should also make reference to document testing.

Following the consensus agreements between all the Services and Offices on definitions of quality writing, statistical quality control standards should be revised. The coordinator or coordinating committee would probably monitor these efforts and offer assistance when appropriate.

**Coordinating the interaction between the six levers.** None of these levers will be effective on its own. All must work in concert if *Reader-Focused Writing* is to be successful. Here are a few examples of the kinds of coordination that will be necessary:

- Before we train large numbers of employees, we will need to promote the initiative and model the behavior so that everyone knows we're intent on changing the way we do business.
- We won't want to train C&P rating specialists until we're prepared to show them how we want rating documents to change. This kind of change will require the attention and agreement of program personnel within the C&P Service. Thus, we'll need to promote the new methods within that Service and bring about a consensus on what kinds of language and formatting promote readability—while following the dictates of the Court of Veterans Appeals and the requirements of General Counsel. Coordination of this effort will take great diplomacy, thoroughness, and seriousness of purpose.
- Some groups of employees don't yet have access to *any* pattern letters, manuals, or circulars written using technical writing principles. Many won't have such materials for some time to come. As we deploy the RFW Tools course over the satellite network, we'll need to target our student population so that we're providing training only to those employees who can immediately utilize the techniques on the job.
- While a definition of quality writing might not have to be in place when most people are trained, it cannot follow training by too wide an interval. Otherwise, employees are unlikely to receive encouragement and reinforcement from their managers to use the new methods.

**Coordinating deployment of the method throughout VBA.** In the last analysis, what counts is whether we actually deploy *Reader-Focused Writing* methods throughout the organization and across the whole range of writing activities, from pattern letters to reference materials. The six levers will help with this deployment; indeed, they depend on deployment in some instances. But without a central coordinating person or committee to monitor and facilitate the various efforts to rewrite letters, redesign forms, and reinvent manuals, this initiative isn't likely to prosper. Here are three challenges we must face immediately:

- Several Services have trained employees in *Reader-Focused Writing* for the creation of letters. A number of field stations also have people trained to write letters. But we haven't begun to revise letters in all program areas, and in some cases we don't have enough trained people to begin the task. We'll need to effectively channel new *Reader-Focused Writing* projects to the trained teams to tackle.
- Revision of PCGL letters has been the primary focus of VBA's *Reader-Focused Writing* activities to date. However, according to a recent survey of Adjudication divisions in the four Areas, 22% of all letters being released are generated by the Wang system, and another 16% are generated by BDN. Ultimately, we'll need to look at *all* of our system-generated and pattern letters if we are to improve customer satisfaction with our letters on a global scale.
- No one has yet received training in manual writing or forms design. Applying technical communication principles to the creation of forms and manuals is quite a different task from rewriting letters. The initial *Writing for Real People* training, while it provided a basic understanding of technical writing principles as they apply to

all kinds of documents, was not intended to prepare employees to write manuals. We believe research and development (R&D) teams for forms and for reference materials should be convened to look at the state of the art in the technical communication discipline for those kinds of documents and recommend solutions to VBA. (Due to the availability of ARMS, the R&D team for reference materials should focus considerable attention on computer screen readability.) Once these teams have reported, each service or staff can begin to develop plans for revising its forms, manuals, handbooks, and circulars.

## Holding It Together

Coordination of all these elements, you'll probably agree, is no small task. It seems likely to consume the efforts of more than one person. In the following pages we'll offer a possible configuration of coordinating personnel which we believe will get the job done cleanly and completely.

We propose a configuration of four elements (See *Figure 5*):

- A coordinating office: The Office of Executive Management and Communications
- A professional technical writing expert
- An Implementation Team
- A resident expert, or "Master Communicator" for each Service, Office, and Field Station

**The office of jurisdiction.** The initiative needs a home, preferably a well-established department which can guarantee it visibility. Our task force has been working under the auspices of the Office of Executive Management and Communications (EMC), and we think this office is the logical choice to be the permanent sponsor. The Director and the staff are already familiar with the project, recognize the need for the program, and endorse the proposed direction. EMC has already been working with the Office of Information Technology to define and implement an improved, user-friendly documents control system. The office's close ties to the Office of Public Affairs and the Office of Congressional Affairs may be of benefit to the program, as well.

As sponsor of *Reader-Focused Writing*, EMC would be responsible for these key areas:

- Overall coordination of the project
- Obtaining expertise from the technical communication community
- Coordinating a *Reader-Focused Writing* Implementation Team, which will be discussed in the next section

**The Implementation Team.** All parts of VBA must be represented in discussions on the future of *Reader-Focused Writing*. Moreover, the coordinator(s) from EMC will need to obtain multiple perspectives when they make major decisions. We believe an Implementation Team composed of representatives of the Services, Staff Offices, and Areas can supply these needs.

The members of the team will need to be extensively trained in *Reader-Focused Writing* methods and have practical experience working with those methods. They should be chosen for their competence, their devotion to the initiative, their ability to work with other people, their practical knowledge of operations in their constituent organizations, and their standing within their organizations.

We believe the Implementation Team should share responsibility for coordination of *Reader-Focused Writing* with the EMC. Its members should also be the primary liaisons with their own organizations.

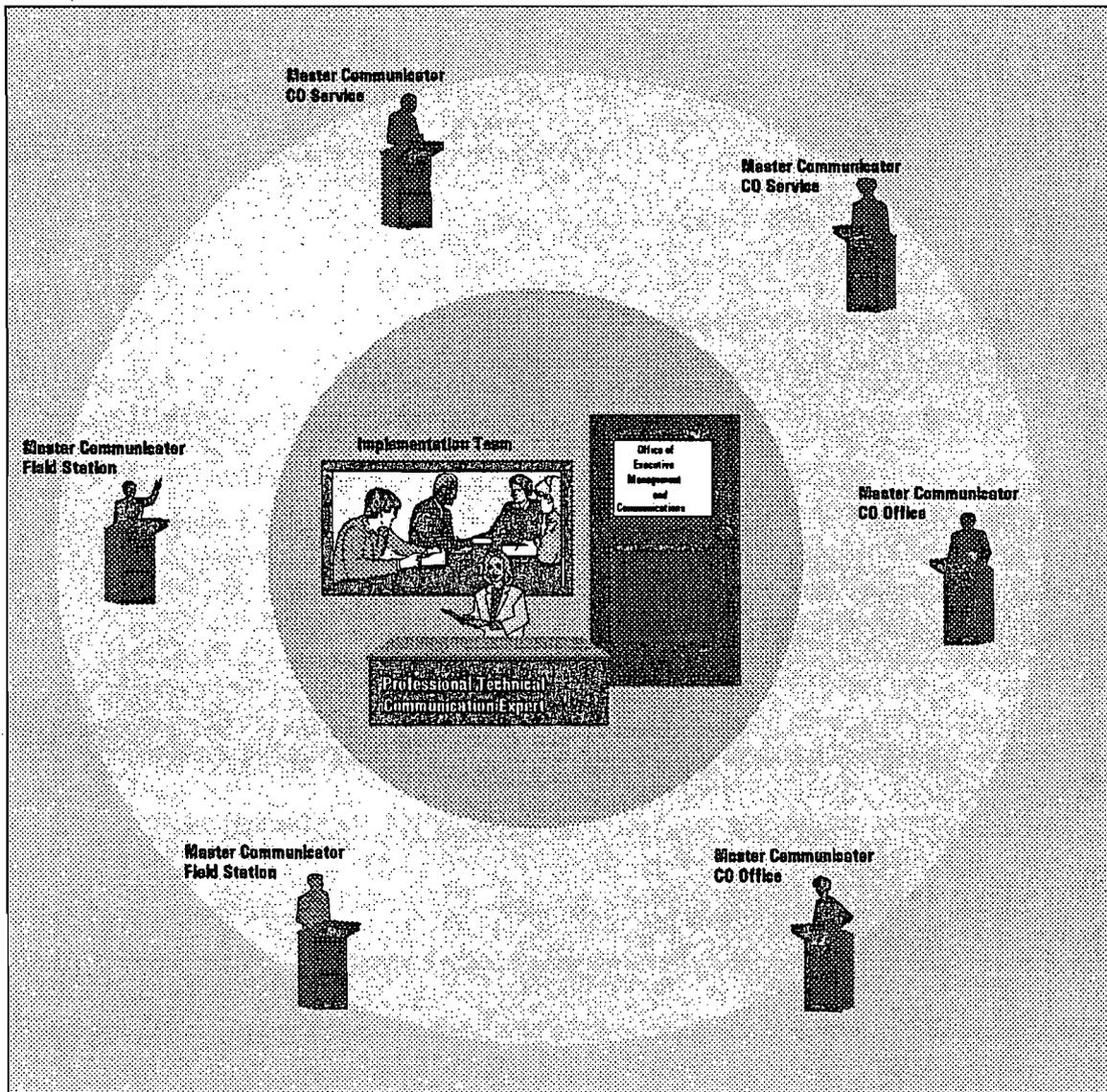


Figure 5. Persons involved in coordinating the implementation of *Reader-Focused Writing*

**The Technical Expert.** The past two decades have seen an explosion in technical communication research and development. The research we've studied up to this point amounts only to a modest "snapshot" of certain parts of the technical communication field; it's not nearly adequate to support us as we take up new challenges such as on-line reference systems.

Just as we hire attorneys for their expertise in the law and computer programmers for their skills in data processing, we now need a person with substantial expertise in technical communication. We need someone established in the technical communication community who can help us appropriate the latest developments. Major corporations hire professional technical writers as a matter of course; we think VBA needs to do the same.

We recommend that VBA establish a contract for ongoing technical writing services with an organization that is familiar with the latest research and has ties to the research community. This organization could work with the Implementation Team; provide training to employees and managers as time permitted; and consult with all the Services, Offices, and Areas on technical writing matters.

**The "master communicators."** During the *Writing for Real People* pilot project, the stations most successful in implementing the project were those that:

- appointed strong team leaders to coordinate the effort
- had strong management support for the initiative

In those cases where the team leader was ineffective, the teams experienced a great deal of difficulty regardless of the level of management support.

Coordination and leadership are, we believe, absolutely necessary at the local level. Although each employee will eventually have some degree of training in *Reader-Focused Writing*, field stations, Services, and Offices will still need someone to provide everyday guidance to managers and employees and to keep *Reader-Focused Writing* "on the agenda." We believe that a "master communicator" should be appointed at each office for this purpose.

The *master communicator* will be a local advocate for the project, helping with instruction in *Reader-Focused Writing*, answering questions about method and style, and referring questions as necessary to the Implementation Team or the coordinator(s).

Ideally, the coordinator(s) or the Implementation Team should hold regular monthly hotlines with all the *master communicators*.

**Coordination beyond VBA.** It's obvious that *Reader-Focused Writing* will not make much of an impact unless the various efforts throughout VBA are well coordinated. But coordination doesn't stop there. Important forces outside VBA will have to buy in to this dramatic change in our writing. How important is their support? We believe the program will *fail* without it.

We're already challenged in our everyday writing to ensure that our letters and publications address legal issues in accordance with the requirements of General Counsel and the Court of Veterans Appeals (COVA).

Unless VBA can work in concert with these bodies, demonstrating that *Reader-Focused Writing* methods can maintain legal sufficiency and improve communication, we may be stopped in our tracks. Experience in the private sector, cited earlier in this document, has proven that legal sufficiency can be achieved without using legalese. But it's up to us to take the initiative and sell the program.

Some other important stakeholders include Congress, the White House, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), Veterans Service Organizations, and other Staffs and Administrations within VA. We'll need to brief these organizations about the *Reader-Focused Writing* initiative. We may want to invite selected members of their staffs to participate in VBA's training program.

### **Closing Thoughts: We'll Get It Done with Coordination and Cooperation**

We've identified a sobering array of tasks. We can do them all if we create and train a network of advocates, and if we support that network with words, actions, and resources. If, through this process, we continually demonstrate top management support, we'll eventually find employees working in concert to provide the best written "products" for our customers. And we'll find customers playing a more constructive role in the benefits delivery process as they respond favorably to our service. *Reader-Focused Writing* can, in fact, help VBA along its journey to become a "learning organization" which continuously reinvents and refines its processes, and which energizes employees to find the best and most cost-effective ways of serving customers.

But we must be sure we've identified the most useful technical writing methods, we must share these methods with everyone in VBA, and we must be tireless in demonstrating to skeptics the value of this initiative.

A project with such promise for our organization deserves a thoughtful, committed implementation. Cooperation and coordination at all levels must be ensured. And resources must be marshaled. Improved efficiency in our business processes and increased satisfaction from our customers will quickly repay these investments.

## Footnotes

1. Research (see Note 8) suggests that Technical Writing methods can shrink the reading time required to understand "legalistic" prose by 50%. Our own research seems to substantiate this. In a recent VBA study, a manual passage revised using technical writing principles appeared to double the chances that employees could understand the text without help.

In order to determine how much time employees were wasting in trying to understand manuals and circulars which could be written more effectively, we estimated how much time VBA employees currently spend in this activity, and then cut that time by half.

We assumed that at least 55% of employees in a Regional Office are first line Adjudication, Finance, Loan Guaranty, or VR&C employees who must refer to manuals regularly. We didn't count VSD because VBCs, while they do refer to circulars, don't routinely use manuals or circulars as often as employees in the regular program areas. Thus, we've conservatively estimated the number of employees who routinely use manuals and circulars.

We also assumed that the Insurance Centers and CARS contain the same percentage of employees using manuals as do the Regional Offices.

After subtracting employees of the four Area Offices and St. Louis RPC and SMRO, we arrived at a (rounded) figure of 11,700 field employees. 55% of these employees (the percentage using manuals) equals 6435.

If all 6435 employees consult manuals and circulars an average of one hour per week, then VBA front-line employees are spending 6435 hours per week researching their manuals. If Reader-Focused Writing can reduce research time by 50%, then 3217 hours per week (50% of 6435 hours) are being *wasted*. Even if we assume that the average employee consults his/her manuals and circulars for only 30 minutes per week (that's 6 minutes per day), we can figure that 1608 hours are being wasted weekly.

2. The Jackson, Mississippi Regional Office conducted two focus groups in February 1993 with members of the Disabled American Veterans and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Both groups agreed (unanimously) that the new letters were superior to our traditional letters.

3. Studies conducted in the Little Rock VA Regional Office and in the Jackson VA Regional Office during the period October 1993 and March, 1994.

4. Carolyn Boccella Bagin & Andrew M. Rose, *Worst Forms Unearthed*, Modern Maturity, Feb.-Mar. 1991, pp. 64, 65. (quoted in Joseph Kimble, in *Plain English: A Charter for Clear Writing*, Thomas Cooley Law Review, 9:1, p. 23)

5. Study conducted in Jackson VA Regional Office, January through March 1994. In one segment of the study, five VBC's were asked to estimate the number of phone calls they had received monthly regarding a traditional letter and its *Writing for Real People* counterpart. Each counselor was interviewed privately. Their answers were:

	Traditional Letter	New Letter
Counselor #1	8 - 12	5
Counselor #2	12	0
Counselor #3	12 - 14	1-2
Counselor #4	10	2
Counselor #5	5	0

While these results are based solely on memory, their startling consistency suggests that the number of calls really did decrease when the new letter was implemented.

6. Study conducted in Jackson VA Regional Office in January 1995.

7. Focus Groups conducted at VAROIC Philadelphia, April 1994.

3. Robert D. Eagleson, *Plain English—A Boon For Lawyers*, The Second Draft (Legal Writing Institute Oct. 1991, note 105, p. 12. (quoted in Joseph Kimble, in *Plain English: A Charter for Clear Writing*, Thomas Cooley Law Review, 9:1, p. 26)

9. Plain Language Pays, Simply Stated (Document Design Center), Feb. 1986, pp. 4.1.

10. G. Dykstra, *Plain Language Centre for Canada*, in E. R. Steinberg (ed.) Plain Language Principles and Practice, 1991. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, p. 17. (Quoted in Karen A. Shriver, *Quality in Document Design: Issues and Controversies*, Technical Communication, 2nd Quarter, 1993, p. 250.)

11. R. D. Eagleson, *Writing in Plain English*. 1990. Canberra, Australia: Australian Government Publishing Service. p. 6. (Quoted in Karen A. Shriver, *Quality in Document Design: Issues and Controversies*, Technical Communication, 2nd Quarter, 1993, p. 250.)

12. C. M. Barnum & S. Carliner (eds.), "Introduction" in *Techniques for Technical Communicators*. New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1993, p. 2.

13. Flesch, R. F. *How to Write Plain English: A Book for Lawyers and Consumers*. New York: Harper and Row, 1979, 8 - 10. *Also:*

14. Siegel, A. "The Plain English Revolution" in *Strategies for Business & Technical Writing*, ed. Hartey, K. (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1985), 98. *Also:*

15. Bowen, B.A., Duffy, T.M., & Steinberg, E.R., *Analyzing the Various Approaches of Plain English Laws*. *Visible Language* 20 (1986), 155-165, cited by Dorney, J. M. in *The Plain English Movement* ERIC (the Educational Resources Information Center) Digest, ERIC

## Is Reader-Focused Writing Business Process Reengineering?

In moving beyond *Writing for Real People* and the other VA writing initiatives already mentioned, the Simplified Communications Task Force recognized the need to expand our scope from looking at *Reader-Focused Writing* as a training initiative to considering it a reengineering initiative with a training component. This point is critical to the success of *Reader-Focused Writing*, as training alone will not accomplish significant change of this magnitude. We used the Evaluation Matrix (Appendix B of VBA's Business Process Reengineering Report) to evaluate whether this initiative does, in fact, meet the criteria needed to be elevated to a reengineering initiative. Clearly, this initiative meets the criteria defined by the Reengineering Work Group to be considered a reengineering project.

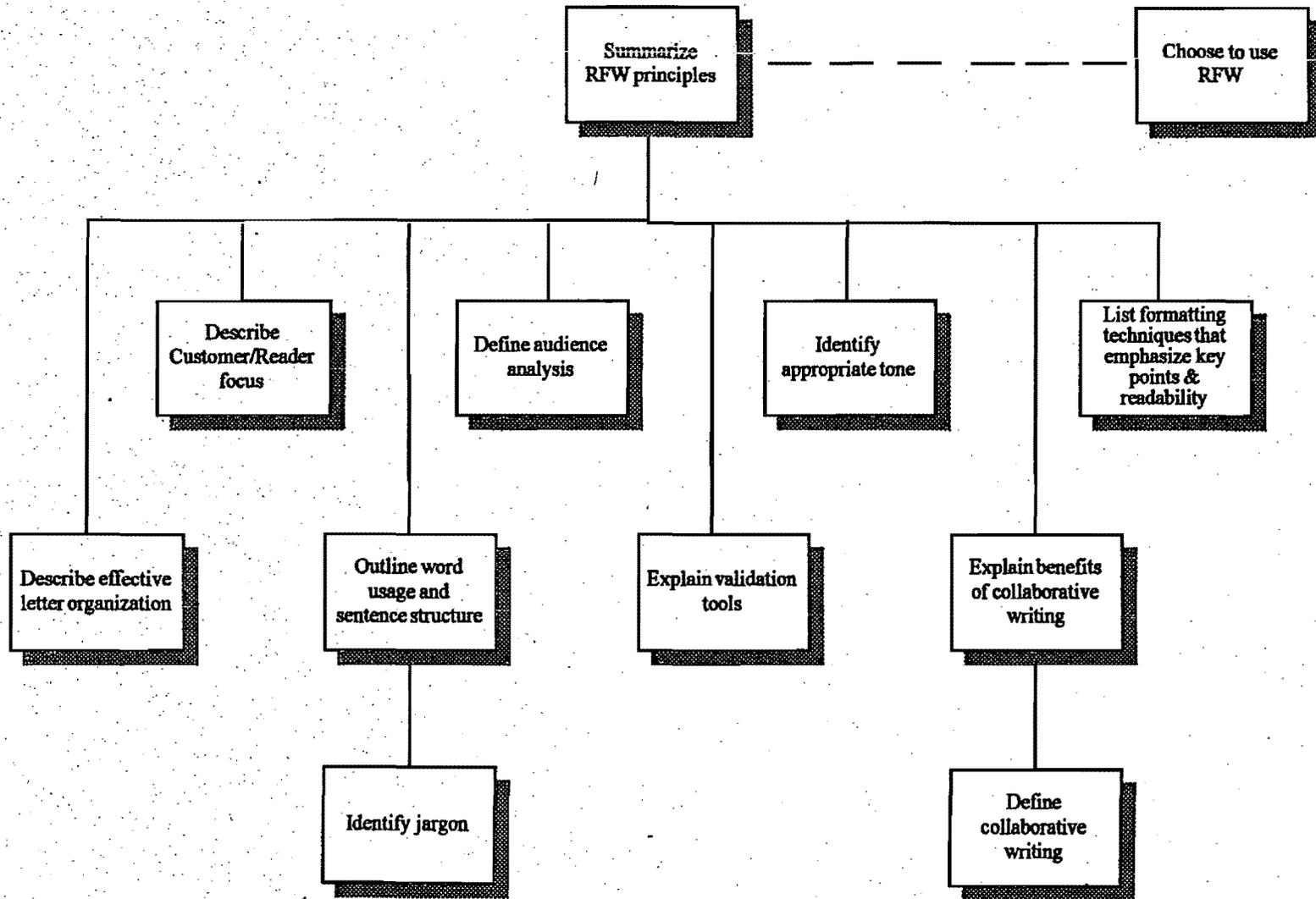
Customers		
Does it put customers first?	Yes	<i>RFW is based on clearly communicating with a reader focus to all VBA customers.</i>
Does customer data support this initiative?	Yes	<i>VBA's customer survey data indicate that we need to improve our written communications with our customers. Focus groups and protocol interviews with veterans have shown that customers find the new writing methods effective.</i>
Process/Procedures/Policy/Regulations		
Does it reduce personnel administration policy; overhead?	No	<i>Only tangentially</i>
Can it be done without procurement?	Maybe	<i>This initiative could best be implemented with contractor support, although it could be accomplished internally if necessary. Depending on the contractor desired, VBA could access OPM's Training Management Assistance contracting vehicle.</i>
Does it reduce or eliminate internal regulations or directives?	Yes	<i>Our studies suggest that VBA's existing directives contain duplicate references which would be eliminated by using RFW.</i>

Does it reduce policy ambiguities?	Yes	<i>Our studies further show that our manuals are so complex that readers can't consistently find the correct references. Further, in a preliminary controlled study, ambiguity was markedly reduced by using RFW. Readers of a revised manual passage were twice as likely to understand the passage than similar readers who studied the original passage.</i>
Does it eliminate unnecessary work?	Yes	<i>Clear correspondence with veterans will reduce the number of phone calls and correspondence received asking for clarification of what we said in an earlier letter; clear ready references will reduce time needed to research policy and procedural questions, as well as time to correct mistakes from incorrect interpretation.</i>
<b>Objectives</b>		
Does it have a clear rationale?	Yes	<i>RFW is VBA's technical writing initiative; technical communications principles are derived from thirty years of academic research and supported by three years of practical testing with veterans.</i>
Does it increase the span of control?	No	
Does it hold employees accountable?	Yes	<i>It can. One of our suggestions (in Chapter 5) is to make employees accountable for communicating effectively enough that rework, e.g., claims denied for failure to furnish complete evidence, is avoided. We believe the initiative will allow VBA to create this kind of accountability.</i>
Is the improvement measurable (i.e., are there clear performance objectives)?	Yes	<i>RFW enables us to set performance objectives for our letters and manuals for the first time. The initiative has developed several yardsticks for measuring performance, including: (1) Percentage of information points understood in protocol interviews, (2) Percentage of information points understood from manuals as reflected in group examinations of employees, (3) Percentage of complete replies to development letters, and (4) Number of telephone calls requesting help with VBA letters and forms.</i>
<b>Effect on Employees</b>		
Does it empower people to do more, such as resolve problems or take action?	Yes	<i>Letter writing teams have had to examine why VA sends letters, and they have recommended processing improvements as a result of the letter-writing task.</i>

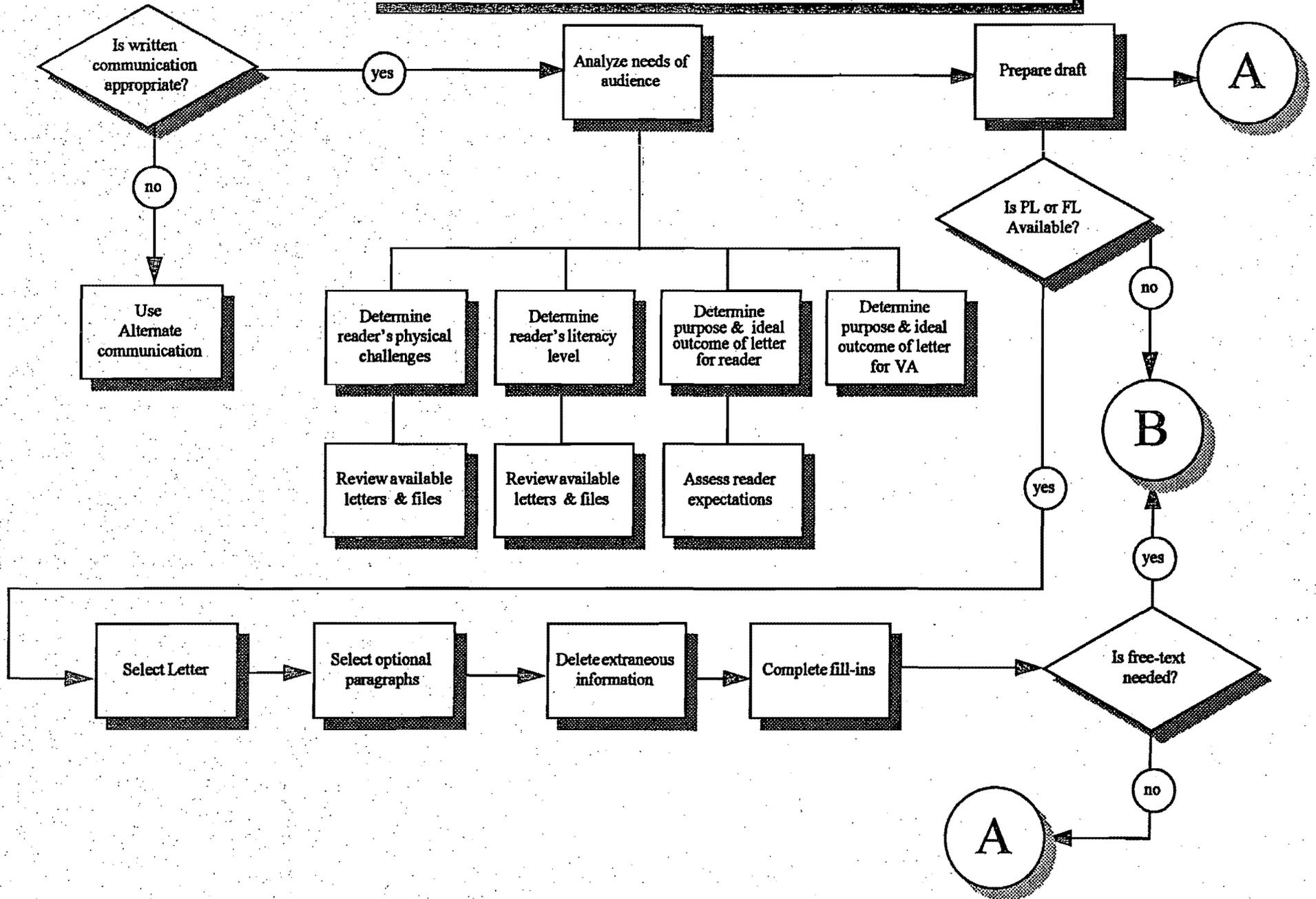
Can it be accomplished without conflicting with rightsizing?	Yes	<i>Clear communications (external and internal) will reduce time spent clarifying meaning.</i>
Can training requirements be accomplished?	Yes	<i>A tiered approach to training ensures that employees receive the training essential to performance of their job.</i>
Can it be accomplished with minimal relocation of employees?	Yes	<i>Employee relocation is not a factor in the successful accomplishment of RFW. If satellite broadcast is selected as the training mode for the Tier 2 training, there will not be any significant travel cost associated with RFW training.</i>
<b>Cost</b>		
Does the proposed change save money?	Yes	<i>Clear communication will enable us to provide the same benefits to veterans at lower cost. We can't predict whether well-informed veterans may demand more services or more benefits. However, the net cost per service per veteran will decrease.</i>
Is it cost effective?	Yes	<i>Yes. We believe the payback period for the entire initiative will be no more than two years.</i>
Can it be accomplished without significant cost?	Yes	<i>The start-up costs include training our employees and obtaining professional technical writing expertise to implement the initiative. Once the up-front costs are borne, we anticipate minimal cost to sustain the program.</i>
<b>Technology</b>		
Have technology requirements been assessed?	Yes	<i>Stage I equipment will support the Reader-Focused Writing initiative.</i>
Can technology be delivered within a reasonable timeframe?	Yes	<i>Stage I equipment has already been deployed.</i>
<b>External Influences</b>		
Would IG, GAO and OMB be supportive?	Yes	<i>GAO has issued a report indicating that VBA should improve its communications.</i>
Does it improve inter- and intra-agency cooperation and coordination?	Yes	<i>Clear communications can only improve cooperation and coordination.</i>
Will Congress support; assist?	Yes	<i>Presumably, Congress will support VBA's efforts to communicate effectively with its constituents.</i>
Will it result in new or improved partnerships?	Yes	<i>The testing and validation process draws in external customers to help us assess the readability of our documents, and ultimately improve our work processes.</i>
Would the VSOs be supportive?	Yes	<i>Improved communications make their job easier.</i>

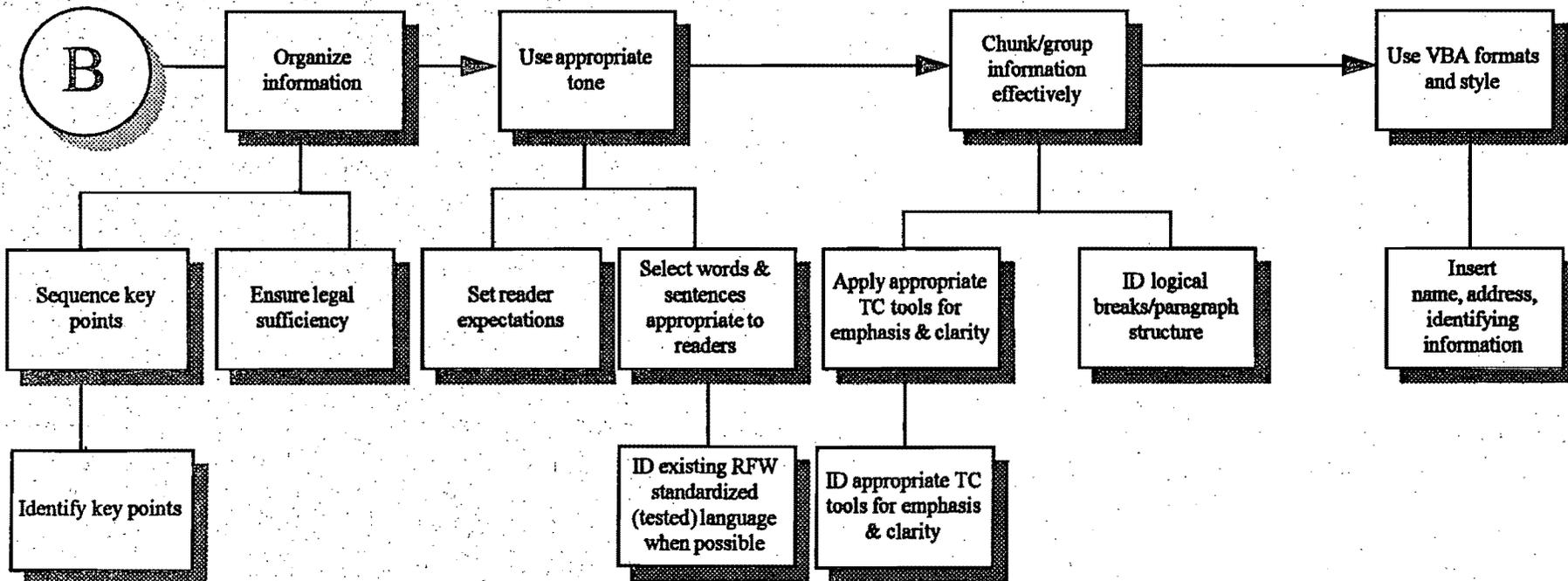
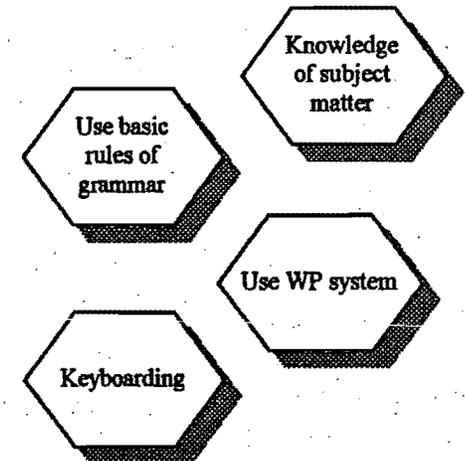
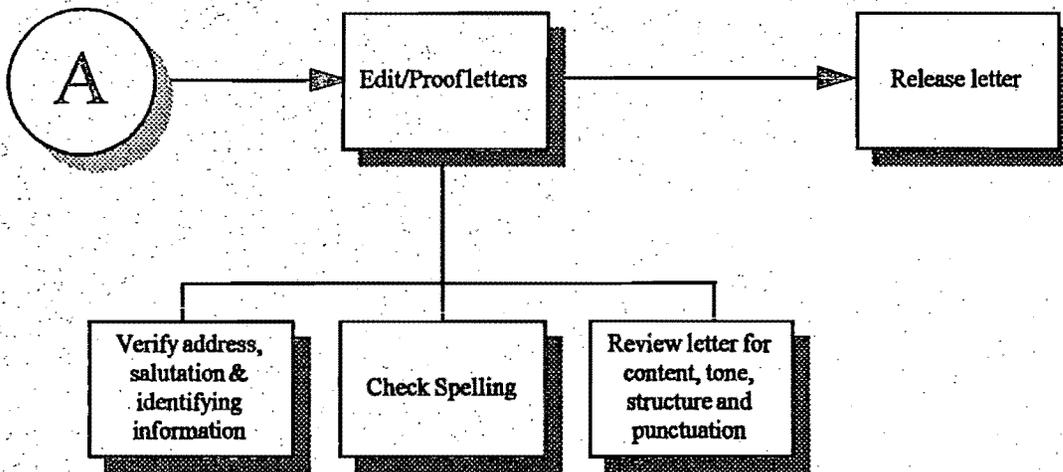
*Appendix B*

**Tier One Goal: Given customer service orientation, the student will identify and explain reader focused writing principles, and will choose to utilize them in written communications.**

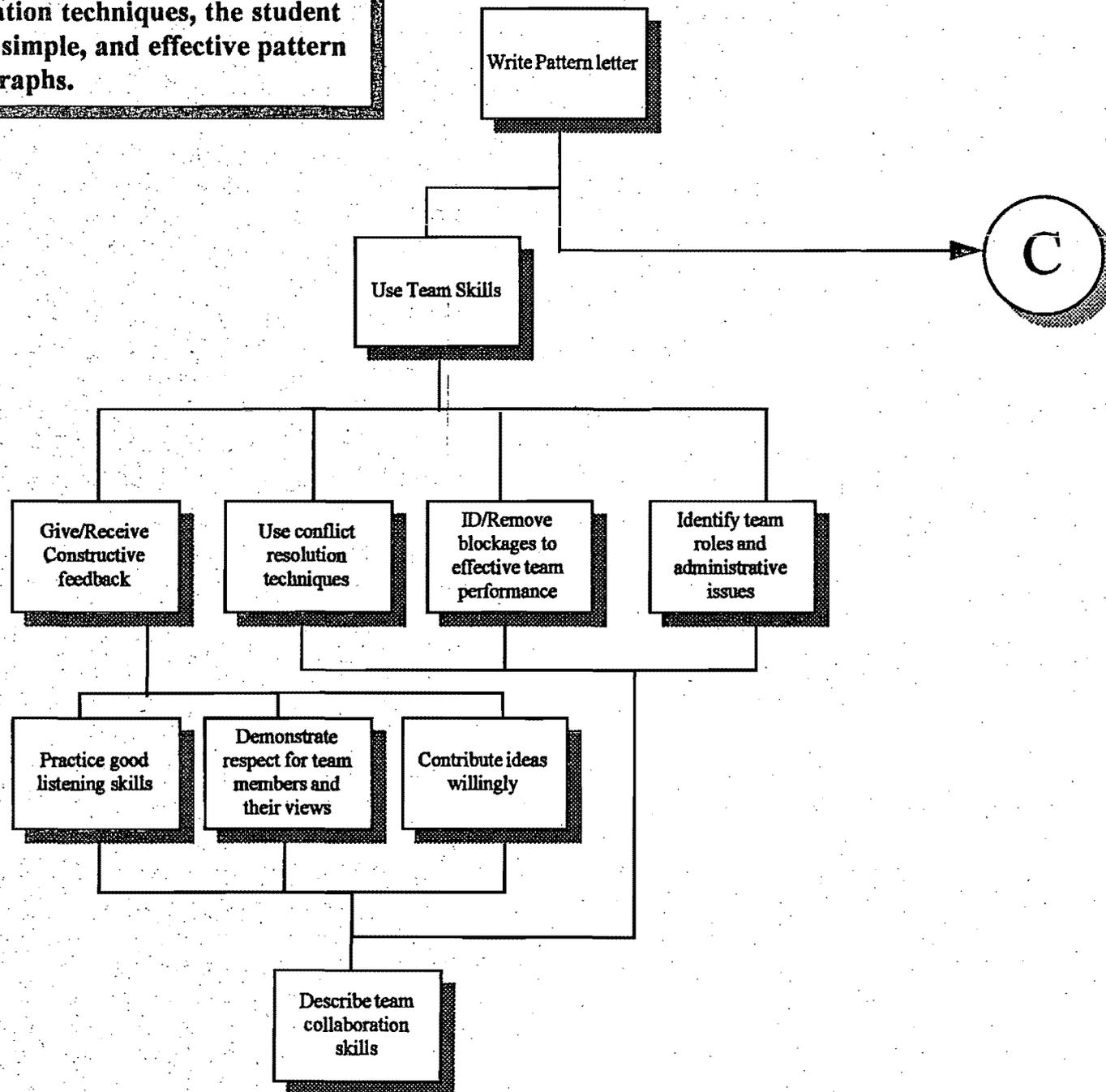


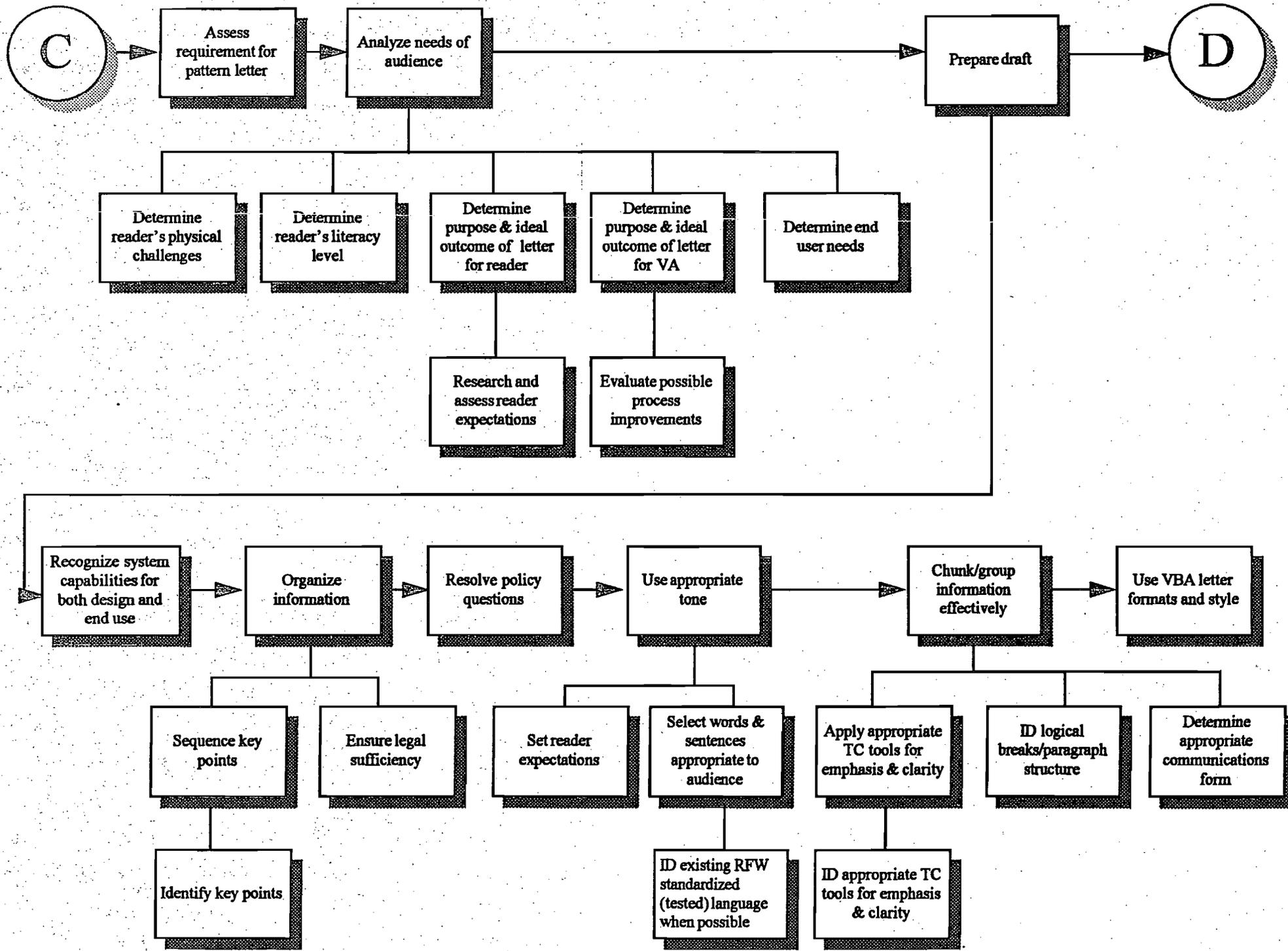
**Tier Two Goal: Utilizing technical communications principles, the student will write clear, simple, and effective correspondence to VBA's internal and external readers.**





**Tier Three Goal: Using collaborative writing and reader validation techniques, the student will design clear, simple, and effective pattern letters and paragraphs.**





C

Assess requirement for pattern letter

Analyze needs of audience

Prepare draft

D

Determine reader's physical challenges

Determine reader's literacy level

Determine purpose & ideal outcome of letter for reader

Determine purpose & ideal outcome of letter for VA

Determine end user needs

Research and assess reader expectations

Evaluate possible process improvements

Recognize system capabilities for both design and end use

Organize information

Resolve policy questions

Use appropriate tone

Chunk/group information effectively

Use VBA letter formats and style

Sequence key points

Ensure legal sufficiency

Set reader expectations

Select words & sentences appropriate to audience

Apply appropriate TC tools for emphasis & clarity

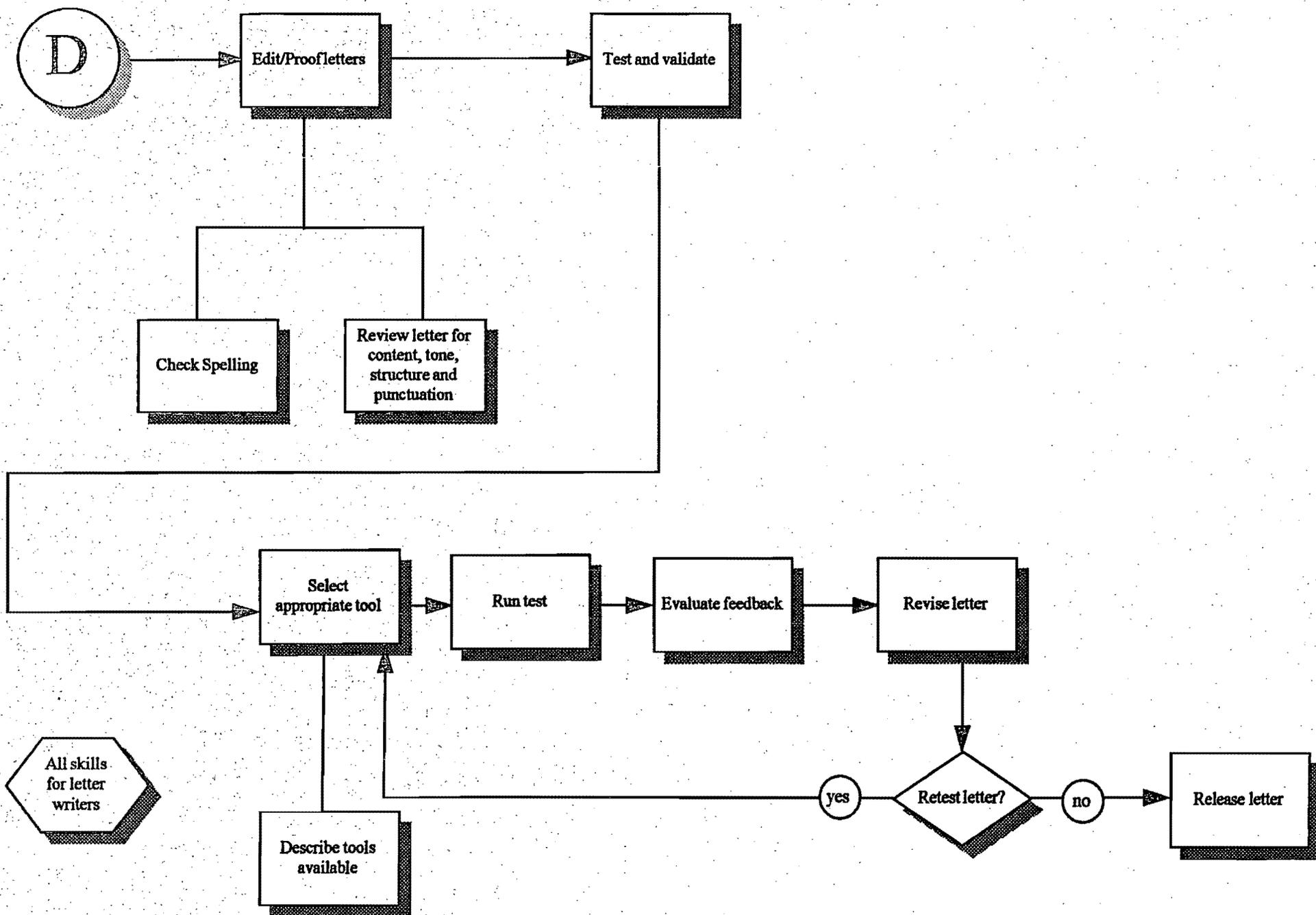
ID logical breaks/paragraph structure

Determine appropriate communications form

Identify key points

ID existing RFW standardized (tested) language when possible

ID appropriate TC tools for emphasis & clarity



# Comparison: VA Correspondence Handbook with *Writing for Real People* & Available Microsoft Word Templates

This report is designed to give the Writing for Real People (*WRP*) Team a starting point to compare VA policies regarding correspondence with *WRP* concepts. To do this, we reviewed the September 1994 draft of the VA Correspondence Handbook and compared it to the principles taught in the *Writing for Real People* (*WRP*) course. The good news is that many of the general goals are consistent with *WRP*. However, the specific way the handbook suggests going about accomplishing these goals is not always the same as *WRP*. Along the way, we also discovered that the handbook guidelines for letter layouts are not always the same as the templates supplied in Microsoft Word.

## How Information was Collected

The draft handbook is 235 pages long, so we only gave it a cursory review. *So, what is our definition of skimming?* Well... we reviewed in-depth those chapters that seemed to apply to *WRP* and then quickly breezed through those chapters that did not seem pertinent.

For those chapters reviewed, we used the following three sources to compare to the VA Correspondence Handbook:

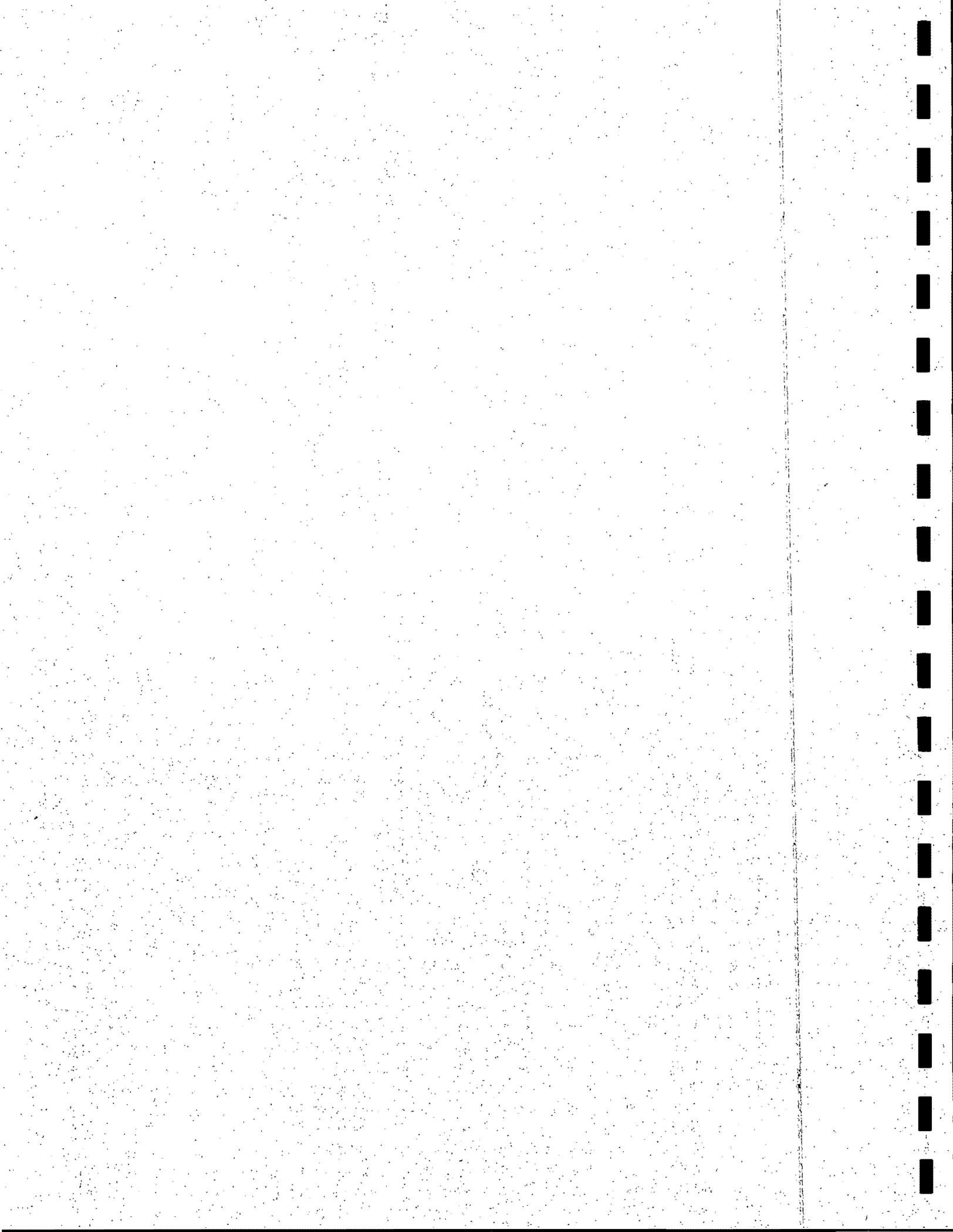
1. *Six Principles of Dynamic Business Writing Manual* (by Reva Daniel)
2. *The Gregg Reference Manual* (by William A. Sabin)
3. Microsoft Word Templates supplied with VA Stage I Installation

Most of the topics in *Six Principles of Dynamic Business Writing* were also covered in the VA Handbook with the exception of how to organize a letter.

## How Information is Separated

We've broken the information collected into the following three categories:

- : Items *consistent* with the *WRP* concepts
- 8 Items *inconsistent* with the *WRP* concepts (or the Gregg Manual)
- ☐ Items *inconsistent* with the *templates* supplied in *Microsoft Word*



## What Was Found

: Consistent with the *WRP* Concepts

The following tables show the page and paragraph of statements supporting *WRP*.

<b>PAGE</b>	<b>PARA</b>	<b>Excerpts from the VA Corr. Handbook</b>	<b><i>WRP</i> Concept Supported</b>
34	2a.	"All correspondence prepared in the Department should be written in clear, simple language and should be brief and to the point. Avoid the use of vague words and phrases." "...should enable the recipient of the correspondence to easily understand what is being said without the need to translate bureaucratic phraseology into layman's language."	Chapter 4 of <i>Six Principles of Dynamic Business Writing</i> is all about writing in a "Powerful, Concise Style."
34	2a	"Special consideration should also be given to correspondence prepared for visually impaired veterans and their beneficiaries by using a larger print size."	The idea of audience analysis is addressed in Chapter 1 of <i>Six Principles of Dynamic Business Writing</i> . It is also addressed when Protocol testing. The idea of using larger typeface is addressed in Chapter 3 of the same book.
34	2e	"Do not refer to the date of the incoming correspondence unless the writer has sent several letters and the date is necessary to identify a particular reply."	Consistent with page 7.2 of <i>Six Principles of Dynamic Business Writing</i> . (See second bullet from the bottom.)
45&46	17b	"A paragraph may be subdivided into subparagraphs, provided there are at least two points to highlight or two issues to note. Number and letter, or bullet, the subparagraph, but not the main paragraphs." "Indent the first lines of each subparagraph four spaces and begin typing at the fifth space."	Chapter 3 of <i>Six Principles of Dynamic Business Writing</i> talks about Stacked Lists. The information is consistent with the VA Handbook. However, the rules are not consistent with the way Microsoft Word is formatted for block and modified block letters. (See  for more details.)
51 & 74	28 & 23a,b	"A fact sheet is a detailed document prepared to accompany correspondence when the correspondence would otherwise be too lengthy, too complex, or too technical."	The idea of a fact sheet is consistent with the <i>WRP</i> suggestion to use supplements. (See <i>Six Principles of Dynamic Business Writing</i> B.9) However, the sample in Ill 3-8 is very stringent in the headings it suggests. (See  for more details.)

112	2d	"Form letters will not be used if it would be in poor taste because of the personal nature of the message, or if the language would not fit the situation."	This statement is consistent with <i>WRP</i> concept of analyzing audience. (See <i>Six Principles of Dynamic Business Writing</i> Chapter 1.)
149 & 154	3a & Ill 12-3	"Typical elements of a decision paper include: issue; background; options with analysis/discussion of each; recommendation; and the decision."	The format of a Decision Paper as illustrated in the VA Handbook very much resembles the <i>WRP</i> style of using headings.
174	1	Style & Usage Guide: "While non-directive in nature, these guidelines seek to establish a degree of uniformity for everyday reference to the new organization that will reflect common sense and expected popular usage."	This comment leaves the door open for the <i>WRP</i> style.
174	1	"This guide adheres to precedents found in major mass media stylebooks and seeks to identify common usage situations that require clarity and consistency."	Leaves the door open to use <i>The Gregg Reference Manual</i> for reference purposes.
188-192	Lists	Overused Words or Phrase	Many of the on these pages are duplicates of the items in <i>Six Principles of Dynamic Business Writing</i> . (Duplicate items are underlined on the copies of page 188 - 192 in the back of this report.) During the <i>WRP</i> course we were also given a list of overused phrases specific to VA. These overused phrases, along with some of those missed in the VA Handbook but included in <i>Six Principles of Dynamic Business Writing</i> , could be useful.

## 8 Inconsistent with the *WRP* Concepts

The following tables show the page and paragraph of statements inconsistent with *WRP*. Since *The Gregg Reference Manual* is distributed as part of the *WRP* course, discrepancies with the Gregg Manual are also identified.

PAGE	PARA	Excerpts from the VA Corr. Handbook	Inconsistency with <i>WRP</i>
34	2e	"Avoid unnecessary repetition..." "... respond to the points made in the incoming correspondence without reiterating them.	This may be in conflict with <i>WRP</i> people finding that repetition has shown to be very useful in some situations.
38	3a	"The preferred format for VA letters is modified block style... In modified block style each element of the letter begins flush with the left margin, except for the first line of each subparagraph, which is indented."	Although this is similar to the <i>WRP</i> style. It does not take the use of headings and white space into consideration. See <i>Six Principles of Dynamic Business Writing</i> , Chap 3-Pleasing Format.
45&46	17a	"Begin each paragraph flush with the left margin."	It does not take the use of headings and white space into consideration. See <i>Six Principles of Dynamic Business Writing</i> , Chap 3-Pleasing Format.
51	27	"Do not use postscripts."	On page 7.4 (6th bullet) of <i>Six Principles of Dynamic Business Writing</i> recommends using P.S. as a way of attracting attention.
57	III3-3	Illustration shows that the second line of the numbered items are not indented.	This is not consistent with either <i>Six Principles of Dynamic Business Writing</i> or the Microsoft Word template.
62	III3-8	The second paragraph of the sample says, "There are three parts to a fact sheet: title, issue, and discussion. The title is centered at the top of the sheet. The ISSUE and DISCUSSION headings are typed in capital letters.	The idea of the fact sheet is consistent with the <i>WRP</i> concepts. However, the headings shown are much more stringent than those used in <i>WRP</i> .
65	5a	The order of the heading in the memo are as follows: "Date," "From", "Subj," and "To."	This order is not consistent with either page 8.2 of <i>Six Principles of Dynamic Business Writing</i> or the Microsoft Word template.

198	2a.(2)	"Use the apostrophe to indicate the coined plurals of letters figures and symbols. (three R's; 5's and 7's)	Not consistent with <i>The Gregg Reference Manual</i> Para 623 or 625. However, para 623 does note that, "some authorities still sanction the use of an apostrophe before the s..."
198	2a.(3)	"To show possession. Add 's when the noun does not end with a s sound. Add only the apostrophe to a noun that ends with an s sound.	Not consistent with <i>The Gregg Reference Manual</i> Para 631.
202	51.(7)	"Before and after Jr., Sr., academic degrees, and names of states preceded by names of cities, within a sentence."	Not consistent with <i>The Gregg Reference Manual</i> Para 156, which says, "Do not to use commas to set off Jr., Sr..." It does note , however, that it can be used when "a person prefers to use commas in his name."
207	3a	Sample shows to put a period after "ft."	Not consistent with <i>The Gregg Reference Manual</i> Para 535, which says, "Units of measure are now commonly abbreviated without period."
212	2a	"Numbers Spelled Out: Single number of less than 10 within a sentence.	Not consistent with <i>The Gregg Reference Manual</i> Para 401, which says, "Spell out numbers from 1 through 10; use figures for numbers above 10. "
214	3d.(8)	"Number Expressed in Figures: Money" The example shows \$0.75 or 75 cents.	Not consistent with <i>The Gregg Reference Manual</i> Para 418, which give specific details about when to spell out amounts and when to use dollar signs.

## ☐ Inconsistent with Templates in Microsoft Word

Below is a comparison of the VA Correspondence Manual with the templates supplied to Philadelphia as part the Stage I LAN installation. We felt it was necessary to compare the templates with the manual because many people will use the templates assuming that they are already set to VA specifications; many people will use the templates as they are rather than go in and change the margins of a template to meet the manual specifications. The following tables show the page and paragraph of statements inconsistent with the templates in Microsoft Word.

PAGE	PARA	Excerpts from the VA Corr. Handbook	Inconsistency with Word Template
38	5a-d	a. "The left margin is <i>1 inch</i> from the left edge of the sheet." b. "The right margin is no more than <i>1 1/4 inches and no less than 3/4 inch</i> from the right edge of the sheet." c. "The top margin of the second & successive pages is <i>1 inch</i> ." d. "The bottom margin for full pages of text should be no less than <i>1 inch</i> ."	LETBLOCK Template: <i>a. 1.25; b.1.31; c. 1.06; d. 1.56.</i> LETMODBK Template: <i>a. 1.50; b. 1.25; c. 1.50; d. 1.31.</i> In addition to the margins being different, when the letterhead is automated, the top margin of the 2nd page will start where the top of the letterhead begins on the first page. Considerations should also be given to the fact that sometimes adjusting margins allows for an entire letter to fit on one page.
46	17b	"Indent the first lines of each subparagraph four spaces and begin typing at the fifth space."	Not consistent with the way Word templates are formatted for LETBLOCK and LETMODBK. Numbers and bullets either come in at the margin and tab to 1/4"; or, if Normal Indent is used, bullets start at 1/2".
46	18c	"Type the name of the addressee two lines below the page number on the second and successive pages exactly as it appears on page 1 and flush with the left margin."	Not consistent with Word header, which automatically does the following for LETBLOCK-- Name Date Page There is something wrong with the header template for LETMODBK; it reads, "Undefined dialog record field."
46	19a	"For modified block style letters the complimentary close is typed on the second line below the body of the letter and flush with the left margin."	This is the opposite of the Word template which puts the signature center for LETMODBK and left justifies it for LETBLOCK.

47	10a	"The signer's name will be typed five lines below the complimentary close..."	LETBLOCK has only 3 spaces after the signature.
64 & 73 & 81	2d &22d & III4-4	The first paragraph of the sample states, "This illustrates the appropriate format for machine-generated memoranda. No alternatives to this format will be considered."	The layout shown is not consistent with what was supplied in Word under either MEMO2 or VAMEMO.
68	12a	"Begin the body of a memorandum on the third line below the last addressee line; i.e., leave two blank lines between the last addressee line and the first line of text."	Both Word memo templates draw a line after the address and start on the next line.
68&69	13b&c	b. "The page number will be typed flush with the left margin, on the seventh line from the top of the page; leave six blank lines from the top of the page." c. "Type the addressee's title two lines below the page number, flush with the left margin."	This is not consistent with the successive page headers in the Word template.

Page 113 of the VA Correspondence Handbook has a section called "Guide or Pattern Letters." Nothing that we read in this section is inconsistent with what we are presently doing. There is, however, a reference to the GSA Record Management Handbook, Form and Guide Letters, that "provides additional guidance on preparing pattern or guide letters." We have not reviewed a copy of the GSA Handbook for inconsistencies.

## Some Things to Think About

### VA Handbook vs. *WRP* Concepts

Overall, the VA Correspondence Handbook is in agreement with a great deal of the *WRP* concepts. Below are two of the biggest areas of difference:

1. The VA Handbook does not make allowances for white space and heading in letters. The idea, however, is not altogether foreign since headings and white space are shown in the sample of the Decision Paper.
2. Nothing in the VA Handbook talks about ways to organize a letter for different situations (e.g., skeptical readers, receptive readers, giving poor news).

### VA Handbook vs. Gregg Manual

There were many small differences in the VA Handbook rules and the Gregg Manual. However, since the VA Handbook states, "This guide adheres to precedents found in major mass media stylebooks..." there may be some room for adjustment. A decision should probably be made as to which rules we expect people to follow.

### VA Handbook Size

We looked at style manuals from several major companies and government agencies, and noted that their handbooks are not nearly as large as VA's "235 Page Bible." It is probably safe to assume that the smaller and more user friendly the handbook, the more likely it is to be used. Below are two examples of the size of other public and private agency handbooks:

1. Dupont's handbook, written in 1994, is 68 pages long.
2. Social Security's handbook, written in 1989, is 25 pages long.

With this thought in mind, we should probably cut sections in our handbook whenever possible. Perhaps rather than having the handbook state that the guide adheres to other mass media stylebooks, it could just refer everyone to whichever stylebook everyone agrees is acceptable.

We could eliminate more redundancy in the chapter regarding overused words. Lists of words found in *Six Principles of Dynamic Business Writing* duplicate many of the ones in the VA Manual. In addition, the lists supplied in the *WRP* course were based on an analysis of VA letters. Therefore, many of the terms were specific to VA. It did not appear that the VA Handbook list was as VA specific and the *WRP* material.

### **VA Handbook vs. Automation**

There were many big differences in the VA Handbook rules for letter & memo layouts and the letter & memo templates found in Microsoft Word. In this case changes must be made to either the templates or the handbook. If not, considering the ease of use of the templates, it is likely that the VA Handbook will lose out.

This points to a side issue that may eventually come to the forefront. *Do we let the old rules guide the way we use the new technology? Or, do we update the rules to allow for all technology has to offer?* One example of this is the manual's explanation of the VA 119 form. In the Philadelphia office and perhaps others, the 119 form has been automated. However, the handbook makes little mention of automating anything but the memos. In this office automating the 119 form is much more efficient, especially when a typed copy is needed for the records. This type of minor change in the handbook could allow for major changes in the way we do business.

### **A Closing Thought**

The VA Correspondence Handbook is still in draft form. It allows us to have an open discussion with those writing the handbook. It also affords us the opportunity to make sure that the improved communications style we recommend is consistent with the final version of the VA Correspondence Handbook.

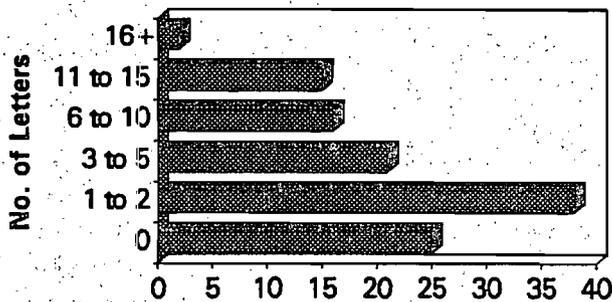
**Writing for Real People  
Follow-Up Training Evaluations  
Highlights of Results**

Prior to the formation of the Improved Communications Task Force, a survey was released to determine the effectiveness of the Writing for Real People Course which was taught in pilot groups throughout the country. Below are the results of the questions most pertinent to this report.

**1. How many letters do you release on a daily basis (including PCGL, PC Letters, Station Glossary, BDN and/or your own creations)?**

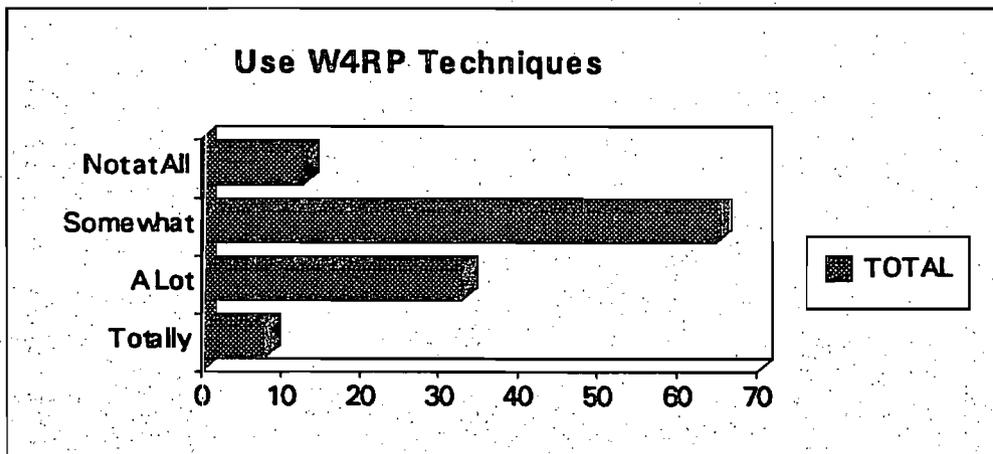
	0	1 to 2	3 to 5	6 to 10	11 to 15	16+
<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>2</b>
21	2	2	1	1	0	0
22	5	4	3	0	0	0
27	2	7	1	0	1	0
310	2	5	2	2	0	0
317	0	1	3		2	2
323	3	3	4	3	1	
329	1	2			1	
330		3			2	
333	1	3	1	1		
339	2	1		2		
348	3	3	2	1	4	
351		3	3	4	2	
372	4	1	1	2	2	

**Letters Released Daily**



3. To what degree have you incorporated *Writing for Real People* into your letter writing style?

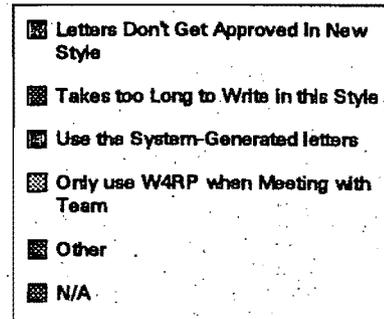
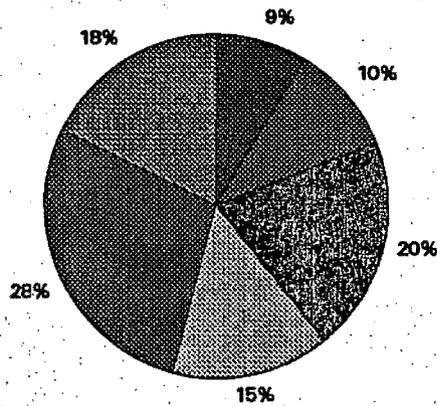
	Totally	A Lot	Somewhat	Not at All
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>13</b>
21	1	2	3	
22	3	1	8	1
27		2	8	
310	1	3	7	
317	2	3	2	1
323	1	7	7	
329			2	2
330		3	2	
333		3	3	
339		1	4	2
348		1	7	4
351		4	8	
372		3	4	3



**4. If you have not changed your writing style since you attended training, what has prevented you?**

	Letters Don't Get Approved in New Style	Takes too Long to Write in this Style	Use the System-Generated letters	Only use W4RP when Meeting with Team	Other	N/A
<b>TOTAL</b>	7	8	16	12	22	14
21	2	1	1		3	1
22	4	1		3	3	2
27						
310						
317		1	1		3	4
323						
329	1	1	1			1
330			2			
333					2	
339			2	2	3	
348		3	4	1	5	2
351		1	5	3	2	
372				3	1	4

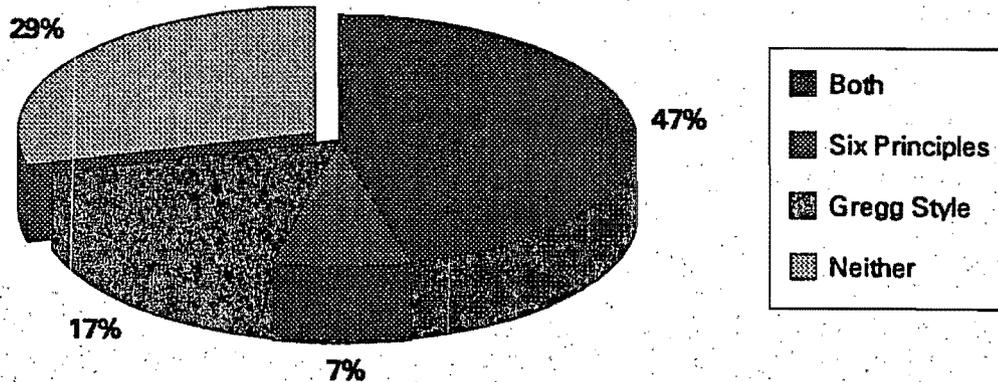
**Why They Don't Use W4RP Style**



5. Do you refer to the *6 Principles of Dynamic Business Writing* book or the *Gregg Style Manual* when drafting correspondence?

	Both	6 Principles	Gregg Style	Neither
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>35</b>
21	2	3	1	
22	6		3	4
27	2	1	3	5
310	3	2	3	2
317	5	1		2
323	7	1	3	3
329	2	1		1
330	1		2	2
333	5			1
339	6		2	2
348	5		2	5
351	9			3
372	3		2	5

Reference Guides



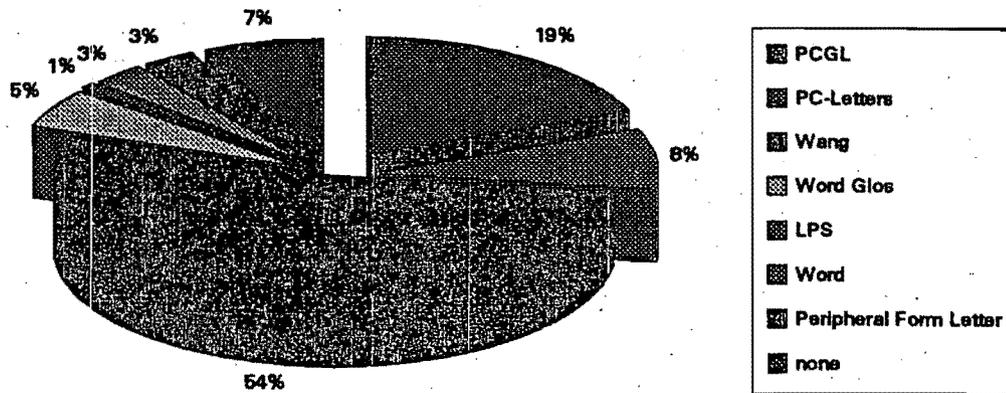
7. See questions in table below:

	Was a team formed?		Have you been a member of a writing team?		Does your team still meet?	
	Q7a		Q7b		Q7c	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
<b>Total</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>20</b>
21	0	6	0	6	0	0
22	13	0	13	0	13	0
27	2	7	3	8	2	3
310	11	0	11	0	11	0
317	7	1	7	1	7	1
323	9	5	10	4	8	2
329	2	1	1	2	0	3
330	5	0	5	0	0	5
333	5	1	6	0	0	6
339	6	0	6	0	6	0
348	11	1	11	1	11	0
351	12	0	12	0	12	0
372	10	0	10	0	10	0

8. Which letter generating systems (for example WANG, Word Glossary, LPS, PC Generated Letters/PCGL, PC Letters, etc.) do you use for pattern letters?

	PCGL	PC-Ltrs	Wang	Word Glossary	LPS	Word	Other	None
<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>9</b>
21			3					2
22	1		4			2		6
27			10					
310	3	7	2			1	2	
317	3		4	2		1		
323	1	3	11	3	1		1	1
329	2		3					
330	2		3				1	
333	2	1	4					
339	1							
348	4		8					
351	3		12					
372	3		6	2				

### Pattern Letter Generating System

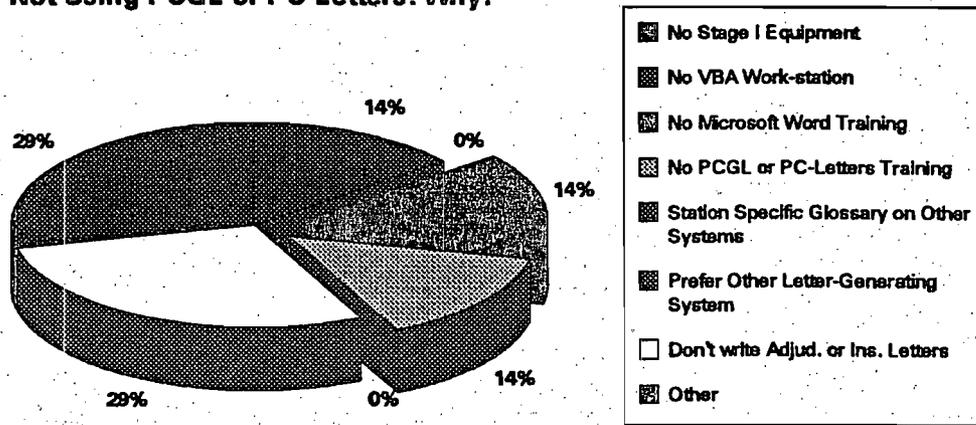


**Note: Question 9 addressed how easy it was to use the letter generating system most often used. Most of the respondents to questions 8 indicated they used Wang most often. Since we conducted this training evaluation, Stage I has been installed in many offices. Informal studies conducted since Stage I installation indicate that employees are making the transition to Word. Therefore, the data collected in question 9 is obsolete.**

**10. If you are not using PCGL (Adjudication) or PC-Letters (Insurance), why not?**

	No Stage I Equipment	No VBA Work-station	No Microsoft Word Training	No PCGL or PC-Letters Training	Station Specific Glossary on Other Systems	Prefer Other Letter-Generating System	Don't write Adjud. or Insurance Letters	Other
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>22</b>
21	1		1	1			2	2
22	1			1			6	6
27	3	1		4	3		5	1
310								
317	1	1	2	2	1	1	5	
323	3	1	3	3	2	1	4	2
329							1	1
330			1	2	1		2	
333			1	1		1	5	2
339	1		1	1			4	1
348	1	1	2	1			4	3
351	4		1	6	2	1	5	3
372				1	3		4	1

**Not Using PCGL or PC-Letters. Why?**



**11. Do you have access to a VBA workstation?**

	Yes, on my desk.	Yes, in my division.	No, haven't received Stage I equip.	No, won't get one in my area.
<b>Total</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>9</b>
21	5		1	
22	8	1	2	2
27	8	2	1	
310	11			
317	5	1		2
323	9	1	2	1
329	3			
330	5			
333	4	1	1	
339	2		1	2
348	6	3	3	
351	6	1	4	2
372	7	1	1	

