

HOW DID YOU TRAIN LETTER WRITERS?

We accomplished our **RFW Tools** training via satellite on the Veterans Benefits Network. Developing this course was a joint project between VBA and information design specialist, Susan Kleimann, formerly with the American Institutes for Research. Together we developed a distance learning course that trained letter writers in 53 offices across the country.

Distance learning guarantees that the training is consistent and of high quality. It also allows us to train a large number of employees in a relatively short timeframe. In four months we trained 800 employees in 32 offices. Independent evaluations show that that the training was very effective and that employees are using the training.

The mean score on pre-class and post-class letters increased from 10 to 14. The top possible score was 15.

HOW DID YOU TRAIN REGULATION WRITERS?

We brought both regulation writers and legal reviewers into the same classroom. Their teacher is a renowned expert on plain English regulation writing, Ginny Redish. Our goal is to have writers and reviewers work as a team.

“The Reader-Focused Writing Program should serve as a model for other government agencies which use letters and other written materials to reach large segments of the American public...”

*J. Peter Kincaid, Ph.D.
Institute of Simulation and Training
developer of Flesch-Kincaid Readability Formula*

“RFW is a major asset for VBA. It is built upon sound principles, has the endorsement of the directorate and widespread acceptance among rank and file across the country.”

*Center for Instructional Research and Curriculum
Development
University of Illinois*

“...a great deal of improvement was demonstrated by course participants. Marked improvement was attained in all areas.”

*Humanalysis
Maitland, Florida*



Reader-Focused Writing

Phone 215-842-2000 (X4267) /Fax 215-381-3504
OR
Phone 202-273-7406 /Fax 202-275-3135

READER-FOCUSED WRITING

*Write to Express...
Not to Impress*

Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Benefits Administration
Plain English Initiative

What is Reader-Focused Writing?

Reader-Focused Writing (RFW) is writing that focuses on what the reader needs to know, rather than on what the writer wants to say.

It is based on 30 years of research on how people read and absorb information. It is backed up by testing documents on readers to ensure that they truly understand our message.

Because RFW is based on research and testing, good writing is no longer measured by personal taste. It is based on what readers tell us they understand.

HOW DO YOU KNOW READERS UNDERSTAND?

Whenever we rewrite letters that will be used many times (i.e.; computer generated letters), we test them using Protocol Testing. Specifically VBA has been using an approach called Cued-Protocol Testing which asks readers to read from one cue (or dot) to another. Each time they read to a cue, we ask them to explain what the section means. If the reader's understanding of the letter is not what the writer intended, changes are made, and the document is retested.



Our experience shows that testing letters before releasing them results in fewer phone calls from confused customers.

HOW DO YOU KNOW IT WORKS? *Show Me the Data!*

Several of our offices have tested before and after versions of letters and manuals to collect quantitative data. Below are a few of the results:

- Poor readers understood less than 40% of a traditional letter; poor readers understood more than 80% of an RFW letter.
- When comparing a traditional manual passage and the RFW rewrite, twice as many users gave accurate responses after reading the RFW version. They found the rewrite to be faster and easier to read. (0% found the traditional version easy, while 89% found the RFW version easy.)
- 25-50% of people responded to an invitation to a focus group written in RFW. 0% responded to the traditional invitation.
- According to telephone counselors' estimates, a traditional letter sent to 750 people generated 1100 phone calls; the RFW rewrite sent to 710 people generated only 200 calls. We estimate a savings of \$40,000 a year in phone calls if this **one** letter were used nationally.

HOW DID YOU GET STARTED?

We started out by evaluating all of the different types of writing we did, both internally and externally. They included

- Pattern & multi-use letters
- Individual letters
- Reference material (manuals)
- Forms
- Regulations

We recognized two things: 1) different types of writing needed different types of training; and 2) every employee did not need every type of training. Using the Instructional Systems Development model, we developed a training plan. The pyramid below shows the type of classes we've developed, or are in the process of developing.



Recipient of Vice President Gore's Hammer Award