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Chapter 2. Web Content

1. Content Defined

Introduction This topic provides the definition of web content.

Change Date Revised February 2016

a. Definition – Web Content Content is information that is disseminated to website visitors. For the purposes of this document, content does not include overall page attributes such as branding, font size, etc., which must be standardized as defined in this document, but does include text, videos, images, studies, forms, pictures, and graphics.

b. Reference for Web Content [VA Handbook 6102](#), July 15, 2008, Chapter 3, page 35.

2. Roles and Responsibilities for Content

Introduction This topic provides information about the various parties responsible for web content.

Change Date Revised February 2016

a. VBA Web Office The VBA Web Communications Office was established in 2005 with the overall responsibility and accountability for coordinating web communications, addressing web policies, approving the creation of new websites, and ensuring content is of high quality and appropriate for all internal and external websites. The office initially reported directly to the Under Secretary of Benefits and was later moved under the Office of Facilities and Access Management.

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2. Roles and Responsibilities for Content, Continued

a. VBA Web Communications Office (continued)

In May 2010, the VBA Web Communications Office was put under the authority of the Benefits Assistance Service (BAS), but maintained its oversight role for the entire administration regarding all web related activities. The office draws its authorities from various statutes, Presidential orders and VA directives. Its primary functions include:

- Approving and disapproving the creation and/or major modification of websites.
- Approving the creation and removal of social media sites.
- Ensuring websites comply with federal mandates, agency rules, and standards.
- Conducting audits of website content and ensuring corrective action is taken.
- Conducting web training classes and developing training material.
- Creating and publishing content for the VBA home page and home anterior pages.
- Managing web self-service functionality related to VBA information and services.
- Managing the Benefits.Gov and the DisasterAssistance.Gov programs on behalf of VA.

- Serving as the VBA liaison to the Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs (OPIA) for the GovDelivery Program.
- Serving as the liaison to OPIA, Digital Services, Veterans Experience Office, Office of Information Technology, and other VA entities relevant to web inquiries and related web/social media matters.
- Managing the main VBA social media pages to include the composing and publishing of social media content, creating and enforcing relevant social media policies and rules, hosting interactive events, and providing guidance and training on social media matters.

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2. Roles and Responsibilities for Content, Continued

b. Program Office or Facility Site

The head of each program office or facility site (e.g., VBA regional office or program office) with an official VA Internet/intranet website is ultimately responsible for the content posted on the website including documents, text, videos, images, studies, forms, pictures, and graphics, and ensuring that the information is current, accurate, factual, grammatically correct, written in plain language and meets the mission of the respective program or organization.

c. Web Content Lead

The web technical lead works for a VBA program/business office or regional office and maintains the website. This person must be knowledgeable about the technical issues regarding the publishing of a Web page. All internal and external websites must have a web technical lead. The web technical lead may also serve as the web content lead and may have other non-web related responsibilities.

The web content lead is responsible for the following:

- Creating and editing web content, including text, videos, images, studies, forms, pictures, and graphics.
 - Ensuring content is current, accurate, factual, grammatically correct, written in plain language, and aligned with the mission of the respective program or organization.
 - Ensuring content is approved by the appropriate VA manager or subject matter expert who has line authority over the website or the content therein.
-

d. Web Technical Lead

The web technical lead works for a VBA program/business office or regional office and maintains the website. This person must be knowledgeable about the technical issues regarding the publishing of a Web page. All internal and external websites must have a web technical lead. The web technical lead may also serve as the web content lead and may have other non-web related responsibilities.

The web technical lead is responsible for the following:

- Checking for broken links and correcting any broken links.
 - Checking for any accessibility (Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act) errors and remediating any found errors.
-

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2. Roles and Responsibilities for Content, Continued

d. Web Technical Lead (continued)

- Assessing and testing the navigation schema and ensuring content can be intuitively found.
 - Ensuring the web pages meet required branding policies, standards, and attributes that provide the framework and corporate and/or vets.gov appearance for publishing web pages.
 - Ensuring the web pages meet required page format styles.
 - Ensuring the web graphics, photos, logos and any other imagery meet required imagery styles as defined by the Department, MyVA, and/or VBA.
-

e. Subject Matter Expert

The subject matter expert (SME) works for a VBA program/business office or regional office and has expert knowledge in his/her area of concentration. This person should work closely with the web content lead and/or technical lead. The SME may serve as the outreach coordinator, public affairs officer, or management analyst at a regional office.

The subject matter expert is responsible for the following:

- Providing factual reviews of web content and correcting any information on web pages that is not factually correct, current, or is misleading.
 - Retaining current knowledge in his/her field of concentration.
 - Informing the web content lead and/or web technical web lead of any policy, regulatory, or legislative changes to his/her program.
-

f. Regional Office

Each regional office (RO) must designate one web content lead and/or web technical lead, as indicated in III.i.3.b. This person has the same duties as described in III.i.3.c and d.

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2. Roles and Responsibilities for Content, Continued

f. Regional Office (continued)

The Office of Field Operations approves the selection of new web content leads and/or web technical leads. The VBA Web Communications Office is the administrative authority in allowing access into the VA enterprise content management system for web editing and promoting.

The RO websites have standard content elements and attributes. As such, their websites must follow certain rules and maintain the following pages and content on their websites:

- Slide Show
 - The slide show (the carousel) must contain one slide and can contain up to three slides highlighting special information, programs, or news items. Each slide contains an image and a description of the program or news item.
- Local Events and Happenings
 - The local events and happenings content should contain upcoming events. The web content lead and/or web technical lead for the website should work closely with the public affairs officer or outreach coordinator in promoting local events and happenings in a timely manner and several days before the event(s).
- Visitor information
 - The “Visiting Hours” page should provide the current operating hours and days of the week.
- Services offered
 - The “Services Offered” page should include information about the services provided at the RO. Any special program or services related to the RO or region should also be included.
- Veterans service organizations
 - The “Veterans Service Organizations” page should include a list of the organizations located at the RO and their specific location and telephone number.

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2. Roles and Responsibilities for Content, Continued

f. Regional Office (continued)

- Directions and Maps
 - The “Directions and Maps” page must contain an address, phone number (if applicable), information on public transportation, any special parking considerations, a photo of the facility, and links to maps (such as Google and MapQuest).
- Other VA Facilities
 - The “Other VA Facilities” page should contain a list of other VA facilities at the same location, near the RO, and under the jurisdiction of the RO. The list should be organized by services provided, i.e., Pre-Discharge Intake Sites, Compensation, Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment, VA Cemeteries, etc., or the list should provide a description of the services provided at the locations.
- Regional Loan Center (if applicable)
 - For the ROs that have a co-located regional loan center, the website should include the services provided by the center, contact information (if applicable), and appropriate resources with links to authoritative information on the VBA Home Loans website.
- Operating Status
 - The operating status widget on the RO home page must show the office is closed, if the RO is closed due to inclement weather or for other causes. The closed status should be immediately removed when the RO resumes its normal operating hours.
- Current operating status
 - The “Current Operating Status” page must include information about the current status (open or closed) and provide a date on when the RO is closed and/or when it will reopen. If the office is closed, information about the cause of the closure, and instructions about service alternatives should be added to the page.

Continue on next page

2. Roles and Responsibilities for Content, Continued

f. Regional Office (continued)

- Work status for employees
 - The “Work Status for Employees” page must include information about the current status (open or closed) and provide a date on when the RO is closed and/or when it will reopen. The page must include directions for what to do in a VA-declared emergency, and the phone number for the VA Employee Helpline.
- About Us
 - The “Meet Our Leadership Page” should include the names, titles, and background information about the leadership team for the RO. Individual biographies should not include information regarding family members. A high resolution photograph should be posted for all leadership individuals.

Note: The RO web content leads and/or web technical leads cannot make changes to the left navigation menu unless approved. The VBA Web Communications Office is the approving authority on changes to the left navigation menu.

The [VBA Regional Office Internet Content Standards](#) document provides further information on content standards for RO websites

g. Managing Content External to VBA

There will be instances where web content that is owned by a specific program office may reside outside of the VBA domain space. In these cases, when content requires updating, the appropriate program/business office will coordinate the update through the VBA Web Communications Office.

VBA offices should make their requests by emailing the VBA Web Communications Office at wedadmin@vba.va.gov. The VBA Web Communications Office will communicate the content request within 24 hours of receipt and ensure the change is made. The VBA Web Communications Office will notify the VBA office when the request is completed.

3. VBA Internet Sites and VA's Outreach Responsibilities

Introduction This topic provides information on VBA's outreach responsibilities as it relates to publishing web pages.

Change Date Revised February 2016

a. VBA Internet Pages and Outreach The [outreach chapter \(Chapter 63\) of Title 38 U.S. C.](#) requires VA to conduct outreach to members of the Armed Forces, Veterans, and dependents. Some segments of this chapter specify certain modalities of outreach (such as letters and phone calls or the Internet); others are nonspecific.

What is clear, however, is that the Secretary is mandated to distribute a large amount of information systematically. The definition of "Outreach" is "the act or process of reaching out in a systematic manner to proactively provide information, services, and benefits counseling to Veterans, and to the spouses, children, and parents of Veterans who may be eligible to receive benefits under the laws administered by the Secretary, to ensure that such individuals are fully informed about, and receive assistance in applying for, such benefits." ([38 USC 6301\(b\)\(1\)](#))

The most systematic means VBA has for distributing information in a highly organized form is its Internet websites. In fact, the Internet is the only resource available that permits VA to distribute all relevant information on benefits and services. Thus, although many VBA employees likely view "outreach" activities as the province of a dedicated outreach staff, it is clear that all program staffs are obligated to provide comprehensive information to potential beneficiaries via the Internet.

The comprehensive nature of this dimension of VBA outreach will become clearer in the paragraphs below.

b. Authoritative Texts on Extent of Required Content [VA Directive 6102](#) states that VA information on the Internet includes "*the policies, programs, activities, and objectives of VA.*"

Continued on next page

3. VBA Internet Sites and VA's Outreach Responsibilities, Continued

**b. Authoritative
Texts on Extent
of Required
Content**
(continued)

The application of the definite article to the terms "policies [and] programs" signifies that VA is to explain *all* its programs on the Internet.

[VA Directive 6361](#) includes in its definition of quality this stance:

Objectivity. Ensuring that disseminated information is presented in an accurate, clear, complete, and unbiased manner, and as a matter of substance, is accurate, reliable, and unbiased. [[VA Directive 6361](#), September 2, 2004, Paragraph 3c(1)]

Before the promulgation of these directives, a provision of long standing stated:

The Secretary— (A) shall distribute *full information* to eligible Veterans and eligible dependents *regarding all benefits and services* to which they may be entitled under laws administered by the Secretary. [[38 USC 6303\(c\)](#). Emphasis added.]

This paragraph is included in the outreach chapter of Title 38, Chapter 63. Note that "full information ... regarding all benefits and services to which [Veterans and dependents] may be entitled" covers a very large array of benefit rules. This could be said to include all the benefit rules in Title 38 U.S.C. plus all additional benefit provisions in Title 38 CFR. While the publication of all of these rules in a form intelligible to laypersons may be too daunting a prospect, it is clear that we must come as close as is reasonably possible.

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3. VBA Internet Sites and VA's Outreach Responsibilities,

Continued

**c. Examples of
Required
Content**

The following are examples of provisions of law that fall under this requirement.

- [38 USC §1712\(d\)](#) requires: “The Secretary shall furnish to each Veteran who is receiving additional compensation or allowance under chapter 11 of this title, or increased pension as a Veteran of a period of war, by reason of being permanently housebound or in need of regular aid and attendance, such drugs and medicines as may be ordered on prescription of a duly licensed physician as specific therapy in the treatment of any illness or injury suffered by such Veteran. The Secretary shall continue to furnish such drugs and medicines so ordered to any such Veteran in need of regular aid and attendance whose pension payments have been discontinued solely because such Veteran's annual income is greater than the applicable maximum annual income limitation, but only so long as such Veteran's annual income does not exceed such maximum annual income limitation by more than \$1,000.”
- The provisions of [38 USC §1160](#) which refer to special consideration for certain cases of loss of paired organs or extremities (compensation).
- The provisions of [38 USC §3017](#) which refer to a death benefit under the Montgomery GI-Bill—Active Duty.
- Guardianship services as under [38 U.S.C. Chapter 55](#).

In one way or another, VBA is obligated to provide information to potentially eligible Veterans and dependents on every VA benefit program or beneficial provision of law (or regulation) that might lead to benefits or services. This information is not, properly speaking, VA's information. It belongs to potential beneficiaries and to citizens in general.

The principal way in which information on VA benefits and services is now disseminated is the Internet. Thus, except in very rare circumstances, provisions such as those listed above must be publicized on VA web pages.

Continued on next page

3. VBA Internet Sites and VA's Outreach Responsibilities, Continued

**d. Situations
Where
Responsibility
for Publishing
Information
May Be
Ambiguous**

Often, two VA or VBA program offices share responsibility for the same program.

Example: The decision that makes the Veteran eligible for free medications ([38 USC 1712\(d\)](#)) is made by Compensation Service and Pension and Fiduciary Service employees, but the supplying of medications is performed by the Veterans Health Administration (VHA).

Which organization is responsible for publicizing this benefit? In these cases, the two organizations should arrive at a public facing solution by considering which organization the Veteran or dependent is most likely to look to for services, and consequently VBA should manage the content without disrupting how and where the content is received on the Internet. In some cases it's appropriate for both organizations to conduct the outreach, i.e., publish the information on the Internet using links to an authoritative location.

With respect to the present example, two facts are significant: First, the one relationship that is certain to exist is the one the Veteran has with Compensation Service and Pension and Fiduciary Service. He or she may not be enrolled in VA health care and may not think of VHA as a potential service provider. (This is perhaps especially likely where the Veteran lives at some distance from a VA medical center.) This provision of Chapter 17 is not contingent on the Veteran being enrolled in VA health care. Thus, while it would be a good thing for VHA to publicize this provision, it is Compensation Service and Pension and Fiduciary Service who should do so.

When the rule applies to multiple programs, how should it be publicized? Clearly, the several staffs could coordinate, and one web content lead could provide the information on a page that other web content lead could link to. What is clear, however, is that all programs for which this provision is relevant must provide the information, one way or another.

4. Organization of Information

Introduction This topic provides information on the organization of information on a website.

Change Date Revised February 2016

a. General Information on Content Organization VBA websites must focus on helping the website's target audience efficiently find the services and information they seek from VA. VBA web pages must help website visitors to get to the content they need and want most, with minimal complexity of navigation and the fewest drilldowns.

b. Web Page Designs VBA offices should assess their online content when building new websites or making major modifications to existing websites and should develop an *information architecture* of the website's content that focuses on organization schemes and navigation structures.

Two of the principles related to organization schemes articulated on usability.gov are:

- Exact organization schemes that divide information into mutually exclusive sections, such as chronological schemes and geographical schemes.
- Subjective organization schemes that categorize specific fields of information, such as topic schemes and task schemes.

VBA websites should be organized in a logical and useful way, such as by subject (topic, tasks, services, life events), by audience group, by geographic location, or any combination of these factors.

Continued on next page

4. Organization of Information, Continued

c. The Content Driven Homepage

VBA offices should have a strategy for home pages that is aimed at ensuring website visitors can reach the information they need.

Sometimes the distinction between major and minor options is difficult. There is a bottom line in these considerations, however, and it is this:

- Veterans, Servicemembers, and their families must find all the benefits and services across VBA's external websites to which they may be entitled.
 - VBA employees must find all the information they need across VBA's internal websites to efficiently research, analyze, comprehend, cite, and otherwise use to perform their duties and work related activities.
 - If a significant topic is not shown on the home page, there must be some reference to it on the home page that is highly likely to lead the visitor to a page where the topic can be reached.
-

d. Navigation Standards and Requirements

The navigation and content for a website should be developed together. The website content and navigation should be structured in a logical manner that makes content easy to find.

Furthermore, navigation content should be consistent where similar types of pages are grouped, and the pages that are linked in the navigation menu should in a consistent location on every page.

A website's navigation structure is critically important to the success of the customer's experience. To assess user experience approaches with navigation, VBA offices should communicate website navigation designs with the VBA Web Communications Office, which will test and report an appropriate navigation schema.

At a minimum, the following navigation changes must be approved by the VBA Web Communications Office:

- Submenu changes in the left navigation panel.
 - Top menu changes in the left navigation panel.
-

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4. Organization of Information, Continued

**e. Additional
Information on
Organization**

VBA offices should review the guidance provided by the Office of Citizen Services and Innovative Technologies in the U.S. General Services Administration on the [DigitalGov platform](#).

5. Readability

Introduction This topic provides information and guidelines for ensuring the readability of all web content.

Change Date Revised February 2016

a. The Plain Language Mandate On October 13, 2010, President Obama signed the Plain Writing Act of 2010. The law requires federal agencies to use clear communication that the public can understand and use. Plain language is designed so that the website's typical visitor can easily understand the material presented in a single reading.

VBA web content leads and/or web technical leads must ensure that all pages and navigational elements on their websites are written in plain language. VBA office should assess their online content and ensure it meets the following plain language criteria:

- Organizes content for the identified target audience.
- Uses design features such as headers, bulleted lists, and tables to guide the reader through text.
- Keeps sentences and paragraphs short.
- Uses pronouns, active voice, and active verbs.
- Chooses simple, everyday words.
- Trims excessive content.

All content should be relevant to the topic of the page and contain all of the necessary benefit information, eligibility information, and application processes. See III.i.3.6 of this chapter for information on Information Quality.

Refer to Appendix B, *Web Writing Checklist* of this chapter for further requirements on plain language.

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5. Readability, Continued

a. The Plain Language Mandate
(continued)

VBA external web pages should be written at a 7th grade level (whenever possible) and written at the most elementary level of understanding for the subject matter presented to the website's target audience.

To most VBA employees, this requirement likely sounds unrealistic. We note that VBA's Plain Language Initiative, Reader-Focused Writing, does not aim at a specific readability grade level. Many writing consultants de-emphasize grade level readability because writers often use it as a crutch. "Writing to the formula" sometimes results in a *worsening* of readability because, to get to the low grade level, writers take shortcuts.

The VBA Web Communications Office has conducted a number of experiments using the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level and the Flesch Reading Ease scales. We conclude that a competent writer who begins by writing a very direct, simple, and natural-sounding text can go on to "tweak" that text, aiming at the 7th grade level, and improve the readability still further. The techniques require practice, but they can be mastered by competent writers.

Part of the approach to successfully writing at the 7th grade level is to recognize that this level can't normally be achieved in a first draft.

6. Information Quality

Introduction This topic defines information quality and provides standards on the quality of information.

Change Date Revised February 2016

a. Definition – Information Quality [VA Directive 6361](#), which implements requirements of Section 515 of the Treasury and General Government Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2001 (Public Law 106-554), offers the following multifaceted definition of information quality:

- **Quality:** The all-encompassing term that includes utility, objectivity, and integrity of VA information.
- **Integrity:** Protecting VA information from unauthorized, unanticipated, or unintentional access or revision to ensure that the information remains authentic and is not compromised.
- **Objectivity:** Ensuring that disseminated information is presented in an accurate, clear, complete, and unbiased manner, and as a matter of substance, is accurate, reliable, and unbiased.
- **Utility:** The usefulness of the information to the intended users.

b. Standards of Information Quality VBA offices must ensure their web content meets certain quality of information standards. Information quality does not imply mere accuracy, although accuracy is an essential element of quality. To be "quality" information, VBA offices must ensure their content meets these standards:

- Information on the website is complete and accurate.
- Information on the website is reliable (this would include currency).
- Information on the website is set forth in an unbiased manner.
- Information on the website is designed so that it's useful to its intended users.
- Information on the website is written in plain language and is easy to find.

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6. Information Quality, Continued

b. Standards of Information Quality (continued)

Furthermore, information on the website must have *integrity*, meaning that it has not been compromised as a result of unauthorized, unanticipated, or unintentional access or revision.

Refer to Appendix A, *Web Content Checklist* and Appendix B, *Web Writing Checklist* of this chapter for further information related to quality of content.

c. Timeliness of Information Quality

All content on VBA websites should be updated regularly. Items such as announcements, carousels, and news elements require frequent updates to stay current.

VBA office should remove outdated information within 24 hours of the expiration of the information.

Most VBA programs undergo legislative or regulatory changes in most years, and those changes may occur at any time. When this occurs, VBA offices should update the content within 24 hours of the new law, regulation, or process. A delay of several days or weeks after the effective date of a new law or regulation is not acceptable.

If implementation must wait for regulations to be written, a notice should be posted notifying visitors of the legislative or program change. When the regulations are approved, the updated policy, program, or legislative information should be updated.

d. Transparency of Information Quality

All VBA websites must provide all information on benefits and services under the laws administered by the Secretary to ensure website visitors are fully informed about benefit programs and assistance in applying for benefits. See [38 U.S.C. §6301 \(b\)\(1\)](#).

7. Actions to be Taken When Accuracy of Information is Called into Question

Introduction This topic provides information on what action to take when the accuracy of the information or content is called into question.

Change Date Revised February 2016

a. Actions to be Taken When Accuracy of Information is Questioned All information disseminated by VBA must be as accurate as possible.

Reports of inaccurate information posted on any website must be investigated immediately by the web content lead and/or web technical lead. This person should check with the appropriate subject matter experts as soon as possible.

It is the responsibility of the web content lead and/or web technical lead to remove inaccurate content or replace it with correct information. If the same inaccurate information is found elsewhere on any other website, the web content lead and/or web technical lead must notify the content lead or owner of the other website.

If the VBA office does not take timely and appropriate action in either replacing or removing inaccurate information, the VBA Web Communications Office will treat the situation as an emergency and will remove such content as appropriate.

8. Completeness of Information

Introduction This topic discusses the issue of completeness of information or content.

Change Date Revised February 2016

a. Completeness of Information The law requires that VA provide "full information ... regarding all benefits and services" (38 USC 6203(c)). This clearly means that no important details should be left out. VBA offices must comply with the law on this and provide complete information on their websites.

For example, it's inadequate to say of Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC), "This benefit program pays a monthly payment to a surviving spouse, child, or parent of a Veteran because of a service-connected death of a Veteran. See the Fact Sheets for more information."

While the statement is true as far as it goes, DIC is often payable in cases where the death is not service-connected. Stating a partial truth here creates a hidden ambiguity. This is, in fact, a misleading statement. The user never suspects that something important has been withheld.

9. Avoidance of Duplication: Linking to Authoritative Sources

Introduction This topic discusses the need to avoid duplication by linking to an authoritative source.

Change Date September 2012

a. Avoiding Duplication or Recreation of Web Content VBA web content leads and/or web technical leads should avoid duplicating or recreating content that already exists on a federal website, especially content on an authoritative VA website. Instead, web content/technical leads should make it a practice to link to the authoritative content sources.

Before creating new information on a particular topic, VBA offices must determine whether the same or comparable information already exists on another VA website.

The web content/technical lead should also check other federal public websites and cross-agency portals such as the USA.gov website for information to which VA can provide a link.

10. Uniformity

Introduction This topic addresses uniformity of the website.

Change Date September 2012

a. Using Common Terminology and Branding Attributes VBA websites must include common terminology and share common branding attributes such as VA agency logos, official seals, and other recognized attributes that identify the Department through the look and feel of those pages.

Simple, straightforward wording should be used to make navigational pathways easier to grasp.

11. Translation into Other Languages

Introduction This topic addresses translating web content into other languages.

Change Date Revised February 2016

a. Requirement to Provide Access for Those With Limited English Proficiency VA is required to comply with existing requirements of Executive Order 13166, "Improving Access to Services for People with Limited English Proficiency" ([Executive Order on Limited English Proficiency](#)) based on Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which bans discrimination on the basis of national origin.

b. How to Determine if Translation is Required VBA offices must determine if any pages or documents on their website require translation, basing this determination on a discernable pattern of recurring, specific requests from the public to provide translated versions of documents posted on websites or otherwise used by VA.

When high demand indicates that a document requires translation and it is found that translation will serve VA's mission, VBA must take the necessary steps to provide and post a translated version of the content on the website.

c. Process for Translation The VBA Web Communications Office manages and publishes external online content in Spanish and Tagalog on behalf of VBA.

VBA offices are required to inform the VBA Web Communications Office of any changes to their web content that has a translated version to ensure the integrity and current version of the translated information.

12. Complying With Digital Rights, Copyright, Trademark, and Patent Laws

Introduction This topic provides information on complying with digital rights, copyright, trademark, and patent laws.

Change Date Revised February 2016

a. General Information on Copyright Compliance Most federal website content in the public domain must not include copyright or other intellectual property notices. When information from the private sector is used as part of an information resource, product or service, VBA must ensure that property rights of the private sector source are adequately protected. Protections apply to any posted material (i.e., documents, graphics, or audio files).

Consent must also be obtained to use the picture and/or voice of any individual in VBA materials, including a VA employee. Permission to use an employee's photograph must be obtained using [VA Form 10-3203, Consent for Use of Picture and/or Voice](#).

Prior to posting, documents and web pages must be reviewed to ensure compliance with copyright, trademark and other laws. See the legal information on the [VBA Media Repository](#) for more information on VBA's stock art licenses.

b. Additional Information on Copyright Compliance More information is available at this link: [Digital Rights, Copyright, Trademark, and Patent Laws](#).

13. Avoiding Apparent Endorsements

Introduction This topic addresses the need to avoid apparent endorsements on VBA websites.

Change Date Revised February 2016

a. General Information Regarding the Prohibition of Endorsements on VA Websites VBA must not endorse the content of non-federal websites or the sponsors of those non-federal websites.

Additionally, VA websites are prohibited from being used for direct or indirect lobbying and/or any endorsements.

The law on this is [18 United States Code § 1913](#). Lobbying with appropriated moneys. VBA offices are responsible for keeping their websites compliant.

VBA web pages that display content that is or may be construed as direct or indirect endorsements, or construed to represent a direct or indirect lobbying effort, must be removed immediately and may not be restored until the inappropriate content is removed from those web pages.

Questions about the acceptability of posting specific types of information on a VBA website should be addressed with the VBA Web Communications Office.

14. Avoidance of Content or Applications That Require a Specific Browser for Viewing

Introduction This topic provides information on the need to avoid content or applications requiring a specific browser for viewing.

Change Date Revised February 2016

a. Utilizing a Browser-Neutral Approach to Intranet Web Pages VBA Internet web pages must be browser-neutral and viewable with industry-standard browsers (with the exception of browsers and plug-ins and links to those plug-ins required to access specific VA applications or documents).

15. Multimedia Content

Introduction This topic provides guidance on requirements related to images and multimedia.

Change Date Revised February 2016

a. Requirements for Images VBA offices should use images only when necessary. Images may include photos, graphics, or other visual elements. They should address the target audience and clearly and simply convey or communicate the content on the web page.

VBA offices should take caution in choosing images and avoid the appearance of exclusion. It is important for Veterans and their families to identify with the imagery. Veterans can be 18 and older, men or women, and of any ethnicity. They have served in numerous conflicts worldwide over the last several decades. Therefore, it is highly recommended that images do not contain individuals unless in a diverse group setting or for specific audience types where exclusion is not relevant.

VBA offices should check for and assess the following attributes when selecting and posting an image:

- The image represents the audience and its members' aspirations.
- The image is authentic, realistic, sincere, and believable.
- The image shows diversity in group photos when applicable.
- The image is not cluttered or overly complex with numbers and data.
- The image has a strong focal point and focus.
- The image uses natural light and one light source.
- The image has balanced color saturation and the color gradient is not overlapping.

VBA offices should work with the VBA Web Communications Office when image elements come into question. It, in turn, will intercede when images are found to not follow best practices or the attributes addressed in this section are not met.

Continued on next page

15. Multimedia Content, Continued

**a.
Requirements
for Images
(continued)**

Best practices in managing images and information on additional resources in obtaining imagery is available on <http://vbaw.vba.va.gov/webcommunications/images.asp>.

**b. Planning for
Multimedia**

VBA offices should contact the VBA Web Communications Office during the planning phase of any video production, or as soon as possible, and provide the following basic information about the product:

- The general content and theme of the video.
 - The estimated timeframe for delivery and whether the content or publication of the video is time sensitive.
 - The planned promotion and advertising of the video on VBA and/or VA websites and social media platforms.
-

**c.
Requirements
for Multimedia**

All video content that is published on a VA website and/or a website that operates on behalf of VA must comply with the applicable rules related to videos in VA Handbook 6102. Additionally, the development and publication of video content should meet the following requirements:

- Video content must support and promote VA policies and practices and cannot undermine, contradict, or in any way counter official VA policy or practices, and must contain content that is current and accurate.
 - Video content must be provided only by authoritative sources and should not duplicate existing materials. All content must be reviewed and approved by the authoritative source if content impacts or crosses other programs or administrations.
 - Video content should be audience-focused. Consideration should be given to the use of best formats for conveying the content. Excessive and unnecessary audio, video, and multimedia products should be avoided.
 - Video content should follow best media practices including, but not limited to, short non-training videos (i.e., between 1-3 minutes), the avoidance of talking heads, the proper resolution of video and multimedia images, properly lit, shot, and in-focus content, and audio products that are clear and of high quality.
-

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15. Multimedia Content, Continued

c.
Requirements
for Multimedia
(continued)

- Videos should provide clear verbal descriptions of visual elements or a suitable narration that provides adequate descriptions of visual elements that is synchronized with the actions in the video.
- Video content should be identified as VA products, with proper use of the VA parent signature. There should be limited, if any, use of other logos and/or identification of internal offices in external (public facing) videos.
- Video content must comply with U.S. copyright law.
- Video content should use plain language and avoid the use of acronyms.
- Video content must conform to all [Section 508](#) requirements including, but not limited to, captions that are synchronized with the audio portion. The captions must be reviewed for misspellings and inaccuracies. If captions are not used, an accessible and complete transcript of the video must be available. Summaries of transcripts are not permitted.

The VBA Web Communications Office will coordinate the promotional efforts of published videos across VBA and/or VA websites and social media platforms. VBA offices are expected to provide appropriate imagery associated with the video for promotional purposes.

Continued on next page

15. Multimedia Content, Continued

d. Multimedia Hosting (continued)

VBA videos that are intended for external audiences are published on the VBA YouTube Channel.

VBA offices should send their video files to the VBA Web Communications Office for publication on the VBA YouTube Channel. The following file types are required:

- MP4 video files
- MP3 audio files (or other file types)
- SRT files (the caption file)

Note: VBA offices must retain a full resolution file (such as WMV or MOV) or provide the resolution file to the VBA Web Communications Office for archival purposes.

The VA Enterprise Web Infrastructure Support (EWIS) Office provides hosting, the creation of pointer files, and general guidelines on the use of multimedia files on websites hosted at the Capital Region Readiness Center. VBA may use this hosting service for internal videos. Further information about this service is available on the [EWIS multimedia web page](#).

16. Appendix A. Web Content Checklist

Change Date Revised May 29, 2014

#	Item
1	<p>Revising a Page:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content leads, follow items 2–12 below. • Reviewers and approvers, follow items 2–13 below
2	<p>Page Title: Be brief—use no more than 70 characters.</p>
3	<p>Page Headings: The page title [H2] summarizes what the page is about. Use subheadings to structure the content on your page. Tag Section headings as H3 and sub-headings as H4 to break up content and improve usability and readability.</p>
4	<p>Keywords: Use 6–12 descriptive words that actually appear on the page. Think about the words someone would type into a search engine to find this content; those are your keywords. Consult with the VBA Web Communications Office for a list of common search terms, if needed.</p>
5	<p>Page Description: Use plain, concise language to describe the page content. Use no more than about 150 characters.</p>
6	<p>Page Features: Where appropriate, include Training, Resources, or other right-column widget boxes. Familiarize yourself with the VBA page templates.</p>
7	<p>Content:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use a conversational tone, second-person voice (you, your; we, our). • Use subheads and bullets. • Write in plain language. • Proofread AND spellcheck your content (do both!), and have a designated editor or competent colleague review before submitting for posting. • Check your facts. • When you revise a page, do not “orphan” another page linked to it (that is, remove internal links to a page without removing [archiving] that page from the website).
8	<p>Linking to Attachments or Files:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If a file (.pdf, .doc, .ppt, etc.) is available on another federal website, link to it from there. DO NOT upload the file to www.benefits.va.gov. Link to the source document. • Name your document so it is clear what the document is about. Be as brief, clear, and concise as possible with file names. Avoid special characters, use a hyphen between words, and capitalize proper nouns. • Files should be smaller than 100 MB. If a file is larger than 100 MB, break it into separate files and name them accordingly (i.e., -part-1, -part-2). • Use this format for your file description: file type (e.g., PDF), file size, number of pages, and effective date of document (e.g., PDF, 437 KB, 61 pages, July 2007).

*Continued on next page***16. Appendix A. Web Content Checklist, Continued**

#	Item
9	Links: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embed links; don't use URLs for link text. • Use descriptive link text to help the reader understand what they'll get if they click. • Look for opportunities to link to other VBA pages. • Update any other pages associated with your page by adding a link to your page. • Reviewers: Validate all links. • All external links must use the ext_redirect.asp file to notify users that they are moving to a non-VA website. • For links that are not descriptive, use a title tag to give more information.
10	Graphics and Images: Write short, descriptive alt tags. Preferred formats are .jpg, .png, or .gif. Images should be optimized for Web whenever possible.
11	Accessibility: Review your Web page against Section 508 rules and standards.
12	Date Stamp: Include the date the page was last updated or reviewed at the bottom of your page, if not automatically updated when using an eCMS form. Do not revise the page date for minor grammatical changes.
13	Page Review Schedule: Set a review schedule in order to ensure the currency of content.

17. Appendix B. Web Writing Checklist

Change Date Revised May 29, 2014

Audience	Write for <i>your</i> reader. Don't write for the experts, the lawyers, or your management, unless they are your intended audience.
Length	Less is more! Be concise. Eliminate ALL unnecessary words. Challenge every word. Do you need it?
Tone	Use conversational pronouns (i.e., you, us, our, we). Write as if you were talking to a friend. Use contractions (e.g., we're instead of we are).
Voice	Use active voice with strong verbs. Say "We mailed your form on May 1" instead of "Your form was mailed by us on May 1."
Word Choice	Use the same words your readers would use when they search for your information on the Web. Avoid acronyms and jargon.
Simplify	Use simple, descriptive headings and short paragraphs.
Links	Never use phrases like "click here" or "more information." Link language should describe what your reader will get by clicking that link. Include keywords to help search engines find your content.
Organization	Put the most important information first, followed by the details.
Improve Tasks	Organize content around your customers' tasks, not your agency's organization. Highlight action items (step 1, step 2, etc.).
Scanability	Separate content into small chunks. Use a lot of white space for easy scanning. In general, write no more than five to seven lines per paragraph. Use lists and bullets, which are easy to scan.
Separate Topics	Present each topic separately. Keep the information on each page to three (or fewer) levels.
Context	Don't assume your readers already know the subject or have read related pages. Each page should stand on its own. Put everything in context.
Test and Evaluate	Test Web pages with customers to make sure real people can understand what you write.
