

PC GENERATED LETTERS (PCGLS)
TRAINEE HANDOUTS

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OBJECTIVES

- Using the trainee handout packet and references, identify types of notification letters for VA purposes, with 85% accuracy.
- Using the trainee handout packet and references, identify the requirements for claimant notification letters, with 85% accuracy.
- Using the trainee handout packet and references, identify the requirements for special notification situations, with 85% accuracy.
- Using the trainee handout packet and references, differentiate PC generated letters (PCGL), with 85% accuracy.
- Using the trainee handout packet, identify Reader-Focused Writing (RFW) principles for PC Generated Letters (PCGL), with 85% accuracy.

REFERENCES

- 38 CFR, Part 3, 3.103
- M21-1, Part II, 5.1, 5.4 and 5.6
- M21-1, Part III, 11.09
- M21-1, Part III, Subpart v, 2.A
- M21-1, Part III, Subpart v, 2.B
- PCGL Job Aid
- PCGL Users Guide
- Reader-Focused Writing Manual

TOPIC 1: NOTIFICATION LETTER OVERVIEW

Types of Notification Letters Used by VBA

The six types of notification letters the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) uses to correspond with the public are:

- Pattern letters
- VA form letters
- Benefits Delivery Network (BDN) letters
- Personal Computer Generated Letters (PCGL)
- Veterans Service Network (VETSNET) letters
- Locally prepared letters

Pattern Letters

The creation of pattern letters or paragraphs is permissible if no existing letter or paragraph will serve the purpose. VA Central Office (VACO) periodically reviews pattern letters used at regional offices (ROs).

VA Form Letters

Limit the use of VA form letters to the purpose for which the letter was created. Do not alter a printed VA form letter to apply to other situations. If a form letter does not apply to the situation, use a locally prepared letter instead.

Benefits Delivery Network (BDN) Letters

The Benefits Delivery Network (BDN) provides certain acknowledgement, development, and award letters.

It is important to have a thorough knowledge of the information provided in these types of letters before attempting to generate a BDN letter.

BDN letters are printed and sent from Philadelphia. As a result, the file copy may not be received by the RO for several weeks after having been initiated.

PC Generated Letter (PCGL)

The following types of letters are generated via PCGL:

- Award letters
- Denial letters
- Pre- and post-determination letters
- Acknowledgement letters

Letters generated via PCGL are written using principles and techniques to ensure the reader's needs are the main focus; providing technically accurate and legally sufficient information. They are available for all RO personnel to use.

When necessary, customize letters generated via PCGL to address the recipient's particular situation.

Veterans Service Network (VETSNET) Letters

VETSNET provides claimants with a computer generated award letter.

While the generation of VETSNET letters is normally the responsibility of the Pre-determination Team within the Veterans Service Center (VSC), it is important to have a thorough knowledge of the information provided in these types of letters.

Locally Prepared Letters

Use a locally prepared letter when pattern, VA form, BDN, or PCGL letters are not applicable.

Requirements for Notification Letters

VA is required to provide claimants and their representatives (Power of Attorney and/or fiduciary) with timely notice of any decision made by VA that affects benefit eligibility or entitlement.

According to 38 CFR 3.103, award and denial letters must include:

- The decision made
- A summary of the evidence considered
- The reason for the decision
- The monthly Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) rates
- The applicable effective dates
- Any benefits being withheld and the reason for withholding benefits
- A notice of procedural due process and appellate rights of the claimant, including his/her rights to a hearing, representative, and appeal
- Information about any additional benefits or entitlements the claimant may be due

Rating Decision – Attached

When a decision is the result of a rating, notification letters do *not* need to:

- Summarize the evidence considered
- State the reason for the decision

Instead, when a rating has been prepared for the decision:

- Attach the rating decision to the notification letter, and
- In the notification letter, advise the claimant that the attached rating decision contains:
 - A summary of the evidence considered
 - The reason for the decision

Rating Decision – Not Attached

If a rating decision is *not* attached, include a summary of the evidence considered. Include descriptive identifiers such as dates, doctor/hospital names, and form names.

Avoid using:

- Form numbers without form names
- VA in-house terminology (for example, abbreviations which are not explained)
- General references to an area of the body if more than one problem in that area is claimed or considered (for example, a reference to the back or knee, if multiple back or knee problems are involved)

Reason for the Decision

When a rating decision is not attached, state the reason for the decision using a detailed explanation of the logic or rationale used in reaching the decision.

This may include the applicable regulations restated in simple lay words.

Avoid using phrases such as:

- “Service-connection not found”
- “Disability not due to service”
- “Wanton and reckless disregard of the probable consequences”

Additional Benefits and Entitlements

Notify the claimant of any additional or ancillary benefits which were not claimed, but to which he or she may be entitled, based on information in the claims folder.

Consider whether the following issues apply to the claimant or whether there may be potential entitlement to any of these benefits or allowances when notifying the claimant of any decision made:

- Vocational rehabilitation benefits
- Automobile and housing allowances
- Clothing allowance
- Dependent’s education benefits
- Special monthly pension
- Elections, waivers, recoupments, retired pay, and separation pay adjustments
- Dependency and relationship issues
- Apportionment issues
- Appeal rights
- Due process issues
- Notice of proposed adverse action or contemporaneous notice
- Incompetency, fiduciary, or guardianship issues
- Adjustments or reductions due to hospitalization, Medicaid-approved nursing homes, or incarceration
- Income, net worth, expenses, and estate information, if applicable

Notification

When notifying the claimant, present the information:

- In a clear, concise format, using Reader-Focused Writing (RFW) principles
- With a customer-friendly tone

Special Notification Requirements

The following situations have special notification requirements:

- Denying a claim by a Former Prisoner of War (FPOW)
- Denying a claim for Aid and Attendance (A&A) or Housebound benefits
- Corresponding with a Veteran with a visual impairment

Notification Denying a Claim by a Former POW

When denying a claim based on FPOW status:

- Use a thoughtful, sympathetic, locally-generated letter suited to the circumstances of the individual case
- Attach a copy of the rating decision to summarize the evidence considered and state the reason for the decision

Notification Denying a Claim for A&A and Housebound Benefits

When denying a claim for A&A or Housebound benefits:

- Use a thoughtful, sympathetic, locally-generated letter suited to the circumstances of the individual case
- Attach a copy of the rating decision to summarize the evidence considered and state the reason for the decision

Notification Denying a Claim for A&A and Awarding Housebound Benefits

If A&A benefits are denied but Housebound benefits are awarded, inform the claimant of the denial as well as the award.

The rationale for informing claimant of both denial as well as award is that claims for A&A or Housebound benefits are usually received from claimants who are old and severely disabled, and sincerely believe themselves entitled.

Notification Involving Visually Impaired Claimant 70% or More Disabling

In accordance with M21-1, Part III, 11.09, when corresponding with or processing the claim of a Veteran with visual impairment evaluated as 70% or more disabling, ensure the following actions are taken:

- VA Form 21-0178, Visually Impaired Veteran, is back-filed in the center flap of the claims folder
- The message “VISUALLY IMPAIRED –VSR NOTIFICATION REQ” is printed in the remarks section of the award print
- The Public Contact Team calls the Veteran to relate the letter's content
- Make the following changes primarily to the body of the standard PCGL:

Component	Guidance
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Font Type	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Arial or Verdana
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Font Size	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 18 point
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Line Spacing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 1.5
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Header and Footers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• As generated unless easily altered
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Envelope	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• May need to be addressed manually to accommodate increased size of address section

TOPIC 2: PC GENERATED LETTERS (PCGL)

PC Generated Letters

In accordance with M21-1MR, Part II, “Direct Services,” there are two types of letters in the PCGL library:

- Civil service preference letters:
 - NSC pension
 - 30% disability or greater
 - At least 10% but less than 30% disability
 - Less than 10% disability
 - Surviving Spouse
 - Spouse of 100% disabled Veteran
 - Mother of deceased Veteran
 - Mother of 100% disabled Veteran
- Commissary/exchange eligibility letters:
 - No future exam
 - Future exam
 - Surviving spouse

These letters may be accessed on the [Direct Services web site](#).

PCGL Sections

PCGL is divided into two sections:

- BDN-generated letters
- Locally-generated letters

If a BDN-generated letter does not meet the notification letter requirements:

- Use a locally-generated letter and suppress the BDN-generated letter,
- Annotate the generated denial file document to show that the BDN-generated letter was suppressed.

Situations Requiring Locally-Generated PCGL Letters

The table below provides a guide for commonly occurring situations that require locally-generated PCGL letters.

Situation	Description
Service-connection is claimed but not established.	Includes reconsideration of a previously denied claim if the evidence reviewed results in a finding that no change in a prior decision is warranted. <i>Example:</i> A confirmed and continued (C&C) rating.
In death cases, service-connection is specifically claimed for the cause of death, but not established.	Includes claims: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In which “Yes” was checked in VA Form 21-534, Application for Dependency and Indemnity Compensation or Death Pension by Surviving Spouse or Child, Block 10, or • For which a death rating was prepared.
Service-connection is established, but a noncompensable evaluation is assigned.	Notification if: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The claimant specifically claimed a compensable evaluation for any disability assigned a zero percent evaluation, or • A Rating Decision needs to be attached to provide more detail of the decision. <i>Exception:</i> If service connection is granted for all claimed disabilities with both compensable and noncompensable evaluations assigned, a BDN-generated letter may be sufficient.
An increased evaluation is claimed but not granted for a previously established service-connected (SC) condition.	Includes claims granted for an increase in the evaluation of a disability, but: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The evaluations for other considered conditions are either continued or reduced, or • The increase does not meet the specific level sought by the claimant in the claim. (For example, the Veteran states in the claim, “I am totally disabled,” but the increase granted is not for this level of disability.) <i>Examples:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A C&C rating • Failure to furnish evidence or report for an exam
Reconsideration of a previously decided claim.	After an award or disallowance of a claim, evidence is submitted that warrants no change in the previous determination.
SC burial allowance is claimed and denied.	For information on a SC burial allowance, see: M21-1MR, Part III, Subpart v, 2.A.6.b M21-1MR, Part VII, Chapter 2.B.7
An ancillary disability or death benefit claim.	Includes any of the following claims denied for any reason: Aid and Attendance (A&A), see M21-1MR, Part IV, Subpart ii, 2.H.36.g Auto allowance, see M21-1MR, Part IX, Subpart I, 2.4.b Clothing allowance, see M21-1MR, Part IX, 7.1.c

TOPIC 3: READER-FOCUSED WRITING (RFW)

Reader-Focused Writing

Reader-Focused Writing (RFW) is a method for ensuring that communication between claimants and VSRs is effective and efficient.

RFW principles, tools, techniques, and job aids are located on the [reader-focused writing web site](#). This information should be used to ensure that letters sent to the public are focused, concise, and accurate.

RFW General Principles

Since PCGL letters were first developed using RFW, any edits, changes, or additions need to follow the same principles and techniques for consistency.

General principles to RFW include:

- Tell the reader the main message up front
- Use headings and group similar information in short sections to help the reader find specific information
 - Question headings provide the questions that readers are asking and guide readers to the answers.
- Use clear and concise sentences that avoid jargon
- Use lots of lists in letters
 - Vertical lists highlight important topics and make it easy for the reader to identify all elements in a series of requirements or procedures.
- Use correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation

Good Writing Elements of VA Notification Letters

Notification letters can be categorized because they address similar issues in a like fashion such as:

- Grant
- Denial
- Inform
- Develop
- Due Process (pre- and post-determination)

Paragraphs of information that are similar and required in more than one category of letter can also be recognized as elements contained in good VA letter writing. Good letter writing elements incorporated into VA notifications includes:

Grant	Denial
<p>When granting benefits, include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefits claimed • Evidence reviewed • Decision reached • Reasons for decision • Ancillary benefits • Claimant's responsibilities • Appeal rights 	<p>When denying benefits, include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefits claimed • Evidence reviewed • Decision reached • Reason for decision • Appeal rights
Develop	Inform
<p>When additional development is required, include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence needed • Acceptable proof • Date required • Consequences if not received 	<p>When providing information, include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Question posed • Explanation • Questioner's resources
Due Process (Pre-determination)	Due Process (Post-determination)
<p>When providing proposed award information, include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence reviewed • Proposed action • Proposed date • Potential effect on all benefits • Claimant's resources 	<p>When providing post-adverse action notice information, include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence reviewed • Action taken • Date taken • Effect on all benefits • Appeal rights

ATTACHMENT A: TOPIC 1 EXERCISE

Part I. Types of VBA letters

Instructions: Match each type of letter with its appropriate description.

- | | | |
|-----------------|---------------------|------------|
| A. BDN | B. Locally Prepared | C. Pattern |
| D. PC Generated | E. VA Form | F. VETSNET |

Letter	Description
	Award, denial, pre- and post-determination, and acknowledgement letters available to all RO personnel. These letters are generated using principles and techniques to ensure the reader's needs are the main focus providing technically accurate and legally sufficient information. When necessary, personnel can customize letters created by the system to address the recipient's particular situation.
	Creations of these letters or paragraphs are permissible if no existing letter or paragraph will serve the purpose. VA Central Office periodically reviews these types of letters used at Regional Offices.
	Limit the use of these letters to the purpose for which the letter was created. Do not alter these printed VA letters to apply to other situations. If the letter does not apply to the situation, use a locally prepared letter instead.
	Regional Office personnel creating these types of acknowledgement, development and award letters must have a thorough knowledge of the information provided in these letters before attempting to generate one. These letters are printed and sent from Philadelphia. As a result, the file copy may not be received by the RO for several weeks after having been initiated.
	These types of generated claimant award letters are normally the responsibility of the Pre-determination Team within the Veterans Service Center.
	Use this type of letter when no other letter type is applicable to the situation.

Phrase:

1	2	3

4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11

12	13	14

15	16	17	18

19	20	21

22

23	24	25	26	27	28

29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36

37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44

ATTACHMENT B: TOPIC 3 EXERCISE

Instructions: Using the principles of Reader-Focused Writing, rewrite the two statements to simplify the information and make it more readable.

Statement 1:

Disability Compensation

The second change in the law provides an opportunity to resume work without affecting your entitlement to compensation at the total disability rate. However, this alteration in the law does not modify the requirement that you immediately report any employment to this office.

Statement 2:

Veteran's Death Benefits

Persons eligible for death benefits include:

Any citizen of the United States who, during any war in which the United States has or may be engaged, served in the Armed Forces of any Government allied with the United States during that war, whose last active service was terminated honorably by death or otherwise, and who was a citizen of the United States at the time of entry into such service and at the time of death.

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

Instructions: You are developing a locally-generated PCGL to notify the claimant of his award for disability pension benefits. You check to make sure the PCGL meets all the requirements for the notification. Read through the notification letter and answer the questions.

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Regional Office

[date]

[claimant's name]

In Reply Refer To:

[claimant's address]

[Salutation]

We made a decision on your claim for disability pension benefits received on [date].

This letter tells you about your entitlement amount, payment start date, what we decided, and how we calculated your benefits. It also tells you of your responsibilities as a Veteran in receipt of disability pension, what to do if you disagree with our decision, and who to contact if you have questions or need assistance.

What Is Your Entitlement Amount and Payment Start Date?

Your monthly entitlement amount is shown below:

Monthly Entitlement Amount	Payment Start Date	Reasons for Change
\$243.00	July 1, XXXX	Original Award
\$339.00	July 1, XXXX	Special Monthly Compensation Adjustment

We are paying you as a single Veteran with no dependents

When Can You Expect Payment?

Your payment begins the first day of the month following your effective date. Generally, your effective date is the date we received your claim. A payment covering the initial amount due under this award will be paid in approximately 15 days. Payment will then be made at the beginning of each month.

What notification requirement is met by this section of the letter?

What notification requirements are met by this section of the letter?

What notification requirement is met by this section of the letter?

What Did We Decide?

We determined that the following condition(s) was/were related to your military service, so service-connection has been granted:

Medical Description	Percent (%) Assigned	Effective Date
Diabetes mellitus type 2 with erectile dysfunction and peripheral neuropathy of the bilateral upper and lower extremities	20%	June 23, XXXX

We granted entitlement to special monthly compensation effective June 13, 2010 based on the loss of use of a creative organ.

We have deferred a decision on the following issue because we need additional information or evidence:

- Cataracts

You will receive a separate letter regarding this deferred issue.

We have enclosed a copy of your Rating Decision for your review. It provides a detailed explanation of our decision, the evidence considered and the reasons for our decision. Your Rating Decision and this letter constitute our decision based on your claim received on June 23, 20XX.

What Income and Allowed Expenses Did We Use?

We used your total income of [amount] to award your benefit from [date]. This included your income from Social Security.

Income We Counted:

Person with Income	Annual Earnings	Monthly Social Security	Montly Retirement	Annual Other Sources
[person]	[amount]	[amount]	[amount]	[amount]
[person]	[amount]	[amount]	[amount]	[amount]

Expenses and Income Totals:

Date of Income Change	Total Expenses	Total Income Counted
[date]	[amount]	[amount]
[date]	[amount]	[amount]

What notification requirements are met by this section of the letter?

What notification requirement is met by this section of the letter?

Are You Entitled to Additional Benefits?

You may be eligible for government life insurance if you were released from active duty after April 25, 1951, are in good health (except for any service-connected conditions), and apply within two years of this notification of your disability rating.

If you are totally disabled, you may be eligible to have your government life insurance premiums waived. The insurance is called Service-Disabled Veterans Insurance (S-DVI), and you should receive a package within two weeks. This package will contain information about the insurance and an application.

You may be entitled to medical care by the VA health care system for any service connected disability. You may apply for medical care or treatment at the nearest medical facility. If you apply in person, present a copy of this letter. If you apply by writing a letter, include your VA file number and a copy of this letter.

What You Should Do If You Disagree with Our Decision

If you do not agree with our decision, you should write and tell us why. You have one year from the date of this letter to appeal the decision. The enclosed VA Form 4107, "Notice of Procedural and Appellate Rights," explains your right to appeal.

Do You Have Questions or Need Assistance?

If you have questions or need assistance with this claim, please call us at 1-800-27-1000. If you use a telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD), the number is 1-800-829-4833.

If you call, please refer to your VA file number [number]. If you write to us, put your full name and VA file number on the letter. You can visit our website at www.va.gov for more information about Veterans' benefits.

Sincerely yours,
[signature]
[name]
Veterans Service Center Manager

Enclosure(s): Rating Decision
VA Form 21-527
VA Form 4107

<p>What notification requirement is met by this section of the letter?</p>
<p>What requirement for notification is met by this section of the letter?</p>

Questions:

1. You are informed that the claimant/recipient of the above letter has been evaluated as 70% visually impaired. What changes do you need to do to make to the standard PCGL to met special notification requirements?
2. What parts of the above letter use the principles of RFW and what principle is used?
3. Using the principles of Reader-Focused Writing (RFW), rewrite the first paragraph of the section "Are You Entitled to Additional Benefits".
4. While reviewing the notification letter above, you realize that you are missing a good writing element. What information needs to be added to the notification letter?