THE CLAIM BRIEF

Helping Veterans Understand VA Decisions

FREE PRINTABLE RESOURCE

VA Decision Letter Reading Checklist

Read the explanation. Separate the dates. Prepare better questions.

6-PAGE CHECKLIST & NOTES

- ☐ Review one issue at a time.
- ☐ Find the reasons, evidence, and favorable findings.
- ☐ Keep a record of questions for accredited help.

> Use privately, offline. This resource provides general education and writing space. It does not evaluate your claim, select a review option, or replace accredited help.

01 / ORIENT YOURSELF

Start with one issue

Keep the actual decision notice and its enclosures beside you. This worksheet helps you locate information; checking a box does not establish that VA made a correct or incorrect decision.

- ☐ I have the decision notice and all review-rights enclosures.
- ☐ I selected one issue to read from beginning to end.
- ☐ I located the outcome: granted, denied, continued, or deferred.
- ☐ I kept the notice date separate from any award effective date.
- ☐ I identified questions that need individual, accredited help.

Issue or condition I am reading about

Outcome and where I found the explanation

> A deferred issue is awaiting a decision. Letter formats vary. Use the headings in your own notice, rather than assuming every letter matches an example.

02 / READ THE EXPLANATION

Findings and reasons

Favorable findings describe what VA accepted. Read them alongside the reasons for the outcome; an accepted fact does not automatically establish every requirement for a benefit.

Favorable findings for this issue - my reading notes

Reason VA gives for this outcome - paragraph or page reference

- ☐ I read the full explanation, not only the outcome line.
- ☐ I separated a service-connection question from a percentage or date question.
- ☐ I wrote down the exact point I do not understand.

> For the legal context, see 38 CFR 3.103 and 3.104. Current rules may differ from the version relevant to an older decision.

03 / COMPARE WITHOUT JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS

Evidence and dates

Compare the evidence list with the reasoning and your records. A record not individually named is not, by itself, proof it was ignored; a list may group many records together.

Record or evidence group	Date range listed	Question / page reference

Date label	Date in my notice / award	Where I found it
Decision notice date		
Award effective date, if any		
Payment information, if any		

These dates serve different purposes. A denied issue ordinarily has no award effective date. This checklist does not calculate deadlines or the correct effective date.

04 / KEEP THE ACTUAL NOTICE IN VIEW

Review rights and follow-up

Review options depend on the kind of decision and its history. Read the notice and enclosures, and ask accredited help about the options and time limits for your particular issue.

- ☐ I located the review-rights enclosure.
- ☐ I noted the forms or official instructions the notice identifies.
- ☐ I have not assumed every decision has the same review options.
- ☐ I know this worksheet does not submit or preserve any review request.

Questions about the decision type, available options, or time limits

Questions about the evidence or rule VA discussed

VA describes Supplemental Claims, Higher-Level Reviews, and Board Appeals on its decision-review pages. This resource does not choose a lane or provide a filing calendar.

05 / NOTES AND SOURCES

Keep a useful reading record

My next conversation: questions I want answered

Official sources and next reading

38 CFR 3.103: Decision notices
ecfr.gov/current/title-38/chapter-I/part-3/section-3.103

38 CFR 3.104: Favorable findings
ecfr.gov/current/title-38/chapter-I/part-3/section-3.104

VA: Decision reviews and appeals
va.gov/decision-reviews/

VA: Effective dates
va.gov/disability/effective-date/

VA: Find and appoint accredited help
va.gov/get-help-from-accredited-representative/

Prepared October 30, 2026. Check the current source and the version relevant to your decision. The Claim Brief is independent, is not affiliated with VA, and does not provide legal, medical, or claim-specific advice. Keep completed worksheets private.