

— FWD ASSIST HQ —

FIELD GUIDE

# Preparing for Any C&P Exam

Walk into any VA compensation and pension  
exam fully prepared.



**J. Erickson**

A FWD Assist HQ Field Guide

## FIELD GUIDE

By J. Erickson | An FWD Assist HQ Field Guide | Publisher: FWD Assist HQ | First Edition, 2026

**This guide is education, not representation.** It explains how part of the VA system works so you can handle your own business with confidence. It is not legal or claims advice, and reading it does not create any representative relationship between you and the author. The author is not affiliated with the Department of Veterans Affairs, and nothing here is endorsed by the VA.

This guide prints no live VA dollar figures and no rating percentages on purpose, because they change. Before you make a decision based on any number, check the current figure at [va.gov](https://va.gov). No book can promise you a rating; the evidence in your file decides the result. Help from an accredited Veterans Service Officer is always free.

**In crisis?** Call the **Veterans Crisis Line**: dial **988**, then press **1**. You can also text **838255** or chat online at [veteranscrisisline.net](https://veteranscrisisline.net). It is free, confidential, and available 24/7.

## Preparing for Any C&P Exam

*Walk into any VA compensation and pension exam fully prepared.*

Companion to *The VA C&P Exam Playbook*.

**This is general education, not legal or claims advice, and not guidance for your specific claim.** It cannot promise you a rating or an outcome, and no one can. For help with your own claim, see a free accredited representative (see [the back of this guide](#)). Nothing here creates a representative relationship.

**Current as of October 2026.** Rules, forms, and figures change. Check current details at [va.gov](https://va.gov).

### THE BEST WAY TO USE THIS GUIDE

The strongest position is to be your own informed advocate and to work with a free accredited representative. An accredited Veterans Service Organization, such as the DAV, VFW, American Legion, or a county or state veterans office, helps at no charge. Accredited claims agents and attorneys can help too. They can't charge for work done before VA issues its initial decision on your claim, and after that they may charge a fee within the limits of 38 CFR 14.636. This guide is here so you understand your own situation and can work with them as a full partner instead of handing it over blind. If you'd rather handle this yourself, and you're comfortable doing that, the guide walks you through every step. Either way, you stay in control.

## The Outcome and What You Need Before You Start

**The outcome:** By the end of this guide you'll have prepared for your C&P exam, sent your records to VA and organized a copy to bring, described your symptoms in functional terms, and reviewed your exam report for accuracy.

This guide prepares you for the task. It doesn't and can't promise a rating, a percentage, or an outcome. The evidence in your file decides the result.

#### WHAT YOU NEED BEFORE YOU START

- ☐ Your exam letter or call details: the date, the place, and whether a VA medical center or a VA contractor runs the exam.
- ☐ Access to VA.gov, or a free accredited representative who can pull records and forms for you.
- ☐ Your medical records: service treatment records, current diagnosis, recent treatment notes, and any provider notes about how the condition limits you.
- ☐ A way to make copies. You'll make two complete sets.
- ☐ Time if you can get it. Two to four weeks before the exam gives you room to pull records and fill gaps.

**When to start:** The day your exam letter or call arrives. Confirm the appointment right away, then use the weeks before the exam to send records to VA and organize your copy. Don't wait until the night before.

## Start Here: The Basics

A Compensation and Pension exam, called a C&P exam or claim exam, is the medical appointment VA uses to get the facts it needs on a claimed condition. A VA or contract examiner reviews your records and may see you in person or by telehealth. Sometimes VA skips the exam and decides from the medical records it already has. The examiner doesn't treat you and can't tell you the result. VA decides the claim on all the evidence in your file, and the exam report carries real weight in that decision. Knowing what to expect helps you show your condition accurately: your typical days and your worst days, with each one named for what it is.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.159(c)(4); 38 CFR § 3.326; 38 CFR § 4.2.

## The Steps

### STEP 1

#### Learn what a C&P exam actually is before you prepare for it.

It's a fact-finding exam, not a treatment visit. The examiner usually fills out a Disability Benefits Questionnaire (DBQ) for each condition and writes a report. VA weighs that report with your records, your statements, and everything else in your file. If something you said never made it into the report, it counts only if it's somewhere else in your file.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 4.2; 38 CFR § 3.159(c)(4).

**Done when** you can say in one sentence that the exam report is one key piece of evidence and your own records need to be in the file too.

### STEP 2

#### Find the DBQ for your condition and read every question on it.

Most DBQs are posted on VA's public DBQ page at [benefits.va.gov/compensation/dbq\\_publicdbqs.asp](https://benefits.va.gov/compensation/dbq_publicdbqs.asp). Read the questions so you know which measurements and functional questions are coming.

**If** your DBQ is on the public page, **then** read it. **If** it's one VA keeps for examiners only (initial PTSD, hearing loss and tinnitus, TBI, general medical, medical opinion, and a few others), **then** read the rating criteria for your condition in 38 CFR Part 4 instead, or ask your accredited representative.

**Done when** you've read the DBQ or the rating criteria and know what the exam will measure.

### STEP 3

#### Confirm the appointment as soon as the letter or call comes.

Call the number on your exam letter to confirm the place and time. Ask whether a VA medical center or a contractor runs it (VA's current contractors are Loyal Source, OptumServe, QTC, and VES). Ask for any help with travel or other accommodations you need. For a mental health, reproductive health, breast, or rectal exam, or a claim tied to military sexual trauma, you can ask for a male or female examiner.

**If** you need a new date, **then** call at least 48 hours ahead. A contractor exam can be rescheduled only once, and the new date has to be within 5 days of the first one. **If** you miss an exam, **then** tell VA the reason right away by phone at 1-800-827-1000, through the claim status tool on VA.gov, or by mail.

**Do not** skip an exam without a good reason and without telling VA. On a first claim, VA rates it on the evidence it already has. On a claim for increase or a Supplemental Claim, VA denies it.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.655; VA's claim exam page at [va.gov/resources/va-claim-exam](https://va.gov/resources/va-claim-exam).

**Done when** the appointment is confirmed and you know who runs it, where, and when.

### STEP 4

#### Gather medical evidence in the five categories the examiner uses.

Pull evidence of the in-service event or start, your current diagnosis, current treatment, a provider's notes on how the condition limits you, and evidence of worsening if you're asking for an increase. Keep one to three key documents per category.

**Do not** bring old records that newer ones replace, unrelated conditions, or duplicate copies. They bury your best evidence and eat the examiner's limited time.

**Done when** each category that applies to you is covered by your strongest, most recent documents.

### STEP 5

#### Organize the package in clearly labeled sections.

Add a cover page with your name, the exam date, the conditions, and a contents list. Order the sections: service connection first, current diagnosis with the most recent first, current treatment, functional impact, then supporting evidence. Number the pages.

**Done when** someone reading it cold can see when your condition started, your current diagnosis, that you're still treated, and how it limits you.

## STEP 6

### Write a one-page condition summary.

Put your name and the exam date at the top. List the conditions being examined. Write a short paragraph on how it started in service, with dates, and a short paragraph on where it stands now and how it's treated. Add two or three lines on what it stops you from doing, and close with where each document sits in the package.

**Done when** someone you trust can read the page and understand when the condition started, your diagnosis, and how it limits you.

## STEP 7

### Fill any evidence gaps before the exam.

Request service records from the National Personnel Records Center with Standard Form 180. Request records VA holds with VA Form 20-10206, the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) or Privacy Act (PA) Request, online or by mail. Allow a few weeks. Where a record doesn't exist, bring a substitute such as a buddy statement and explain the gap in your condition summary.

**If** a record exists but you don't have it, **then** request it now, and tell VA where it is. VA has to make reasonable efforts to get it once your claim is in. **If** it truly doesn't exist, **then** bring a substitute and note the gap.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.159(c).

**Done when** every category is covered by a record, a substitute, or a written explanation of the gap.

## STEP 8

### Send new records to VA, then make two copies of the package.

Send any record VA doesn't have yet to VA itself before the exam: upload it with the claim status tool on VA.gov, give it to your accredited representative to submit, or mail it. The examiner may look at records you bring but can't submit them for you. Then copy the package twice. Bring one set for the examiner to read and keep the other.

**Do not** count on the examiner to put your records in your file, and don't hand over your only set. Only what reaches VA is part of the record the rater reads.

**Done when** VA has your new records, and you have two identical copies and aren't traveling with your only originals.

## STEP 9

### Put your symptoms in functional-limitation language.

For each main symptom, cover how often it happens, how bad it is, how long it lasts, and what it stops you from doing. Turn "it hurts" into what you can't do, such as "I can't bend to pick things up off the floor" or "I can stand about one hour before I have to sit."

**Do not** stop at "it hurts." Pain counts, but the examiner needs to know what the pain stops you from doing and when it starts in a movement, so the report shows the functional loss.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 4.40; 38 CFR § 4.59.

**Done when** you can say your top limitations out loud, each with how often, how bad, how long, and what it stops.

## STEP 10

### Dress for movement and plan to show your true function.

Wear comfortable clothes that let the examiner see and move the joint or area being examined. Plan to arrive 15 minutes early; if you're late, the exam can be canceled. Do the movements honestly and stop where pain or limits stop you.

**Do not** act out pain or exaggerate it, and don't push through pain to look tough. Either one makes the findings wrong.

**Done when** you're dressed for the exam, know when to leave, and plan to show your actual, honest function.

## STEP 11

### In the room, answer in functional terms and help the record come out right.

Give specific answers. Tell the examiner which medications you take and what the condition is like without them, and say when a movement starts to hurt. For joints and the spine, expect range of motion to be measured with a goniometer, a hinged measuring tool. If the examiner reads back something wrong, correct it on the spot.

**If** the examiner skips a measurement or test the DBQ calls for, **then** ask about it and write down the answer. **If** you hear something wrong, **then** correct it before you leave. Fixing it now is far easier than fixing it later.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 4.46; 38 CFR § 4.59.

**Done when** every claimed condition was examined and you corrected anything wrong you heard.

## STEP 12

### Write a post-exam summary the same day.

While it's fresh, write down the examiner's name, what they asked, what you answered, which tests they ran, and how long it took. Date it.

**Done when** you have a dated record of the exam to compare against the report later.

## STEP 13

### Request your exam report and read it line by line.

You can't get the results at the exam or from the examiner. Ask for the final report with VA Form 20-10206 online, by mail to the Evidence Intake Center (PO Box 4444, Janesville, WI 53547-4444), or in person at a VA regional office, or ask your accredited representative. Compare each section to what you said and to your post-exam notes.

**Done when** you've read the full report and marked every omission, understatement, or misstatement.

## STEP 14

### If the report is wrong, respond in writing before the rating decision.

Send a factual statement on VA Form 21-4138, Statement in Support of Claim (paper or online), yourself or through your accredited representative. Quote what you said, quote what the report says, explain the mismatch, and point to the records that back you up. If the exam left out required findings or gave an opinion with no reasons, ask VA for a new exam. Once VA gives an exam, it has to be an adequate one.

**If** the report matches what you described, **then** keep your copy and let the claim proceed. **If** it doesn't, **then** send the statement or new-exam request before the rating decision is issued.

**Do not** send an angry or accusatory statement. "The examiner lied" gets set aside. A calm side-by-side comparison with records gives the rater something to weigh.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.159(c)(4); 38 CFR § 4.2; Barr v. Nicholson, 21 Vet. App. 303 (2007).

**Done when** either the report matches your account, or your written statement or new-exam request is on file before the rating decision.

## Recap Checklist

- ☐ I understand the exam report is one key piece of evidence and my records need to be in the file too.
- ☐ I read the DBQ for my condition, or the rating criteria if it isn't public.
- ☐ I confirmed the appointment and know who runs it, where, and when.
- ☐ I gathered evidence in the five categories and left the clutter at home.
- ☐ I organized the package with a cover page and numbered pages.
- ☐ I wrote a one-page condition summary.
- ☐ I filled gaps by requesting records, bringing substitutes, or explaining them.
- ☐ I sent new records to VA and made two copies of the package.
- ☐ I put my symptoms in how-often, how-bad, how-long, and what-it-stops terms.
- ☐ I dressed for movement, planned to arrive early, and will show my honest function.
- ☐ I answered in functional terms and corrected anything wrong in the room.
- ☐ I wrote a post-exam summary the same day.
- ☐ I requested my report with VA Form 20-10206 and read it line by line.
- ☐ I sent a factual statement or asked for a new exam if the report was wrong.

**Reminder:** rules and rates change. Check any current figure at [va.gov](https://www.va.gov). Help from an accredited Veterans Service Organization is free. Accredited claims agents and attorneys can't charge for work done before VA issues its initial decision on your claim. After that, they may charge a fee within the limits of 38 CFR 14.636. This guide prepared you for the task. The evidence in your file decides the result.

## Get Free, Accredited Help

---

For anything about your own claim, talk to an accredited representative. Help from an accredited Veterans Service Organization is free. Accredited claims agents and attorneys can't charge for work done before VA issues its initial decision on your claim. After that, they may charge a fee within the limits of 38 CFR 14.636. Free help is available through Veterans Service Organizations such as the DAV, VFW, and American Legion, and through county and state veterans offices.

To find one near you, visit [va.gov/get-help-from-accredited-representative](https://va.gov/get-help-from-accredited-representative). Representation begins only when you sign VA Form 21-22 (for a Veterans Service Organization) or 21-22a (for an individual agent or attorney). With one rare exception for a single unpaid case, only accredited people can represent you before the VA, and only an accredited agent or attorney can charge you a fee. Nothing in this guide creates that relationship.

**A warning about claim sharks.** Anyone who offers to file your initial claim for a fee, or who guarantees you a rating or a percentage, is selling something you shouldn't buy. Accredited Veterans Service Organizations help at no charge, and accredited claims agents and attorneys may charge only after VA issues its initial decision, within the limits of 38 CFR 14.636. Report predatory companies to the VA Office of Inspector General at 1-800-488-8244.

## Keep Going: The Full Guide

---

This field guide is the short, do-this-now companion to the book *The VA C&P Exam Playbook*. See every FWD Assist HQ title that is out now at [fwdassisthq.com/books](https://fwdassisthq.com/books).

*Current as of October 2026. Rules, forms, and figures change. Check current details at [va.gov](https://va.gov).*

## About the Author

---

**J. Erickson.** Author, educator, former veteran service officer.

J. Erickson is a service-disabled Air Force veteran. He served as a military firefighter and as a veteran service officer, where he spent years walking veterans through the same claims process he writes about now. He holds an MBA and writes plain-language guides for veterans who want to understand the system without a translator.

He writes the For the Rest of Us series at [fwdassisthq.com](https://fwdassisthq.com). This guide is published by FWD Assist HQ as a veteran education resource. It is not affiliated with or endorsed by the Department of Veterans Affairs.