

THE ADULTING VAULT

Military to Federal Career Roadmap

How to Turn Your Service Record Into a Federal Job Offer

Everything They Forgot to Tell You

You already have most of what federal agencies are looking for: experience under pressure, a clearance, and in many cases a hiring preference that civilian applicants cannot touch. What you do not have is the vocabulary, and that is the whole problem. This roadmap translates your record into the language a federal human resources specialist is trained to score, walks you through the hiring rules as they exist today, and shows you the appointment authorities that let agencies hire you without competition at all.



Please Read This First

This guide is general educational information, not legal or career advice, and it is not affiliated with, endorsed by, or produced by any federal agency. Federal hiring rules change. The job opportunity announcement you are looking at is always the controlling document. Verify current requirements at usajobs.gov and opm.gov before you rely on anything here.

CURRENCY OF THIS GUIDE

The federal hiring rules in this guide reflect the Office of Personnel Management Merit Hiring Plan of May 29, 2025, implementing Executive Order 14170, together with OPM implementation guidance and USAJOBS documentation current as of mid-2026. Appointment authority details reflect OPM FedsHireVets guidance and 5 CFR Parts 302, 307, and 316. These rules change. Verify before you rely on them.

Start Here: What Changed

If you were given transition advice before late 2025, some of it is now wrong.

THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT CORRECTION

You may have been told that federal resumes should run three to five pages, and that you should never cut detail. That was correct for decades. It is no longer correct.

As of September 27, 2025, USAJOBS accepts resumes of two pages or less. The system will not let you upload or build a longer one. If the only resume an agency receives from you exceeds two pages, you are ruled ineligible.

Transition briefings, base workshops, and older guides have been slow to update. If someone hands you a five-page federal resume template, it will cost you the application.

This came out of the Merit Hiring Plan issued by the Office of Personnel Management in May 2025, implementing Executive Order 14170. The same plan added four short essay questions to most competitive announcements at GS-05 and above. Part Seven covers those, including a certification requirement that carries criminal exposure and that most applicants never read.

The rest of what you learned still holds. Keywords matter. Specialized experience is everything. Veterans preference is real. What changed is the container.

Part One: How Federal Hiring Actually Works

The structure is unfamiliar, not complicated.

Series, grade, and what they mean

Every federal position has an occupational series — a four-digit code identifying the kind of work — and a grade, identifying the level. A 1102 is a contract specialist. An 0343 is a management or program analyst. A 2210 is information technology. Finding your series is the first real task of a federal job search, because it determines which announcements are even worth reading.

Term	What it means to you
Series	The occupation. Search by series once you know yours and your results improve dramatically.
Grade (GS-5 through GS-15)	The level. Roughly, GS-5 to 7 entry, 9 to 11 journeyman, 12 to 13 senior specialist, 14 to 15 management.
Step	Within-grade pay increments. Largely automatic; negotiable at hire in some cases.
Promotion potential	The grade the job can grow to without reapplying. A GS-9 with promotion potential to GS-12 is three raises built in.
Broadband systems (NH, NJ, DR)	Some agencies use pay bands instead of grades. NH-03, for example, spans roughly GS-12 to GS-13.
Competitive vs excepted service	Two different hiring systems with different rules. Some agencies hire entirely outside the competitive service.

The path your application takes

1. You apply to a specific announcement. Applications do not carry across postings.
2. A human resources specialist screens you against the announcement's specialized experience statement. This is a compliance check, not a judgment of your talent.
3. Qualified applicants are rated, often against an occupational questionnaire, and sorted into quality categories.
4. Veterans preference is applied. Preference eligibles float to the top of their category.
5. The top category goes to the hiring manager on a referral certificate.

6. The manager interviews and selects. Then security, suitability, and onboarding — which is where the months go.

EXPECT THE TIMELINE TO BE LONG

Four to six months from announcement close to start date is ordinary, not a red flag. Some take longer.

Plan your transition finances around that reality. Do not resign anything on the strength of a referral, an interview, or even a tentative offer. A firm offer follows the background investigation, not the interview.

Part Two: Finding Your Series

The highest-leverage twenty minutes in your entire transition.

Most transitioning service members search USAJOBS by keyword, get thousands of irrelevant results, and conclude the system is broken. It is not — you are searching the way you would search a commercial job board, and federal postings are organized by occupation code instead.

Three ways to find yours

7. Work backward from job titles. Find any posting that looks close to what you did. Note its series number. Search that series directly.
8. Use the military crosswalk tools. USAJOBS and the Department of Labor both publish tools that map military occupation codes to federal series. Treat the output as a starting list, not an answer — they are often too literal.
9. Ask a human. Find someone on LinkedIn who left your branch and your job and now works federal. Ask what series they landed in. This is the fastest and most accurate method and almost nobody does it.

DO NOT OVER-NARROW

Your military job maps to more series than you think. A logistics NCO is a plausible candidate for 2003, 0346, 1101, 1102, and 0343 depending on how the experience is framed.

Pick two or three target series, not one. Then write a targeted two-page resume for each and reuse it.

Worksheet: Series Targeting

Series #	Title	Why it fits my record	Target grade

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Which series did I find by looking at real postings rather than by using a crosswalk tool? Those are usually the better leads.

Part Three: Translating the Record

Your experience is not the problem. The vocabulary is.

A human resources specialist screening your resume is not a veteran and is not required to be. They cannot infer that "NCOIC" means supervisor, that a hand receipt implies property accountability, or that a platoon is roughly thirty people. If they cannot map your words onto the announcement, they cannot credit the experience — and the rules do not permit them to guess in your favor.

So translate everything. Keep rank and unit for context, because they establish scope and progression. Translate the rest.

Vocabulary

Instead of	Write
NCOIC / OIC of a section	Supervised a team of N performing [function]
Platoon sergeant	Directly supervised N personnel; accountable for training, performance, and welfare
Property book officer / hand receipt holder	Accountable for \$N in equipment across N locations, with zero loss over N years
Conducted PMCS	Maintained operational readiness of N systems at N% availability
S4 / J4 / G4	Logistics planning, supply chain, and distribution management
S3 / J3	Operations planning and execution
Wrote OPORDs and FRAGOs	Developed operational plans and issued change directives to N subordinate elements
Unit training NCO	Designed, scheduled, and delivered training programs for N personnel
Served on a deployment	Performed [function] in an austere overseas environment with limited resources and no reachback
Battle rhythm / white board	Recurring operational reporting and decision cycle
CONOPS	Concept of operations; proposed approach for leadership decision

Rank does not equal grade

There is no official conversion from rank to GS grade, and anyone who hands you a clean chart is selling something. What actually determines your grade is the complexity, independence, and scope of the work you did, matched against the announcement's specialized experience statement.

That said, a rough orientation: senior NCOs and company-grade officers frequently qualify at GS-9 through GS-12 depending on the series. Field grade officers and senior enlisted with significant program responsibility often qualify at GS-12 through GS-14. Do not let a chart talk you out of applying to something you can substantiate, and do not let one talk you into a grade you cannot.

THE EQUIVALENCY QUESTION

When an announcement says "specialized experience equivalent to the GS-11 level," it is describing independence and complexity, not a job title.

Work performed with limited supervision, on problems without established answers, where the consequences reached beyond your own team. Most senior enlisted work meets that description. The job is making it visible in how you write it.

Worksheet: Translation

Take your three most significant assignments. Write the military version, then the federal version.

How I would say it in uniform	How a screener needs to read it	The number

Part Four: The Two-Page Resume

A compression problem, not a deletion problem.

Keep a master file

Build one long document containing everything — every assignment, every award, every number you can substantiate. It never gets submitted. It is the quarry you cut each targeted two-page version from. This single habit takes your per-application time from four hours to forty minutes.

Required on every entry

These fields are why civilian resumes fail federal screens. Leaving one out is the most common self-inflicted rejection there is.

Element	Format
Employer	Branch and unit, e.g. U.S. Army, 3rd Sustainment Brigade
Job title	Duty position, translated. "Supervisory Logistics Manager (Platoon Sergeant)"
Start and end dates	Month and year, both ends
Hours per week	Numeric. Use 40 for active duty unless you have reason to state otherwise
Series and grade	For any federal civilian positions only
Description	Specific enough to map onto the announcement's duties

The page budget

Two pages is roughly seven hundred to nine hundred words. Spend it on purpose.

Section	Budget
Contact block, with clearance level	3–4 lines
Most relevant assignment	35–45% of the space
Second relevant assignment	20–25%
Earlier service, compressed	10–15%

Section	Budget
Education and military schools	2-4 lines
Certifications and clearance	2-4 lines

COMPRESSION ORDER

- 10.** Cut whole assignments that do not touch the specialized experience before you cut anything else.
- 11.** Cut duties, keep accomplishments. If the title implies it, it is not earning space.
- 12.** Merge related bullets into one with the strongest result.
- 13.** Cut hedges. "Responsible for assisting with coordination of" becomes "Coordinated."
- 14.** Adjust formatting last. Never below ten point.

FORMATTING THAT SURVIVES

Standard fonts, ten to twelve point. Half-inch margins minimum. No tables, columns, text boxes, graphics, or content in headers and footers. Spell out every acronym on first use, including ones you are certain everybody knows.

Writing bullets that score

Action, scope, result. Every bullet. "Managed logistics operations" tells a screener nothing. "Directed distribution of \$4.2M in Class IX repair parts across 6 forward locations, sustaining 94% operational readiness during a 9-month deployment" tells them everything.

FINDING NUMBERS

- People supervised, directly and indirectly
- Dollar value of equipment, property, or budget you were accountable for
- Readiness rates, availability percentages, inspection results
- Volume — shipments, records, transactions, missions, personnel actions
- Geography — sites, countries, forward locations
- Time — cycle time reduced, deadlines met under compression
- Zero-defect outcomes — no losses, no findings, no accidents over a stated period

Part Five: Preference and Appointment Authorities

Two different things, constantly confused, both worth understanding.

Veterans preference improves your standing on a competitive announcement. Appointment authorities let an agency hire you without a competitive announcement at all. The second category is where transitioning service members leave the most value on the table, because almost nobody explains it.

Preference, briefly

Preference eligibles receive additional consideration when agencies fill positions through competitive examining. In category rating, preference eligibles are placed ahead of non-preference candidates within the same quality category. It does not guarantee selection and it does not lower the qualification bar — you still have to be found qualified on your own merits.

- Documentation is the DD-214, member copy 4, for basic preference
- Ten-point preference additionally requires the SF-15 and supporting documentation
- Attach them every time. Unclaimed preference is not applied retroactively

The three authorities worth knowing

VRA — VETERANS RECRUITMENT APPOINTMENT

Allows noncompetitive appointment of eligible veterans to positions at any grade level through GS-11 or equivalent. After two years of substantially continuous service, the appointment converts to the competitive service. There is no limit on how many times you may be appointed under it, provided you remain eligible.

Broadly, eligibility runs to disabled veterans, holders of a campaign badge or the Armed Forces Service Medal, and those honorably separated within the last three years. That last category is why this authority matters enormously during your transition window and much less afterward.

30 PERCENT OR MORE DISABLED VETERAN

Allows an agency to appoint noncompetitively a veteran with a service-connected disability rating of 30 percent or more. Critically, there is no grade level limitation on this authority — though you must still meet all qualification requirements for the position.

Appointments are made as temporary (more than 60 days) or term, and the agency may convert you to a career or career-conditional appointment at any point during that period. Eligibility runs to those retired from active service with a 30 percent or greater

rating, or rated by the Department of Veterans Affairs with a compensable service-connected disability of 30 percent or more.

VEOA — VETERANS EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES ACT

Does something different: it lets you apply to merit promotion announcements that would otherwise be restricted to current federal employees, when the agency is recruiting from outside its own workforce. You are not given preference as a scoring factor under VEOA — you are simply allowed in the door. You are also not subject to geographic area of consideration limits.

Eligibility requires that your latest discharge be under honorable conditions, and that you either be a preference eligible or have substantially completed three or more years of active service.

WHAT TO DO WITH THIS

Determine which authorities you qualify for now, in writing, before you start applying. Eligibility depends on discharge characterization, disability rating, campaign service, and time since separation — and one of those clocks is running.

Then say so. Name your eligibility in your application and mention it directly to hiring managers. Many managers do not know these authorities exist, and the ones who do find them enormously convenient.

Schedule A, a separate authority for individuals with qualifying disabilities, may also apply to you. It is distinct from the veteran authorities and has its own documentation requirements.

Worksheet: My Eligibility

Authority	Do I qualify?	Documentation I need	Have it?

Part Six: Your Clearance Is an Asset

Say so, correctly, on page one.

An active clearance is worth real money to an employer, because sponsoring one costs them time and money and leaves the position unfilled meanwhile. It is one of the few things on your resume that a private-sector recruiter and a federal hiring manager value equally.

How to state it

- Name the level and the status: "Active Secret clearance" or "Active TS/SCI"
- Include the date of your most recent investigation or periodic reinvestigation if you know it
- Put it in the contact block or immediately below it, not buried at the bottom
- Never state the details of what you worked on, the programs involved, or anything classified. State the clearance, nothing else

THE REINVESTIGATION CLOCK

Clearance eligibility can generally be reinstated within a defined window after separation without a full new investigation, but the window is finite and the specifics depend on your investigation type and current policy.

This is a real reason not to spend eighteen months deciding what you want to do. Confirm your own status and timeline with your security office before you separate, while you still have one.

Part Seven: The Four Essay Questions

Read this before you start an application, not during one.

Competitive service announcements open to the public at GS-05 and above now include four short free-response essay questions, standardized government-wide by the Merit Hiring Plan and capped at roughly two hundred words each. Teacher, Wage Grade, and seasonal positions are excluded, and agencies may exempt other positions.

They do not appear in the announcement text. They surface inside the application flow after you begin applying, which catches people out with a closing date approaching.

Topic	What it asks
Commitment to the Constitution	How it led you to pursue this role, with a concrete example
Government efficiency	How you would improve outcomes, with specific examples of processes improved or costs reduced
Executive Orders and policy priorities	One or two that matter to you, and how you would help implement them
Work ethic	How it has contributed to your achievements

YOU MUST WRITE THESE YOURSELF

Submitting these responses requires certifying that you did not use artificial intelligence tools or outside consultants to generate them. That certification is made under 18 U.S.C. 1001, the federal false statements statute.

Knowingly making a false certification on a federal application is a federal crime carrying fines and potential imprisonment.

Do not paste these questions into an AI writing tool. Do not pay anyone to draft them. Do not adapt sample answers you found online. Write them yourself or leave them blank.

This guide therefore contains no model answers, and you should be wary of any product that sells them. What follows is preparation — so that what you write is genuinely yours.

Story bank

Collect the raw material now. Write from it later, in your own words, in one sitting.

A time you upheld a standard when it would have been easier not to.

The Adulging Vault • Everything They Forgot to Tell You

Something you changed that measurably worked better afterward.

A policy area you actually follow and care about, and what you could contribute to it.

Something you finished that most people would have quit.

Part Eight: Timing Your Transition

Federal hiring is slow. Start earlier than feels reasonable.

When	What to do
18–24 months out	Identify target series. Start the master resume file. Confirm clearance status with your security office.
12–18 months out	Begin applying. Yes, this early — the timeline absorbs it. Explore SkillBridge or similar programs if your branch offers them.
9–12 months out	Confirm appointment authority eligibility in writing. Assemble DD-214, SF-15, VA rating letter, transcripts.
6–9 months out	Apply steadily. Attend agency-specific hiring events, which frequently use direct hire authority on the spot.
3–6 months out	Interviews and tentative offers land here for applications sent months earlier.
0–3 months out	Onboarding, security processing, start dates. Keep applying until you have a firm offer in writing.

OTHER ROUTES WORTH KNOWING

Direct hire authority — agencies fill hard-to-staff occupations without the usual rating and ranking. Fast and less crowded.

Term and temporary appointments — shorter commitments that frequently convert, and that build the federal experience competitive announcements ask for.

Contractor to federal — supporting an agency as a contractor builds directly relevant specialized experience and internal visibility.

Applicants who only chase public competitive announcements compete against the largest possible pool for the smallest share of openings.

Part Nine: Pre-Submission Audit

Ten minutes, every time.

COMPLIANCE

- ☐ Two pages or fewer, confirmed in the actual file
- ☐ Every position has employer, title, month and year dates, and hours per week
- ☐ DD-214 member copy 4 attached
- ☐ SF-15 and supporting documentation attached, if claiming ten-point preference
- ☐ VA rating letter attached, if using a disability-based authority
- ☐ Transcripts attached, if education is qualifying
- ☐ Correct announcement number, before the closing date

TRANSLATION

- ☐ No unexplained acronym anywhere in the document
- ☐ No rank, unit designation, or military term left untranslated
- ☐ A civilian who has never served could read it and understand the scope
- ☐ Every element of the specialized experience statement is visibly evidenced

QUALITY

- ☐ Every bullet has a result, not just a duty
- ☐ Numbers throughout, every one defensible in an interview
- ☐ Clearance stated at the top, with no classified detail
- ☐ Read aloud once, start to finish

Closing

The hardest part of this transition is not qualification. Most transitioning service members are more qualified than they believe, and the ones who struggle usually struggle because the system could not read what they wrote.

The second hardest part is the silence. You will send applications into a process that gives no feedback and takes months, at exactly the moment your life has the least certainty in it. That is genuinely difficult and it is not a reflection of your record.

Track what you send. Keep the master file growing. Confirm your authority eligibility while the clocks are still in your favor. And apply earlier than seems reasonable, because the timeline will absorb every month you give it.

WHERE TO VERIFY

usajobs.gov — announcements, resume requirements, hiring paths

opm.gov/fedshirevets — veterans employment, appointment authorities, documentation

Your installation transition office and your security office, while you still have access to both