Ernst van Veen was born in Rotterdam, Netherlands, on 7 March 1933. In 1957 he obtained his masters' degree in Chemical Engineering at the Technical University of Delft. During his career with Shell International he and his family lived in Ingolstadt (Germany), Abadan (Iran), Colombo (Sri Lanka), Caracas and Punto Cardon (Venezuela), Singapore, Aberdeen (Scotland), Curaçao (Antilles) and finally in Wassenaar (Netherlands).

After his retirement in 1990 he enrolled at the history department of Leiden University, where in 1994 he graduated cum laude. He has written articles on nationalism, on the role of Flanders in the colonisation of Madeira and the Azores and on the history of the Dutch colonization of Taiwan. An inventory of archival documents concerning the Dutch-Portuguese relations in Asia is at this moment in preparation.

Since 1959 he has been married to Janny Gaastra. They have two sons, both Delft engineering graduates, both married and living abroad.

Besides history, his hobbies are golf, water colour painting and, during the European winter, travel to the southern hemisphere.