



Leadership and Military Writing

Direct, Organized, Strategic

Allyson McNitt, PhD

To write is human, to edit is divine.

—Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*

Employment as a Department of the Army civilian brought with it many assumptions and preconceptions for me, most of which were focused on the kind of authors with whom I would work, on authors' existing writing habits, and on any sensitivities authors might hold regarding the content and quality of their articles. My limited personal experience with members of the Armed Forces resulted in slightly

skewed perceptions of how I was expected to engage with soldiers, how soldiers engaged with each other, the pecking order in the Armed Forces, how soldiers might perceive me, how I might perceive them, etc. I had strong credentials for my editorial position: three academic degrees in English, a few publications, and twelve years' experience teaching writing at the college level; however, I possessed little to no insight into the writing habits of the military. I foolishly assumed I could leap into editing military writing a fully formed leader-warrior who was daringly armed with the blades of sharpened verbal skills and who was galvanized by an impassioned love for

the written word. I could brandish my darkly glittering editorial broadsword, which would naturally reshape some military writing habits into the conventions of formal, academic writing that was specifically designed for publication. I could be a wizened legend of editorial genius, inspiring to a few, helpful to some, perhaps a chal-

lenge for others, but maybe with a cool hat if I eventually earned it. Such is the ego of a PhD.

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In my experience, most wordsmiths are naturally attuned to internalizing key words and phrases that appear in specific locations and in specific contexts. The curiously lengthy process required to grant my permanent position as an Army civilian reminded me that I was no longer within the realm of my own familiar. The process, however, offered me enough time to look around for any important keywords or phrases posted on walls, in cases, or even on signs. As it turns out, Fort Leavenworth likes the word “leadership,” and the word makes frequent appearances in many locations on the installation. In unfamiliar environments, I find comfort in contextualizing working definitions of important terms; for me, it eases the assimilation process. Thus, through context clues and a little bit of background reading, I came to understand that the concept of leadership in the military is similar enough to a civilian’s understanding of the concept, but that leadership is more visibly nuanced in the military than outside of it.

Leadership assumes many forms in areas inside and outside the military, and even if those forms are difficult to perceive on occasion, they are always present. From the terse commands of a military officer to a kindergartner selected to lead a classroom in a group song, leadership is often seen but reliably difficult to define. But is there a distinction between the general idea of leadership and “military” leadership? How

should military writing treat the concept of leadership? How can military writers, who are generally removed from conventional civilian academic writing standards, contribute to civilian discourse without losing their own voices? Simple definitions are often good places to begin when one seeks answers to difficult questions, but in order to arrive at a thorough and specific definition, one must be able to apply critical-thinking skills to expand the simple definition. One simple definition of military leadership comes from a 2015 article “Army Leadership and the Communication Paradox.” Christopher M. Ford notes that every exercise of leadership “involves a leader and a follower ... leadership cannot occur without communication between the leader and the follower. Army and civilian leadership books use countless adjectives to describe what leaders should be and could do while giving little or no attention or thought to the communication aspects of leadership.”¹ Rarely do people enlist in the military with the goal of avoiding leadership. Many of the adjectives found in these leadership books are useful for shaping a broad ideal for actions and behaviors for leaders in the military, but upon closer examination, I noticed that much of the advice and many of the descriptions in these books are inadequate as they apply to the written communication habits that I believe are necessary for building a solidly effective military leader. The U.S. military is one of the most revered fighting forces in the world and is backed by many of the world’s most talented tactical and strategic military minds, so it stands to reason that the most effective military leaders must be able to conform to the conventions of both written military and civilian discourse in order to contribute effectively to any civilian or military discussions.

The difficulties with effective communication within the military are not new; in the past, inadequate military communication has been responsible for such preventable incidents as a 2014 friendly fire incident that

Previous page: Photo by Staff Sgt. Kelvin Green, U.S. Army

killed five U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan, and the Battle of Balaclava, as commemorated in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's 1854 poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade."² While ineffective communication often rears its hydra heads in just about any field under the sun, the very nature of the Armed Forces assumes a specific responsibility for people's lives and sense of safety; thus, skillful, effective communication is crucial to preserving this responsibility. Anyone could access Army Regulation (AR) 25-50, *Preparing and Managing Correspondence*, and note that it contains a number of different writing templates and tips for Army members to follow as a way of preparing effective communication to others, and anyone might notice that the regulation includes everything from understanding the general purpose of writing to ways to write memorandums and letters, and the correct way to include figures in specific documents. But at its core, "effective Army writing is understood by the reader in a single rapid reading and is clear, concise, and well organized."³ For brief communication such as memos, orders, informational papers, and emails, a rapid reading is necessary and efficient, and the documents need to be free of mechanical errors and contain unambiguous word choices, with the main idea (thesis) stated clearly and early on in the document. But to a relatively untrained writer with genuine military leadership aspirations, what is an error? What is an unambiguous word choice? How are these problems avoided? How does one identify and correct these issues?

For some kinds of military communication, the simple AR 25-50 advice is enough, and many rapid readings of myriad sources for information, including PowerPoint presentations, Prezis, emails, radio, television, social media, etc., suffice for their designated tasks when the messages are simple and succinct. Errors and questionable word choices may or may not mean the difference between life and death in these instances. However, when military leaders venture into academic or professional writing for publications that rely highly on author credibility, evidence of critical thinking, research, source synthesis, specific formatting, and original thought, they need to be aware of the extra preparatory steps that are involved in revisions. Revisions are crucial to creating an effective, high-quality message or idea to be well received in the professional or academic community. How would an aspiring military leader bridge the gap between the military writing conventions he or she has

been taught and the conventions more likely to appear in formal civilian discourse? How would an aspiring military leader know that there was a gap that needed a bridge? Fortunately for aspiring military leaders, there are editors! Editors like to feel needed, and they want to help leaders. Editors employed by the Department of the Army, however, are individual resources for military writers and often look forward to navigating writers through the ubiquitous field of rhetorical obstacles.

Soldiers need to be able to internalize extended definitions of leadership so that effective communication efforts extend naturally to the written domain. Since I have been on a military installation, however, I have not seen many occasions where military writers showed much evidence of an internalized definition. Many authors like to sprinkle the word "leadership" into their articles without a thorough definition laid out for context in hopes that a general audience will perhaps "get what they mean." An author's assumption that an audience will understand intent when it comes to complicated terminology both overestimates the efforts of the general public and also presumes a great deal of confidence in the precision of the writing. Even the best writers need to define and internalize key terms and concepts. Even if soldiers are not directly addressing concepts of leadership, elements of the definition need to inform all of their written communication. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, defines "leadership" as "the activity of influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation to accomplish the mission and improve the organization."⁴ Leadership here is an activity; it is something one does. Successfully applying this concept to convey purpose and direction and motivation in professional and academic writing (while most importantly influencing an audience) demonstrates a kind of active leadership that results from a great deal of diligence and product dedication that is not easy for the average soldier to mirror.

Much like writing itself, leadership is a process. ADP 6-22 suggests that most people

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possess leadership potential and can eventually learn to be effective leaders.⁵ Leadership development, doctrine states, “begins with education, training, and experience.”⁶ Richard M. Swain and Albert C. Pierce frame the leadership definition as a “creative combination of purposeful and identifiable characteristics and behaviors intended to influence others; features and actions that are subject to observation, assessment, evaluation, and correction.”⁷ If the goal of effective military writing is to influence others, then in addition to the conventional essay-writing standards enforced by writing programs at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College and other military institutions, the military needs to include courses in its leadership program that focus on the particulars of adapting existing essays to fit academic publication conventions. Ford maintains that “[a]ll levels of the Army officer education system should expressly acknowledge the importance of communication skills in leadership. Bundling communication among other aspects of leadership diminishes the central importance of the concept.”⁸ If a soldier is able to write short, effective emails and memos but is unable to communicate in a professional, academic manner, he or she sets a poor example for future military leaders and to the military’s detriment. Leaders set examples for others every day by demonstrating their technical savvy, through their physical prowess, and by maintaining their calm in the face of adversity. If a leader is able to exhibit all of those fine characteristics but is unable to write effectively at the highest levels, he or she represents a flawed leadership, and that person could (for example) miss a valuable opportunity to infuse a military perspective into discussions among civilian political figures.

Why should military leaders, future or otherwise, involve themselves in academic writing, which is notorious for its perceived elitism and its long-winded commentary? Why should the military incorporate courses into its writing programs that are designed to assist military leaders (or future leaders) with expanding, editing, revising, and adapting existing essays to fit civilian academic publication conventions? Unlike most popular publications, academic publications rely primarily on scholarly evidentiary support, critical analysis, and a strong position (thesis) on the topic. Government policy analysts and policy practitioners read academic journals, and the ideas featured in these kinds of publications can inspire or shape influential people’s (or even a whole government’s) strategic thinking. For example, in the book

Academic Writing for Military Personnel, Adam Chapnick and Craig Stone note that Canada’s 2005 International Policy Statement “reflects many of the ideas in Andrew Cohen’s *While Canada Slept: How We Lost Our Place in the World*, the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute’s *In the National Interest: Canadian Foreign Policy in an Insecure World*, and Jennifer Welsh’s *At Home in the World: Canada’s Global Vision for the 21st Century*.”⁹ Even if government policy dialogue exists on a primarily civilian level, military personnel who can contribute their ideas and perspectives on an academic level vis-à-vis academic publications are able to integrate themselves into this civilian-dominated arena and join the conversation. As Chapnick and Stone contend, “it is crucial that the military does not exclude itself from these discussions” because for better or worse, this day and age celebrates “the democratization of foreign and security policy,” and the military needs to be able to have its voice heard.¹⁰

Inside and outside the military, academic writing should stand out from other types of writing because it specifically refers to writing a research/argumentative essay. Academic writing requires a different approach to conveying a message than the usual military writing such as staff reports, speech writing, memos, orders, or any form of creative expression. The writing standard in the Army prioritizes placing the main point at the beginning of an essay (bottom line up front [BLUF]) for quick readability and rapid message transmission, and statements announcing the presence of the BLUF convention in essays seems to apply uniformly to all military writing.¹¹ After all, “[a]n order that can be understood will be understood. When and if our soldiers are called upon to risk their lives in the accomplishment of their mission, there must be no mistaking exactly what we require of them.”¹² The good news is that unlike some types of military writing, one can usually assume that no one’s lives are immediately at stake when writing or adapting an academic essay to fit publication requirements. The bad news is that in order to construct an effective academic essay for publication, the essay needs to be significantly altered from the typical classroom essay in the areas of form, word choices, idea organization, and evidentiary support.

Attention, Please! Avoid Announcements!

I have noticed that most of the articles submitted to *Military Review* are academic, in that the majority of

them contain clear arguments with appropriate, scholarly sources supporting a central thesis. However, many of those articles contain elements of the expository essay, which is predominantly supposed to be a descriptive essay aiming to expose the full extent of a specific issue without necessarily passing judgment or taking a position on it. Many authors begin their essays with ap-

essay abstract, so researchers can decide whether to use that article when looking for sources.

There is nothing wrong with announcing the BLUF convention while the article is in draft form. Doing so might give the author a sense of clarity because the essay's purpose is stated early on, and having it written out can keep the writer on task. But because academic writing



propriate theses that are often prefaced with the words, “This article will argue that ...,” or “The purpose of this article is to” While this kind of explicit approach is not technically incorrect, in civilian academic writing, announcing the purpose in this way suggests that the writer is either new to writing or returning to it after a lengthy absence; most seasoned academics will not announce the presence of their thesis in their published work.¹³ Announcing the essay’s purpose early on fulfills the BLUF convention taught at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College and in other military writing programs, and some editors appreciate the approach because it provides the reader with a “road map” for navigating lengthy articles. However, this kind of announcement seems to be more suitable for an

Pvt. Kaleb Shriver, 1st Theater Sustainment Command (TSC), writes an essay 10 March 2020 during one of the situational training exercises as part of the Blackjack Challenge hosted by the 1st TSC operational command post at Camp Arifjan, Kuwait. (Photo by Spc. Dakota Vanidestine, U.S. Army Reserve)

has the chance to reach a politically influential audience, it is crucial for the author to construct a more implicit thesis in order to accommodate academic publication conventions. An implicit thesis statement, according to Chapnick and Stone, “manages to convey the same intent without being quite as deliberate.”¹⁴ In most cases, the thesis can remain the same but without the announcement. In the *Guide to Effective Military Writing*, William

A. McIntosh states that “[g]ood writing saves time, money, and materiel. More important, it saves lives. It ennoble the professions, distinguishes great leaders, and advances careers.”¹⁵ McIntosh’s position that writing saves lives and advances careers might seem dramatic at

the argument is without having it spelled out, then the *writer is not doing his or her job*. Effective military leaders must continuously attend to the clear and efficient ways they write in all aspects of military writing, if only to avoid letting others take over who might have inferior

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first. But when a soldier assumes a leadership position, and when he or she harbors a motivation to advance his or her career and wishes to inspire followers who might be less motivated, inspired, or challenged to write, that soldier needs to be the leading exemplar when writing for all occasions, including for publication, to ensure that lives are saved and careers are advanced. One of the easiest things to do to begin this process is to eliminate the thesis announcement and simply rely on the thesis itself to convey the message.

An effective thesis cannot be answered with a simple “yes” or “no” because it is not really a topic, it is not really a fact, and it is not really an opinion. I taught writing at the college level for over ten years, and every semester I spent an inordinate amount of time addressing the specifics of composing an effective thesis statement, probably to the despair of my students. It is an incredibly difficult concept to grasp for those who struggle with writing, and sometimes even for those who do not. However, it is the most important part of an article or essay, and it deserves precision and clarity if the argument is to succeed. According to the Harvard Writing Center, “A good thesis has two parts. It should tell what you plan to argue, and it should ‘telegraph’ how you plan to argue—that is, what particular support for your claim is going where in your essay.”¹⁶ The thesis should never be a question or a list, it should never be vague or confrontational, and it needs to contain a definable, arguable claim that is as specific as possible.¹⁷ A writer can telegraph the way he or she plans to argue his or her position without explicitly announcing “This paper argues that ...” If the target audience or the publication’s editors are unable to determine what

standards or values when it comes to writing and ways of communication. Announcing the essay’s purpose when writing for publication risks destabilizing the implied relationship between the leader (author) and his or her followers (audience), primarily because doing so presumes that the audience lacks the requisite understanding to be able to follow what should be an organized argument without a map. Insulting one’s audience is generally discouraged in formal writing.

The Ins and Outs of Academic Writing

In addition to dedication and self-awareness, effective leaders are known for their motivation. It seems wrong for a leader to excel in most aspects of leadership only to fall short when writing, but it happens. In an article on the merits of leadership and motivation, Robin Wink points out that the “military operates in a leadership-centric way that is not present in civil service From day one, whether you are a newly commissioned officer or a young enlisted troop, you are focused on leadership. This constant emphasis includes formal training, unit ceremonies, and day-to-day activities.”¹⁸ Further, Jay A. Conger and Rabindra N. Kanungo note that exceptional leaders “communicate their own motivation to lead their followers. Through expressive modes of action, both verbal and nonverbal, the leaders communicate their convictions, self-confidence, and dedication in order to give credibility to what they advocate.”¹⁹ Many people are motivated by external forces such as money or the promise of love or sex or the social status that accompanies a new executive position at a prestigious company. In

contrast, people with exceptional leadership potential “are motivated by a deeply embedded desire to achieve for the sake of achievement.”²⁰ If a soldier aspires to set a high bar for his or her leadership example, he or she will benefit from considering how achievement manifests itself, and how achievement reflects on the leader, especially when writing for publication. So many writers, however confident they might be with many of their military leadership skills, are rarely as clear and effective in writing as they think they are; this may be due to ineffective training, or not enough attention to written detail.

Aside from common writing problems such as run-on sentences, comma splices, verb tense shifts, faulty parallelisms, and dangling modifiers (among others), word choice, general wordiness, and specialized jargon will complicate the flow of an academic essay’s argument. Military writing is supposed to be full of specialized jargon, so authors should not necessarily feel obligated to define every term they include in their work. Most of the problems I have encountered with military writers lie with undefined concepts, imprecise word choices, or lazy attempts at explanations. Most of the time, I notice that the lazy writing stems from various assumptions an author makes about his or her audience. Chapnick and Stone contend that if a writer uses words that only a limited audience can understand, the writer risks “projecting arrogance and insecurity.”²¹ The arrogance, the authors say, “comes from the idea that if readers don’t understand the text, then they are simply not smart enough to be deserving of your time. The insecurity is reflected in the impression that you are hiding behind an obscure vocabulary to disguise the fact that you have nothing of value to say.”²² Leaders should avoid insulting their audience, so one way a writer could combat the temptation to show off any overly wordy and jargon-laden writing skills is to write simply and thoroughly so that an audience can focus on ideas and not stumble over unfamiliar terminology and egregiously large words.

In the 1970s, E. B. White (author of *Charlotte’s Web*) revised and added to an existing text, *The Elements of Style*, initially written by William Strunk Jr. The advice in that book determined writing style elements that still apply to clear, concise writing today. One of the most famous examples from that book is the imperative to *omit needless words*.²³ Many of the articles submitted to *Military Review* are laden with needless words; for example, “due to the fact that,” “call your attention to the fact that,” “indeed,”

“in essence,” “of course,” “basically,” and “that being said.” Strunk and White assert that a sentence “should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts.”²⁴ Any worthy engineer would not include an unneeded part into a design, and writing itself is a specific kind of design; the author is the engineer. Writers need to understand that true writing craftsmanship relies on every word having a specific function. The phrase “the fact that” is, according to Strunk and White, “an especially debilitating expression” and “should be revised out of every sentence in which it occurs.”²⁵ Many people prefer to “write like they talk,” but final products often end up sounding lazy and elementary when writers take that approach. One simple, underrated way to omit needless words like “due to the fact that” is to employ the classic subordinating conjunction “because.”

Because it is so difficult to convince writers to revise or adjust their prescribed habits for publication, the need to incorporate courses into military leadership programs is critical to how effective people will be when they develop as leaders. Writing for publication does not have to be limited to authors with graduate degrees; people who are less confident with their writing skills should feel encouraged to contribute to the academic conversation as well because they will have support. Everyone must revise their drafts if they seek publication, regardless of writing skill, but no one can do it alone. One must cultivate relationships with instructors or editors, because the more eyes on an essay means the more it will develop in the process, and the stronger it will be in the end.

While I am still a relatively new person to the military, I feel that there is still a lot to learn about how to engage with military writing, but I think having a working understanding of leadership will help me be a better resource for aspiring military writers. There is no “right way” to write an article for publication, but there are many steps and considerations involved in dressing up an article for a publication. There are only a few considerations mentioned in this article, but so much effort and dedication go into an essay revision that there is no way to address everything at once. Adding courses to a military leadership program designed to address this material and cover all the requirements would benefit the military immensely, and the writers and leaders of the world would be better for it. ■

Notes

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2021 General William E. DePuy

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