

# Terminological Terrain

## How to Map and Navigate Jargon in Professional Writing

Dr. Elena Wicker

**F**ire. What comes to mind when you read that word? To the camper, fire means warmth and sustenance, and the trouble of getting it lit. The firefighter asks what type of fire and determines the best way to extinguish it. To a human resources professional, the person under discussion isn't coming in to work the next day. If a teenager says this to you, your outfit is probably excellent. The soldier hears the word and pulls the trigger.

Communities that share a common endeavor or profession, like the military, medicine, technology, and others, develop their own specialized words and phrases.<sup>1</sup> These words are recorded in reference documents and are taught to new members of the profession through training and education. For questions of meaning, a lawyer will reference *Black's Law Dictionary*, a doctor will search *Stedman* or *Taber's lexicon*, and the soldier will reference *Field Manual 1-02.1, Operational Terms*, or other strategy, theory, and doctrine.<sup>2</sup> Of all American professions, the military doesn't have the most technical language, but there are still a comparable number of words of military jargon than are in the average English-speaker's working vocabulary. "Milspeak" is quantitatively its own language.

The ability to use the right words and the right sources is a part of Army professionalism and is a necessary skill when



(Graphic from Bureau of Land Management, *Gobbledygook Has Gotta Go* [1966])

contributing to professional journals and debates. Instead of killing all jargon on sight, a more worthwhile skill is the ability to identify jargon and make an informed choice about when and why to use it. It is difficult to analyze our vocabularies, but it is possible with practice. Jargon is a tool to help you express ideas and build arguments, but only if you can identify and wield it intentionally.

## Obstacles to Mapping Terminological Terrain

There are four core challenges that arise when trying to identify and find balance with jargon: function, belonging, fragmentation, and recognition. As you write, these will undermine your ability to explain your arguments in clear language.

First, jargon is extremely functional. It exists for a reason: to rapidly and accurately transmit complex information. Brevity codes are a great analogy for military jargon more broadly.<sup>3</sup> Brevity codes are one-word military codes, typically used over the radio, that signal far more complex ideas. If you say “mud,” you are telling the receiver that you’ve spotted a ground threat, but it hasn’t fired yet. “Pond” means carry out the jamming plan laid out in previous orders. Spelling out each message takes more words and more time. However, brevity codes only work if both sender and receiver have the same understanding of the code word. A brevity code means nothing to someone who has never been taught multiservice brevity doctrine. Army words are extremely functional within the Army but mean nothing to those outside the profession.

Second, if you don’t use the appropriate language, you could be identified as an interloper or worse, incompetent. Carl Builder describes the Army as a “guild,” an “association of craftsmen who take the greatest pride in their skills, as opposed to their possessions or positions.”<sup>4</sup> The ability to use Army language accurately and appropriately is a sign of understanding and belonging in the Army guild. Unfortunately, this means that any lack of understanding could have negative consequences. If someone reveals that they do not understand the language, they may be reprimanded or sidelined. This is why it is so rare to hear someone ask what jargon means or what acronyms stand for, even when most in the room couldn’t explain the jargon themselves.

Third, there are many smaller dialects within the broader set of Army jargon. Military jargon is extremely fragmented. Language emerges around a specialized set of skills, and words are developed as needed. The U.S. Army has seventeen basic branches, twenty-three functional areas, and nearly two hundred military occupational specialties (depending on how you’re counting). These include infantry, engineers, West Point professors, and range widely from bandmasters to astronauts. There are higher-level terms that everyone shares, like permanent change of station (PCS), but technical specialties vary widely. Specialties whose tasks are closer to one another (like infantry and armor) have more jargon in common. Those whose professional tasks are more different will have greater difference in language. For example, an Army bandmaster and an Army astronaut might both have permanent changes of station, but their work requires entirely different vocabularies.

Finally, a suite of cognitive biases makes it hard to analyze our own vocabularies.

First, we forget how we know what we know. We assume that other people have the same background knowledge as we do. (They often do not.) This is the curse of knowledge, or the *curse of expertise*.<sup>5</sup> For each soldier, every school, branch, assignment, deployment, and experience has contributed to a unique mosaic of background knowledge.

Next, the more frequently we are exposed to information, the more we assume it is true. This is *repetition bias* and *illusory truth*: the more you look at it, the more it seems right, even if you know

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better.<sup>6</sup> This is how you miss spelling errors after four or five edits of the same paragraph. This is also the bias that Vladimir Putin’s “firehose of falsehoods” relies on.<sup>7</sup>

Third, the illusion of *explanatory depth* makes us think that we understand complex systems ... until we are asked to explain them.<sup>8</sup> If asked whether you understand how an M1 Abrams works, you might say yes. But could you name every component and explain how each acts and interacts, step by step? Can you describe exactly how, in plain language, “multi-domain operations” are supposed to work? (There are certainly folks who can do both, but they are in the minority.) Jargon is a great enabler of explanatory depth illusions: you can use the technical term without ever having to explain exactly what it is or how it works.

Lastly, humans rarely explain themselves as they communicate. Jargon is rarely defined, and acronyms are rarely expanded. This is how we can learn how to use an acronym correctly in a sentence without ever having learned what it stands for. Despite these biases, it is entirely possible to learn how to actively recognize and work with your professional language.

## How to Navigate Gobbledygook

Technical dialects have risen from necessity, and over the course of military training, that language becomes normalized in your speech and writing. It can be very hard to identify your own jargon. As an exercise, consider the following sentences from the opening of the current Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations*:

FM 3-0 expands on the Army’s capstone doctrine for multidomain operations described in ADP 3-0. It describes how Army forces contribute landpower to the joint force and integrate joint capabilities into operations on land to achieve military objectives and fulfill policy aims.<sup>9</sup>

How many words in this example are Army jargon?

The answer is every single noun. They all have special relevance to the U.S. Army, making them coded words with hidden meanings. Even the word “land,” which at first glance seems to be a standard English word, signals a specific domain of war and the Army’s legacy of excellence in land warfare. Once you begin to actively look for jargon, you will notice it everywhere.

The ability to identify and selectively use jargon is a muscle that grows stronger with practice.

The average non-military reader will not catch the significance of “land” as a domain of war. However, when you are writing for a professional publication such as in *Military Review* or another journal, the average professional Army reader will immediately understand the relevance of the land domain. In fact, the debates you are contrib-

uting to will require the application of professional language to complex questions. How do we learn to analyze our own vocabularies and writing, and then apply those abilities to professional writing?

## 1. Read and Write

Anyone can write, but not all can write well ... yet. Stephen King wrote that to be a writer, you must “read a lot and write a lot.”<sup>10</sup> No shortcuts. You might hear the saying “it’s only a lot of reading if you do it,” but the idea that soldiers aren’t readers is a myth. During World War I, books were sent alongside soldiers headed to the front in crates designed to bolt together into bookshelves.<sup>11</sup> A journalist described Army transports setting sail from Hoboken, New Jersey, as holding over double the number of passengers of a normal transatlantic voyage. There was no wasted space, “but there is room for books.”<sup>12</sup> Articles and debates in professional journals have driven the development of the modern force, like Gen. Donn Starry’s “Extending the



(Graphic by author)

Battlefield” article in *Military Review*.<sup>13</sup> The U.S. Army has always been a reading and writing Army.

Writing styles, or genres, are often taught to us, sometimes unknowingly.<sup>14</sup> In his reflections on writing, Frank Gavin described the challenges of finding his own voice amid the conventions of academic writing.<sup>15</sup> His undergraduate students were unconvinced of the jargon-filled academic scholarship, but graduate students—future professors—are taught to emulate the bombastic byzantine writing style evinced by the seminal articles of their academic fields. We model our writing on what we read. This doesn’t mean that you can only read professional journals to write for professional journals. Professional journals will keep you most up-to-date on developments in the Army profession, but there is no sole genre relevant to the Army reader. There are great works of doctrine, history, science fiction, poetry, cartoons, academic tomes, biographies, memoirs, memos, and others that have shaped the U.S. Army.

Every genre of writing develops meaning in a slightly different way that you can successfully emulate. This begins with structure. Take your favorite pieces of writing and turn them into outlines. Many articles start with a hook, introduce the argument, make their case, give some examples, and close with recommendations. Academic articles have a hook, a theory, a few case studies, a discussion, and close. These outlines are templates, telling you exactly what you need to write. As you test and experiment with these templates, certain structures will inspire you more than others. Read widely, pay attention to structure, and start putting pen to paper. (Or fingers to keyboard.) Just like physical training, practice and repetition hone your writing skills. Like any muscle, you must get in your writing reps and sets.

## 2. Assume It’s Jargon (It Probably Is)

If you are writing about anything related to your current or prior work, it is a safe bet that you are using a lot of jargon. If an explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) technician is writing about explosives, they’re using a lot of jargon. (And “EOD” is itself jargon.) The same is true of a strategist writing about strategy, or any soldier writing about the Army. Each prior assignment has taught you a set of technical jargon that you can now use fluently and unconsciously.

Language also evolves over time. What was once meaningless can become meaningful, and vice versa. In 1976, Col. Lloyd J. Matthews, an associate editor of *Parameters*, wrote “To Military Writers: A Word from the Editor on Words,” which was a guide for authors describing twenty-five vague words that were “used to unimaginative excess.”<sup>16</sup> He laid out elements of “Pentagonese, military gobbledygook, and Army officialese,” which he deemed obstacles to effective communication.<sup>17</sup> These overused words included configuration, image, interface, ongoing, orchestrate, parameter, scenario, spectrum, and utilize; these words are in common use today.

When talking about any topic relating to your prior assignments, education, or current work, your going-in assumption should be that, like FM 3-0, all your nouns are jargon. (And probably quite a few of the verbs.) Your cognitive biases will all be telling you that your writing is perfectly clear and free of any technical terms. Your biases are lying to you. Once you accept this fact, you can begin to shape it. This is necessary because, as Stephen King advises authors, vocabulary is “the bread of writing.”<sup>18</sup>

## 3. Write for Your Audience

This is common advice, but it is often hard to follow. The Army is not a linguistic monolith. Different communities have unique technical language—words that mean something specific to that profession. If you are writing for your branch’s professional journal, translation is less of a challenge. However, a writer in one Army branch attempting to reach readers in a different branch must think about translation. This is even more challenging if writing for the Army as a whole, if writing for the joint community, and especially if writing for a non-military audience. Remember fragmentation: Army astronauts need different terminology than Army bandmasters. The Navy speaks a different language than the Army. Read your audience’s main journal and adopt their language to express your argument.

Here are examples of words that can cause problems in translation:

convergence, division, domain, experiment, force, friction, gravity, integration, range, momentum, kinetic, solution, transfer, unit, work.

These are all military terminology and jargon, evoking some multidomain operations and Clausewitzian principles of war, but they are also mathematical and scientific principles. Clausewitzian friction differentiates “real War from War on paper,” but mathematical friction is represented by the equation  $F = \mu N$ .<sup>19</sup> Translation is a serious challenge for the military and scientific communities, not only because they often use different words, but also because the communities use the same words to mean very different things.

There are two simple ways to check if something is jargon or standard English: (1) ask someone with no prior military experience or exposure if it is, or (2) look it up in a *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*.<sup>20</sup> Standard English dictionary entries have numbered lists of definitions, typically ordered by how common the definition is. If your intended definition is not listed first, then there is a more common definition in use than the one you’re thinking of. If you look up “operation,” the military use is number six, preceded by “the quality of being functional” and the medical and mathematical meanings.<sup>21</sup> For the word “friction,” the Clausewitzian meaning doesn’t even make the list.

If you’re writing for an Army professional journal, you also have FM 1-02.1, *Operational Terms*, or the *DoD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* at your disposal.<sup>22</sup> A *Military Review* article from 1972 on the military vocabulary stated that “those who try to understand the mysteries of military communication should have [the *DoD Dictionary*] handy so that they may look up baffling phrases.”<sup>23</sup> If your word isn’t in those documents, that doesn’t mean it isn’t a legitimate Army word, it just means that the word isn’t codified in doctrine.

## 4. Just Tell Us What You Mean

We like to say, “words have meaning.” I would update this to say that most words have meaning. George Orwell wrote in his essay, “Politics and the English Language,” that when certain topics are raised, “prose consists less and less of *words* chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of *phrases* tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house.”<sup>24</sup> Every profession has their required prefabricated words and phrases. For the Army, those might be “multi-domain operations” or “integrated deterrence.” Political scientists must be able to talk about “ontologies” and

“multicollinearity.” These *can* have meaning, but they do not always. It is critical that you develop the skills to identify the difference.

A warning to writers and readers: in 1973, researchers hired an actor to give an utterly incomprehensible lecture on game theory to a class of medical students.<sup>25</sup> The lecture was a pompous script, crafted from academic jargon and designed to be utterly meaningless. After the lecture, students gave favorable reviews and some even said that they had read publications by “Dr. Myron Fox.” The researchers later described how complicated language and confident presentation effectively overrode the students’ “crap detectors,” so they perceived gobbledygook as genius. Complex language presented confidently will hide logical flaws from both you and your readers.

If you have to say “well what I really mean is,” then you’re overcomplicating your writing. Just tell the reader what you really mean. Spell out your acronyms (or don’t use them at all), define your jargon, and don’t hide your points behind complex language. Simple language does not mean a simple argument; it ensures that others can understand and substantively engage with your writing. As Col. Matthews wrote in 1976, “The careful writer will always distinguish between the intelligently modern and the mindlessly faddish.”<sup>26</sup> You’re building arguments, not prefabricated Orwellian henhouses.

## 5. Jargon Is Your Friend, Not Your Enemy

It is possible to go too far with jargon removal. Randall Munroe of XKCD wrote a book called the *Thing Explainer* that only uses the thousand most used words in the English language.<sup>27</sup> In that book, a helicopter is a “sky boat with turning wings,” which is hilarious, but this doesn’t help an Army pilot. Army pilots need FM 3-04, *Army Aviation*, a full set of technical manuals, and more.<sup>28</sup> If you are contributing to a professional debate, you must use professional language. True “plain language” may undermine the intent of your writing.

Orwell wrote, “Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.”<sup>29</sup> As a member of a professional community, when writing for a professional journal, sometimes the long word is the right choice. Rather



than kill all jargon on sight, use your best judgment in light of number 3 on this list. Identify your audience and translate your argument into terms they understand. Munroe created a website called Simple Writer, where you can type in a sentence and it will flag any word that is not in the top thousand most common words of the English language.<sup>30</sup> Amusingly, if you put the FM 3-0 sentences from the jargon identification exercise above into the writer, it flags almost every word except “land,” which is a word we know has special relevance to the Army.

## A Jargon-Conscious Checklist for Writers

When I describe how to write with and without jargon, I present the following checklist. It expands on the researching, writing, and editing portions of the Harding Project’s guidance for starting professional writing.<sup>31</sup> Again, this is not intended to strip all jargon out of your writing. This is to insert jargon recognition into your process.

- ◆ Identify topic and intent. What do you want to write about? Some journals publish suggested

Sgt. 1st Class Amanda Tidmore (left) and Corbin Campbell, 305th Military Intelligence Battalion cadre, conduct research for the Krak- en Analytics writing competition 17 April 2024 at the CW2 Christo- pher G. Nason Military Intelligence Library, Fort Huachuca, Arizona. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Spencer Bryant, U.S. Army)

themes and topics, like *Military Review*, and these are a good place to start.<sup>32</sup>

- ◆ Identify target publication and check the submission guidelines. This will give you word count, citation style, and the journal’s philosophy. If they have a writer’s guide, read that too.
- ◆ Identify your audience’s lexicon. Are you writing for an Army publication? Who is their readership mainly? Use this to calibrate your jargon use. (If you’re writing for *Army Sustainment*, you can use more sustainer language. War on The Rocks? Take it out or define it as you go.)
- ◆ Write! Draft your article using submission criteria and audience language as best you can.
- ◆ Reread your work through your audience’s eyes to identify technical language. First, just mark or highlight your jargon. You’re looking for anything

having to do with your specific Army experience and any words that you hear a lot at work. Err on the side of assuming words are jargon; they most likely are.

- Look through your article again, and this time highlight every acronym. (There are few exceptions to this; “U.S.” is one of them.) If you only use the acronym once or twice, spell it out and delete the acronym. If you use it more than twice, make sure that the acronym is spelled out the first time you use it. Keep all acronyms flagged for the next step; military acronyms are just abbreviated jargon.
- For each flagged word, ask yourself whether the word is critical to your argument. Does it name the debate to which you are contributing? Will your reader understand it? If the answer is an unequivocal yes to any of these questions, leave it. If the word is a stand-in for a complex idea, provide a sentence of explanation and cite the source. If the word is not critical, replace it with a standard English equivalent or your audience’s synonyms. If you are at all in doubt, replace.
- Bonus tip #1. If you are writing for a public outlet and are trying to remove all your technical language, get a nonmilitary reader to look at your work. Nonmilitary readers are those with no prior military *exposure*. Uniformed service members, Army civilians, contractors, and most spouses are disqualified. They will have learned some amount of Army jargon and could miss technical language as they read your work.
- You’ve chosen which pieces of jargon stay and go, so now you need to revisit the length guidelines. Remember, plain language is almost always longer than jargon. You will likely have to get your word count back within the journal limits after you replace jargon.

- Bonus tip #2. Check your work’s readability in Microsoft Word. This is under the “editor” button in document stats. It won’t catch the short pieces of jargon that are easily mistaken for standard English (like “fires”), but it’ll help you identify run-on sentences or unnecessary complexity in your article.
- Ensure that the content still says what you need it to say. Once you’ve edited out the appropriate amount of jargon, does your argument still make sense?
- Submit!

## Finding Balance with Army Language

Writing guides don’t say “kill your jargon” because jargon is inherently a bad thing, they say it because too many writers don’t use jargon judiciously. Jargon is a precision weapon. Using jargon intentionally can establish your expertise, build credibility with your peers, and allow you to express complicated technical ideas. Eliminating jargon strategically builds trust with readers, increases understanding, reaches a larger audience, and allows more readers to engage with your argument substantively. Jargon should not always be killed; it should be wielded selectively and intentionally.

Don’t be fooled into thinking that recognizing your jargon is easy or that you will be able to analyze your own vocabulary immediately. Community pressure, cognitive bias, and habit are working against your ability to identify your jargon and tame it. Take comfort in the fact that you are not alone on this journey. The ability to actively recognize jargon takes time and effort to develop, and it requires taking active steps toward understanding your vocabulary and how you use it. By understanding where jargon comes from, its functions, and how to recognize it, we can all begin to write and communicate more effectively.<sup>33</sup> ■

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