

# Aligning Incentives

## Professional Writing in the Army's Operational Domain

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Clear writing is an essential skill for Army leaders—important to all, regardless of age, rank, branch, component, or position. It benefits soldiers while serving and is an invaluable tool when transitioning to civilian life. Using strong writing skills to contribute to the U.S. Army's professional dialogue is key to ensuring a healthy flow of ideas and perspectives across the force.<sup>1</sup> Sadly, numerous Army publications have suffered in recent years with decreasing article submissions, readership, and impact across the force.<sup>2</sup> Senior Army leaders, including Chief of Staff of the Army (CSA) Gen. Randy George, recently called on all soldiers to return to more intellectual rigor with professional writing, supporting dialogue on critical topics in professional Army publications.<sup>3</sup> The newly launched Harding Project supports the CSA's guidance, seeking to reinvigorate U.S. Army professional journals and making writing venues more accessible for soldiers across the force.<sup>4</sup>

A key to successfully implementing the CSA's guidance is a robust supply of timely, well-written articles from the operational force. However, writing a professional article can seem daunting for many soldiers. The nationwide decline in writing skills is well-documented, and schools are less frequently mandating writing courses, including at West Point.<sup>5</sup> While professional writing courses are featured in the U.S. Army's institutional domain, covered in most professional military schools, a soldier's writing education often stagnates in the operational domain. The U.S. Army's fast-paced operational tempo and profuse tasks create trade-offs for soldiers and leaders who can only accomplish so much.<sup>6</sup> Varying education levels and writing

skills create further challenges for unit leaders who would like to create a writing development program. Given these constraints and trends, how can a unit's leadership develop and incentivize professional writing in their organization?

This article provides a way for a battalion to operationalize the CSA's guidance and cultivate writing skills in the operational domain. While the Army's institutional domain has lead on educating writing skills, we argue that leaders in the operational domain need to do more to improve their subordinates' writing skills in accordance with the Army's leader development model (see the figure). Professional writing deserves a central place in every unit's leader development strategy and needs to be incentivized by commanders. Leaders at echelon can play an important role in cultivating a subordinate's writing skills, creating unit-level writing development programs, setting reasonable goals, mentoring authors through the submission process, and most importantly—incentivizing writing. More plainly, commanders should look to make professional discourse “cool” in their organizations.

We launched the Mustang Writing Initiative in January 2023, comprising a series of leader professional development sessions, working lunches, writing workshops, and battalion internal peer-review sessions. With concerted effort and command emphasis, seven Mustang authors have published articles in professional journals over the last year. Another six, including officers and noncommissioned officers, have papers submitted for review or papers that are in various stages of development. This experience shows Army leaders in the operational domain can play an important role in developing their

subordinates' writing skills, fostering better writers, and supporting the CSAs call to write.

## The Mustang Writing Initiative—How It Started

As we mentioned, creating an effective incentive structure aligned with professional writing helps produce results in an era of competing demands on leader time. What motivated the authors to write? The answer is simple—we are in a business where the inability to do one's job can result in the unnecessary death of soldiers. Combat experience as junior officers was central to shaping our professional outlook and worldview. Specifically, both of us have experienced a common occurrence of showing up to an area of operations to relieve a unit from a mission only to realize that the previous team did not write anything down about best practices or what they learned. We came to understand the importance and professional imperative of sharing the answers to the test, especially when that knowledge came at the expense of soldiers' lives. Writing serves to formalize those lessons and memorialize the efforts of the thousands of soldiers who came before. Units can fall into the trap of immediately moving to solve a problem they do not understand without a professional discourse.

The Mustang Writing Initiative (hereinafter the Initiative) was initially published in our battalion's quarterly training guidance as part of the battalion's leader development strategy. The Initiative began as an optional effort designed to support any Mustangs interested in authoring a professional paper. The Initiative's expanded purpose was to improve Mustangs' written communication skills with tailored feedback, peer review, and senior leader engagement. We deliberately decided to make participation optional, acknowledging that professional writing takes time and focus that may not be available for all soldiers in our formation.

Given these challenges associated with professional writing, we did not mandate publication in a professional outlet as the only end state. Publishing an article in a U.S. Army journal was not a feasible first step for numerous volunteers who needed additional writing development. We acknowledged different education levels and writing experiences among Initiative volunteers, and we had a broad definition for a "professional paper." Instead of only focusing on professional publications, we encouraged participants also to consider

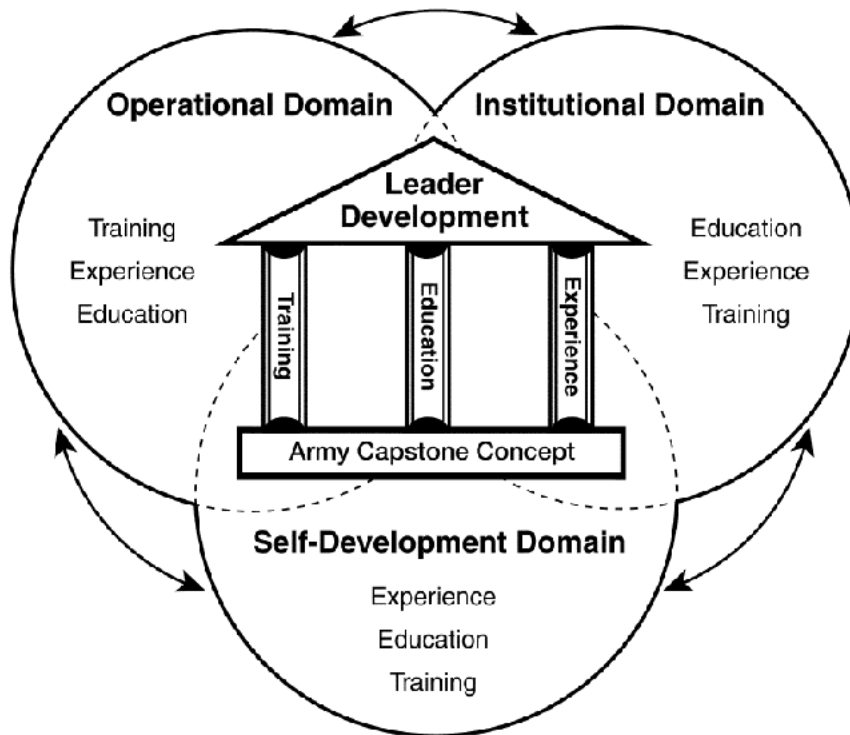
publishing an after action review (AAR) or a short white paper intended to be shared across our brigade and division.

Given an already busy battle rhythm, we conducted monthly Initiative meetings as a working lunch to maximize attendance and limit scheduling conflicts. Initial meetings focused on identifying potential topics, developing thesis statements, conducting literature reviews, creating outlines, and leveraging evidence. Additionally, we offered short discussions about writing techniques from sources such as Dr. Trent Lythgoe's *Professional Writing: The Command and General Staff College Writing Guide*.<sup>7</sup> As authors developed outlines and drafted papers, they received tailored feedback on working drafts from one of us (battalion commander or XO), along with submission advice and recommended next steps. As the Initiative has evolved, the monthly meetings now entail the following:

- We briefly discuss recent professional publications of interest to the 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment, and recommend future reading.
- Successful authors share their publication experience to include thesis development, evidence selection, research process, outlet selection, and submission lessons learned.
- Working draft authors share an update on their projects, including current draft status, literature review, help needed, and goal outlet or product (e.g., AAR or white paper).

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(Figure from Department of the Army Pamphlet 350-58, *Army Leader Development Program*)

## Figure. Army's Leader Development Model

- We close the meeting with an opportunity for new authors to share project ideas, ask questions, and receive feedback from the audience on thesis development, paper outline, and literature review help.

In total, this monthly working lunch lasts an hour, and participants are encouraged to schedule follow-on appointments as needed to receive focused assistance with any steps in the writing process. On average, over the last year, each of us invested approximately ten hours into the Mustang Writing per month; those hours comprised monthly group meetings, one-on-one meetings, and time spent reviewing draft outlines and papers. We've found this process to be an effective method to develop our junior writers, educate participants about the research and writing process, mentor volunteers through the submission process, and hold authors accountable for completing drafts. Eleven Mustang authors who used this model over the last year wrote nine professional articles, three white papers, and two AARs that contributed to the U.S. Army's professional discourse and shared lessons learned across the force.

In addition to the Initiative, we instituted a requirement for the staff duty officer (SDO) to write an analytical essay during their twenty-four-hour duty. Using the division and brigade commander priorities as a guide, we selected articles for the SDO to read and write a one-page, single-spaced essay asking the author to explain how the selected article is relevant to their current position. The SDO then sends that essay to the battalion commander, executive officer, command sergeant major, and their commander and first sergeant. Feedback for the SDO essay comes in the form of a note from the battalion commander focused on the essay's substance, the writing, and recommendations to improve. Mustang officers serve as SDO once a month, meaning they will write twelve essays a year. The paper is a page in length, requiring five minutes to read and another ten minutes to type a response.

### What We Learned

Foremost, a unit writing program takes time and effort. Specifically, it takes commander energy that is already short in supply and in high demand. A more professionalized and intellectually curious team is

more lethal than one that does not engage in an active dialogue about more effectively achieving readiness. We believe the writing program's value comes from the pride attained from completing the rigorous process associated with professional writing and the camaraderie that comes with working with peers to make these articles happen. A successful method to ensure completion is to encourage coauthorship to

to dive in themselves. Our investment in the program showed that we valued professional discourse, enabling the program to take off with new authors joining the Initiative every month. What started as a handful of captains has evolved into a program with all ranks including noncommissioned officers.

Another way to incentivize writing is senior leader affirmation. Successful Army writing across the

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help share the burden as well as further the network of people thinking critically in the unit. This is even more true when the authors are writing about new and innovative ways of training ready formations and employing new technology. All of us have heard young leaders complain about how stupid something is—well, why don't they write about it and bring about change?

Additionally, we are not advocating for everyone to submit articles to professional journals. The flood of papers would drown the already thin editorial teams of our military journals, and the rigor required for professional publication is not necessary for everyone in the formation. We have found over the last year that we do not struggle to find people who want to publish. Most people feel they have nothing to offer the larger community, are afraid of the backlash associated with online trolls, and/or feel that they aren't good enough to see something like this come to fruition. It is our job as leaders to encourage and assist those who are seeking professional development and to show our people that we care.

Like all leader development efforts, the number one key to success of any writing program is commander participation and follow-through. If the battalion commander is personally writing an article, participating in the program by sharing drafts (even if they are underdeveloped and need improvement) and taking feedback about how to best proceed with their article, then others will be encouraged

force requires buy-in at echelon, with senior leaders meaningfully engaging with authors and continuing the professional dialogue started in an article. Authors will be encouraged to continue professional writing if they receive one email from a general officer telling them to keep going. Or from a battalion commander, company commander, or first sergeant who gained something from the article published by a first lieutenant or staff sergeant. If an author spends months refining an article and exercises personal courage by opening themselves up to worldwide criticism only to receive deafening silence, then it is reasonable to assume that author will never write again. Worse, they may actively discourage those around them from attempting professional writing.

## Conclusion

The CSA and the Harding Project both note that U.S. Army professional journals need to be revitalized to strengthen written discourse and produce new ideas for emerging operational concepts and technology. Writing education in the U.S. Army cannot only exist in the institutional domain and professional military education. As noted in the Army's leader development model, education continues in the operational domain (see the figure).<sup>8</sup> To answer the CSA's charge and create an additional supply of articles, the operational domain needs to do more to foster professional writing in its ranks. We should not allow our people to take complicated topics and boil them down into one-slide concept of operations and instead,

encourage our people to write tight, intelligent papers to communicate those ideas across a larger community of engaged minds. Leaders at echelon can enhance writing skills in their units by creating unit writing development programs and incentivizing their soldiers to write professionally. Though the force is challenged by a busy operational tempo, an investment from leaders at echelon can provide soldiers with the writing development they need to meaningfully engage in professional discourse, share lessons learned, refine doctrine, and prepare the U.S. Army for the complicated operating environment of the future.

## Finally, Congrats to These Mustang Authors!

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- 1st Lt. Dan Slaton, “Operating Upper Tactical Internet in the High North,” *Army Communicator* (forthcoming)

## Current Mustang Writing Initiative Working Drafts

- Staff Sgt. Austin Abadie, Sgt. Damien Kirven, 1st Lt. Ben Kenneaster, and Staff Sgt. Theodore Montgomery, “Bradley Fighting Vehicle Lethality Initiative: An SME Informed Method for Improving Gunnery Results”
- Staff Sgt. Cordell Wright, “Back-Ups to Belt-Fed Machineguns”
- Capt. Chris Smartt, “Creative Battalion Religious Support during EUCOM Rotation”
- Capt. Cam Waugh, “Analysis of the Armored Cavalry Troop Performance during CBR XVIII”
- 1st Lt. Christian Arnett, “Battalion LNO Experience on EUCOM Rotation” ■

## Notes

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