A Catalyst for Writing

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We know those ideas are out there. We see them every time we talk to soldiers, whether at home station, at the combat training centers, or on deployment. … Yet our profession currently misses out on those ideas. … Yet the nature of our profession is that the details are just as important—probably even more important—than the big ideas…[and] the Army needs the absolute best ideas at echelon.

—"Strengthening the Profession"

This article introduces the concept of a *catalyst paper* as a distinct approach to writing Army white papers that encourages all ranks to share observations from the field, introduce suggestions, and examine lessons learned. Such grassroots research papers are written to help busy leaders think, spark dialogue among their peers, and introduce their teams to new methods. Commanders can share them across units and help nominate papers for publication in Army professional journals for dissemination and preservation.

The point of a catalyst paper is to concisely present ideas with a less formal writing style than typically found in academic journals. Catalyst papers encourage authors to relax their writing style toward a more conversational and digestible tone—because the papers are not meant for academics. They are written by leaders in the field for their fellow soldiers.

Background

Gen. Randy George, as the new chief of staff of the Army (CSA), has a vision to strengthen the profession, "from top to bottom by building expertise through written discourse."[1] We need to do better than using blogs and social media to share ideas or commenting through tweets. We must get better at putting pen to paper so we can communicate more effectively, share our ideas so we can learn from each other and transform at a faster pace, cross talk, challenge one another, appreciate what each of us are learning at echelon and across the globe, and think critically.

The problem is soldiers and leaders hesitate to write. Cultural stigmas, biases, and self-imposed barriers inhibit soldiers from writing about their ideas and sharing them with the broader Army community.

The CSA and sergeant major of the Army (SMA) acknowledge that writing "requires some courage to put your ideas out there, and both individuals and the institution will take some licks in the process."[2] They pledge that, "We will be open to the best ideas, even if they challenge the sacred cows of the Army's conventional wisdom."[3] We need to address the barriers preventing Army leaders from writing professionally especially if they have really interesting insights they know are worth sharing.

Inhibitors to Writing

Soldiers and leaders hesitate to write for many reasons. For one, they may be rusty at it. Furthermore, the thought of writing rarely evokes pleasant memories from our academic pursuits. For those who do write, the idea of publishing can seem daunting: *Where to start? Am I a good enough writer?* Leaders might feel too busy to see the project through to publication: *Is it worth the time, energy, and risk of rejection to attempt pushing this paper through a laborious back-and-forth publishing process?*

Then there is the litany of cultural stigmas, biases, and anti-intellectual norms still lingering within the

Army. Col. Todd Schmidt, editor in chief of the Army journal *Military Review*, acknowledges the anti-intellectual dilemma in the Army, stating, "Often, military writers, or 'influencers,' run the risk of castigation as self-promoters who are trying to draw attention to themselves. They are categorized as ego-driven in their efforts to write, share ideas, and join the public discourse."[4] Schmidt admits it might be true. But even if it's not the reality, just allowing that stigma to persist dissuades potential authors from bringing their ideas into professional forums.

Brainstorming was conceived in 1953 by a businessman named Alex Osborn who recognized his employees seemed to lack creativity but knew they were really just holding back on sharing good ideas. Susan Caine, the author of *Quiet*, wrote, "They had good ideas, Osborn believed, but were loath to share them for fear of their colleague's judgement … The solution was to remove the threat of criticism from group work."[5] He thus invented the idea of brainstorming, with four rules to ensure ideas were generated in a nonjudgemental atmosphere.[6]

In today's Army writing culture, a piece written by a lieutenant general is likely to be received differently than the same article written by a lieutenant. The credibility associated with rank and experience makes us more receptive to a senior officer's ideas than those of a junior leader. Experience is valuable, but good ideas come from all levels. Prejudging an article based on the author's rank or position stifles professional discourse. And, since rank does not correlate to intellect, we need to consciously avoid lending undue bias on the author's rank or position to prejudge their ideas. Just let the merits of the idea speak for themselves and spark conversation, debate, and counterpoints on their own.

The good news is that the CSA, the SMA, and other senior Army leaders are on a mission to change the Army's writing culture

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Previous page: A soldier writes during the essay preparation event 7 September 2023 at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin. Sixty soldiers from across the nation traveled to Fort McCoy to compete in the 2023 U.S. Army Reserve Best Squad Competition. (Photo by Sgt. Alyssa Blom, U.S. Army Reserve)

and make it more approachable for all ranks.[7] We have an opportunity to snuff the old anti-intellectual notions within the Army and make professional writing an integral part of leader development. We just need to breach or bypass some of the institutional barriers that hold writers back. A good place to start is rethinking how we write and who we are writing for.

Reorienting Our Expectations

There's a pervasive notion within the Army that professional writing means we have to write in a sophisticated style, but this impression makes our writing rigid. Stuffy. Boring. It drives a lot of Army authors to write word salads and clunky sentences full of buzzwords. This is a shame. We can all admit something upfront: most people don't like reading "graduate-level" writing. Even those who have graduate degrees don't like reading dense, dry, long-winded sentences. If we don't like to read that stuff, why do we feel the need to write that way?

Lt. Gen. Milford Beagle Jr., commander of the Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, recently noted that Army writing needs transformation. The Army's last guidance on effective writing was written in 1986. That manual notes, "Too much Army writing does not communicate well. It confuses rather than clarifies; it is wordy rather than concise; it hinders the main idea rather than getting to the point."[8] Beagle's comment was simply, "I say this is true, true, and true, and the same can be said for the year 2023."[9] It seems like it is time to transform how we encourage leaders to write.

We can start by ending the myth that professional Army writing should meet some bar of "graduate-level writing" (whatever that actually is).[10] This assumed standard drives writers to add jargon to sound smarter or doctrinally sound. In the process, the key points can get buried. We conflate the distinction between official writing and professional writing. Clunky writing covers central ideas in fluff and lets the reader's attention drift. Memorandums, awards, and evaluations need a formal style and active voice. Professional writing can be fluid and engaging. It's okay to dial back the Army's war against passive voice in professional writing. We should instead focus our attention on communicating ideas, not creating dread about rigid styles and specific formatting requirements.

A Practical Writing Style

Sometimes we try too hard to say simple ideas. A good practice in those moments is to step back from the keyboard, look away from the page, and just say out loud what you are trying to say … and write that, exactly how you said it out loud. That's an easy way to clean up clunky writing. We do not need to overcomplicate what we are trying to say or place undue expectations on how we write. The hallmark of good writing (and good communication) is to distill complex issues into something simple to understand. This should be the expectation for catalyst papers: easily digestible, concise, and clear, not muddled with buzzwords and jargon.

We should reorient our writing style toward a more practical style, striving for a conversational, not lofty, tone that is intentionally digestible. The sweet spot is probably somewhere between three to six pages (1,500–3,000 words), depending on the nature of the topic. Too short and you might not cover the substance enough, but too long and it risks a dismissal as "TL;DR."[11] Any longer than about ten pages or five thousand words and the topic might be too broad or best presented as a series of papers.[12] Experienced writers come to appreciate that it is actually easier to write a long paper than a short one—concise writing takes more effort than rambling.

There doesn't need to be strict formats and etiquette to writing catalyst papers. No *two-line spacing followed by one-line with left-indent, size 12 Arial font, set margins* and landmines everywhere for leaders to harp on. The papers should generally include the bottom line up front, some background context, key points, recommendations, suggestions for further research and development if applicable, and a conclusion. These papers should not grow into much more than what they are intended to be: concise research papers to share findings and conclusions among Army colleagues.

The relaxed style of a catalyst paper helps instill confidence in novice writers and gets them to research concepts and write about their findings. It preserves the best version of their thoughts so others can learn from what they discovered.

Fostering Initiatives at the Unit Level

Catalyst papers focus on adding value to the immediate organization: the battalion, the brigade, the division. They are unit-driven initiatives curated by

command teams as they sense good ideas emerging from within their formations.

It can be an individual effort or a collective endeavor, such as a platoon leader and platoon sergeant working with their noncommissioned officers or leaders from different units (and different perspectives) collaborating to research and write the paper. Or, one action officer can be the lead author to pull from as many peers, outside experts, and contributors as needed. The

project. It's natural to think research is about discovering new theories, creating paradigm shifts, and marking inflection points: big ideas, cracking the code on a devilish problem, going deep on an issue, and solving all its tangled problems.

Research comes in many forms. It can be digging up old concepts from the past from archived materials and books or talking to our gray beards to show how what was old is new again, but different. It can be researching

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ideas and the content are paramount.[13] The experience of doing real-world research with real-world impact is powerful. The trick is to find issues that soldiers are already inclined to work on, knowledge gaps within the team or emerging problems that they hope to solve.

Young leaders often just need a nudge to write and do research. This best comes from command teams who notice a soldier's demonstrated interest for an important topic and ask them to write about it as a catalyst paper. These papers can be great primers ahead of training or before fielding new equipment, or to capture progress at the end of one training cycle that can carry over to the next. Catalyst papers do not need to be approached as major endeavors expected for publication and shared with the masses. Start them as an expeditious project to help surrounding colleagues to benefit from our work and our findings. We fight and die for the guy to the left and right. Dedicating the time to help our left and right by writing taps into that same motivation. And selfless servants, quiet professionals don't need or necessarily want the credit or attention from publishing. They just want to contribute to the team.

A catalyst paper should take a few days or weeks to finish and get out to the force. Set a reasonable suspense and spare the soldier from making the project more demanding than it needs to be.

A Catalyst for Research

It's helpful to dispel some misperceptions about what to expect or envision when we take on a research

how other units, services, agencies, or civilian groups approach the same activity: doing interviews; reading their manuals; or attending or observing training from other services, civilian schools, and international courses—cross-pollinating.

But experienced researchers come to understand that most good research yields base hits, advancing the needle—the conversation, the knowledge of the field—slightly forward. "Marginal improvement is worth seeking … For marginally better thinking about an issue can lead to much more than marginally better results."[14] So, catalyst papers help one set of soldiers pass the baton to the next, who pass it to the next, where we continue to build on each other's work. Validate, test, and reexamine findings. Determine the limits of theories and the specific applications, and how an idea works best under certain conditions but fails to produce in others.

That is the goal for Army professional discourse. Experiment with ideas, pick at one thread in a tangled mess of a problem, and share what is learned in that moment: successes along with the failures, the unexpected discoveries that came to light along the way, indications of how we can adapt old methods to new challenges, and what else is needed to further understand the problem.

Lastly, there is a hidden benefit to doing research that mirrors the same effect of teaching. Nothing teaches an individual about a topic better than having to teach a class on it. That same effect carries over

in having leaders write a research paper on topic. Knowing our words will be read by others forces us to understand the subject, examine what we are trying to say, and discover aspects to the issue that we never knew existed.

There's a secret to having motivated leaders do research on a topic: no matter how well the paper turns out, just going through the journey of having to research and write about it forces those involved to become better.

Scope and Purpose

Catalyst papers help us learn about another unit's experimentation, where they found success, and what did not work. As leaders, we often choose to write after we succeed and internally after we fail. This is a mistake. Writing about failures is as important as sharing successes. And nobody just wants to read someone else's victory lap. So, avoid writing a paper that just gloats about how awesome your unit performed at a combat training center. Talking only about overwhelming success is not helpful in and of itself.

It certainly feels *good* to write about winning. But we should not let our writing be seen as posturing ourselves and our units over others. Articles that peacock about accomplishments just foster competition and whispers of disdain, not collaboration. Also, humblebrags are easy to spot and quickly resented. We should highlight successes, but there is a subtle difference between sharing best practices and boasting. The distinction is in how forthright we are with our challenges, mistakes, and struggles along the way. Sincere professional discourse reveals failures, successes, and dead ends.

Scientists also have a bad habit of publishing articles when they have breakthroughs. Rarely do scientists publish about when they tested for something and found no significant results. But sharing what you *did not find* when testing military concepts can be valuable. It helps others to learn from your trials, see what came up short, so they do not have to look there too. If you shine a light behind a door and see there's nothing there, write about it so others can try opening different doors next. Don't oversell a concept that was tested, just share what insight was gained, explain how far you got, and what you did not get to try. This helps other units pick up the knowledge where you left off.

A Catalyst for Debate

A catalyst paper can spark a dialogue by just presenting one way to approach a problem. It should present a well-thought-out proposal backed up by research, but it may been seen a shortsighted idea by others. That's okay.

Experienced decision-makers are likely to agree that sometimes we do not know what we want until we see what we do not want. And only after we see a bad proposal do we start to think about what the direction should be instead. So be comfortable letting catalyst papers serve this purpose as well. Help leaders think about what they want by showing them something they don't want.

Catalyst papers should be built to be probed, beat up, kicked around. They spark the conversation. Because in the absence of any plan, a catalyst paper can offer something to start the conversation—a primer for others to weigh in on, to solicit their perspective, and to contribute to the eventual solution. Readers can like or dislike the ideas in the paper and the catalyst paper can still be a success. As long as it inspires a debate among professionals. The only way the paper is actually unsuccessful is if people read it and do nothing else. The goal is to promote discourse and inspire transformation.

A Catalyst for Publishing

Unit-driven catalyst papers become the seeds that will produce impactful Army professional journal articles.

Of course, not all papers should get published. But some should, based both on the relevancy and coherence of the paper. The first paper or two drafted by a novice writer might remain as unit-level projects, but good writing comes with experience—as soldiers write more, the better their work becomes. Commanders can help nominate the right papers for publication that deserve wider dissemination. This is how our professional journals build better content, draw more readership, and create more discourse.

It's also helpful to highlight the distinction between academic journals and the Army's branch journals. Academic journals are exclusive by design and have stringent expectations for their contributors to follow. For certain career fields, publishing in top-tier academic journals builds professional credibility and standing with employers. Army branch journals, such as *Infantry*,

While academic journals can certainly help writers build professional credibility, U.S. Army branch journals serve a different purpose—their primary audience is the military. Editors of these journals seek articles that can not only benefit the community but also preserve articles for future reference via their websites or other governmental archives. (Composite graphic by Beth Warrington, *Military Review*)

Armor, Sustainment, Field Artillery, and *Special Warfare,* have a different purpose. Their editors are looking for submissions that benefit the community and preserve Army articles for future reference. They seek primarily to reach military audiences. Their editorial standards are commensurate with our professional dialogue. In other words, they're not looking to make life difficult to publish for the sake of being exclusive. Quite opposite, they want to be accessible and accommodating to Army writers. They just want to help get ideas out to the force.

As of late, their readership has dropped. But the Army's Harding Project and the Army University Press are in the midst of changing that.[15] Leaders are working to reinvigorate the Army's branch journals. Soon their websites will be more accessible and mobile-friendly.

The intent is to ensure the content is more relevant and practical, which is absolutely attainable when grassroots articles emerge from the field as compelling pieces that help busy people think and provokes thought among colleagues.

Recommendations

Embrace digestible writing. Shift our internal writing style to encourage a more conversational tone meant expressly to communicate ideas. We can pump the brakes on trying to write at the graduate level. Just celebrate when novice writers put words to paper and incrementally help them get better at writing over time. Academics are not our target audience, so we do not need to write for them. The audience is our fellow soldiers and

colleagues within the profession, so write to them in a style that is easy to digest and clear to understand.

Introduce catalyst papers early. Catalyst papers can be introduced to junior leaders in NCO Education System (NCOES) courses, the Basic Officer Leader Course, and the Captains Career Course to instill confidence in this stress-free writing approach. Teach them how to collaborate to do research that advances an idea for their peers to debate. Publish the best ones in Army

Conclusion

Catalyst papers jump start conversations, and they help others chew on ideas and learn from current efforts. They can help us transform. They should be fast to read and easy to digest, structured and coherent but conversational. If you want to know what a catalyst paper looks and sounds like, you are reading one.

Catalyst papers are meant for units to share internally and publish in Army professional journals, not

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professional journals. Teach not just how to write the papers, but how to comment and reply to papers written by their peers, since the whole purpose of a catalyst paper is to start the dialogue.

Additional Research Opportunities

NCOES and catalyst papers. If NCOES embraces the idea of teaching catalyst papers to NCOs, at what level should we expect NCOs to write their own papers? Do we introduce junior NCOs to catalyst papers by teaching them how to write responses in basic courses? What is the right NCOES level to teach NCOs to write catalyst papers (either group or individual projects)? Can we introduce collaboration across ranks (among NCOs and/or officers) through different professional military education programs?

The right platforms to carry the conversation. The Army needs to sort out what platforms to build to carry the conversation started by catalyst papers, sites that allow feedback and discussion, not trolling, real threads of conversation. How do we pull the conversations away from the pages of Reddit or X (formerly Twitter) toward sites dedicated to our profession? Do we assume the risk and avoid certificates or passwords? Because nobody wants to go behind a firewall. How can we make these pages accessible at home and on mobile devices so we maintain the discourse with our soldiers? How we want to facilitate responses? As other papers? As threads on a site? Do we establish lengths for those replies?

academic journals. The stringent and often time-consuming process of publishing in academic journals is still important, it's just distinct from a catalyst paper. Different purposes, different audiences.

Writing a catalyst paper provides the best briefing you never had to give—because it is all captured on paper for anyone to read—even years later when you publish it in an Army professional journal. Writing and doing the research ourselves will always teach us more about a topic than if we just received the brief and were told all "the answers," because pulling on threads, talking to subject-matter experts, and experimenting with concepts is how we will discover new insights and unknown aspects of the problem.

These grassroots findings coming from the field might just help orient the rest of the Army to the issue discovered by your unit. Your efforts to move the needle toward a solution might be a powerful breakthrough—a base hit—even if the whole problem remains to be solved. Write about those efforts, the challenges along the way, and findings in catalyst papers. Spark the dialogue across the profession so we can continue to transform. Strengthen the profession and the peers you serve beside through written discourse. ■

This article was written to help advance the chief of staff of the Army's call for all Army leaders to revitalize our professional discourse. The conclusions of this paper were directly shaped by numerous professionals throughout the research phase. This includes insightful conversations with

the director of Army University Press, the Harding Project director, the deputy director of the XVIII ABC Infantry Warfighter's Forum, and the acting editor for Infantry Journal. *Peers and colleagues provided valuable insight, perspective, and feedback on this project including leaders at each rank from sergeant through command sergeant major and second lieutenant through colonel. Ultimately, this article exemplifies a collaborative effort to bring forward ideas from the field through grassroots research using a catalyst paper to help the Army transform through discourse.*

Notes

Epigraph. Randy George, Gary Brito, and Michael Weimer, "Strengthening the Profession: A Call to All Army Leaders to Revitalize Our Professional Discourse," Modern War Institute, 11 September 2023, https://mwi.westpoint.edu/strengthening-the-profession-a-call-to-all-army-leaders-to-revitalize-our-professional-discourse/.

1. Ibid.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Todd A. Schmidt, "Where Have All the Warrior-Scholars Gone? A Challenge to All Military Professionals," *Military Review* 103, no. 1 (January-February 2023): 2–3, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/January-February-2023/Letter-from-the-Editor/. Schmidt goes on to acknowledge, "Some of that may be true." But then he continues by saying, "Regardless, we want and need to encourage our military professionals to contribute their thoughts in writing to make the profession better as well as inform society and the public about our Army, despite any consequences."
5. Susan Cain, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* (New York: Crown, 2013), 87.
6. Ibid. Those four rules: (1) Don't judge or criticize ideas. (2) Be freewheeling. The wilder the idea, the better. (3) Go for quantity. The more ideas you have, the better. (4) Build on the ideas of fellow group members.
7. In addition to "Strengthening the Army Profession," see Milford H. Beagle Jr., "Professional Discourse and Dialogue Made Easy," *Military Review* Online Exclusive, 14 December 2023, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/journals/military-review/online-exclusive/2023-ole/professional-discourse-and-dialogue-made-easy/; Schmidt, "Where Have All the Warrior-Scholars Gone?"; and Todd A. Schmidt, "Chief Priority! Ignite a Renaissance in Military Scholarship and Writing," *Military Review* 103, no. 6 (November-December 2023): 1–2, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/November-December-2023/Chief-Priority/.
8. Department of the Army Pamphlet 600-67, *Effective Writing for Army Leaders* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986 [obsolete]), 1.
9. Beagle, "Professional Discourse and Dialogue Made Easy," 1.
10. If this means trying to emulate the reading comprehension paragraphs on standardized tests, then we certainly have gone astray.
11. TL;DR stands for "too long; didn't read."
12. This article is about 4,500 words. It turned out longer than preferred but there was much to cover.
13. A note about whether to attribute yourself as the author of a paper: If inclined, they can be written as "non-papers," where the author's identity, including name, rank, and position, is omitted to allow the content of the papers stand for themselves and eliminate bias for or against the author. Non-papers are a diplomatic tool used to discretely float proposals in sensitive negotiations. It's an informal document such as a discussion paper or white paper that excludes any attributable markings to remove outside influences that might otherwise prevent the idea from coming forward. Another approach to avoiding direct attribution is to publish an article on behalf of the unit or organization instead of the individual authors. The downside with nonattribution or publishing a paper on behalf of an organization instead of individual author is losing the ability to track down the contributors for additional questions and dialogue as time goes by. But it's better to get the ideas out into the Army community, and if authors are hesitant to write because of personal attribution, then a non-paper or organizational paper are ways to resolve concerns of attribution.
14. Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), 31.
15. Zachary Griffiths and Theo Lipsky, "Introducing the Harding Project: Renewing Professional Military Writing," Modern War Institute, 5 September 2023, https://mwi.westpoint.edu/introducing-the-harding-project-renewing-professional-military-writing/.