

Breaking Barriers to Professional Writing

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We often hear the call for military professionals to publish. Sharing experiences and thoughts is something every professional should strive to do to steward the profession. I am currently an associate professor at the U.S. Army's Command and General Staff College. One of the classes I teach is Effective Writing taught during the first few weeks of the course. As part of my class, my students read the article "Read, Think, Write, and Publish" by Adm. James Stavridis. Stavridis posits that the military offers plenty to write about, and that publishing ideas and solutions extends learning beyond the local to the greater profession.¹

My students mostly agree that professional writing is important. On average, about 25 percent of my students have published something, with those mostly medical or judge advocate general students. Those students that have published state they gain a broader scope of their profession from the research conducted for the article as well as from discussions with peers and subject matter experts as they socialize their draft. Most also feel that publishing gives them some credibility in their field. Many have written to share techniques, tactics, and procedures or to help others solve problems they encountered in various exercises from home-station training to contingency operations. A few mention they write about topics to generate conversations about change needed in their branch or functional area. Others publish solely to build their resume for future jobs. The majority of published students stated publishing increased their self-confidence. All of these are great reasons to publish, but why don't more professionals publish?

The following sections present the top six barriers my students mention for not publishing. These were taken from my notes of our class discussions over the

last six years, involving over five hundred students. My story is no different than many of their comments. I only published one article, just before retirement, in my over twenty-five years in uniform. In hindsight, I was wrong for not writing more. Hopefully, I can dispel some of the common barriers and provide advice to break through the challenges with the hope that more officers will take the time to share their experience and insights with the broader Army.

Time

Students mention that they cannot set aside time to write due to ever-increasing demands from work and family. This is likely true, as my family and volunteering consumed a lot of my time; I also tried to be successful in my career. In all honesty, soldiers have to make writing a priority. Publishing does not have to be a five thousand-word research thesis. The first step is simply putting some thoughts down on an aspect of training, operations, or routine activities of an organization that can be shared to help others. These thoughts

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can then be developed into a five hundred- to seven hundred-word narrative that tells a story. Narratives of how a unit armorer managed maintenance on weapons during a deployment or how a clerk's efficiency saved money in a medical clinic can be a great help to others in similar situations. All of these simple

armorers, medics, squad leaders, or supply clerks) is doing, the benefits to the organization of recognizing these individuals is immeasurable. In hindsight, this is where I was really wrong for not taking the time during my career to write about the many great ideas and techniques the people I worked with developed



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topics are familiar, require little to no research, and take little time to draft. Another method is to coauthor, which can split the effort and encourage others. Maj. Gary Klein posted an excellent article outlining benefits of and tips for coauthoring on the *From the Green Notebook* blog.²

It is true that often, the process for publication can be difficult and take a long time. I recently had an article accepted by an online publication that took seven months and two resubmits before approval. Depending on the publication, there may be legal forms to sign or security checks to complete with the writer's organization. Also, the publication may be backlogged and the article may not be published for up to a year. Socializing and publication staffing can take time as well. All that said, if the topic is worth it, then the time is well spent.

No Value

One of the most common student comments is that there is no incentive to publish. Performance is the biggest part of evaluations, and it is unlikely that a published article will push anyone over the top. Additionally, there is no monetary value associated with publishing. While these are true, professionals should strive to improve the organization and not to benefit themselves. But as one former student pointed out, everyone is trying to stand out for promotion potential and ratings, and publication is one way to do that—even if a soldier coauthors. If one looks at publishing from a leadership perspective, one may see a different benefit. When someone writes about the great things that someone in his or her unit (that

and all of their great accomplishments. My current job requires me to publish. However, after my second article became required reading in our curriculum and I received emails from many people who liked it, I stopped thinking of publishing as a requirement but instead as another educational tool.

Pointless

Students often comment that “no one will read it” or “it won't change anything.” With respect to the larger Army, this might be the case, but individual writing might very well help another person learn something or add to the conversation to begin change. When students say no one will read it, I ask them what they do when they have a question. The most often answer is “search online.” Well, if no one writes about topics, then there will be nothing to find in an online search. I still receive an email or phone call yearly about the first article I published in 2014. While there is no guarantee that the article will be widely read, readership depends on where it is published. For example, a recent post on *The Field Grade Leader* blog discussing the assignment interactive module marketplace had over 1,450 views.³

Where?

Students also mention that they do not know where to publish. When I was a young company grade officer, there were mainly professional magazines that would accept articles. Today, there are many more online magazines, blogs, discussion websites, and forums. Do not worry about whether someone will want

to publish individual ideas. Many publications are looking for material. If the publication is not willing to publish, find another forum to publish. Some particularly good blogs include *The Field Grade Leader*, *The Military Leader*, *From the Green Notebook*, *The Company Leader*, *3x5 Leadership*, and *The Center for*

with NCOs about conducting training or preparing for boards, or a discussion on a book and what was taken from it. I started YouTube videos for my Force Management classes three years ago. During that time, I have posted thirty-eight videos, two with former students, with over eighty-two thousand views

“If the files are full of ammunition, then there is nothing to fear because the article can be defended against any assault.”

Junior Officers. The Naval Postgraduate School has a very good list of military publications.⁴ Depending on the topic, do not rule out nonmilitary publications. Several of my students published in national professional associations such as the Institute for Operations Research and the Management Sciences and the National Association of Environmental Professionals because of the technical aspect of their subject. A good practice is to email the publication and ask if they are interested in the topic. Once the article gets accepted, review the organization’s publication standards for format, length, citations, etc. It is wise to find someone with an English degree to review work for structure and grammar. This can help with publication while also improving professional writing skills. I have four people that bravely read the horrible drafts I send them to clean up my writing.

Another creative idea presented by one student is alternative publishing. Anyone can post a video to a social media “vlog.” I did a quick search in YouTube and found several channels of soldiers posting short videos on mainly leadership topics, but everyone has their own voice. These voices can address some of the same topics that someone might want to write about. From my experience making videos for my class’s YouTube channel, this is a complex process. There is time to write a script or adlib, record, and edit the video, and buy video processing software. The writer will still want to have his or her unit public affairs and security officers view the video before posting.

This is a great way to share topics such as good ideas about leader development programs, interviews

and seven hundred subscribers. These videos are well received by CGSC students as well as by many others in various organizations. Brig. Gen. Ross Coffman has a very good video about his experience using videos for his brigade’s professional development.⁵

Fear

Probably the biggest concern from students has been that they do not want to get into trouble. This is a valid concern, but as Stavridis wrote, “Nail your ideas to the wall. ... What matters is testing your ideas on the field of intellectual battle.”⁶ There are many ways to reduce this fear. First, a writer can speak to his or her boss about a particular topic in order to get the boss’s buy-in and ask him or her to proofread the article. This demonstrates trust as well as gets the approval of the boss. Next, staff the draft with experts at the appropriate center of excellence to reduce the risk of errors. Additionally, research what others have written on the topic. Also, check with the security office and legal counsel for review before submitting for publication. The one article I published at the end of my career was reviewed by seven general officers because the scope of the article made recommendations for change across several branches. I wanted to make sure that there was concurrence and the general officers’ concerns were addressed. Granted, not all articles need to be reviewed by general officers, but if someone is writing about recommended changes to doctrine, he or she may want to have the doctrine writer at the center of excellence review it to provide insights into what that person is already doing

to address the problem. A writer may also want to encourage dialog, discussion, and professional “blade sharpening.” Writers should not get into trouble for professionally expressing experience or an observation while posting a solution to a perceived problem or contributing to the body of knowledge on a topic.

free), or read another kind of book and submit a review to the branch’s professional journal.

I encourage writers to reconsider why they do not publish and take a different approach. Find ideas and thoughts or the story of soldiers’ achievements to share, get smart people involved to guide the narra-



Another way to steward the profession is to encourage and support others to write.



A professional organization welcomes solutions to perceived problems and discourse. They are not looking to get anyone in trouble for professionally raising an issue or highlighting a solution. To be honest, everyone needs support when writing. To help gain support, socialize the idea with others to get different perspectives and increase confidence in ideas. I am not the expert in any of the seven articles I have published, but by researching and staffing with others, I became smarter on the topic, which has made me a better instructor. Joe Byerly has an excellent article about fear of writing on the *From the Green Notebook* blog.⁷ Remember, if the files are full of ammunition, then there is nothing to fear because the article can be defended against any assault.

Self-Doubt

Finally, some of my students think they are not smart enough or do not have anything to write about. This could not be further from the truth! Each organization or person has a unique perspective and an idea to make the Army better. The Army needs new ideas from creative thinkers, and the best way to get those inspired ideas out there is to publish them somewhere. I recommend looking internal to an organization and how business is conducted and write on the good processes or personnel. Another idea is to visit some of the forums mentioned above to see what others are writing about, as this may spur some ideas. If you like reading, contact *Military Review* and see what books are available for review (and reviewers get to keep the book for

time, make the time to get the draft done, and persevere through the approval process. There are many ideas around us, such as how to plan an organizational day or improve culture, what it is like working as a battalion operations officer (S-3) and taking graduate classes, lessons learned from the first sergeant, a professional development program’s successful or unsuccessful ideas, etc. The options are endless as are the opportunities to spread a wealth of knowledge. Another way to steward the profession is to encourage and support others to write. I have cowritten three articles with former students.

My overall message is that publishing, no matter the topic, helps us think and grow as individuals and as a military community of professionals. I am very passionate about encouraging my students to publish their thoughts and ideas. Whether a noncommissioned officer, warrant officer, Department of the Army civilian, or commissioned officer, professionals have an obligation to steward the profession by making it better. Individual ideas and experiences are valuable and improve the Army, the organization, peers, and any branch or functional area. A final recommendation before writing is to read the article “Leadership and Military Writing” by Dr. Allyson McNitt in *Military Review* to get an editor’s point of view.⁸

I do want to thank the collective body of my students over the years for their great thoughts and insights in our class discussions that were the driver for this article. The great ideas above are from the students while any perceived bad ideas are solely mine. ■

Notes

1. James Stavridis, "Read, Think, Write, and Publish," *Proceedings* 134, no. 8/1,266 (August 2008).
2. Gary Klein, "If You Want to Write, Collaborate!," *From the Green Notebook* (blog), accessed 8 June 2021, <https://fromthegreennotebook.com/2018/03/20/if-you-want-to-write-collaborate/>.
3. Trey Guy, "Tips for Navigating the AIM Marketplace," *The Field Grade Leader* (blog), accessed 8 June 2021, <http://fieldgradeleader.themilitaryleader.com/tips-for-navigating-the-aim-marketplace/>.
4. Matthew Cox, "Sig Sauer Delivers Final Next-Generation Squad Weapon Prototypes to Army," Yahoo, 3 February 2021, accessed 6 June 2021, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/sig-sauer-delivers-final-next-143936983.html>.
5. "Leader Development Programs" YouTube video, 2:00, posted by "Center for the Army Professional and Leadership CPAL," 25 May 2020, accessed 2 February 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmiFebzOR_4&t=119s.
6. Stavridis, "Read, Think, Write, and Publish."
7. Joe Byerly, "Are You Scared to Write?," *From the Green Notebook* (blog), accessed 6 June 2021, <https://fromthegreennotebook.com/2021/02/06/are-you-scared-to-write/>.
8. Allyson McNitt, "Leadership and Military Writing: Direct, Organized, Strategic," *Military Review* 101, no. 1 (2021): 121–27.