

# Building a Community

## How to Create a Professional Writing Network

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*The quintessential skill of an officer is to bring order out of chaos ... To do that, and to be successful senior officers, you need to read, think, and write ... I would argue you must write.*

—Adm. James G. Stavridis

When we think about writing professionally, the vision that appears in many people's minds is likely one of a solitary individual, an intellectual island furiously generating ideas on a whiteboard or slaving away over a keyboard. When actually writing, we can also feel like we are a lone rock being buffeted by the waves—or at least I felt that way when first attempting to write. I struggled to gain the confidence to put my fingers on the keyboard, and even when I did, I thought my ideas were unoriginal or poorly argued.

Looking back on over a decade of writing and publishing, however, my writing projects were never an individual endeavor. My writing—and all professional writing, no matter the profession—is a group project. From idea generation to a first draft, through revisions and into the publishing process, every step of the way includes the men and women around you. How you incorporate them and allow them to bring out the best in your work is up to you.

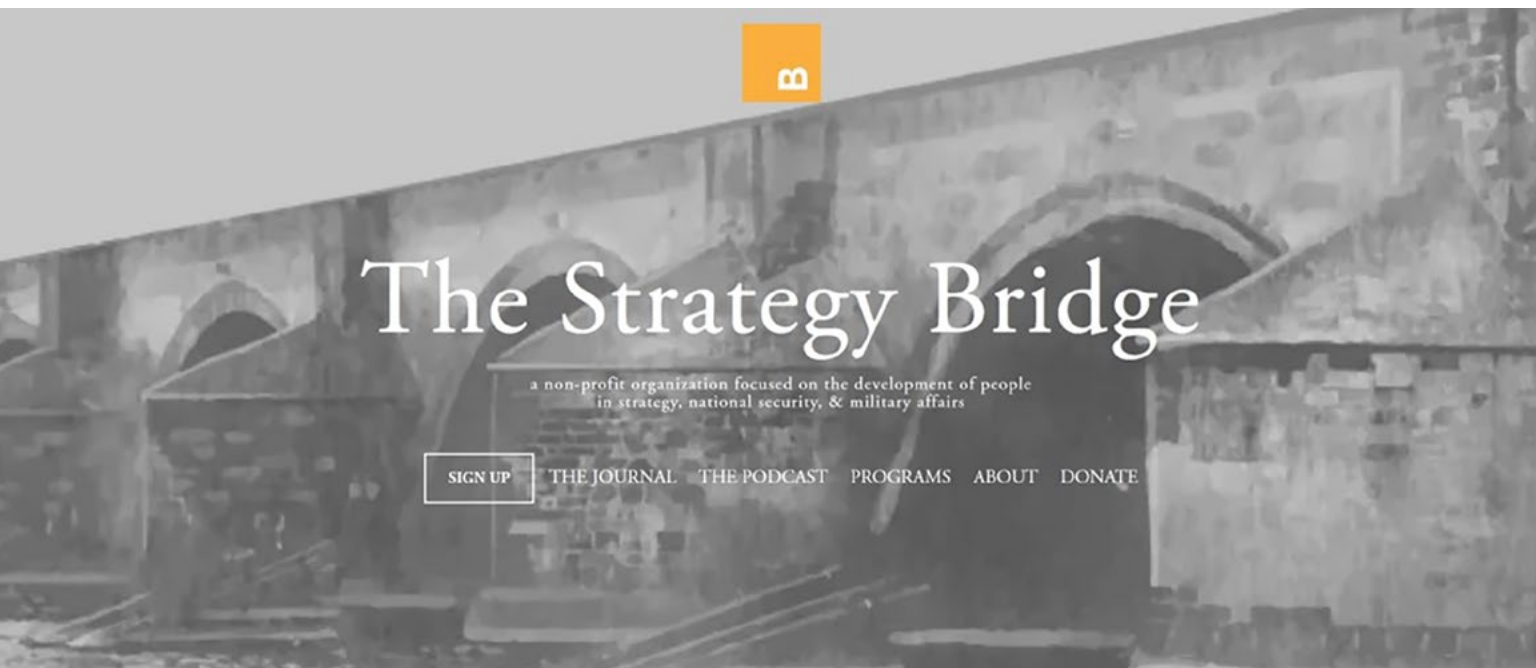
Even more than a group project, writing is an act of community-building. It can be a process whereby we draw from the communities around us, generating ideas from those around us by observing and discussing what they're reading, writing, or doing. It can be a process of extending our communities by reaching out to new people and professions to satiate our curiosity

or expand our knowledge. Finally, it can be a process of strengthening by helping others to learn and write, even when we're not writing ourselves. "Iron sharpens iron" was a saying I often heard in my first few years in uniform. But raw materials, muscle and hammer, and heat are required to even forge a blade to be sharpened. A community provides and fosters the raw materials for an idea, helps shape and strengthen the idea through intellectual discussion, and provides energy through editorial feedback.

### Writing Communities

The idea of writing as a community endeavor is not a new one. When I entered the Army, sharing information via forums like PlatoonLeader.net and CompanyCommander.net was critical for providing tools and advice for new officers.<sup>1</sup> Another article in this compilation, titled "Building and Running an Online Forum," provides a "how-to" guide to establish a modern version of these forums.<sup>2</sup> In my early career, most of these forums morphed into blogs where individuals on combat tours in Afghanistan and Iraq shared their trials, tribulations, and solutions.<sup>3</sup> These individual blogs began responding to each other and grew into platforms where multiple people—and frequently guests—could contribute.

My own writing experience mirrors this. I began blogging as "the barefoot strategist" in 2011 after returning from a deployment to Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> In 2013, I helped start the Defense Entrepreneurs Forum, an organization focused on empowering junior officers.<sup>5</sup> At the Defense Entrepreneurs Forum's inaugural meeting in Chicago that same year, I joined forces with a few other military writers to create The



The Strategy Bridge is a nonprofit organization created to develop a community of thinkers and writers interested in improving the level of discussion on strategy and military affairs. (Screenshot from The Strategy Bridge, <https://thestrategybridge.org/masthead>)

Strategy Bridge.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, junior officers were forming other organizations to focus on military writing; these included Joe Byerly's *From the Green Notebook*, Drew Steadman's *The Military Leader*, and Josh Bowen's *3x5 Leadership*.<sup>7</sup>

To capitalize on this groundswell of content and writing energy, a handful of us created the Military Writers Guild to pool the resources and knowledge of not only military writers but also civilian authors, editors, and publishers interested in military affairs.<sup>8</sup> Each of these forums and organizations added to a constellation of writers, creating an organic community for people to leverage and support.

## Building Your Own Communities

What does this brief history lesson mean for today's writers? You can and should make your own communities to support your writing endeavors. Leverage and use the existing writing communities, but do not be bound to them. Create the groups of people, the connections, and the networks required to enable you. More importantly, use your efforts to provide the resources to help others do the same. The following are some hard-won lessons that might help you along the way.

**Find your passion.** What topics generate the most intellectual energy for you? What ideas get you

engaged, or what are you trying to learn? What are the hot topics in your personal and professional circles that you eagerly engage in when among others? Writing is an exercise in thinking; that kind of active analysis and creation takes significant intellectual energy. If you are not passionate about the subject or curious enough to push through when you are tired or hit a roadblock, you may not have the energy to complete it.

Engage with those around you to recharge your interest and energy, as required. Getting ideas and energy from those in your immediate vicinity is the first step in building your writing network.

**Survey the landscape.** Once you've figured out a subject of interest, do the preliminary work. Review branch journals, military journals, private but military-related publications, books, and other research

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The Military Writers Guild is a community committed to the development of the profession of arms through the exchange of ideas and experiences. Contributors include writers from the military as well as civilian authors, editors, and publishers interested in military affairs. (Screenshot from the Military Writers Guild, <https://www.militarywritersguild.org/vision>)

material to ensure you have a sense of what's already been done on the subject and where you might enter the discussion.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, assess the people and organizations that might know or engage with the topic and reach out for support. Expanding your connections beyond your immediate vicinity into subject-matter experts and organizations is the second step in creating a writing network.

**The big idea.** Now that you've found a topic that energizes you and researched the possibilities, develop the nugget of wisdom or key problem you're engaging with. This is essentially your hypothesis or thesis statement. The thesis in my first coauthored article in 2010 was "a vital aspect of [U.S. support to foreign policy] is advising and assisting partner security forces, also known as security force assistance (SFA). This support will be an enduring strategic requirement for the Army."<sup>10</sup> We had just finished writing a new doctrinal manual on SFA and wanted to delve deeper into the subject without the constraints of formal doctrine.

After months of working on the topic, we knew exactly where we could enter the conversation, and we were passionate about what it meant for the Army. Finding your voice and understanding where your project fits is key in further developing the writing project and providing a clear hook for the people in your networks to cling onto as you start sharing your writing.

**Identify your objective.** What are you trying to achieve by working on this topic? If it is simply to research and think through a problem, then the objective should be to gather information and formulate your thoughts. What you share with those in your network or how you reach out to expand your network will be more informal and focused on clarifying your grasp of the issue. You may or may not end up working toward publication.

If your goal is to share information, shape a conversation within the profession, or have an impact toward some kind of change, then crafting the product and building the network must be more deliberate. Who



are the audiences you wish to inform or persuade? What mediums or publications will get the information to those audiences? Is the issue contentious or likely to cause others to immediately push back? If the goal is to do more than simply recite facts and share information, then you should carefully build a writing community tailored to sharpen your argument, foresee and address obstacles that might inadvertently be created, provide advice on how to avoid repercussions or

significant time and effort into publishing? Don't be afraid to reach out to someone you don't know. If you can get a warm hand off via an introduction, great. However, even an email out of the blue generally lands. I honestly cannot think of a time when someone I contacted didn't at least give me five minutes of their time. However, when you do so, be respectful of the other person's time by being brief and clear. If they bite, you'll have a shot at genuine information, expanding your

“Writers and researchers—and definitely professional military writers—recognize their work is for public consumption, resulting in a professional obligation to entertain credible and genuine requests for information.”

blowback, and possibly even prevent you from making a professional mistake. This is the most impactful and important aspect of building and maintaining a writing community—ensuring accurate and clear arguments while preventing mistakes that could be costly.

**Transmit in the clear.** While social media isn't the tool it was in the recent past, it is still a path to generate discussion and feedback from people and places you would not expect. Studying regeneration of the force while on the Army staff, I was curious if and how the United States might quickly grow one million new soldiers in the event of a catastrophic modern conflict. Having spent three years building one new brigade to surge into Iraq, the fear was that the U.S. Army would be incapable of growing quickly if needed. I tweeted the idea for feedback, resulting in a great discussion that led to an article for the Modern War Institute.<sup>11</sup> Aside from sharing ideas with your current community, throwing an idea to assess the wisdom of the crowds is still a great way to expand your networks.

**Embrace the cold call.** Frequently, going direct to someone who is the expert on a topic you're interested in is the best path to information. Writers and researchers—and definitely professional military writers—recognize their work is for public consumption, resulting in a professional obligation to entertain credible and genuine requests for information. Plus, who doesn't enjoy talking about work they spent

network, and possibly creating another connection who can refine and support your work and grow into a mentorship relationship. You'll know almost immediately whether this new connection will strengthen over time.

**Give back.** Don't be an intellectual succubus. Just as you should expect most professionals to at least entertain your thoughts and ideas initially, you should expect to provide a similar service as you progress in your career and writing. Figure out where you can give back to the people and communities that have supported your writing journey. Use your connections to make connections between others. The master of this is Jim Greer, a retired colonel, former director of the School for Advanced Military Studies, and a current instructor at that fine institution. Jim has been a mentor of mine for almost two decades, and I'm but one of hundreds of officers that he guides. He is a master of recognizing how to connect people based on their areas of study, personal goals, or personalities. Be like Jim—connect everyone you can to strengthen and expand not only your community but also the whole profession of arms.

**Reengage.** As your network grows, keeping up with everyone in the various communities you've built is impossible. However, as projects, memories, or events remind you of those in your networks, reengage with a quick social media direct message, email, text, or phone call. Not only will this show respect and the appreciation for past support, but it will also likely recharge both sides

in the process of catching up. I worked on more than one project that was generated simply by reaching out to someone I had not communicated with in a while.

**Be deliberate.** As you progress in your writing and military career, there will be a time when the tables turn. Instead of reaching out for mentorship or support, others will be reaching out to you. As mentioned earlier, you should take this responsibility seriously and work to support those that you can. However, you must also be deliberate, mindful of your time, and refrain from overcommitting. Being open to others can take more than you are able to give if you are not careful. Build your community so that you can share mentorship and support, allowing you to balance how much you take on and provide a wealth and breadth of experience and advice to those who are seeking mentorship.

**Reassess.** Finally, always reassess the strength, purpose, and value of your communities. Some may have run their course and no longer provide what is needed for the group. Others are still valuable but may require

increased time and attention. Just as you should be deliberate in the amount of time you provide to others to support their efforts, you should not fear letting some communities go if you assess your time is better spent in other directions or with other communities. Just as everyone is replaceable in the profession, every community is purpose-built and will either survive your departure or gracefully degrade as you move on to other endeavors.

## The Return on Investment

No matter what writing project you pursue or what you intend to achieve by writing, you can expect that the process and finished product will always be improved by engaging a community in its crafting. We build trained, proficient, and strong teams to fight our Nation's wars—we should also build knowledgeable, experienced, and valuable communities to enhance our intellectual endeavors. Like the other articles in this compendium, hopefully, these considerations, tips, and tricks provide some value to support your writing endeavors. ■

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## Notes

**Epigraph.** James G. Stavridis, "Read, Think, Write: Keys to 21st-Century Security Leadership," *Joint Force Quarterly* 63 (4th Quarter, 2011): 110–12, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/JFQ/Joint-Force-Quarterly-63.aspx>.

1. Few sources remain that detail the integral importance of these forums to junior officers. They become so useful, the Army acquired them from the officers who started the forums, put them behind a CAC sign in, and killed the energy behind the forums. The Center for Junior Officers at West Point attempted to reenergize the forums in the middle of the 2010s but gained little traction. See Center for Junior Officers, "PLATOON LEADER. NET: No CAC Necessary," Medium, 28 May 2015, <https://medium.com/@USArmyCJO/platoon-leader-net-8b36a14672e0>.

2. Erik Davis and Nick Frazier, "Building and Running an Online Forum," *Military Review* 104, no. SE-02 (2024): 65–69.

3. Just to get a sense of the proliferation of military blogs during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, see MilBlogging.com's database from 2011. "Recently Added," Milblogging.com, archived 14 July 2011, at the Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20110714093321/http://www.milblogging.com/result.php?mode=simple&searchfor=&orderby=listingDate&dir=desc>.

4. "The Barefoot Strategist: Strategy, Planning, Policy, International Relations, Security Affairs, and Barefoot Running," Tumblr, accessed 28 May 2024, <https://barefootstrategist.tumblr.com/page/20>. Not at all a pretentious title for a blog, I know. We all cringe at our early writing.

5. Mark Jacobsen, Nate Finney, and Ben Kohlmann, "Why the Defense Entrepreneurs Forum Matters: Peripheral Networks and

Innovation," War on the Rocks, 21 October 2013, <https://warontherocks.com/2013/10/why-the-defense-entrepreneurs-forum-matters-peripheral-networks-innovation/>. The Defense Entrepreneurs Forum still exists and can be found online at <https://www.def.org>.

6. Nathan K. Finney, "Bridging Divides: Thoughts on a Startup Conference," The Strategy Bridge, 25 October 2013, <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2013/10/25/bridging-divides-thoughts-on-a-startup-conference>.

7. These are just a few of many military and military-adjacent organizations created in the early 2010s to empower junior officers to write: From the Green Notebook, accessed 28 May 2024, <https://fromthegreennotebook.com>; The Military Leader, accessed 28 May 2024, <https://themilitaryleader.com>; and 3x5 Leadership, accessed 28 May 2024, <https://www.3x5leadership.com>.

8. Military Writers Guild, accessed 28 May 2024, <https://militarywritersguild.org>.

9. See Todd Schmidt, "Strengthening the Army Profession through the Harding Project," *Military Review* 104, no. 3 (March–April 2024): 1–2, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/March-April-2024/Harding-Project/>. This will become easier as the Army University Press moves forward on archiving and connecting military professional writing resources.

10. Joshua J. Potter, Jon Klug, and Nathan K. Finney, "Developing Foreign Security Forces in the Era of Persistent Conflict," *Army Magazine* (January 2010): 43–48.

11. Nathan K. Finney, "A High-Tech Call to Arms: Mobilizing the Masses in the Twenty-First Century," Modern War Institute at West Point, 3 February 2017, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/high-tech-call-arms-mobilizing-masses-twenty-first-century/>.