



(Illustration by Reggie Torrez, Multimedia and Visual Information Division [OCPA], U.S. Army)

# Catalyst Papers

## A Practical Writing Style for Army Leaders to Share Ideas

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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”

**T**here’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.<sup>1</sup> 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?

We must end the myth that professional Army writing should meet some bar of "graduate-level writing."<sup>2</sup> This assumed standard drives writers to add jargon to sound smarter or doctrinally sound. In the process, the key points can get buried. We should instead focus our attention on communicating ideas, not creating dread about rigid styles and specific formatting requirements.

This article explains the concept of a *catalyst paper* to help recalibrate Army writing norms. Catalyst papers are 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.

## 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 over-complicate 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 toward a more practical style, striving for a conversational, not lofty, tone that is intentionally digestible. The sweet spot is probably somewhere around 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 "too long; didn't read." 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. 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.

Catalyst 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. There doesn't need to be strict formats and etiquette to writing them. 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.

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, pulling information from as many

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peers, outside experts, and contributors as needed. The ideas and the content are paramount.<sup>3</sup> 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 research. Paper ideas come from all sorts of conversations. They can come up in short-form blog posts (see Erik Davis and Nicholas Frazier's "Building and Running an Online Forum") or a unit's staff duty after action review comments.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes, paper ideas are best fostered 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 or 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 person to the left and right. Dedicating the time to help them through writing taps into that same motivation. Selfless servants and 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 project. It's natural to think research is about discovering new theories, creating paradigm shifts, and marking inflection points. A research project doesn't always entail big ideas, cracking the code on a devilish problem, or 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 how other units, services, agencies, or civilian groups approach the same activity. Research can include doing

interviews, comparing field manuals, or observing training from other services, civilian schools, and international courses.

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."<sup>5</sup> Catalyst papers help one set of soldiers pass the baton to the next, who pass it to the next, where they continue to build on each other's work. Validate, test, and re-examine 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 of 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 to external audiences after we succeed while preferring to keep lessons learned "in house" times we encounter failure or disappointing results. 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, humble-brags are easy to spot and are 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 about breakthroughs and discoveries. 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 and see what came up short so that 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. 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 be seen as a shortsighted idea by others. That's okay.

Experienced decision-makers are likely to agree that we may 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, and 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.

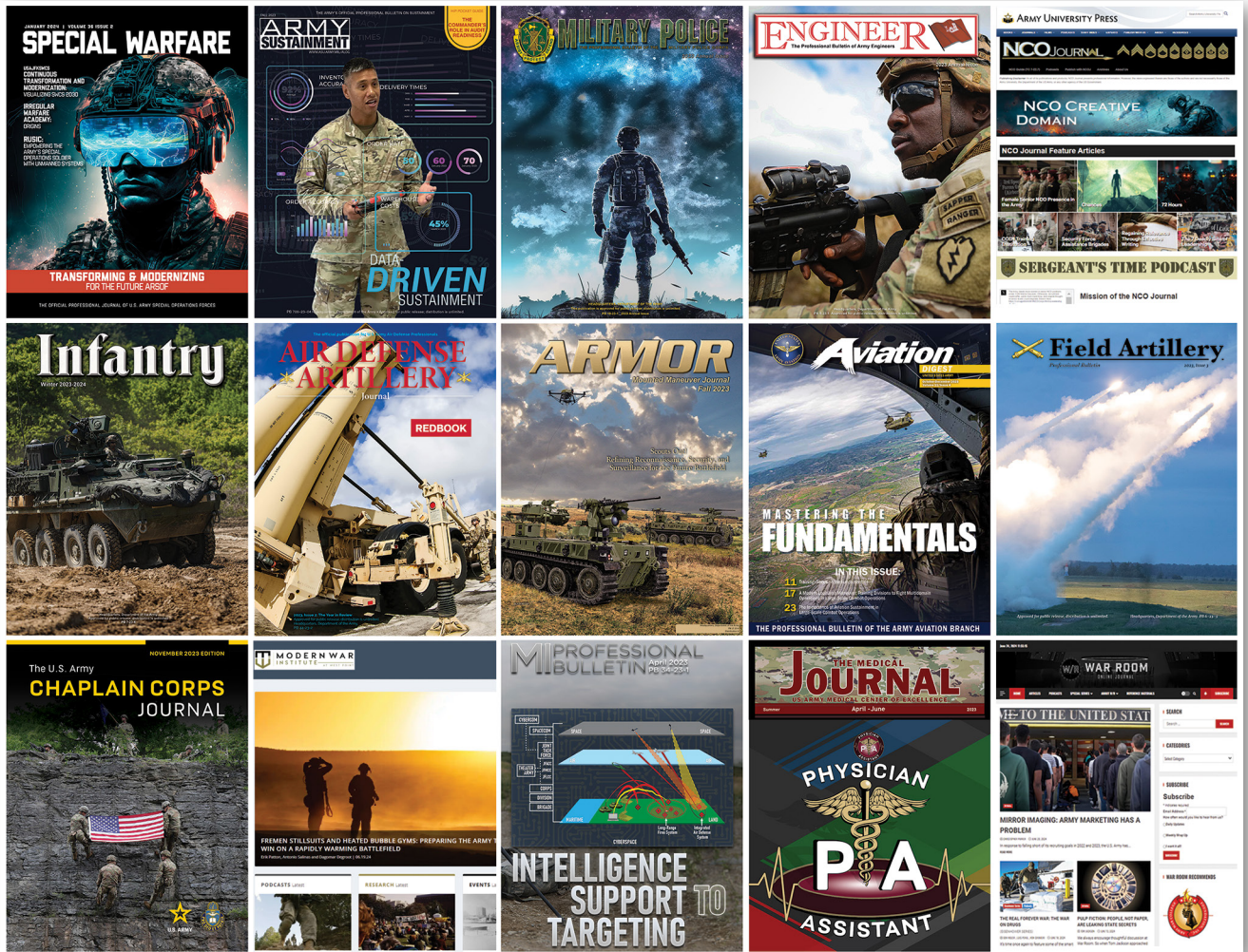
Of course, not all papers should be published. But some should, based both on the relevancy and coherence of the paper. The first paper or two drafted by a novice writer might remain as unit-level projects, but good writing often comes with experience—as soldiers write more, the better their work becomes. 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. For those interested in starting a unit-led program to help new writers write papers and articles, see Jay Ireland and Ryan Van Wie's "How to Develop and Run a Unit Writing Program."<sup>6</sup>

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*, *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 the opposite, they want to be accessible and accommodating to Army writers and to help get ideas out to the force.

## Suggestions

**Embrace digestible writing.** Shift our internal writing style to encourage a more conversational tone meant





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*)

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 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

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.

## 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 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 wrestling with ideas 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 help solve one small component of a wider issue might lead to a powerful breakthrough 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 with through written discourse. ■

*The conclusions of this article were directly shaped by numerous professionals throughout the research phase. Peers and colleagues provided valuable insight, perspective, and feedback on this project, including leaders at each rank from sergeant to command sergeant major and second lieutenant to colonel. Ultimately, this article exemplifies a collaborative effort to bring forward ideas from the field through grassroots research. If you wanted to know what a catalyst paper looks like or how writing can help the Army transform through discourse, it looks like this article. In its original form, this article was written as a catalyst paper.*

## 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. Marshall McGurk, “When Understanding Goes M.I.A.: Lost in Metaphors, Idioms, and Analogies,” The Harding Project, 26 March 2024, <https://www.hardingproject.com/p/when-understanding-goes-mia-lost>.

2. If this means trying to emulate the reading comprehension paragraphs on standardized tests, then we certainly have gone astray.

3. A note about whether to attribute yourself as the author of a paper: If inclined, they can be written as “nonpapers,” where the author’s identity, including name, rank, and position, is omitted to allow the content of the papers stand for itself and eliminate bias for or against the author. Nonpapers 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 nonpaper or organizational paper are ways to resolve concerns of attribution.

4. Erik Davis and Nicholas Frazier, “Building and Running an Online Forum,” *Military Review* 104, no. SE-02 (2024): 65–69.

5. Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), 31.

6. Jay Ireland and Ryan Van Wie, “How to Develop and Run a Unit Writing Program,” *Military Review* 104, no. SE-02 (2024): 76–81.