After a submitted article is accepted for publication, editors work to ensure information is delivered with accuracy and precision by following grammar, punctuation, and usage guidance found in a broadly accepted publication style guide such as the *Chicago Manual of Style*. Using computer applications such as Microsoft Word ensure authors and editors can follow and discuss the editing progress from draft to print. (Composite by Beth Warrington, *Military Review*)

Your Draft Is Done, Now What?

Working with an Editor

John Amble

You have an idea. You think it is an important one, one that advances the U.S. Army's collective understanding of a critical subject. You have followed the Harding Project since its launch in September 2023, inspired by its commitment to revitalizing Army publishing and motivated by senior leaders' firm backing of the initiative, so you decide to write an article.[1]

You submit to a publishing outlet—perhaps it's your first time doing so. What should you expect if your article is accepted? What will the editorial process entail? And how can you get the most out that process, make it smooth and efficient, and be confident that when your article is published, it will be at its best?

First Things First: Before Submitting

This is an article about working with an editor, which, by definition, only occurs once you have submitted a piece of your work to a publishing outlet and it has been accepted. So why does it begin with a section focusing on what you do before submitting? After all, there are exceptional articles on the writing process elsewhere in this edition—Leyton Summerlin's "Muddy Boots and Powerful Pages: Why We Write" and Theo Lipsky's "How to Write an Article," for example.[2] It's because writing is a process—one that defies categorization into distinct phases with no overlap. Any discussion about one stage of the publication process and one stage only necessarily has artificial boundaries. Moreover, just as those phases have blurred lines separating them, they also influence one another. In this case, the work you do before submitting to a publishing outlet will shape both an editor's assessment of your article and the way you work together, should it be accepted.

So, what can you do to streamline the editorial process? First, write what you know. Every author is an expert in something. Find that something and leverage your experience with the subject or unique perspective on it. Doing so will improve your chances of having your work accepted, because editors deciding whether to publish it will likely also see your biography, assuming you have included one in your submission (whether an outlet explicitly asks you to or not, you should). And even for outlets that employ a blind review process, the natural credibility of a piece of commentary or analysis written by somebody with extensive experience on the subject will be readily apparent. That credibility will lend itself toward a more well-crafted narrative, which will make the editorial process smoother.

Second, choose the right publishing outlet for your work. There should be a fit in terms of not only subject matter but also length, style, and tone. The best way to know which outlet is the optimal home for your article is by reading the other content various outlets publish. As the editorial director at the Modern War Institute at West Point, I take a broad view of what constitutes modern war and thus what subjects we aim to cover with our publishing. Still, I frequently receive submissions that are well written, deeply interesting, and yet wholly outside of even these broad definitional boundaries. By submitting to the right outlet, you maximize your chances of having your work accepted and ensure that the editorial process will be as smooth as possible by avoiding the need for deeply substantive revisions solely aimed at fitting the piece to the publication.

Third, read an outlet's published submission guidelines and follow them.[3] They exist for a reason and editors will be grateful. Doing so also signals a degree of seriousness and commitment to having your work published. It will simplify the editorial process, removing the need to alter the length of the article, adjust the way citations are handled, and otherwise work iteratively to conform to the submission guidelines.

Fourth, you are your article's first editor. Proofread your work, and then proofread it again. Try to catch your own typos, grammatical errors, and syntax problems. Do not count on Microsoft Word's organic spelling and grammar tools to catch everything. Double-check the spellings of names and other proper nouns in particular. Read the piece aloud to see if you catch problematic items you previously missed. Take some time away from the article and come back to give it a fresh look. Push yourself to be critical, deliberately adopting the mindset of a reader predisposed to disagree with your argument or analysis.

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An author reworks aspects of the article with the assistance and under the guidance of an experienced editor. (AI image by Gerardo Mena, Army University Press)

Finally, invite feedback from your professional network. Writing can be a lonely endeavor, but that does not mean that it has to be. Share your article ideas with others—their responses will help you decide whether you want to commit the time and effort to begin work on a first draft. Once you have that draft, share it with peers, mentors, and others and invite them to critique it. Rebecca Segal's article in this edition, "A Writer's Guide to Giving and Receiving Feedback," details why this is important.[4] Doing so will strengthen your work.

Teamwork Makes the Dream Work

Now that you have done the hard work before submitting your article, it is time to send it to the outlet you selected. Here begins your work with an editor. It could be a short working relationship. Nobody's work is always accepted, and there is a very good chance your submission will be declined.[5] If that is the case, do not lose heart. If the editor explains that the outlet

has chosen not to publish your article because the subject is not a good fit, you can ask if he or she has any recommendations for more suitable outlets. The world of military and defense publishing is small, and most editors will be willing to suggest alternatives. Even if that is not the case and you believe in the quality of your work, submit it elsewhere (but do not submit to multiple outlets at once). And if you never ultimately find a home for your article, the hours you spent crafting it were not wasted; they were hours that made you a better writer. File the draft away and move on. Maybe you will come back to it later when current events give it a new relevance or your perspective on the issue has changed. Maybe you will not. Regardless, keep writing.

If your work is accepted, the most important thing to understand is that you and the editor are now a team. You should understand each other's roles, perspectives, and ultimate objectives. You share the

same goal—publishing the best version of your work possible—but will almost certainly not have a common vision of how to get there. You have an intimate relationship with your article—its structure, its individual words, probably even its title. And why wouldn't you? All of it is your creation. An editor will not have the same relationship with it. To you, it is a complete draft. To an editor, it is a starting point. It may be a starting

> " An analogy—admittedly imperfect but still useful—is to the three levels of war: strategic, operational, and tactical. On top sits the overarching (strategic) purpose of an article. "

point very close to the finish line, but it is a starting point, nonetheless. This is a necessary feature of any team: it is made stronger by the distinct perspectives of its members, but it is strongest when those members appreciate their distinct roles.

Just like any team, communication is key. This starts from the beginning. Share any useful context about your article. Were you motivated to write it after a direct professional experience with the subject matter? Tell the editor. Does your job give you a unique perspective on the topic? Tell the editor. Does it build on previous writing that you have published? Tell the editor. All that context will help the editor understand your intent and shape the editorial process to refine the article.

What's the Point?

If you publish articles in numerous outlets, you will find that each handles the editorial process differently. You might have an editor make edits to your piece and ask for you to approve them. You might receive a draft with comments an editor asks you to address. Or, most likely in my experience, the process will be iterative and a combination of both.

I find it useful to conceptualize editing as a three-layered process. An analogy—admittedly imperfect but still useful—is to the three levels of war: strategic, operational, and tactical. On top sits the overarching (strategic) purpose of an article. What is its intent? What effect does it aim to have on readers? Who does

it aim to reach? At this level, an editor will work to ensure that the piece has a clear identity, that readers will naturally understand its purpose. An article about the potential of emerging technologies to improve targeting cycles and condense sensor-to-shooter times might be fundamentally analytical in character, simply describing to readers how these technologies work and their potential applications. Another on the same subject, however, might be a work of commentary, advocating for leaders to prioritize funding for research and development on those technologies.

These two articles will contain much of the same information, but the way that information is used will differ. If your work is one or the other, an editor will ensure that it is framed in such a way to make that clear. As such, edits and feedback that you receive will focus particularly on the opening and closing sections of the draft.

The middle layer of editing, to continue the analogy, is akin to the operational level of war, where campaign planning ensures that tactical actions connect to the overarching strategic objective. In writing, the parallel to this is structure development. Are there sections to the piece? Do they build upon one another logically? Is there a narrative thread that ties it all together, or is it a disjointed set of ideas that needs that thread reinforced? Do tangential points risk distracting readers? If it is intended to be a persuasive piece, have you anticipated counterarguments and addressed them? These are the questions an editor will be asking. The edits and comments you receive from the editor will be principally directed toward ensuring they are answered satisfactorily.

Lastly, there is the lowest level of the editorial process, where a lengthy sentence gets split in two, punctuation may be changed, word choice is questioned, and a host of other minor issues are addressed. Much

of this layer is predetermined by a style guide. At the Modern War Institute, we (like many other outlets you will encounter) use the *Chicago Manual of Style*. For spelling and related issues not explicitly covered in that style guide, it recommends referring to *Webster's Dictionary*. This is one part of the science of editing, following a set of rules prescribed by a style guide on everything from hyphenating compound adjectives to capitalizing words transliterated from foreign languages. The other part of the science of editing is fact-checking. Is quoted text found in the source provided? Does a NATO member state actually field a particular weapon system or vehicle? Is that the formal name of a treaty? Was a specific line item included in the most recent National Defense Authorization Act, or was it in the previous year's bill? The vast majority of factual inaccuracies I see in submitted articles are not deliberate distortions. But they happen, and they detract severely from the professionalism and credibility of published work. An editor will work to catch them and ensure that all information in an article is delivered with precision and accuracy.

There is an art to editing as well as a science. After all, writing is a creative process, even on the most technical of subjects. Does a particular word or phrase convey exactly what an author intends, or would a substitute do the job more effectively and clearly? Would a sentence's impact be amplified by placing it earlier in a paragraph? Does the article's lyrical quality—its combination of short and long sentences, its use of dashes to set off bits of explanatory material (like this one), and other features—enhance its readability?

This tripartite distinction between levels of editing has served me well, both in organizing my approach to each individual article I work on and in explaining to authors how the process works and what my intentions are with their work. But I mentioned that it is an imperfect analogy. Why? Because the levels of war delineate distinctions within an enterprise activity—warfighting—in which it is possible for individual members of the enterprise to focus principally on one level. In writing (and editing), the entirety of the work—from an article's overall structure to the placement of each punctuation mark—is interlinked. A single sentence's optimal formulation might change if a piece is restructured and its paragraph moved to a different place. Still, if you think of the process of editing and revision

in these terms, it will help you understand that process and provide a framework for doing the work of transforming your article into its best possible version.

Trust …

If you understand an editor's objectives and perspective, it becomes easy to trust him or her. That trust is crucial. On a practical level, it eases the process. If an editor changes *U.S.* to *US*, decapitalizes *commanding general*, or swaps out *Al Qaeda* for *al-Qaeda*, trusting that this change is determined by the outlet's style guide allows you to focus together on higher-level, substantive edits.

Moreover, an editor's experience (and access to reader metrics) lends itself to understanding what works and what does not, what is most likely to attract and retain readers' attention, and what tends to limit—or expand—an article's audience. The feedback you receive will reflect this understanding. Still, it can be extraordinarily difficult to cut the witty turn of phrase that an editor tells you feels out of place or eliminate a section you are especially proud of because it disrupts the overall flow of the article. "In writing," William Faulkner (probably apocryphally) warned, "you must kill all your darlings."[6] This means that you often need to ruthlessly eliminate bits of your writing that you are most pleased with in order to improve the work in its entirety. Doing so is extraordinarily difficult. But an editor's job is to identify your darlings for you and tell you which must go. If you trust the editor and trust the process, it will be easier to say goodbye.

… But Verify

Of course, people make mistakes. If an edit seems objectively wrong, question it. If you believe cutting text in one place removes necessary context for something that comes later in the article, raise the issue. If you simply do not understand the reasoning for a revision, ask about it. Many editors will anticipate those questions and, where the motives behind a particular edit or set of edits might not be intuitive, will explain them. Many will also explicitly encourage you to ask about edits that are unclear or to push back against those that do not preserve either your meaning or your voice. Your article might be published under the masthead of a particular publication, and it is in an editor's interest to protect the outlet's professional reputation by publishing the best version of it, but your name is

on it. A good editor will respect that. By ensuring open communication about any issues that arise, the end product will be a contribution to public discussion that both of you should be proud to see published.

Final Thoughts

As an editor, one of the most common mistakes I see authors make is adding a final section that contributes little value to the article. The tone is often disengaged, as if the author had run out of the energy needed to punctuate the article with the conclusion it deserves. Or it is packed with platitudes grabbed as the most readily available handholds when an author is not certain what else to do to bring the article to a close. Or, worst of all, it simply summarizes the points already made because years of writing for a grade in class have left too many of us with the false impression that Aristotle's triptych is the only way to structure our writing. The final section is your opportunity to choose what idea will be in readers' minds as they walk away from your article. Take the opportunity.

Since I should try to heed my own advice and avoid those common problems with a concluding section, I'll leave you with this. Go write something. Somewhere an editor is waiting to work with you on it. ■

Notes

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

2. Leyton Summerlin, "Muddy Boots and Powerful Pages: Why We Write," Military Review 104, no. SE-02 (2024): 22–26; Theo Lipsky, "How to Write an Article," Military Review 104, no. SE-02 (2024): 27–34.

3. Military Review's submission guidelines, for example, to "strive to reduce the number of endnotes to the minimum consistent with honest acknowledgment of indebtedness." You only see six endnotes here because this article is mainly drawn from personal experience and because I read the submission guidelines. "Military Review: Article Submission Guide," Army University Press, accessed 10 June 2024, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/MR-Article-Submission-Guide/.

4. Rebecca Segal, "A Writer's Guide to Giving and Receiving Feedback," Military Review 104, no. SE-02 (2024): 94–99.

5. Zachary Griffiths, "On Rejection," Harding Project, 16 April 2024, https://www.hardingproject.com/p/on-rejection.

6. Van Jackson, "Nuke Your Darlings: On Writing in National Security," War on the Rocks, 14 December 2017, https://warontherocks.com/2017/12/nuke-darlings-writing-national-security/.

"The great evil of gobbledygook is not only that it is ugly and irritating and indigestible, but that it allows the user to get away with vagueness and irresponsibility for what he says at the same time that it makes him sound highly professional and articulate."

—Argus J. Tresidder, "On Gobbledygook," *Military Review* 54, no. 4 (April 1974): 22