



Spc. Daniyel Kim, an aircraft structural repairer with 12th Combat Aviation Brigade, 7th Army Training Command, writes an essay during the U.S. Army Europe and Africa Best Warrior Competition at U.S. Army Garrison Bavaria Hohenfels Training Area, Germany, 8 August 2021. The essay covered issues relevant to Army leadership, tactical proficiency, and lethality. Based on the *Army People Strategy*, the Army is ensuring it has the right people, with the right skills and training, in the right roles, to succeed in complex future missions. (Photo by Spc. Michael Alexander, U.S. Army)

How to Write an Article

Capt. Theo Lipsky, U.S. Army

Every day, soldiers have good ideas about how to better our Army. Doing something about these ideas is hard. Those soldiers with good ideas often don't know where to begin. Some think themselves unqualified to speak up. Others figure they lack the power to do something about their ideas were they to try. For these reasons, many good ideas die in our Army without a hearing.

One way to give life to an idea is to write about it. Much of the world is the consequence of a decision by

someone with an idea to put pen to paper. Doing so is not easy, particularly if one lacks practice, but writing repays the effort needed many times over by sparing a good idea a premature death. What follows is a short guide to writing a commentary article for publication. Read it when you think you've got an idea worth sharing.

Why Write?

Elsewhere in this special issue of *Military Review*, Sgt. 1st Class Leyton Summerlin provides an extended

answer to the question, “Why write?”¹ His reflection is excellent and warrants a careful read. As a complement, this article considers the question briefly below, because in answering it, one already begins also to answer how to write an article.

You can be forgiven for asking, “Why bother writing?” There are many self-evident reasons to not write. A soldier may think they spend enough of their life thinking about the Army. An officer may think that social media affords them more reach than writing and for less effort. Some worry that speaking invites more trouble from higher headquarters than it’s worth. Others say that the chance the Army listens is slim, and slimmer still is the chance that the article changes anything.

So, why write? For one, writing makes us better thinkers, and thinking is soldier business. In setting down ideas we are forced to confront logical holes and the limits of our knowledge on a topic. It is only once we see our thoughts that we can improve them. This fact has moved many, such as historian David McCullough, to observe, “Writing is thinking.”²

Writing also makes us better leaders. Brig. Gen. S. L. A. Marshall said it best in 1966 when he wrote that those “who can command words to serve their thoughts and feelings are well on their way to commanding men to serve their purposes ... senior commanders respect the junior who has a facility for thinking an idea through and then expressing it comprehensively in clear, unvarnished phrases.”³ A day spent on the line today shows this as true now as it was in 1966.

Above all, writing endures. Our writing outlasts our thoughts, our spoken words, our online activity, and ultimately, ourselves. Col. Emory Upton’s example teaches us as much. Upton led Union troops with valor on the bloody Civil War battlefields, then dedicated his life to writing about how to improve the Army. He died before he saw his writing make a difference. But make a difference it did, leading to critical reforms that readied

the Army for the First World War. You just never know what may come of your writing.⁴

Have an Idea

Good writing starts with a good idea that

the writer cares about. Figure out what, if anything, you want to say. This seemingly obvious point is worth marking because the temptation runs the opposite way. Out of a desire to be heard, we decide to write and then try to figure out what we want to say. This a common human error. Guard against it. An article with something to say is worth a hundred without a point.

The good news is that soldiers and officers get good ideas all the time in the conduct of their duties. We care about these ideas because we care about our profession, even if it can frustrate us, or else we would not put up with the hardships of military service. These ideas may address a technical problem with equipment, a doctrinal gap discovered during training, a cultural issue observed in a formation, or a regulatory shortcoming.

Ideas are incomplete if they stop at diagnosis. When they do, they amount to what many call “admiring the problem.” Rather than admire a problem, come up with potential ways to fix it. Research the mechanisms by which change happens in the Army. Proposed fixes don’t need to be perfect but should be as specific as possible. Strong, precise analysis and recommendations are more likely to be adopted.

When you have an idea, you may dismiss it on the grounds that were it any good, someone else would have thought of it. After all, the people who craft doctrine and lead formations are smart. What are the chances they missed something that a soldier now sees? The short answer: high. On the ground, we see what happens when the Army’s policies and doctrine meet reality. Issues arise in practice that do not in theory. Consequently, your observations are crucial.

Even if you decide your idea has merit, humility may stop you from writing. Most of us are not experts in the topics that interest us and so feel unqualified to write about them. Rather than give up on an idea, take the opportunity to learn. Search for related reading in the many databases available via Army libraries or on defense websites. Talk to those in your unit who may know about the issue of concern, whether a maintenance chief or first sergeant.

If you are still worried you have only part of the answer, consider coauthorship. For example, an artilleryman and an aviator who have a novel idea for how to train the observation of artillery fire using unmanned aircraft systems could author an article together. The artilleryman might provide insight into

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gunnery training and the aviator on air space deconfliction. Coauthorship can work many ways, but when it's effective, it makes the article more credible and more comprehensive.

You may discover that someone has already written what you want to say. If so, do not despair. The historical record can sustain two pieces of writing that argue the same point. For an idea to gain momentum, it often takes more than a single piece. Your topic need not be entirely novel. The key thing is to offer the reader a new piece of information or a new angle from which to view your topic. News people sometimes call this a scoop. What's yours?

Pick Your Audience

Once you have an idea that you care about, have studied the topic, consulted your fellow service members, and come up with possible solutions, it is time to pick an audience. Even a good idea well-articulated will not get far if addressed to those who can do nothing about it. Find out who needs to hear your argument and write as if you're talking to them across a mess hall table.

So how do you know who your audience is? Often, the answer asserts itself as you study the problem and its solutions. For example, if you have seen a problem with enlisted promotion policy, you may decide the Army deputy G-1 and the Human Resource Command leadership are your audience. Of course, you want others to read the piece, but here writing abides by the marksman-ship principle "aim small, miss small."

What if you don't know who within the great Army bureaucracy can do something about your identified problem? A good place to start is the Army regulation or manual concerning your topic. The first chapter or preface will usually list responsibility holders or proponents for the policy in question. Ask those in your unit who have experience in the institutional Army, as most senior officers do, whether you're on the right track. Their answers will fill in what publications leave out.

Picking your audience empowers you to look forward. Articles that simply mourn past mistakes limit themselves. Articles that anticipate an upcoming decision or opportunity and recommend actions for the audience to take maximize the chance the piece has of making a difference. Pick an audience early and carefully so you can then anticipate your audience's

next opportunity to act on your idea. Without knowing your audience, you won't be able to do so.

Targeting an upcoming decision is not always possible, but always consider doing so. Say you want to recommend a change to barracks maintenance policies. If your desired audience will soon testify before a House committee on the topic, framing your article in terms of what your audience should say to the committee representatives is useful. The same could be said for upcoming regulations revisions, acquisition decisions, force structure changes, or even cultural pivots.

Make an Outline

You now have an idea you care about. You have done your homework; you know your audience and have perhaps identified an upcoming decision to target. It is time to map your idea out. Do so by making an outline. Preparing a good outline for an article, like preparing a good route on a map, will make the trip on which you are embarking much easier.

There are many article types, including those that use narratives, lists, dialogue, historical vignettes, or fiction to convey a point. Depending on your argument and style, your piece may call for any of these. For this article's purpose we will consider one of the more common article types one encounters in today's commentary: an argumentative essay, ranging roughly from eight hundred to three thousand words.

A typical structure for an argumentative essay, though not the only one, runs as follows: an introduction that poses the article's central point, a section that provides needed background information, a body that explains the problem in depth, a set of recommendations, a consideration of alternate perspectives, and a conclusion that looks forward.

Start with an outline. An outline sorts the many thoughts in your head into their respective roles, alerts you to gaps in your argument, gives you a road-map when you get lost in your writing, and ensures your editor finds in your first draft a structure with which he or she can work. A sample outline format is provided in the figure.

Write your outline at the paragraph level. Each paragraph should contain a single thought. The preceding paragraph to this one, for example, concerned the purpose of an outline. This paragraph concerns the nature of your paragraphs. More than one thought per

An Abbreviated Example Outline	
Section One: Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Topic sentence for the hook paragraph: A surprising, punchy bid for the reader's attention ii. Topic sentence introducing the argument: An urgent statement of the problem and a summarized recommendation
Section Two: Background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Topic sentence that provides an overview of the issue background ii. Topic sentence that introduces an additional aspect of the background <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. First piece of evidence
Section Three: The Problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Topic sentence that relates the problem to the background ii. Topic sentence concerning an aspect of the problem <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. First piece of evidence b. Second piece of evidence iii. Topic sentence concerning a second aspect of the problem <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. First piece of evidence b. Second piece of evidence
Section Four: How to Fix the Problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Topic sentence reviewing possible solutions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Statement of relationship between nature of the problem and solution ii. Topic sentence introducing recommendation one <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. How it addresses problem characteristic in theory iii. Topic sentence connecting recommendation to evidence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. First piece of evidence iv. Topic sentence introducing more supporting evidence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Second piece of evidence v. Topic sentence acknowledging an alternate recommendation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. First piece of evidence b. Second piece of evidence vi. Topic sentence addressing why you do not forward the alternate recommendation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Reference your analysis b. Countercitation
Section Five: Alternative Perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Topic sentence acknowledging the existence of alternate explanation of problem, the most prevalent being ... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. First piece of evidence b. Second piece of evidence ii. Topic sentence that addresses why you do not adopt this explanation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Reference to your analysis b. Countercitation
Section Six: Conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Topic sentence that restates the problem with fresh language that draws on the argument you have developed since the introduction ii. Topic sentence addressing upcoming opportunities to change <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. First piece of evidence b. Second piece of evidence iii. A closing sentence that reminds the reader of the question's urgency

(Figure by author)

Figure. Example Outline

paragraph makes them too big and big paragraphs kill momentum. So, I'll end this paragraph here.

Include in the outline a first draft of each paragraph's first sentence, often called a topic sentence.

Writing each topic sentence into the outline confirms for you that each paragraph has a single discernible idea. Doing so allows you also to see whether your writing flows. If you read *only* the topic sentences from your outline sequentially and there are no great leaps in thought or topic, you can rest assured your writing will be easy to follow. If your topic sentences jump around or do not flow naturally, they require your attention.

When figuring how to best connect topic sentences, consider the advice of then Capt. Joseph Greene in the July-August 1936 edition of the *Infantry Journal*, who, in his own commendable how-to article, explained continuity this way:

This is one of the important tricks of writing—hooking thoughts together. It is done in two main ways: by using connecting words and phrases, such as “therefore,” “but,” “and also,” ... and several scores others; and by using sentences, phrases or words that reflect back to the old thought or carry forward into the new ... Remember, too, that thought should not only flow smoothly from one paragraph to another but from one sentence to another within paragraphs. This does not mean that every sentence must contain a special connective word. That kind of writing, even though it is much easier to read than disconnected composition, is tiresome. It is avoided chiefly by using plenty of short sentences among the longer ones. Witness this four-word sentence.⁵

Write the Article

You have distilled your good idea into an outline aimed at a specific audience. It is time to start writing. Doing so is hard. George Orwell, one of our greatest authorities on writing, famously compared writing a book to “a long bout of some painful illness.”⁶ But like a lot of hard things in the Army, it is worth doing. So how does one start?

Simply put, start writing, follow the outline, and keep going. You may be unhappy with the words that come out at first. They may jumble, take digressions, repeat themselves or fall flat. Resist the urge to edit them as you first write them. Writing requires momentum, and second-guessing your prose can kill that momentum. Editing is important but follows the first draft.

As you start writing, remember the outline, but you need not adhere to it sequentially. For example, you may write body paragraphs before the introduction or conclusion. You may write a consideration of why you’re wrong before you write your recommendations. That said, do not abandon your sections altogether. We’ll look at them in sequence now.

The introduction often includes at least two paragraphs. This is because an introduction has two tasks: to grab the reader’s attention and to pose the article’s main point. One can grab the reader’s attention many ways, but a basic principle, like in comedy, is that surprise works. In the second paragraph, you might state the article’s main point. If you want to target a particular upcoming decision—say, for example, an upcoming revision of force structure—address that decision in the introduction.

Next is the background section. Consider your article’s background broadly. Though you may not need to explain the nature of enlisted promotions to one of your target audience members, like the Army deputy G-1, some of your readers might do with a refresher. Background sections are a good place to refer to other articles on the same topic. These sections also afford you a chance to introduce yourself and note why your voice is useful to the conversation on your chosen topic.

The body of your article is where you develop your argument. If you intend to discuss multiple problems or a multifaceted problem, you may want to divide the body of the article into subsections to help your reader keep track of your argument. Though there is no one right answer, a principle to consider is that your body should be longer than your background and introduction combined.

Give evidence for your argument in the body of your article. You might draw evidence from history, from current events, from academic research, or from other writing. You might also want to invoke your own experience. Be mindful of resting too much of your argument on a single piece of evidence, a single case, or a single anecdote. Doing so weakens the argument by inadvertently suggesting it is only true in certain cases, or worse, not at all.

Once you convey to the readers the nature of the problem with evidence, tell them how to fix it. Recommended solutions don’t need to be perfect or complete. Too complete or confident a solution may

invite unproductive nitpicking or distract readers with minutiae. However, specific recommendations separate your piece from a mere complaint and propel the conversation in productive directions.

Consider some alternative perspectives to avoid straw manning, to demonstrate good faith to your readers, and to improve your own argument. Often there are many ways to view a problem and drawbacks to any fix, including your proposed one. Write out the best of these counterarguments as you see them. Then address them with evidence and concede where they point out unresolved issues.

You have arrived at the end. Resist the urge to begin your closing by writing “In conclusion.” Instead, remind your reader of the identified problem’s urgency, its stakes, upcoming opportunities to change things for the better, and how to do so. If you invoked an image or theme at the outset, consider returning to it. This has the effect of tying a bow for the reader.

As you write, think about the publication in which you intend to submit the article. If the publication has stylistic preferences listed on its submission page, adhere to them. Read several articles the publication has already run that are comparable to yours. Note their typical tone, average paragraph length, use of headers, and topic. Mimic them. Doing so does not sacrifice style but does show a thoughtful deference to the publication that takes your piece on.

Revise

You are not done when you complete your draft. You must revise your work. Set your draft aside, think about something unrelated to it, then return to it. Read the entire piece aloud. Its flaws will instantly strike you, whether they are ones of grammar, of logic, of evidence, or of style. In the time you took away from the piece you may have encountered supporting or discrepant evidence. Make needed changes.

Do not limit the article’s revisions to your own. Writing is difficult because by writing, you speak your inner thoughts to others. It is hard to tell where you end and your article draft begins. It would be easier to not write anything at all because when you are silent, it is harder for others to criticize your position. The vulnerability inherent in writing makes it an unexpectedly personal thing. Nonetheless, good writing results from good feedback. Seek it. For advice on

how to do so well, see Rebecca Segal’s piece included in this publication.⁷

Ask for feedback from those who would know if you were wrong. The fellow soldier who agrees with you whenever you discuss issues over coffee, however good a person, should not be the only one who reads your draft. Seek feedback on your draft from your leadership as well. Leaders may have much to offer your piece, as they have usually been around longer than you and know a thing or two about the context in which your problem developed.

Showing your work to your leaders serves other purposes, too. Your article may alert them to an overlooked problem in their formation. Sharing your draft with your leaders will also spare them a surprise if it is published. This is particularly important if you are presenting controversial recommendations or challenging policies that directly impact your organization.

Some of the feedback you get may be hard to hear; not everyone will love your article. However, if the idea is worth pursuing, then take in the feedback that helps you better craft an argument. At times, this may involve some extensive rewriting. Trent Lythgoe’s piece “From Rough Draft to Polished Manuscript: The Power of Rewriting,” elsewhere in this compilation, gives great guidance on how to rewrite well.⁸

Seek feedback from your unit public affairs office and security officers as part of a prepublication review. These reviews are intended to prevent unintentional disclosure of controlled information or controversy, both of which are unlikely. The purpose of a prepublication review is not to censor. Submitting your article for a prepublication review is a low-cost way to err on the side of caution. One can learn more about prepublication reviews in Army Regulation 360-1, *The Army Public Affairs Program*, and Army Regulation 385-5, *The Army Information Security Program*.⁹

Submit Your Article

Once you have sought and incorporated feedback and rewritten your piece as needed, you are ready to submit your article. Guidance for how to do so can be found on publication websites, typically under a “submissions guidelines” page. Adhere strictly to these guidelines and submit to one publication at a time. Editors at publications often receive dozens of submissions a week, so afford them patience as they consider yours. John Amble gives sage advice on working with editors elsewhere in this issue.¹⁰

Submit first to the publication or website most likely to reach your target audience. Publications and websites are born, die, and change, but at the time of this writing, the following generally holds: tactical issues, concerning problems roughly at the brigade level and below, are suited for branch magazines and websites such as *From the Green Notebook*, which enjoy tactical-level readership. Questions of doctrine or regulation may reach relevant those positioned to change both through publications such as *Military Review* and the Army War College's *Parameters*. Ideas related to high-level policy may require a hearing from Pentagon policymakers and so might be well suited for *Army Times* or the website War on the Rocks. Other platforms cover the gamut, such as the Modern War Institute.

Publications and websites differ on the sorts of articles they want. Some only accept op-eds—short for “opposite the editorial page,” a throwback term to when opinion pieces from writers not affiliated with a newspaper’s editorial board appeared opposite that paper’s editorials in the layout. Some, such as *Military Review*, desire formal citations. Some accept what they call “commentary.” If you have a publication

in mind, learn that publication’s expectations early in the writing process to avoid wasting time on the wrong sort of article.

Publications will often ask for a pitch before you submit your draft. In just a few words, these pitches must state the problem, why it matters, how to fix it, and why your voice is worth listening to. Pitches may seem like a chore. Embrace them instead as a useful exercise. If you struggle to distill your argument to those essential points in the space of a hundred or so words, the clarity of your argument may benefit from iterative process of trying.

Your writing will be rejected at some point. No matter what, keep writing. Recall that the good to be gained from writing is reaped whether you are ever published, as it is in the process of writing that you learn and discipline your thoughts. Only once you are at peace with rejection will you start to write with the confidence to do so well. It’s almost but not quite a *Catch-22*, which, by the way, was rejected twenty-two times.¹¹ ■

An abridged seven-step guide to writing an article can be found in the appendix following this article.

Notes

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3. S. L. A. Marshall, *The Officer as a Leader*, 1st ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Company, April 1966), 79.

4. Richard C. Brown, “General Emory Upton—The Army’s Mahan,” *Military Affairs* 17, no. 3 (1953): 125–31, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1982669>.

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8. Trent Lythgoe, “Rewriting: The Secret to Writing Well,” *Military Review* 104, no. SE-02 (2024): 51–59.

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10. John Amble, “Your Draft Is Done, Now What? Working with an Editor,” *Military Review* 104, no. SE-02 (2024): 100–5.

11. Sian Cain, “From Animal Farm to *Catch-22*: The Most Regrettable Rejections in the History of Publishing,” *The Guardian* (website), 26 August 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/shortcuts/2019/aug/26/animal-farm-catch-22-most-regrettable-rejections-history-publishing>.

Appendix. How to Write an Article: An Abridged Seven-Step Guide

Step One	Have an idea worth writing about. To know whether the idea is worth developing, ask of it, <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is this idea useful?• Is there evidence to support this idea?• Is there anything new about this idea—what is your scoop?
Step Two	Pick your audience. To know who your article's audience might be, ask, <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Who would care?• Who has the power to act on your recommendations?• Who faces upcoming decisions related to your topic?
Step Three	Write the outline. Do so at the paragraph level. There are many types of articles, but a reliable argumentative format is as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• introduction to seize the reader's attention• background information the reader needs• a discussion of the problem that concerns you• your recommended solutions• a consideration of reasons you might be wrong• a conclusion that looks forward
Step Four	Write the article. Your task here is to turn your thoughts into words. Don't edit yourself too much as you do so. Save that for the next step. Otherwise, you'll never get enough out.
Step Five	Revise your writing. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Read your piece aloud to yourself.• Seek feedback from those who know your topic.• Take nothing personally.
Step Six	Submit your writing. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pick a publication suited to you.• Pitch your piece well and briefly.• Expect rejection.
Step Seven	Keep writing. You will be a better thinker, a better speaker, and a better soldier for it. Good luck.

(Appendix by author)