A U.S. Army Best Squad Competition participant writes during the essay preparation event at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin, 7 September 2023. The Army is increasing emphasis on teaching and developing writing skills as an essential component of effective leadership at the small-unit level. (Photo by Sgt. Alyssa Blom, U.S. Army)

How to Develop and Run a Unit Writing Program

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Although this "how-to" compilation provides excellent tools for aspiring authors, professional writing can seem daunting for many soldiers. The nationwide decline in writing skills is well-documented, and schools are less frequently mandating writing courses, including at West Point.[1] The U.S. Army's fast-paced operational tempo and profuse tasks create trade-offs for soldiers and leaders who can only accomplish so much.[2] Additionally, varying education levels and writing skills create perceived entry barriers for aspiring authors. Given these constraints and trends, how can a unit's leadership develop and incentivize professional writing in their organization?

This guide provides tools for unit leaders who want to create a writing development program. Leaders at echelon can develop unit-level writing programs to cultivate subordinate communication skills, set reasonable writing goals, mentor authors through the submission process, and incentivize writing across the formation. Most importantly, these efforts will enhance critical thinking and foster an environment that supports professional discourse and debate on important topics.

The following guide is based on our experience creating and managing the 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment's Mustang Writing Initiative.[3] The "Initiative" began in January 2023 and included leader professional development sessions, working lunches, writing workshops, and battalion internal peer-review sessions.

We hope company and battalion leaders will read this article before they take the guidon or begin key staff and field grade key developmental assignments. Reading this might spark ideas for how leaders can develop similar unit writing programs in their formations. In our experience, creating and incentivizing a unit writing program was incredibly beneficial in developing writing skills and fostering professional dialogue as soldiers grappled with complex topics. In fact, the program led to the publication of ten articles, and numerous others will follow soon.[4]

Where to Begin? Establishing the Program

A unit writing program is a commander's program; it needs to be introduced as such. We published the intent of our unit writing program in our battalion's quarterly training guidance as part of the leader development strategy. The initial requirements and objectives should be clearly defined. At a minimum, you know to tell the formation the why, the how, and the who to get the program underway.

Start by figuring out the purpose of your program, the "why." Is it to produce articles? To spark conversations across the formation? Understanding why you want a program will dictate its structure. Our initial purpose was simply to improve the formation's written communication skills. This can be more tangible or focus on developing specific knowledge related to an upcoming mission or general unit operations.

With an overarching purpose established, figuring out the "how" comes next. While the specific execution details are likely to change and adapt to the reality of competing requirements, a basic framework is critical for expectation management. Our Initiative was based on improving written communication skills with tailored feedback, peer review, and senior leader engagement. What the commander spends time on is important, and other leaders will take notice.

Identifying the "who" is a little more challenging and is inherently influenced by your program objectives. We deliberately decided to make participation optional, acknowledging that professional writing takes time and focus that may not be available for all soldiers in our formation. As J. P. Clark highlights in this special issue, historic U.S. Army attempts at mandatory unit writing programs were met with mixed success.[5]

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Because of our broad audience and general professional development objective, we were creative with individual output expectations; we did not mandate publication in a professional outlet as the only end state. Publishing an article in a U.S. Army journal was not a feasible first step for numerous volunteers who needed additional writing development. We acknowledged different education levels and writing experiences among Initiative volunteers, and we had a broad definition for a "professional paper." Instead of only focusing on professional publications, we encouraged participants to consider publishing an after action review or a short white paper intended to be shared across our brigade and division. We found that simply working through the process was incredibly beneficial for the participant's professional development.

Once the program is established, the real work begins.

Running the Program

There is more to a unit writing program than simply putting out guidance. At the end of the day, these types of programs are mentorship and development opportunities that require leadership involvement. The extent of that involvement is a crucial decision that will influence how involved the rest of the formation is. Whether this is meetings, updates, or even just providing informal feedback, you need to have a plan for encouraging and supporting the aspiring authors.

Given an already busy battle rhythm, we conducted monthly Initiative meetings as working lunches to maximize attendance and limit scheduling conflicts. Initial meetings focused on identifying potential topics, developing arguments, conducting literature reviews, creating outlines, and leveraging evidence. These engagements can be solely leader-led or briefs from the participants, updating the group on their current progress or identifying potential issues. However, in-person meetings may not be possible for U.S. Army Reserve, National Guard, and deployed/geographically dispersed formations. For those units, Erik Davis and Nick Frazier's "Building and Running an Online Forum" provides innovative ideas for creating an online forum that would be ideal for a virtual unit writing program.[6]

One helpful approach we discovered was incorporating external resources. This could include bringing in a guest speaker or providing participants with an article to read beforehand. We found success in offering short discussions about writing techniques from sources such as Dr. Trent Lythgoe's *Professional Writing: The Command and General Staff College Writing Guide*.[7]

As the program progresses, the meetings must account for the varying progress of authors. As authors developed outlines and drafted papers in our program, we focused on providing them with tailored feedback from leaders with more writing experience. For us, this was generally provided by the battalion commander and XO in one-on-one office calls. Once authors began completing polished drafts, this transitioned to include submission advice and recommended next steps. As the Initiative evolved, our monthly meetings settled on the following format:

- Holding a brief discussion on recent professional publications of interest to our unit and recommending future reading.
- Having successful authors share their publication experience, including thesis development, evidence selection, research process, outlet selection, and submission lessons learned.
- Having authors with working drafts share an update on their projects, including current draft status, literature review, help needed, and goal outlet or product (e.g., after action review or white paper).
- Providing an opportunity for new authors to share project ideas, ask questions, and receive feedback from the audience on thesis development, paper outline, and literature review help.

There is a time commitment to running a program like this, and at the end of the day, there will be an opportunity cost. For us, this monthly working lunch typically lasted an hour to ninety minutes. Still, participants were encouraged to schedule follow-up appointments as needed to receive focused assistance with any steps in the writing process. On average, Initiative leaders (battalion commander and XO) invested approximately ten hours per month into the program. Those hours included our monthly group meetings, one-on-one discussions with participants, and reviewing draft outlines and papers.

Building the Audience

Depending on your writing program's "who," you may have to get creative to get participants, especially if it is entirely voluntary. It is worth noting that not

everyone in the formation will pursue writing. This guide is not advocating to create a program that forces everyone to submit articles to professional journals. The resulting flood of papers would drown our military journals' already thin editorial teams, and the rigor required for professional publication is not necessarily for everyone in the formation. The question then becomes how to incentivize participation.

We found that a commander's active participation in the program is the most important factor to motivating authors to volunteer. If the battalion commander is personally writing an article, participating in the program by sharing drafts (even if they are underdeveloped and need improvement), and receiving feedback about how to best proceed with their article, then others will be encouraged to dive in themselves. Our investment in the program showed that we valued professional discourse, enabling the program to take off with new authors joining the Initiative every month.

Another way to garner participation is to incentivize writing with senior leader affirmation. Successful Army writing across the force requires buy-in at echelon, with senior leaders meaningfully engaging with authors and continuing the professional dialogue started in an article. Authors will be encouraged to continue professional writing if they receive an email from a general officer telling them to keep going, or a positive comment from a battalion commander, company commander, or first sergeant who gained something from the article published by a first lieutenant or staff sergeant. If an author spends months refining an article and exercises personal courage by opening themselves up to worldwide criticism only to receive deafening silence, then it is reasonable to assume that the author will never write again. Worse, they may actively discourage those around them from attempting professional writing.

Because a lack of confidence in writing is an underlying issue, another approach to motivate soldiers to volunteer to start a project is to encourage coauthorship. This helps share the burden and furthers the network of people thinking critically in the unit. This is particularly important when the authors write about new and innovative ways of training ready formations and employing new technology. While a young lieutenant or NCO may not yet be a

Staff Duty Analytical Writing Assignment

Staff duty shifts are a great way to get staff duty officers (SDOs) and staff duty NCOs to write. Below are several prompts that we provided to our SDOs over the last year. They had to write one page, single spaced, and submit to the Top 3 and their company command team before their shift ended. The battalion commander or XO responded with feedback on the SDO author's writing and engaged with some of their ideas.

- **Crew Lethality.** Read chapters 3 and 4 from the *III Corps Lethality Report*. Write a one-page paper explaining what concrete steps you will take in to increase lethality in your current or future platoon.
- **Unit Culture.** Read the executive summary and finding 1 (pages 17–42) from the *Report of the Fort Hood Independent Review Committee*. Write a one-page paper explaining what concrete steps you will take to ensure the Army's SHARP program is embraced and enforced in your unit at the soldier-level (platoon, staff section, etc.).
- **Delegation and Empowerment.** Read William Oncken and Donald Wass's "Management Time: Who's Got the Monkey?" from the *Harvard Business Review*. Write a one-page paper explaining what concrete steps you will make to better delegate and empower your subordinates.
- **Ukraine Lessons Learned.** Read Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds's *Stormbreak: Fighting through Russian Defences in Ukraine's 2023 Offensive*, and write a one-page paper exploring which two aspects of large-scale combat operations described in this RUSI report are most important to your current job in 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment? Briefly explain why these aspects are important and what you can do in the fiscal year 2024 training progression to address these large-scale combat operation trends.
- **Career Opportunities.** Read the U.S. Army Broadening Opportunities Program Catalog. Write a one-page paper that answers which Army career opportunities and broadening assignments are you interested in and why.

master at combined arms maneuver, they might be the subject-matter expert in their brigade or division on leveraging new equipment or operating in a new environment. A gentle nudge and encouragement from leaders might be the needed spark to inspire a young NCO or officer to start writing about their experience.

Finally, you can decide if it makes sense to have a mandatory component of the program. For example, we instituted a requirement for the staff duty officer (SDO) to complete an analytical writing assignment during their twenty-four-hour duty, and we used the division and brigade commanders' priorities as a guide. We then selected articles for the SDO to read, and prompted them to write a one-page, single-spaced paper explaining how the selected article was relevant to their current position.

Once complete, the SDO would send that essay to the battalion commander, executive officer, command sergeant major, and their company-level commander and first sergeant. Feedback for the SDO essay was provided in the form of a note from the battalion commander or XO focused on the essay's substance, the writing, and recommendations to improve. Because officers in our formation served as SDOs on average once a month, they had numerous opportunities to write papers for their chain of command to read. At just a single page, this assignment only requires five minutes to read and roughly another ten minutes to type a response. At a minimum, this allowed every lieutenant in the battalion to have an opportunity to receive direct feedback on their writing skills. This could sometimes inspire the SDO to join the writing program and expand their assignment to larger projects. Our battalion had two such instances.

Conclusion

Leaders at echelon can enhance writing skills in their units by creating unit writing development programs and incentivizing their soldiers to write professionally. This special edition provides an excellent starting syllabus for developing a unit writing program. Unit leaders can discuss two to three articles from this issue during leader professional development sessions or writing workshops to introduce prospective authors to each step of the writing process: Theo Lipsky's "How to Write an Article," Rebecca Segal's "A Writer's Guide to Giving and Receiving Feedback," and John Amble's "How to Work with an Editor" provide an excellent starting foundation for any prospective author.[8] With that foundation in place, they can then transition to something similar to our working lunches, focused on reviewing works in progress, soliciting group feedback, sharing new helpful articles, etc. Units interested in coming up with ideas on what to write need to read Max Ferguson's article "Catalyst Papers: A Practical Writing Style for Army Leaders to Share Ideas."[9] Though the force is challenged by a busy operational tempo, an investment from leaders at echelon can provide soldiers with the writing development they need to meaningfully engage in professional discourse, share lessons learned, refine doctrine, and prepare the U.S. Army for the complicated operating environment of the future. ■

Notes

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3. Note: this article is revised for this special edition from an earlier version: Jay Ireland and Ryan Van Wie, "Aligning Incentives: Professional Writing in the Army's Operational Domain," *Military Review* Online Exclusive, 9 February 2024, https://www.armyu-press.army.mil/journals/military-review/online-exclusive/2024-ole/aligning-incentives/. The authors would like to thank this special edition's authors and coeditor, Maj. Brennan Deveraux, whose helpful feedback improved our earlier paper.

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7. Trent Lythgoe, ed., *Professional Writing: The Command and General Staff College Writing Guide*, Student Text 22-2 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, July 2023), https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/home/Resources/CGSC-Professional-Writing-Guide.pdf.

8. John Amble, "Working with an Editor," *Military Review* 104, no. SE-02 (2024): 100–5; Theo Lipsky, "How to Write an Article," *Military Review* 104, no. SE-02 (2024): 27–34; Rebecca Segal, "A Writer's Guide to Giving and Receiving Feedback," *Military Review* 104, no. SE-02 (2024): 94–99.

9. Max Ferguson, "Catalyst Papers: A Practical Writing Style for Army Leaders to Share Ideas," *Military Review* 104, no. SE-02 (2024): 70–75.

"As to composition, I held with the few rules of thumb which practice had convinced me were sound. Knowing almost nothing of the rules of English grammar, then or later, I would still add nothing to the basic prescription:

- Every sentence must express at least one idea clearly.
- Economy of words is the correct principle, so shy at adjectives.
- There is always the right word, the strong word, so keep thinking and do not settle for a weaker one."

—S. L. A. Marshall, "Genesis to Revelation," *Military Review* 52, no. 2 (February 1972): 24

"And there is a fourth category of Infantryman—those who would like to write for publication but who do not have any of the confidence of this former group. They worry about their ability to write and fear that their efforts will be ridiculed by some editor sitting in a final judgement in a book-lined office someplace. So rather than face such ridicule and possible rejection, they do nothing about those articles that they have been thinking about."

—Marie B. Edgerton and Albert N. Garland, "Writing for Publication," *Infantry* 73, no. 5 (September-October 1983): 20–21