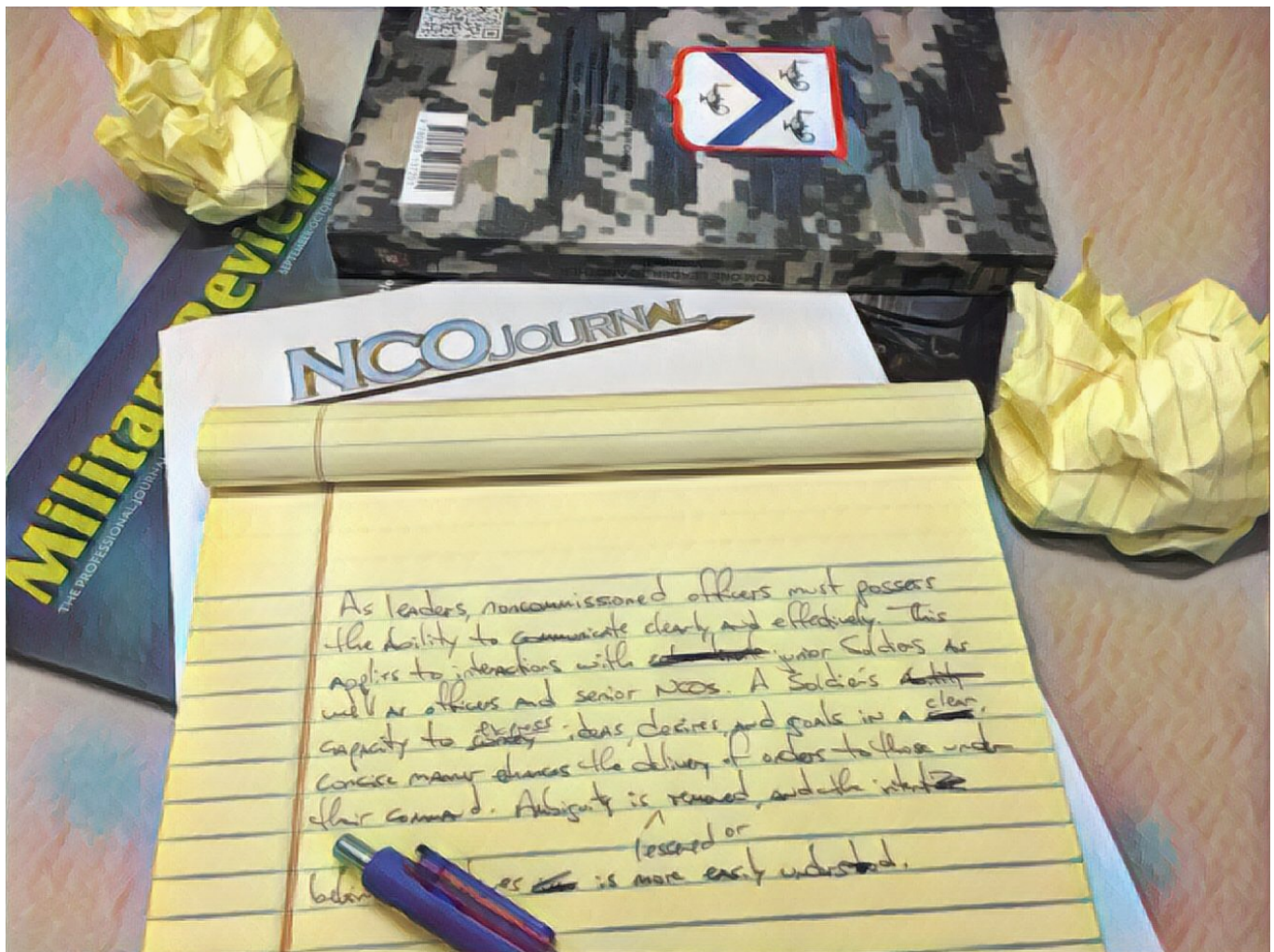


The Art of Words: Professional Writing Through the Ranks

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The ability to communicate effectively is a skill every Soldier needs to cultivate and practice as part of strengthening their leadership influence. Noncommissioned officers at every level now face the challenge of “upping their writing game.” (Graphic by Dayton Ward, NCO Journal)

TRADOC's Command Sgt. Maj. David S. Davenport encourages NCOs to write and seek authorship.

As leaders, noncommissioned officers must possess the ability to communicate clearly and with authority with junior Soldiers as well as officers and senior NCOs. A Soldier's capacity to

express ideas, desires, and goals in a clear and concise manner enhances the delivery of orders to those under their command.

The higher an NCO advances in rank, the more they write. Situation reports, operations orders, point papers, personnel evaluations, professional award recommendations, counseling reports, and even articles for publication (<http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/NCO-Journal-Submission-Guidelines/>) are just some examples, and each requires a solid ability to transcribe one's thoughts to paper.

Recognizing this need and that it is not necessarily a skill that comes naturally to everyone, the Army has increased training and communication aimed at teaching Soldiers the value and benefits of strong writing.

Making the Grade

One prominent example of this new focus is in the recently overhauled Noncommissioned Officers Professional Development System, which tests Soldiers' writing ability as they progress upward through the NCO ranks. It is just one component of the Army's intent to improve its professional military education programs and develop stronger, mentally agile leaders.

Related: Noncommissioned Officer 2020 Strategy

(https://www.army.mil/standto/archive_2016-02-23/)

Another change to NCOPDS requires NCOs selected for advancement to attend resident leadership courses commensurate with their new rank before promotion.

As of Oct. 1, 2016, Soldiers must complete a writing assessment before attending these courses.¹ This directive is an outgrowth of a pilot program held in 2015, which evaluated 500 Soldiers attending Basic Leader Courses at different posts around the country. As part of the test, NCOs wrote essays about a topic provided by instructors. Criteria for grading the papers included English comprehension, grammar, spelling, and complexity of writing. For Soldiers attending the BLC, scoring of their essays followed standards applicable to first-year college students.²

Following the successful pilot program, the assessment initiative expanded to all Soldiers scheduled to attend the BLC, with NCOs carrying their completed and graded essays with them to the resident course.

"The main goal is, the student brings their results with them to school, and it becomes a discussion point or discussion topic in a lesson or counseling with an instructor," said Dr. Liston Bailey, chief of the Learning Innovations and Initiatives Division for the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command's Institute of NCO Professional Development.³

Referring to the results of the pilot program from which the current assessment evolved, Bailey

said, "The findings were that a significant portion of the sample could do better with their writing. We found some deficiencies. We found there were opportunities to improve their performance in terms of written communication."⁴

Related: Building the New NCO Professional

(<http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2015-Online-Exclusive-Articles/NCO-Professional/>) (*Military Review*)

Beyond these initial assessments, writing will factor heavily throughout all of the resident academies, as well as Structured Self-Development courses and other distance learning efforts. Note-taking exercises and writing assignments at different checkpoints during each course will improve writing ability while promoting research and strategic thinking.⁵

Furthermore, testing which requires answers provided in essay form replaces the usual model of multiple-choice questions. The U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy implemented this approach, driven by the belief that such testing requires students to have an enhanced understanding of the course's subject matter, which improves test scores.⁶

As they progress through each level of PME, the goal is for NCOs, at each rank, to advance their writing skills to match different levels of collegiate education. For example, Soldiers selected for staff sergeant and slated to attend the Advanced Leader Course should be striving to write at the college upperclassman level. Staff sergeants attending the Senior Leader Course, while preparing for promotion to sergeant first class, would be aiming to write at the early graduate school level.⁷

Effective Leaders are Effective Communicators

While it may appear as though the Army's intent concentrates on making Soldiers better students, there is a loftier goal driving this enhanced attention to writing. In addition to improving performance and PME scores, encouraging a commitment to enriched writing deepens Soldiers' analytical and strategic thinking skills. This allows them to convey their thoughts with greater efficiency and make better decisions.⁸ As leaders and mentors, NCOs must continuously work to improve and demonstrate this ability if they are to function in both the technical and tactical environments.

As defined in Army Regulation 25-50

(https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/r25_50.pdf), *Preparing and Managing Correspondence*, effective writing "is understood by the reader in a single rapid reading and is free of errors in substance, organization, style, and correctness."⁹ For the individual Soldier, this means possessing a capacity to write with a command of language and voice that enables the communication of ideas and objectives in a distinct, well-reasoned manner.

In an age where PowerPoint slides are an expedient means of summarizing and presenting data, it is often too easy to forego careful analysis and thorough comprehension of the underlying information. Soldiers are therefore encouraged to look beyond such tools of convenience by providing more detailed written communications as a part of their daily operations.¹⁰ NCOs, in particular, will be required to strengthen themselves in this area, as evidenced by the heightened emphasis on writing as a component of PME.

"In today's operating environment, it is assured that the role of the NCO will be as critical as ever in our Army's ability to operate and win the wars of tomorrow. No longer will the NCO be singularly concerned with the kinetic aspects of training, developing and leading Soldiers," said Sgt. Maj. of the Army Daniel A. Dailey, speaking about the value of professional writing. "Enhancing our NCO Corps' reading, research, and writing skills is absolutely critical to developing the type of agile, adaptable NCO who can lead in a complex world."¹¹

Related: The Importance of Effective Writing in the NCO Corps

(<http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2017/September/Effective-Writing/>) (*NCO Journal*)

Along with striving to improve individual writing skills comes the need for Soldiers to expand their reading efforts, which can lead to enhancing their strategic thinking ability. Professional reading lists and programs have long been encouraged by numerous Army leaders.

Sgt. Maj. Dailey's book club (<http://cape.army.mil/library/sma-book-club/>) fosters guided discussion opportunities between junior NCOs and their Soldiers. Frequently updated, the list features both fiction and non-fiction representing a broad spectrum of subjects and genres.¹² Leaders at every level can incorporate professional reading, along with note taking, writing reviews, and guiding discussions about selected titles as part of their unit's PME efforts.¹³

Writing for an Audience

In addition to advocating for increased writing proficiency in the areas of PME and daily mission duties, Soldiers are encouraged to continue refining these skills by presenting their thoughts and ideas for professional publication.

Soldiers interested in writing about military subjects can submit articles to the *NCO Journal* (<http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>), *Military Review* (<http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Military-Review/>), and the *Journal of Military Learning* (<http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Journal-of-Military-Learning/>), all published by the Army University Press (<http://www.armyupress.army.mil/>), which welcome submissions on any number of topics from the operational force. Each publication focuses on a different aspect of information sharing for specific audiences within the Army or larger military community.

Interested writers are encouraged to review their respective submission guidelines

interested writers are encouraged to review their respective submission guidelines (<http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Publish-With-Us/>). In addition to challenging communication, writing, and research skills, submitting to these platforms offers the opportunity to share ideas and perspectives from a variety of professionals and subject matter experts. Having articles published in this manner can also enhance an NCO's Evaluation Report.¹⁵

Conclusion

As their careers advance and their responsibilities increase, NCOs at every level can maintain their effectiveness as leaders by continuing to hone their writing and critical thinking abilities. By investing in the improvement of these proficiencies, the Army benefits from a smarter, better-prepared leadership corps which stands ready to tackle ever greater, more complex challenges.¹⁶

Notes

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