

Make Your Voice Heard, Write for the NCO Journal

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Cpl. Zachary Bandli begins the written essay portion of the 2014 Department of the Army Best Warrior Competition at Fort Lee, Va., Oct. 6, 2014. Written communication skills show depth and are important to NCO professional development. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Jourdain Yardan)

Why Write?

Eavesdropping is a favorite pastime of mine; I learn a great deal by listening to others discuss their careers, the Army, and training. Among the things I learned during my passive social reconnaissance was that officers I am around are expected to publish one paper or article each rating cycle. Noncommissioned officers have no such spoken or unspoken norm. We can

push this aside and say we should let the brains of the Army write while we, the “backbone of the Army,” worry about getting results. This seems shortsighted to me; officer articles influence Army policy every day—tactics, promotions, acquisitions, and even NCO duties and responsibilities. We, the NCO Corps, owe it to the Army to make our voice heard through written communication.

When asked to write an article about, how to get published in the NCO Journal, I struggled to separate the how from the why. When writing, the first step of how to be successful is to find the why. Your reasons “why” will be slightly different from mine, but there are several strong reasons every NCO should try to write one professional article each rating period.

Improves Communication Skills

The assumption of writing teachers are students who “write the way they talk.” This can be very hard to explain to new writers. Written and spoken English are not the same; written English requires a formal tone and uses stricter grammar rules. Taking this further, writing in a blog and writing for a professional journal are not the same. Understanding this will improve your written communication skills.

In writing, it is important to know your audience. Who is reading this? What do they already know? What will interest them? A good writer answers these questions and adapts his or her writing so the audience will understand, empathize, and react. Adapting a message to the audience is key to good communication, written or otherwise. Moreover, soft skills, including demonstrated written communication, are in demand by employers and promotion boards.

Looks Good Professionally

Should you put a bullet about your NCO Journal article on your NCO Evaluation Report? Though some would argue against this, there are several key reasons I always try to include a

bullet for my published articles. The NCO education system requires increasingly intense written communication skills, and it is best to highlight your abilities in this area, additionally, it shows depth. Your NCOER should always show that you can do more than work in your assigned military occupational specialty. Writing is an excellent way to fill the “intellect” or “develops” blocks on your NCOER. NCOs are mainly responsible to train, mentor, and coach, but writing is a big part of the job. If you have not discovered this, you need to evaluate your counseling program. Finally, decent writing may be inherent, but good writing (dare I say great writing) takes practice.

Decision makers Read Professional Journals

Maybe the Joint Chiefs won't use your article to influence military policy. Then again, they might. Army history has plenty of examples where Soldier ideas changed the Army. In fact, the Army often makes requests for equipment or ideas to improve operations such as the Army Ideas for Innovation of AI2 program and the NCO Journal. In any case, written discourse has a way of spawning discussions. A well-written article might spawn further dialogue on the subject, encourage others to discuss the subject, or invite more articles. Why let the officers make all the arguments? Decision makers deserve the broadest viewpoint possible.

How to Write for the NCO Journal

To quote Mark Twain, “The best way to get ahead is to start.”¹ To start writing, you need little more than a pen and paper or a blank computer screen. Even though most people have written at least one paper, many find the idea of writing an article daunting. The five-paragraph essay formula for writing the can help the novice writer begin. Begin with the introductory paragraph, three supporting paragraphs and a concluding paragraph. Purpose, direction, and

motivation are also key to writing. The eight steps below will help guide you through the process from choosing a subject to submitting to the NCO Journal.

Step One: Find CRAAP to Write

The CRAAP test (which stands for Currency, Relevancy, Authority, Accuracy, and Purpose) is used to evaluate validity of sources in academic settings.² It also has the benefit of being an unnecessary acronym and sparking middle-school giggles. When you begin researching your article, you should use this to evaluate sources, but you can also use it to evaluate if your article will invite interest.

Your article should address current concerns and issues. This is one of many reasons NCOs and writers should read current events regularly. Professional journals (the NCO Journal for example) should also form a portion of your research. You would not go into combat without studying the terrain and you should not submit an article without knowing the journal. For example, an article about whether we should allow black socks with PT uniforms is not current, but perhaps a discussion of reflective belts would be current. Discussing same-sex marriages in the Army is probably not current, but transgender issues certainly are. Topics or events have a shelf life, which depends on their “newsworthiness.” The NCO Journal has also made a list of writing topics available here, <http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Writing-Topics>.

Relevancy relates to finding your audience; it also means you must tell readers why your article is relevant. Ask the NCO Journal, if your article relates to what is important to Army NCOs. This proves easy since NCO business often boils down to most of what the Army does each day. Discussing the cost of purchasing the new M4A1 probably is not relevant to your audience (though there are journals for that topic), but discussing the wisdom of handing Pvt.

Snuffly an automatic rifle probably is relevant. Once you have established relevancy, tell your readers why it is relevant. Journal writing is a different style than creative writing. It is best to put all your cards face up on the table.

Are you the right person to write this article? Is there scholarly research on this subject you can cite? These are two aspects of authority. We love our family, but how often do we see complaints from spouses that are not well researched or accurate? Why? They have no authority on the subject. However, a spouse may cite scholarly research on a subject and gain authority. If you're not an expert, find someone who is. When possible, include scholarly insight in your professional writing. You need to use Chicago style citation formats, and give credit where it is due.

Which brings us quickly to accuracy. You owe it to your readers to be as accurate as humanly possible. This may take the form of citing scholarly sources, doing personal research, or simply being honest. Accuracy requires objectivity as well, and if your article requires emotion to make a point rather than facts, you should consider a different subject or forum.

Purpose is the final part of the CRAAP test and sums up the other four parts of the acronym. The NCO Journal seeks to open discussion on issues that affect the Army and the NCO Corps; it does not publish propaganda. It does not publish gripes and complaints. Remember your purpose: inform, educate, and discuss. Your article should provide information for NCOs to better accomplish the mission and care for Soldiers.

Step Two: Research and Plan

Despite what your teachers tell you, you do not need an outline. Some writers work well with intense planning, others prefer to let words flow, but you may find that simply forming a plan in your head is enough.

On the other hand, an outline may help you plan your research, and you should always conduct research. The best writers use outlines to organize their thoughts. Stream of conscience writing is hard to read and may fail to communicate clearly. Again, we come back to CRAAP—specifically accuracy and authority.³ What have others said on this subject? Maybe you have found a subject no one has addressed before. Why was it overlooked? You may be the Sgt. Maj. of the Army and therefore a recognized authority on NCO matters, but no one should cite him or herself. Research is essential.

Articles for professional journals, like academic papers, need a thesis. For a more casual tone (such as what I used in this article), it is acceptable to not state your thesis explicitly, but the simple purpose must be present. One exercise for writers (fiction and nonfiction) is to summarize your piece in a single sentence. A straightforward statement of purpose is key especially for an online medium.

Do not be frightened by the word, “thesis.” A thesis is just what you plan to prove in your article in as few words as possible. In an online publication, this should come as early as possible, maybe even in the first sentence. If your readers do not know what the article is about in the first twenty words, they may not read word twenty-one.

Step Three: Write

Sounds simple: write an article. Except that, you have a thirty-day exercise coming up. Your Soldier just failed an Army physical fitness test. A new video game was just released. Your friend just knocked on your door with a 12-pack. Your phone keeps making noise, and if you do not stop those evil pigs, who will help the irritated avians find closure?

Writing is rarely the problem; but making time to write can be very difficult. Notice I do not say “finding time.” In today’s world, there is no free time to be found. Something always

competes for your attention, and you must decide where your priorities lie. The truth about writing in the military is the “how” and “why” reason: writing takes discipline.

Some fear that others will not want to hear what they have to say or that they will laugh at their efforts. People insist they cannot write well, plead that they are horrible spellers, or take pride in barely passing high school English. It’s always easier to find an excuse rather than work to improve oneself. Writing requires that you believe in yourself. It also requires goal setting and self-reflection. In my opinion, writing a professional piece (or writing anything you plan to let others read) requires a measure of “personal courage.”

Step Four: Find a Hook

The “hook” is 15-20 words at the beginning of your article. In an academic paper, the thesis statement is often at the end of the first paragraph. In an article, especially one for online publication, the first sentence needs to be attention grabbing. Why? First, you want the editor to be interested immediately. They have hundreds of articles to read and the quicker you grab their interest, the more likely you are to be accepted for publication. Second, when your article is shared later, only the first 15-20 words will show on social media. You need to hook readers quickly.

Why did I put advice on a hook after writing? Shouldn’t that be part of the writing process? You may get an excellent hook on your first try. You may think that you have a great hook, but as you progress through the article, it may no longer seem relevant. Your first paragraph must be strong enough to encourage busy readers to make time to read what you wrote.

Step Five: Read Your Article

Ask any professional writer what the key to writing is. They will invariably say, “writers are readers.” Though it seems like a truism, many new writers fail in a very simple way: they fail to read their own writing.

Do I mean edit your article? Yes, and no. If you read your article the right way, you won’t be able to stop yourself from making needed changes. This requires you to look at your piece objectively.

If you are new to writing or you haven’t taken college literature you’re probably looking at that last paragraph wondering one thing: there’s a *right* way to read? My children are between diapers and third grade. They read every night and can’t tell me the names of half the characters. This is not the right kind of reading for your article. Reading is not scanning words to the end of a line, moving to the beginning of the next line, and repeating the action. In fact, we adapt our reading speed and depth to the situation. This is why high schoolers read Shakespeare, because, it requires a deeper, more active kind of reading than an online news article about writing.

Some define this kind of reading as, “close reading.” When you read your article, you look for connections, awkward phrases, failures in logic, or places that need expansion. What do you need to change to make this article great? Did you prove what you set out to prove? Read your article as if someone else wrote it. Not a family member; family members often overlook our faults. Read it and be brutally honest with yourself. The great thing about applying close reading to your work is, unlike another person’s writing, you can make it better.

Step Six: Proofread Your Article

“But I just read it and did a bunch of edits.”

Proofreading and editing are not the same thing.⁴ I'm going to repeat that out of editorial privilege and for rhetorical effect: proofreading and editing are entirely different processes.

Think of this as a big picture, little picture issue. Editing is the process where we analyze our arguments, writing style, and choice of words. Proofreading ensures you spelled words correctly, used the right word, and did not duplicate or miss any words, using spellcheck is a good start, but it will not catch everything. This is a lesson a Soldier in my unit learned the hard way. Only after ordering hundreds of troop shirts did anyone notice they said, "2nd Calvary Regiment." My first unit had a policy letter warning that if the military police called to say a Soldier was in "gale," you must call the 1st Sgt. This same letter instructed staff duty not to pick Soldiers up at the "gait." Spellcheck may help you remember when "i" comes before "e," but it can miss obvious mistakes. The human eye, your eye, always trumps a computer.

One excellent way to proofread is to read your piece backwards. Start at the end and read a sentence at a time. It is easy to read what we meant to write rather than what is actually on the page. Reading backwards, a sentence at a time, breaks the flow and lets you see obvious mistakes.

Step Seven: Format

Some publications are extremely strict about submission formats; When in doubt, Army regulation 25-50, preparing and managing correspondence is a reasonable compromise.⁵ The correct style for the NCO Journal is Chicago Manual of Style, rather than the American Psychological Association (APA) or Modern Language Association (MLA) styles. The samples on The NCO Journal website are a great place to start, and the Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL) goes into even greater detail.⁶

The NCO Journal prefers double-spaced lines with no extra space between paragraphs and half-inch indents for paragraphs (Word defaults to this). Most editors do not like a mixing of block styles and indented paragraphs, and you should avoid this.

The most important thing isn't to have a perfect format in most cases. Your submission needs to be readable and well thought out. Speaking of readable, it never hurts to look it over one more time before moving on. A second and even third look at your first 100 words avoids mistakes that result in immediate rejection, such as misspelled words in the first line. (Yes, it happens.)

Step Eight: Submit Your Article

The NCO Journal uses usarmy.leavenworth.tradoc.mbx.army-press@mail.mil for submissions. Take a moment to review the [submission guidelines](#) before attaching your piece and clicking send and always include a short bio.

Sending your article may be the hardest part. What if they don't like it and reject it? If that happens, you will be in very, very good company. Every writer has gotten at least one rejection. If your work is rejected, fix it and try again. Writing, more than most things we do, requires resiliency. Come to think of it, that is one more reason why you should write for the NCO Journal.

Closing Thoughts

The NCOs who decide to take the plunge and write for the NCO Journal or any professional journal will find the experience worthwhile, even if they only find themselves. Writing can be a frustrating pastime, but there is nothing quite like seeing your name in print. Those who work to improve their writing find it most rewarding. Some claim that you can't teach creativity, so trying to teach writing is worthless. What you can teach is good writing to a

decent writer and sometimes great writing to a good writer. The Army needs the professional opinions of its silent professionals. As publishers go, the NCO Journal is one of the most professional (and helpful) I have ever worked with. Writing costs nothing but time and reaps professional and personal rewards. What do you have to lose?

Notes

1. Mark Twain, "Memoranda: The Late Benjamin Franklin," *The Galaxy* (New York), July 1870, 2010, accessed September 20, 2017, <http://www.twainquotes.com/Galaxy/187007e.html>.
2. "The CRAAP Test," Creighton University, 2017, , accessed September 15, 2017, <http://www.creighton.edu/reinert/researchtoolbox/tutorialsandguides/thecraaptest/>.
3. "Evaluating Information – Applying the CRAAP Test." Meriam Library. Accessed September 0, 2017. https://www.csuchico.edu/lins/handouts/eval_websites.pdf
4. Madraso, Jan. "Proofreading: The Skill We've Neglected to Teach." *The English Journal* 82, no. (1993): 32. doi:10.2307/819701.
5. U.S. Army. *Preparing and Managing Correspondence*, Department of the Army. "AR25-50 Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office 2013
6. "Purdue Online Writing Lab," *Purdue*, accessed 18 September 2017, <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/717/01/>