

Writing Skills Will Be Emphasized In New NCO Professional Military Education

By Clifford Kyle Jones - NCO Journal

July 12, 2016



Sgt. 1st Class Alan McCoy, staff administrative assistant with A Company, 94th Combat Support Hospital, and Staff Sgt. Tonya O'Connell, mental health tech with 176th Medical Brigade, practice public affairs skills in Seagoville, Texas. All NCOs will be required to improve their writing skills under TRADOC's education plans. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Kai L. Jensen)

The topic that prompted the most discussion — and the most anxiety — at last month's State of NCO Development Town Hall 2 wasn't even directly on the agenda. What had Soldiers most worried was the NCO Professional Military Education's new emphasis on writing.

During the second segment of the town hall, representatives from the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy — Command Sgt. Maj. Dennis Defreese, commandant; Command Sgt. Maj. Jeffrey Huggins, deputy commandant; and Charles Guyette, director of the Directorate of Training — described the new Master Leader Course and its writing requirements. They also explained how communication skills, specifically written communication skills, would become integral to every level of PME.

In speaking about the need and structure of the MLC, Defreese said, "The other part of the

Master Leader Course is that every student who got to the Sergeants Major Course would say the same thing in the initial critiques: 'We've never been taught how to write, and now we get here and we have to write university-style papers.'

"So we're backing that down to the Master Leader Course," he said, "and over the next year, all the way down to the Basic Leader Course. We'll have a writing assessment, and we'll force them to improve their writing skills or communication skills, both [orally] and in writing."

That set the chat board buzzing, with commenters concerned about implementation, assessment and instruction.

Huggins responded to some of those concerns during USASMA's session.

"There's a level of angst, obviously, in the Army right now on the redesigns of the educational system," he said. "We are not throwing you into the shark tank. We are putting a lot of energy into the instructors and the training of the instructors so that they can help. ... This is not a, 'Hey, you can't write, we're booting you out of the Army.' This is, 'The Army is becoming more educated, it has to be able to communicate better, and this is how we're getting after it.' "

And he assured Soldiers that they would be given the tools to succeed.

"It's not show up and be prepared," Huggins said. "We're going to help you get there."

Many of the students who reached the Sergeants Major Course have been concerned about their writing ability, Defreese noted. But he also said that as the course has dropped multiple choice exams in favor of more thorough written exams and coursework, the failure rate has fallen because students learn and retain the information better.

Guyette said, "The rigor of the course really drives the students to force themselves to improve their skill in an area they have not had before. It's something they're not comfortable with, but we have to take them out of their comfort zones, give them these [tools]. And the outcome we've experienced with this course is that they're improving their writing and briefing capabilities."

Training and Doctrine Command's command sergeant major, David Davenport, who led the town hall, spent the second half-hour of the session on the online chat board that accompanied the webcast. When he came back to the set, he said, "There are a lot of great questions coming in on the chat board, and I noticed a common theme about them: It's really about the writing assessments and the writing courses that we're putting into our Professional Military Education."

To help answer some of those questions, Davenport brought Institute for NCO Professional Development Director Aubrey Butts back onto the set to further explain the Army's plans to improve Soldiers' communication skills

improve Soldiers' communication skills.

Butts explained that a writing assessment had already begun in most iterations of the Basic Leader Course, using software, called Criterion, that evaluates writing. Soldiers are given immediate feedback on writing assignments, scored 1 to 6. Butts said the Army is looking for a minimum score of 3, but that score doesn't affect graduation.

"We're not only doing the assessment," Butts said. "Score 3 and below and we'll offer a self-improvement course, which should be improved in the next couple months."

Further assessments will be extended into the Advanced Leader Course, the Senior Leader Course, the Master Leader Course and the Sergeant Major Course, and each Soldier's assessment will be tracked over time. Butts said this will allow for a "longitudinal study" of NCOs' writing ability.

"Right now, if you look at the Army, only about 21 percent of the people who go to school can write effectively," Butts said. "And it's a problem with the new NCOER. If you look at it — it's short. It's concise. You have to be to the point. And if we don't teach our NCOs to write, No. 1, we're going to select the wrong noncommissioned officers for promotion. Secondly, with all the new technology that comes out, you have to text messages and receive messages, and if you can't put it in a concise format, you aren't going to be able to get all the support that you need on the modern-day battlefield."

During the chat, INCOPD and USASMA representatives indicated that TRADOC was working with the Army Intelligence Center of Excellence in Fort Huachuca, Arizona, to develop a complete writing program and curriculum (<http://intellibrary.libguides.com/writing>) that could be rolled out to all the Army's centers of excellence.

Davenport noted that writing ability, as assessed during each level of PME, will be annotated on the new Department of the Army form 1059. That form should be out later this year, Davenport said on the chat, and TRADOC is working on writing assessment guidelines and standards.

Several commenters asked how instructors would be trained to improve Soldiers' writing skills.

"The faculty development program gives instructors more exposure to English, grammar and comprehension and [will] norm the grading standards against a rubric," Guyette said of the MLC instructors. "Internally, USASMA will have to monitor to make sure that they're executing that."

Defreeze added, "It's not just the Master Leader Course. We're going to send instructors to help teach ALC and SLC instructors how to do that grading and norming of written tests as we put written requirements into ALC and SLC."

A representative from INCOPD said on the chat that Army University and the Combined Arms Center are "reviewing how cohorts address writing skills in PME."

Center are reviewing how cohorts address writing skills in PME.

“In addition, USASMA will look at ways to incorporate instructional techniques to foster writing skills as a part of the NCO PME continuum, ...” the INCOPD representative continued. “We intend to ensure that facilitators of learning have the training and tools required to provide meaningful feedback on writing standards as a part of NCO PME. This issue is being looked at by the Army University and USASMA.”

In closing out the writing discussion, Master Sgt. Michael Lavigne, who moderated the town hall, said, “I can see that that’s going to cause some angst in the next couple years as this is introduced because there are a lot of people who are great doers but not very strong writers. But if it’s progressive and sequential, they can start out young and develop as they go.”

Davenport concurred.

“And that’s the vision,” he said. “Understand that it’s a gap that we have right now, and it’s a way to close that gap over time.”