

NCOs often face barriers to writing, including time constraints and a lack of confidence. However, encouraging them to share their insights can improve military policies by bringing grassroots ideas and frontline experience to the forefront. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Michael Alexander)

Why NCOs Don't Write and Why They Should

By former Staff Sgt. Nicholas J. DiMichele

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While enlisted in the Army, I never penned any op-eds or other literature while on active duty. Why didn't I? And why don't other NCOs?

I began examining those questions after becoming a Dubik fellow. Named after retired Lt. Gen. James M. Dubik, author of countless articles and books, the fellowship supports Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. Randy A. George's effort to reinvigorate professional writing in the military on crucial national security topics.

As I reflected, I sought input from those best placed to answer my questions: current and former NCOs.

I learned NCOs lack the time and confidence to write and publish articles. Moreover, many fear the impact of doing so, are unaware of available publishing outlets, or see no reason to add their voices to the conversation.

Even so, my investigation reinforced the notion that NCOs have a valuable contribution to make to the force through the written word. What's more, the experience crystallized my idea for a solution: The Army should unite the *NCO Journal* with NCO Academies (NCOAs) to increase awareness of the journal and promote a way for junior to mid-grade NCOs to share grassroots ideas and recommendations with senior leaders.

To see why, let's take a closer look at why NCOs don't write and why they should, and then examine how they can get published.

Why NCOs Don't Write

One reason NCOs don't write is because of their limited time and their duties as enlisted leaders. NCOs

focus on hands-on training, maintaining discipline and morale, and attending to practical components of military operations. Officers, on the other hand, are responsible and focused on strategic planning and higher-level decision-making.

So, NCOs don't have the time or opportunity to write. It isn't among their duties except as a component of counseling, awards, or evaluations.

A former Soldier reinforced this idea. He joined the Army to learn and to go to war, he stressed, *not* to find out how to write op-eds or academic papers.

Time is also a considerable constraint, he noted. After a long day at the range, being out in the field, or doing layouts, NCOs want to go home and relax – not write.

Communication style may also be a factor. Soldiers train to be direct, concise, and focused on immediate needs with actionable information. This brevity is incredibly effective and necessary in tactical and operational settings. However, it doesn't translate well into the strategic and reflective thinking required for articles, op-eds, or academic papers. Compared to what NCOs know, such long-form writing seems unnatural and counterproductive.

Another roadblock lies in the limited encouragement and resources NCOs receive, coupled with cultural challenges.

The Army promotes comprehensive writing through staff colleges and fellowships, but these are largely only open to officers. While the Sergeants Major Academy and *NCO Journal* provide writing venues for NCOs, contributions to publications are written mainly by sergeants major.

To be clear, there is nothing wrong with senior enlisted leaders publishing. Their contributions impart knowledge and move ideas forward. The issue is that younger NCOs don't because they're either not taught or encouraged to do so in professional military education (PME) or are unaware these outlets exist.

A sergeant first class with 14 years of experience as an infantryman highlighted cultural challenges, noting how NCOs don't see the point in writing because they believe no one will read or heed their ideas or opinions.

He cited the example of sensing sessions, the NCO Professional Development System (NCOPDS), and other forums where, in his view, concerns or proposals result in no change (or where NCOs are discouraged from raising ideas). He also touched on fears that writing could inspire retaliation from Army members who disagree with authors or think their work places the military in a bad light. (This article doesn't identify sources because many interviewees requested to remain anonymous – an example of why



A Soldier with 41st Field Artillery Brigade leads his team in the Land Navigation event during Victory Corps' Best Squad Competition on Grafenwöhr, Germany. NCOs focus on hands-on training and the practical components of military operations, having no time or opportunity to write beyond counseling, awards, and evaluations. (U.S. Army Reserve photo by Spc. Jet Cortez)

NCOs don't choose to write or seek publication.)

A sergeant major reinforced this point. NCOs are wary of writing because of potential career consequences – or from a lack of confidence that others care about what they have to say. A published author, this sergeant major shared his experience with imposter syndrome: He didn't think he could articulate his ideas on paper.

A master sergeant shared similar sentiments, emphasizing NCOs lack confidence. They feel they don't have a platform, he said, or wonder why they should write a paper that won't get published or read.

Why NCOs Should Write

Even given these challenges, it is crucial to recognize NCOs' value in military writing. Their tactical, on-the-ground experience and frontline perspective yield unique insights into the realities of military operations, leadership, training, lessons learned, and, most importantly, what does and doesn't work (which leaders may not be aware of).

NCOs' practical experience and perspective can provide invaluable insights into the realities of military operations, leadership, and training. NCOs who write bridge the gap between strategic planning and tactical execution, ensuring real-world facts inform policies and procedures.

Speaking with a current sergeant major about the importance of writing, he noted that NCOs can provide tremendous insight into what works and what doesn't. He stressed how NCOs could impact thought if they expressed citation-free opinions and suggestions rather than fixating on academic writing standards (i.e., following the style edicts of the APA, MLA, or Turabian).

What the sergeant major suggests is that the Army built barriers that disincentivize NCOs from writing because they don't have the time to learn or conduct academic polishing.

We shouldn't completely ignore academic writing, but the sergeant major makes an astute point: Getting across ideas may not always require academic research.

A master sergeant I spoke with reinforced this notion by noting how a platform for junior to mid-grade NCOs would hugely benefit bottom-up communication – and allow senior leaders to gauge the formation's temperature. Leaders would get a better finger on the

pulse of what low-echelon formations are thinking.

The critical takeaway is that some NCOs may not share brilliant ideas or recommendations because of unnecessary impediments.

A sergeant first class at TRADOC made a strong argument for why NCOs should write: They don't write policy, but they can influence it, and their priority is to enforce it.

Indeed, NCOs should influence policy and highlight what works and (more importantly) what doesn't. Sharing their thoughts and opinions about these higher headquarters strategies allows younger NCOs to influence and shape the future Army.

Another argument is that NCOs possess tremendous tactical knowledge, typically passed verbally or through hands-on training – but rarely written. For example, a

former weapons squad leader wished there was a centralized database for tips, tricks, and ways to run a squad. I've been to a few units and seen various weapons squads in action, and the lessons there, both good and bad, would greatly benefit the NCO Corps as a whole – if that knowledge was in writing and accessible across the Army.

Looking at the big picture, NCOs should write because they advise officers. Most junior and mid-grade NCOs act as advisors in verbal form and likely only transition to written communication when they are at the sergeant major level.

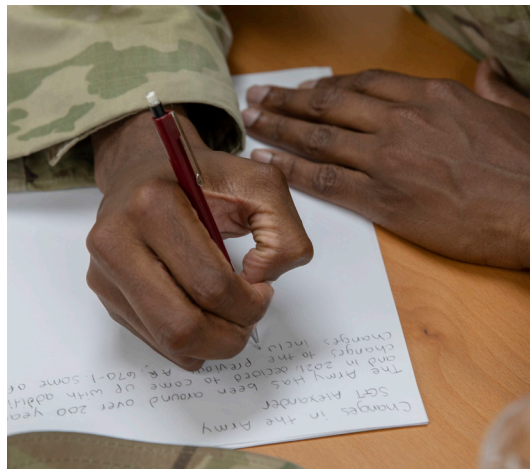
Encouraging NCOs to write and publish early in their careers is an investment in future senior enlisted advisors

who serve at higher-level headquarters (or become Sergeant Major of the Army or the Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff).

Building NCOs' writing proficiency and sense of legitimacy in working with the written word prepares them to move into senior roles as advisors.

How to Get NCOs to Write

Providing more educational opportunities, creating platforms for NCOs to publish their work, and fostering a culture that values and rewards writing contributions from all ranks are ways to promote writing among NCOs. By addressing the barriers to writing, the military can tap into the wealth of knowledge and experience NCOs possess, enhancing both their professional development and the force's overall effectiveness.



Despite the challenges, NCOs bring immense value to military writing through their frontline perspective and tactical experience. Their insights can bridge the gap between strategic planning and execution, ensuring leaders understand what is and isn't working in military operations. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Maximilian Huth)



Noncommissioned Officer Academies such as the Basic Leader Course, Advanced Leader Course, and Senior Leader Course should promote and market the *NCO Journal* as a writing opportunity for NCOs. (U.S. Army Reserve photo by Sgt. James Garvin)

An idea reinforced and refined through my interviews is to leverage NCOAs to promote writing among their students. The *NCO Journal* should plug in with the NCOAs (i.e., BLC, ALC, and SLC) to accomplish two goals:

1. Promote and market the *NCO Journal* at schoolhouses
2. Use the NCOAs as a pipeline for publishing articles in the *NCO Journal*

During my interviews, it became clear the *NCO Journal* isn't well known. Many interviewees wished there was a venue for NCOs to promote their ideas, opinions, and recommendations, but they had no idea of the journal's existence.

At the start of a BLC, ALC, or SLC class, an *NCO Journal* editor could visit schoolhouses and explain the publication, who it's for, and how to publish in it. Visits would increase awareness of the journal. We are at a considerable disadvantage if we want NCOs to share their ideas and increase military discourse but they have no idea outlets exist.

The second result of connecting the *NCO Journal* to the NCOAs would be a boost in the flow of potential publications and ideas to this official venue. Reflecting on my experience and speaking with current and former NCOs, I know these NCOAs already have a writing

assignment associated with graduation. At the end of NCOA programs, students' writing assignments could be sent to the *NCO Journal* for vetting and potential publication. Getting more of these grassroots ideas and recommendations through an official publication would allow for more significant discussion within the force.

An additional benefit to this approach is that it would build the confidence of individual NCOs across the corps. I asked many interviewees: If the *NCO Journal* published one of your pieces, would you spend more free time writing for publication and promoting the journal at the unit level? All agreed publication would be a huge motivator.

A master sergeant I interviewed stressed that if the military incorporated the journal idea into the NCOA pipeline, papers offering criticism should also provide recommendations. NCOs mustn't just complain on paper without offering solutions.

The bottom line: Injecting the *NCO Journal* into NCOAs helps the publication from a marketing standpoint and creates a pipeline for getting more ideas to senior levels across the force (with the added benefit of increasing NCOs' confidence in writing and seeking publication).

In addition, highlighting the monthly recommended articles of the Chief of Staff of the Army (CSA) would be

a tremendous motivator for students to contribute to the journal. A sergeant or staff sergeant could see their work among work cited by the CSA!

I must note some limitations to this approach. From a staffing standpoint, the *NCO Journal* may need more personnel to brief at every NCOA class or to vet all the articles classes produce. The Army could allocate specific billets to the NCOA to serve as liaison NCOs for the journal. Hiring more editors could solve the problem. Regardless, as with many organizations, staffing is a considerable limitation.

A master sergeant interviewee recommended the *NCO Journal* brief at ALC and SLC but not BLC. Limiting the briefings would reduce the number of article submissions to vet and the time and staff required to speak to each class.

Another limitation is a cultural challenge. If NCOAs require an article submission at the end of courses, this could become a “check the block” requirement. (Everyone in the Army is familiar with such tasks, fulfilled out of mere duty.)

However, if properly handled, students will associate writing and submitting articles with pride, publication with prestige, and the fruit of their work as an impactful contribution to an ongoing dialogue. (The previously mentioned CSA monthly recommendation list would support this perspective.)

One limitation alluded to earlier is the fear of retaliation. I suspect many Soldiers are apprehensive about writing because they don’t want to derail their careers or receive an undesired duty assignment.

Under any circumstances, writing and publishing can be challenging. People judge what you write. Writing and publishing are even more difficult in an organization like the Army, where advancing your career depends on evaluation reports and attending various schools. The Army is a massive organization with a small community, and your name can spread quickly.

To help with this challenge, the *NCO Journal* could offer something akin to a “dissent channel” (as the State Department does) or allow NCOs to publish anonymously, under pen names, or using only their rank. Doing so could enable NCOs to write without fear of reprisal or ridicule. Many interviewees think providing such an option for publication would create an opportunity to tackle sensitive topics.

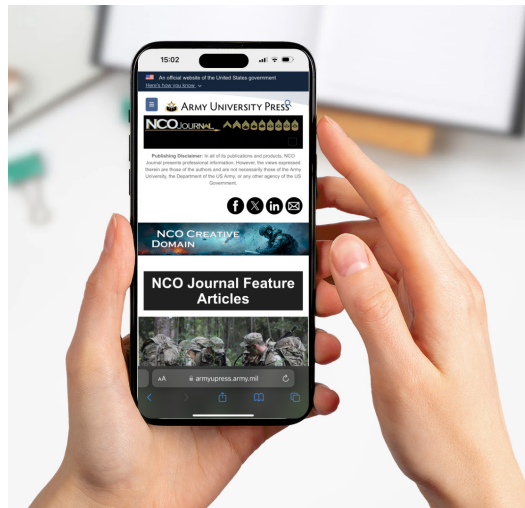
Final Reflections

I want to thank all interviewees who participated in this discussion. Your insights on this engrossing topic were invaluable.

Looking at why NCOs don’t write and why they should, I found a solution in injecting the *NCO Journal* into NCOAs. Such a move would create a pipeline and increase the number of grassroots ideas and opinions reaching senior leadership.

The Army is a learning organization with great ideas and views at the unit level. We need to find a way to tap into them and communicate them laterally across the force and to senior levels.

If we want to reinvigorate professional military writing and discourse, we must find avenues to inject it into pre-existing functions. ■



Initiatives to promote writing among NCOs could include providing more educational opportunities, creating platforms for NCOs to publish their work (like the *NCO Journal*), and fostering a culture that values and rewards writing contributions from all ranks. (Graphic by *NCO Journal*)

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