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Train as You Write: A New Mindset for an Evolving Army

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Training in the Army's methodology, regardless of funding or echelon, shares one purpose and intent: to teach or refine the skills our Soldiers and leaders need to survive and thrive in the rigors of warfare. The form and scale vary, from hip-pocket training in the back of a Company Operations Facility (COF), to more formalized events such as echeloned live-fire exercises (LFXs), or a culminating event such as a rotation to a Combat Training Center (CTC), but the intent remains.

Good training, then, should always seek to be "challenging, relevant, and realistic" and conducted to demand "the highest standards" (HQDA, 2021, p. 1-1). Like many senior leaders, I internalized this training and worked with my officer counterpart to create conditions that allowed our subordinates to fail, with the goal of promoting better decision-making under stress. We

used our training scenarios to drive the fundamentals of individual Soldier disciplines through the collective tasks that informed MET-driven proficiencies.

Upon reflection, however, I recognize we failed to impress on our leader population the necessity of fostering good Army writing. I transitioned out of the operational formation into the professional development pipe stream and this move allowed me to identify gaps in writing ability. It became clear a lot of tactical and technical expertise improvements made during my time as a platoon sergeant and then as a first sergeant were never supplemented with an ask from senior leaders to improve my writing.

Realizing the Pen Can Sharpen the Sword

For nearly all Army career fields, given the limited time and resources, there is a natural tendency to

spend the most time and energy on tactical and technical training. NCOs recognize this focus solidifies MET proficiencies and enhances warfighting skills and functions. This is not only driven by common sense but is doctrinally supported in ADP 7-0. However, there should also be a push for organizational-domain learning requirements that focus on the need for Soldiers and leaders



At the height of the Global War on Terrorism, as a product of “how things were,” there was little emphasis on honing writing as a skill and as a primary means of capturing expertise from NCOs. (U.S. Army Photo by Spc. Joshua Edwards)

to improve their writing skills. Clearly communicating intentions, needs, actions, plans, or accounts comes from NCOs who have both trained to standard and practiced putting that training into a compelling narrative.

It should be no surprise to any NCO who has attended an NCOPDS in the past decade that the Army as a whole, and the NCOPDS in particular, are moving toward much more rigorous writing-based assessments throughout the NCOPDS POIs. Additional emphasis is coming from the highest echelons of leadership and specifically from the current Sergeant Major of the Army (SMA), with such initiatives such as Muddy Boots, “a writing effort started by the 17th Sergeant Major of the Army (SMA)” (Blood, 2025). The Army is using lessons learned, knowledge management, and written communication as the medium for more widely sharing this information.

As a force, we are seeing a rapid loss of experience as senior leaders complete their service and move on to the next chapter of their post-Army careers. With each passing day, critical lessons learned, tacit knowledge, and portions of the larger Army story are dissipating at a rate that threatens to rob the next generation of important insights and stories. One of the factors creating this problem is that, at the height of operational tempo during the Global War on Terrorism, and as a product of “how things were,” there was little emphasis on honing writing as a skill and as a primary means of capturing expertise from NCOs.

The NCO of Tomorrow Must Learn to Write Today

Previous failures to promote an objective and tangible technical skill aside, the Army now emphasizes writing in the institutional domain of learning. From the Basic

Leader Course (BLC) onward, NCOs will be required to write and will have graded assessments of their writing, driving their GPA and the associated DA-1059 from their school. The time for junior and senior leaders to learn to write, however, is not when they are finally in the student’s seat. Rather, leaders who oversee training in the learning organizational domain must seek ways to create a culture of writing to prepare their organization’s leaders for the likelihood of higher education and the need for better written communication.

Writing skill must not be viewed simply as a way to improve student success in NCOPDS environments. Rather, our leaders need to understand that better writing improves them as total Soldiers, potentially increasing positive outcomes both professionally and personally. A common point of friction is the resistance to the monthly developmental counseling of Soldiers from their junior leaders. The counseling form, and the process, relies heavily on the ability of leaders and subordinates to communicate and, together, determine a path forward to improve Soldiers as they prepare to become leaders. Insufficient time is often cited as one of the main reasons junior leaders fail to counsel their subordinates, but the struggle to write is also a factor that junior leaders point to as a reason for their failure to counsel.

Make Space for Writing; Don’t Passively Find It

In the Army Leadership Requirements Model (LRM), written communication touches on the points of Intellect, Leads, and Develops (ATP 6-22.1, 2024). To benefit leaders and Soldiers, writing must become another tool in our collective toolbox. At the organizational level, I would recommend finding ways



As Soldiers and NCOs encounter the need for robust papers and shorter, time-constrained essays in their NCOPDS pipeline, they will be more readily equipped to succeed, increasing the likelihood that they will continue to promote and impact more Soldiers during their careers. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. 1st Class James Braswell)

to emphasize writing without creating another point of friction regarding time availability. One simple idea would be to assign a short essay that is added to Soldier and NCO of the Month Board Memoranda of Instruction (MOIs). Having Soldiers and leaders write on the NCO Creed, an organizational issue, or a professional subject specific to their MOS can be a great way not only to encourage writing but also improve critical thinking and research skills.

Incorporate a writing element into NCOPDS and LPDs on the training calendar, and provide enough time for Soldiers to read, research, and write it. If a reading is assigned or a topic is discussed, evaluate leaders' comprehension of the topic by requiring a one-page summary that includes how they will apply the information in the future. Incentivize the task by offering a reward for the best paper. Don't merely make writing another thing for leaders to finger drill; make it a worthwhile endeavor that enhances their success.

These suggestions are just some of many that could help improve our leaders. The onus is on each of us as leaders to find ways to improve our formations, develop our subordinates, and work at creatively threading things that do not turn a slide green or flip an MET to "T" status, to benefit the force at large, and our organizations in particular. If your leaders can write more effectively, they can counsel more quickly, making another key of development more accessible. Furthermore, as Soldiers and NCOs encounter the need for robust papers and shorter, time-constrained essays in their NCOPDS pipeline, they will be more readily equipped to succeed, increasing the likelihood that they will continue to promote and impact more Soldiers during their careers. ■

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