"THE PEN IS MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD" A FRAMEWORK FOR EFFECTIVE MILITARY COMMUNICATION IN ENGLISH / "LA PLUME EST PLUS PUISSANTE QUE L'ÉPÉE" UN CADRE POUR UNE COMMUNICATION MILITAIRE EFFICACE EN ANGLAIS[1]

Abstract: *Accurate, clear, and concise communication in the military is one of the most important elements of interaction at all levels of the organization. Qualitative writing draws on unambiguous and coherent discourse, whose construction must respect a specific style and standards. The article proposes an informed discussion targeting the development of military writing skills, based on clear standards and guidelines. Drawing on a specific example (military memorandum), the authors discuss the most prevalent elements of effective military writing and suggest a specific military writing style aimed at ensuring a successful written interaction in this professional context.*

Keywords: *communication, military writing, military students, style, standards, guidelines.*

Résumé: *La communication précise, claire et concise est l'un des éléments les plus importants de l'interaction à tous les niveaux de l'organisation militaire. La rédaction de qualité s'appuie sur un discours sans ambiguïté et cohérent, dont la construction doit respecter un style et des normes spécifiques. L'article propose une discussion éclairée visant le développement des compétences en rédaction militaire, sur la base de normes et de directives claires. En partant d'un exemple spécifique (mémorandum militaire), les auteurs discutent les éléments les plus courants d'une rédaction militaire efficace et suggèrent un style de rédaction militaire spécifique, visant à garantir une interaction écrite réussie dans ce contexte professionnel.*

Mots-clés: *communication, rédaction militaire, étudiants militaires, style, normes, directives.*

Introduction

Discussing the meaning of the adjective "effective" represents a good starting point for reconsidering effective army writing. By definition, effective means "successful in achieving the result that you want" (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/effective, June 10th, 2022), "adequate to accomplish a purpose; producing the intended or expected result" (https://www.dictionary.com/browse/effective, June 10th, 2022) or "producing the desired effect" (https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/effective, June 10th, 2022). Based on these explanations, we can deduce that functionality is at the core of effective writing, in that writing is effective when it is functional.
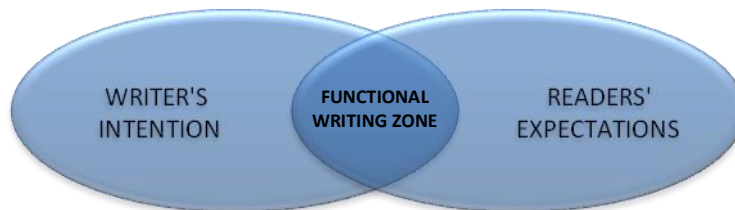

Figure 1 – Convergence of writer's intention and readers' expectations

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Functionality refers to evaluating a writing product in terms of its adequacy for accomplishing the writer's purpose; from the readers' perspective, it must fulfil their reasons for reading (Gieseman, 2015). Consequently, functional writing represents a successful marriage between intentions and expectations (Figure 1).

At the intersection of these two dimensions, the concept of functionality also brings into discussion the importance of a writing standard, one that would emphasize the functions of writing over its forms, while accounting for the critical thinking and reasoning abilities that must underlie effective communication. Therefore, a functional standard is needed in order to help writers develop and express their ideas, and readers to understand and apply them. Such a standard would integrate the conventions for various types of written products, detailing on structure, style, form, and language.

A brief examination of the specialized literature on the topic of military writing will provide context and clarity for developing pertinent arguments underlying the utility of writing. Traditionally, the military has always emphasized the importance of clear written communication, whose conventions have been promoted in different manuals: Army Regulation 600-70, *The Army Writing Program* (1985), Department of the Army Pamphlet 600-67, *Effective Writing for Army Leaders* (1986), Army Regulation 25-50, *Preparing and Managing Correspondence* (2015), or discussed in different publications, by authors such as: Desirae Gieseman (2015), Jim Tice (2015), Lyn Quitman Troyka and Douglas Hesse (2018) etc.

Undoubtedly, there is a wide array of works that aim at improving writing skills. By and large, all theoretical and practical approaches target prevalent challenges in writing, such as simplicity, style, format, composition techniques, language (structural accuracy, lexical appropriateness), and mechanics.

1. Writing for improvement

"We must improve our communicating skills. An order that can be understood will be understood. When and if our soldiers will be called upon to risk their lives in the accomplishment of their mission, there must be no mistaking exactly what we require from them. All of us, from chief down, need to improve our skills. Learning to write well is a lifelong endeavor".

With U.S. Army General John A. Wickman's caveat in mind, developing writing skills has become a long-term objective of military instruction, at all levels of education and throughout the professional career.

During their studies, military students can improve academic competence by writing memoranda, letters, articles, essays, or reports about professional military topics. This instructional necessity stems from the reality that future military leaders will have to write as part of their daily tasks. Familiarizing students with the conventions of professional writing is inherent to their future development and a catalyst for developing competent and versatile leaders.

Success in the current and future operational environments (deeply typified by versatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity – VUCA) requires a cognitive approach based on another VUCA framework (vision, understanding, clarity, and agility). Starting from our extensive teaching experience in military higher education, we can argue that challenging and encouraging cadets to write facilitates the development and improvement of critical thinking skills. In order to develop vision, understanding, clarity, and agility, future leaders need to be trained to become free, creative, critical, and risk-taking thinkers. In his 2011 article, Lythgoe advises: "if the Army wants better thinkers, we should start by educating better writers" (2011:49).

To enhance military students' ability for critical thinking and prompt them to tackle various professional issues in greater depth, we encourage the production of

different forms of communication that target a wide array of cognitive abilities, including reasoning, argumentation, synthesizing, creativity, etc. Through writing, creative thinking is integrated within critical thinking. More than often, the application of creative processes in dealing with doctrinal procedures, typically considered analytical, is essential for problem solving. For example, the military decision making process (MDMP) considerably depends on a certain amount of creativity, especially in the "generate options" step, which is not typically based on a creative approach. Against this backdrop, we advocate the implementation of a writing class, in which students have the opportunity to practice and improve their writing skills in a framework that allows them to apply both critical and creative thinking in order to visualize, understand, describe, and solve different problems. Such practice can represent an effective springboard for what future leaders will be required to produce as part of their job: different formal and authoritative written products (correspondence, pamphlets, memoranda, regulations, studies, policy documents, decision papers, briefing notes, after action reviews, schedules, plans, orders, etc.).

2. Army writing standards

As early as 1986, the U.S. Army set up a writing program detailed in the DA Pamphlet 600-67, a document that coined the phrase "the standard for Army writing" justifying its necessity by framing writing as an essential leadership skill. It postulated that "Good Army writing is clear, concise, organized, and right to the point" (Effective Writing for Army Leaders, 1986:1). In other words, it is structured. It means that it is well-organized, according to independent units of information that are easily accessible, manageable, and reusable. One of the most essential writing skills, especially when it comes to written military products, is the ability to permeate one's composition with structure.

Structuring military writing hinges on a series of basic principles:

1. *Bottom line up front (the BLUF principle)*, which mandates structuring written products by starting with the main point/idea. Beginning a composition with the main idea helps quickly transmit a focused message and avoids bearing the main point in details.

2. *Separate ideas according to paragraphs*. The basic element of all structured writing is the paragraph. It should contain systematically organized elements of composition: a topic sentence, main points (variable in number), and a conclusion.

3. *Write meaningful paragraphs*. A meaningful paragraph is (a) organized, (b) systematically developed, and (c) logically arranged.

(a) There are different patterns of paragraph organization, according to the manner in which information is presented, i.e. the linguistic function to be deployed in communication:

- narrative (time order);
- descriptive (spatial order);
- comparison and contrast (focus on similarities and differences);
- cause and effect (roots of a problem and the results);
- analysis (examination of concepts, notions, situations);
- classification (grouping of concepts, notions, situations);
- definition (explanation of a topic or term).

(b) Paragraph development should follow the application of the following guidelines:

- express one idea in each paragraph;
- begin each paragraph with a topic sentence;
- add supporting details and data;
- emphasize main idea in the last sentence;

- connect ideas with appropriate linking devices (addition, cause or result, comparison, explanation, repetition, concession, etc.).

(c) At composition level, a logical arrangement of paragraphs ensures a coherent and cohesive flow of ideas. Regardless of the format, the text of military writing typically consists of three parts: introduction, body, and conclusion.

- the introduction, or the initial paragraph (or paragraphs) announces the topic of the writing, states the problem, indicates the purpose, or contextualizes the subject;

- the body (regardless of its arrangement or number of paragraphs) presents the most consistent information, with facts, criteria, or data presented first, and analyses, explanations, or exemplifications following;

- the conclusion summarizes the essential points made in the paper and normally recommends a specific course of action.

4. *Use a specific format.* Military writing abounds in explicit formats, to be used according to the intended purpose of written communication: memoranda (formal, informal, special purpose memos), operations orders (OPORDs), fragmentation orders (FRAGOs), standing operating procedures (SOPs), reports (after action, situation), surveys, etc.

Organizing information into coherent sentences and paragraphs is not the sole prerequisite of clear communication. Effective writing also entails observing a specific writing style based on well-established guidelines. Principles of effective style include accuracy, brevity, completeness, clarity, coherence, and unity. All these elements should be reflected in the manner in which distinctive parts of the written discourse (words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs) are constructed. In order to adopt and apply an effective military writing style, the following must be observed:

1. *Choose effective words and phrases.* The selection of vocabulary and grammar directly impacts on the clarity and conciseness of the discourse. Lexical choices should be informed by the use of concrete, common, familiar, meaningful words. Clarity is also achieved by the avoidance of wordiness, of stilted words and overworked phrases. For example, artificial connectives such as "accordingly" or "consequently" could be replaced by their more simple equivalents "and so", "therefore", while trite phrases such as "for the reason that" or "in the event that" or "on the basis of" could be avoided by using fresher and more natural synonyms: "since", "if", and "by" respectively.

2. *Build clear, concise, and logical sentences.* Each sentence should be limited to a single thought and grammatical ambiguities, such as faulty pronoun references or misused parallel constructions should be avoided. A sentence of the type "The American soldier followed the Taliban into the hills, where he shot him." can prove confusing as "the Taliban" could be mistaken for the antecedent because of the ambiguous pronoun reference. In the clear version, this sentence might read "The American soldier followed the Taliban into the hills and shot him."

3. *Write complete sentences*, by not omitting parts of compound tenses or necessary prepositions in set phrases. The awkward formulation "The higher echelon is neither interested nor concerned with our proposition." can be rendered more accurate by using the correct preposition with each phrase "The higher echelon is neither interested in nor concerned with our proposition."

4. *Write coherent sentences.* A sentence that is both clear and coherent must be unified. This translates into avoiding wrong subject-verb relationships and using short sentences instead of complicated paragraph-like constructions. By the AR 25-50 standard, "The average length of a sentence should be about 15 words." (Preparing and Managing Correspondence, 2015:6). However, not all sentences should be limited to this standard. A majority of short sentences make the writing appear childish and dull. Therefore, the length of sentences should vary and be balanced so as to achieve an average of approximately 15 words.

5. *Use the active voice*. This is probably one of the major style alterations that go against the traditional habit of using passive voice in military communication. A direct, natural, and forceful style is enhanced by the active voice. On the other hand, the passive voice transmits a vague, indirect, and unfocused message which hides the doer of the action and avoids agency, thus hindering communication. However, the passive voice is indicated in specific contexts, for example when the actor is unknown or unimportant or when the emphasis is placed on the action rather than on the actor: "Our left flank was attacked at dawn."

3. Setting the example

The following are examples of poor writing versus good writing, whose analysis is based on authentic samples of military correspondence, adapted from DA PAM 600-67 (Effective Writing for Army Leaders, 1986:7-8). The comparison between the samples pivots on the calculation of the clarity index of the texts, which is a clear indication of the effectiveness of the language used and the brief and concise construction of the discourse. The clarity index has been calculated according to the following formula[1]:

$$(B \div A) + (C \div B) = \textbf{\textit{CLARITY INDEX}}$$

* where C ÷ B represents the percentage of long words x 100

The interpretation of the clarity index should be done as follows: if the score is less than 20, the writing is probably too abrupt – too simple. If it is greater than 40, the writing is probably too complex for easy understanding. Consequently, the easiest to read and comprehend without difficulty is an index of around 30.

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
41st Field Artillery Regiment
Fort Monroe, VA

12 December 2020

SUBJECT: Request to be assigned to participate in the FTX "Snow Hunter"

Commander
2nd Battalion
41st Field Artillery
Fort Monroe, VA

1. It has recently come to my attention that this Battalion urgently needs a volunteer to participate in the Field Training Exercise "Snow Hunter" in Fort Drum this winter.

2. I graduated third in a class of sixty-one from the U.S. Army Winter Warfare School in July 2018 and was awarded the distinction of a distinguished graduate. I studied the latest tactics for cold weather patrols which make me a specialist in the field.

3. The S-3 Captain informed me that anyone interested should submit a copy of their last physical examination. As shown, I have suffered no cold weather injuries, which makes me less suspectible to such injuries.

4. I strongly believe that I am currently eligible and fully qualified to participate in this Field Training Exercise.

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[1] Effective Writing for Army Leaders, 1986:3

THOMAS C. BENNET
1LT, FA

Sample 1.a – Example of poor writing

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
41st Field Artillery Regiment
Fort Monroe, VA

12 December 2020

SUBJECT: Request for FTX "Snow Hunter" Assignment

Commander
2nd Battalion
41st Field Artillery
Fort Monroe, VA

1. I request to represent the Battalion on FTX "Snow Hunter" in Fort Drum this winter.

2. I feel qualified for this assignment due to my expertise in cold weather operations. I am also a distinguished graduate of the Army Winter Warfare School.

3. Find attached a copy of my latest physical examination.

THOMAS C. BENNET
1LT, FA
PC

Sample 1.b – Example of good writing

The two examples in sample 1 illustrate two different standards and styles of military writing composition. Although it respects the required format, the first sample is considered poor writing because it is too elaborate, does not respect the BLUF principle and contains laboured constructions that make the overall message complicated, overly detailed (e.g.: "*It has recently come to my attention that ...*"; "*The S-3 Captain informed me that anyone interested should submit a copy of their last physical examination*") and permeated with subjective formulations *("I strongly believe that I am currently eligible and fully qualified ...")*.

For the sake of clarity, military writing in general and this type of military letter, in particular, require more precise phrasing, straightforward language, concise sentences and plain constructions. As shown in the second example, an ideal sample will start with a clearly formulated main idea (e.g.: "*I request to represent the Battalion on FTX Snow Hunter in Fort Drum this winter.*") and then briefly develop the ensuing statements that support the topic sentence.

A quick quantitative overview of the two samples indicates a numerical imbalance of the total number of sentences, number of words, number of long words and words per sentence (Table 1). The last column in the table comparatively illustrates the clarity index of the two texts:

SAMPLES	No. of sentences (A)	No. of words (B)	No. of long words (C)	CLARITY INDEX
SAMPLE 1.a	6	149	25	41
SAMPLE 1.b	4	68	9	30

Table 1 – Quantitative analysis for samples 1.a and 1.b

We can observe that the "good writing" example contains only a third of the total number of words used in the first sample. Also, the number of long words in the first example is almost triple as compared to the second example. As a result, the overall clarity index is higher in the first example, which clearly supports the conclusion that this sample is too wordy, too elaborate, and too detailed, and fails to obey the principle of message simplicity.

SUBJECT: Summary of Action

1. Herewith is the Summary of action regarding the elimination case of the mentioned officer. Be reminded that when I informed you about this case, I recommended that the Vice Chief be briefed of my conclusions since he, as CC FORSCOM, initiated the Board of Inquiry and finally recommended that the Board's proposal for elimination under other than honorable conditions be considered. You charged me with briefing the Vice Chief and advised that after I had decided on the matter you would come to a final decision concerning the case.

2. I requested and obtained an interview with the Vice Chief. I made clear that I wanted to inform him of my recommendation to you in the case since he had activated the Board of Inquiry and had eventually recommended that the Board's recommendation for the elimination of COL Marrow be approved with an under other than honorable conditions discharge. The Vice Chief was appreciative of my consideration but refrained from commenting regarding his decision on my recommendation.

Sample 2.a – Example of poor writing

SUBJECT: Summary of Action

Here is LTC Marrow's case summary.

I did decide to meet with the Vice Chief. I felt that since General Smith, as CG FORSCOM, started the case and recommended discharging Marrow, he ought to get the update.

The Vice Chief appreciated my visit but did not make any comment regarding my recommendations.

Sample 2.b – Example of good writing

The two samples presented above are examples of military summaries of action. We can identify clear discrepancies between sample 2.a and 2.b and it is obvious that sample 2.a displays a burdened style, with long, complicated sentences, containing embedded structures that affect the coherence of the message (e.g. "*You will recall that **when I briefed you on this case, I suggested that the Vice Chief be informed of my recommendation since** he, as CC FORSCOM, initiated the Board of Inquiry and ultimately recommended approval of that Board's recommendation for elimination under other than honorable conditions*"). Comparatively, sample 2.b respects the standards of Army writing, being brief, clear, and concise in transmitting the main idea (e.g. "*... I did decide ...", "I felt that ...*"). There is a definite imbalance in terms of the length of the two samples, which results in the following clarity index score:

SAMPLES	No. of sentences (A)	No. of words (B)	No. of long words (C)	CLARITY INDEX
SAMPLE 2.a	6	168	36	**49**
SAMPLE 2.b	4	52	7	**26**

Table 2 – Quantitative analysis for samples 2.a and 2.b

The analysis indicates that, in terms of words, sample 2.b uses less than a third, as compared to sample 2.a, giving the clarity index almost half the value of the latter.

DA form 4697- Report of Survey

I have examined all available evidence as shown in exhibits A to G and as indicated below have personally investigated the same and it is my belief that the article(s) listed hereon and/or on attached sheets, total cost $433.50 was not damaged in an accidental manner. Something like this does not just happen; therefore, the soldier is responsible if negligent. AS SP4 Farmer states in his statement (exhibit B) the tailgate of the M113 was down when Corporal Newton laid his M16 on it to don his protective mask, (Exhibit A), because he thought he smelled CS. This act was in direct contravention of the Division, Brigade, Battalion, and Company Field SOP which states in part that "at no time will equipment be placed on the ramp of M113 personnel carriers" (Exhibit G). It also is expressly prohibited by the proper masking procedure which is to hold the rifle between the legs while masking (Exhibit F, "Soldier's Manual of Common Tasks," p.37). When the squad leader (SSG Clark) told the driver to raise the ramp Exhibit C), he didn't know that Newton had set his weapon down on the ramp. It was dark and nobody could see anything and Newton was still adjusting his mask. Well, one thing led to another and the next thing you know Newton M16 is only good for shooting around corners. Such actions show negligence and make SP4 Farmer liable for restitution. (Exhibit D – statement from DS maintenance saying the M16 is irreparably damaged beyond repair).

Sample 3.a – Example of poor writing

DA form 4697- Report of Survey

I have investigated the evidence and find CPL Andrew C. Newton as negligent. CPL Newton damaged his M16 by carelessly leaving it on an M113 ramp. CPL Newton admits that he laid his M16 on the tailgate of the M113 to put on his protective mask. By doing so, he violated two specific directives. CPL Newton neither followed proper masking procedure (Exhibit F, "Soldier's Manual of Common Tasks," p.37) nor obeyed his field SOP that "at no time will equipment be placed on the ramp of personnel carriers" (Exhibit G). His squad leader, SSG Clark, attests (Exhibit C) that CPL Newton knew the SOP.

Direct support maintenance confirms that the M16 (total cost - $433.50) is damaged beyond repair (Exhibit D).

Sample 3.b – Example of good writing

The last two examples are illustrations of a "good" and a "poor" survey report, a type of military writing aimed at presenting the conclusions of an investigation in the aftermath of an incident. Again, the two samples are unequal in what concerns the length of the text, which clearly shows that the longer text is too laboured, offering too many unnecessary information and details that hinder the clarity of the message. This assessment is also illustrated by the clarity index, calculated as follows:

SAMPLES	No. of sentences (A)	No. of words (B)	No. of long words (C)	CLARITY INDEX
SAMPLE 3.a	9	251	33	40
SAMPLE 3.b	7	121	16	30

Table 3 – Quantitative analysis for samples 3.a and 3.b

The quantitative analysis of the samples discussed supports the qualitative interpretation in that it statistically demonstrates the discrepancies between the discussed examples in terms of discourse construction. According to the discussed

standards and styles of military writing, the second sample in each pair is considered a better example because it respects the requirements that messages be short, brief, and accurate and that they express ideas unambiguously by presenting factual and pertinent information.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that, if used properly, the pen is mightier than the sword. Army writing becomes effective when it clearly transmits the writer's intention and meets the reader's expectations. To these aims, military writing must observe specific standards that regulate the writing process by applying appropriate writing conventions. The implementation of a functional standard does not mean an abrupt divorce from the traditional approaches of English composition, but rather a more practical reinterpretation of the principles and guidelines standardizing written communication. The novelty of our proposal is a paradigm shift that pivots on the "think well, write well" approach, which successfully blends critical and creative thinking in the framework of writing non only as a means of communication, but also as a way of developing the necessary competences of future military leaders.

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