

BETTER MILITARY WRITING

Background and Introduction

This course has evolved over decades of teaching and writing. We have provided many references throughout this booklet so you may expand your knowledge. The internet has produced some excellent sources. In particular, each service website has good information, the various War Colleges, National Defense University, and the Vice President's own site to improve communications throughout the government.

Now we have the internet (which was invented for the Pentagon) and e-mail. This represents another opportunity to show your writing skills and a demand on all to write well. If it isn't written well on the internet, it won't be read and communications will fail!

Sprinkled throughout the appendices are websites for you to review and help you in challenging ways. The following appendices will be useful to keep this booklet on your reference shelf:

Appendix A. *Bibliography on Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking (Army War College).*

Appendix B. *Becoming a Better Military Writer (Army War College).*

Appendix C. *Helpful Guidance for Army Writers.*

Appendix D. *Navy Writing and Other Sources.*

Appendix E. *Military Evaluation Reports.*

Appendix F. *The Elements of Style.*

Appendix G. *Federal Plain Language Network.*

Appendix H. *Military and Other Communications Humor.*

Preparing this course has been a challenge. Now each of you go on and take up the challenge. **WRITE WELL.** Your readers will appreciate it!

Write Well!!!

Write well because so many readers are at your mercy. In the military we rarely write to just one person. Even our most routine work is likely to receive many readings — from secretaries, supervisors, and addresses (there is that awful word). The quality of writing in a single office memo or bulletin notices, for example, can help the productivity of dozens of readers or slow it down. Give those readers a break. They can throw away a bad sales letter, but they have to read your official one.

Write well because poor writing hurts more than readers. A confusing instruction can damage a ship. A clumsy evaluation can damage the career of a fine subordinate. At its worst, poor writing leads to lives lost and programs rejected. We can learn today from what one Service Secretary said in 1963: *"I am convinced that our effectiveness in dealing with the Office the Secretary of Defense has suffered by the poor impression we have made in our papers."* Look at it this way: to your readers, you are what you write. When your writing is ineffective, it hurts both

your's and your organization's credibility. It suggests ineffectiveness in general.

Write well to help yourself. By turning the impressions in your head into clear writing, you improve thinking. In the process, your career is likely to improve. Management experts rank skill in communicating among the top requirements for success. You benefit when you save reviewers from having to tinker. (Sure, some reviewers tinker compulsively, but poor writing begs them to make "improvements.") Then, too, from writing well comes the simple satisfaction of doing your job well.

Write well because the Navy (military) needs effective writing more than ever before. Our complexity is growing, and with it grows the need for writing that helps us cope with that complexity. This doesn't mean you must polish ever phrase to poetic perfection; few of us can be poets. All of us, however, can master everyday writing. The Navy turns out a staggering 500 million pages of paperwork each year. The salary time needed to read them all just once consumes \$120 million. Don't make the cost any higher. See that for each of your readers, once is enough.

— *Note from the Navy Correspondence Manual*



Selected Writing References

Develop your own style, but there are a few books that are worth reading. Remember, good writers are great readers. Read a lot!

One of the best sources for improving writing is the internet. Remember, the military invented this unique information technology. Often, you don't need to leave your office, and basic research for you writing is at the end of your mouse pointer. Use it!

We have included Appendix A as your basic tool for books and pamphlets to help you. We have put together a series of valuable older books, booklets, and pamphlets on writing. All of the appendices should be reviewed and thoroughly reviewed. Age of these sources are not critical, what they say is:

BETTER MILITARY WRITING

- **Writing Guide for Naval Officers** (BuPers 10009), 1958 (out of print), 88 pp.
- **Writing for Results, In Business, Government, and the Professions**, David Ewing, Wiley Interscience, (out of print), 1974, 452 pp.
- **Words into Type**, based on studies by *Marjorie E. Skillin, Robert M. Gay*, and other authorities. 3d edition. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1974, 585 pages, \$39.95.
- **The Elements of Style** by *William Strunk, Jr.*, and *E. B. White*. 3d edition. New York: Macmillan, 1979, 92 pages, \$4.95 (paper).
- **U.S. Air Force Effective Writing Course** (AFP 13-5), (out of print), 1980, 71 pp.
- **The Complete Writing Guide** by *Carolyn Mullins*, Prentice-Hall, 1980, 274 pp.
- **On Writing Well**, *William Zinsser*, Harper & Roe, 1980, (out of print), 176 pp.
- **Tongue and Quill, Communicating to Manage in Tomorrow's Air Force** (AU-22), Headquarters Air University, July 1982, 193 pp.
- **Guide to Effective Military Writing** by *William McIntosh*. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 1994, 2nd edition, 224 pages, \$14.95 (paper).
- Any first-rate dictionary. My choice: **Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary** edited by *Frederick C. Mish*, et al. Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1985, 1,564 pages, \$16.95 to \$23.95.

Internet Writing References

Bartleby.com

To further improve this booklet, we have completed extensive internet research. You cannot beat what is available to you over the internet...this is the best site we have seen to help writers. Put it on your bookmarks.

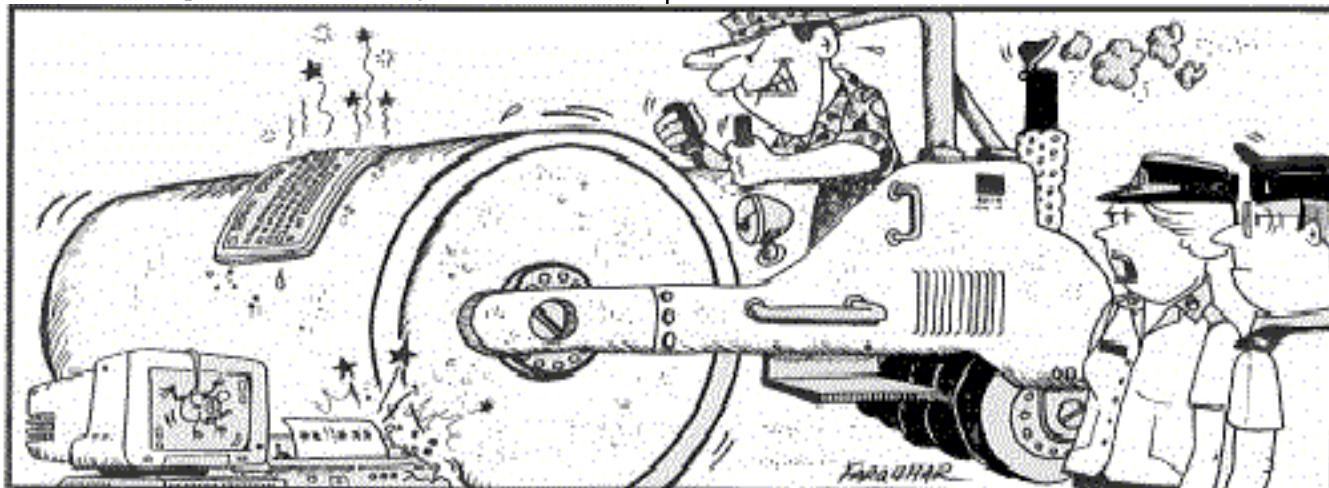
These must be considered for reference books.

General

- **Columbia Encyclopedia, 6th ed. 2000.** The most up-to-date encyclopedia available contains over 50,000 articles, 40,000 published on the bibliographic citations and over 80,000 web cross-reference entries.
- **American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, 3rd ed. 1996.** This unabridged dictionary containing over 200,000 entries is the preeminent full-size dictionary of the English language now available.
- **Roget's II: The New Thesaurus, 3rd ed. 1995.** Containing 35,000 synonyms in an easy-to-use format, this thesaurus features succinct word definitions.

Language, Style & Composition

- **American Heritage® Book of English Usage.** 1996 With a detailed look at grammar, style, diction, word formation, gender, social groups and scientific forms, this valuable reference work is ideal for students, writers, academicians and anybody concerned about proper writing style.
- **Fowler, H. W. 1908. The King's English, 2nd ed.** This reference work has remained a standard resource—serving generations of students and writers with common sense rules of style and grammar.
- **Strunk, William, Jr. 1918.** *The Elements of Style*. Believing that one must first know the rules to break them, this classic reference book is a must-have for any student or writer.
- **Quiller-Couch, Sir Arthur. 1916.** *On the Art of Writing*. This collection of lectures captures the artistic and vital nature of language.



CORPORAL CAPSLOCK IS SIMPLY MAKING A SUBTLE REFERENCE TO HIS DISLIKE FOR THE 'INFORMATION SUPER HIGHWAY'!

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- **Quiller-Couch, Sir Arthur. 1920.** *On the Art of Reading.* This series of lectures is rich with insight on the activity of effectual and intelligent reading.
- **Mencken, H.L. 1921. *The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States, 2nd ed.*** This classic bridges the discrepancies between British and American English and defines the distinguishing characteristics of the language of the United States.
- **Sapir, Edward. 1921. *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech.*** The classic text on the relation of language and culture.

Quotations

- **Simpson's Contemporary Quotations. 1988.** The most notable quotations since 1950 contains over 10,000 quotations from 4,000 sources and is organized into 25 categories and 60 sections.
- **Bartlett, John. 1919. *Familiar Quotations, 10th ed.*** Including over 11,000 quotations, the first new edition of John Bartlett's corpus to be published after his death in 1905 keeps most of his original work intact.

Why Improve Military Writing?

"It is the policy of the shipyard commander that all activities of the shipyard shall be carried out in a manner that will ensure the protection and enhancement of the environment through the control and abatement of environmental pollution."

— SECNAVINST 5216.5C (29 AUG 1998), p 1-1.

Confusing Memorandum

From: Commander
To: _____ Corporation
Via: Defense Contract Administrative Services
Subj: Contract No. _____
Ref: (a) through (f)

1. Reference (b) which forwarded reference (c) to _____ Corporation for action was hand-carried to this Command by representatives during reference (a) along with references (c), (d) and (e) requesting clarification of the correspondence.

2. Reviewing references (m), (n), (p), and (q) of reference (c) in light of references (e) and (f) clarification of references (m), (n), (p), and (q) of reference (c) is as follows:

a. Approval for references (m), (n), and (p) is not required. These references are for information only in accordance with reference (f).

b. Reference (q) which was forwarded by reference (d) for approval was approved by reference (e).

3. In light of above no action on references (m), (n), and (q) of reference (c) is required.

By Direction

Pentagonese Begone

On my first day of CMS school, Naval Station San Diego, I stood outside of the BOQ waiting for the bus. A Navy Ensign was standing nearby, so I thought by chance he might be attending the same school as I. *"Are you here for CMS?"* I asked.

"No." he replied, *"I'm just TEMDU at FLTTRAGRU with CINCPACFLT waiting for ACPITS."* *"Oh,"* I said, not wanting to be outdone, *"I had that last week."*

— LCDR R.A. Fliegel,

Pentagonese, Be Gone!, Proceedings, Jan 1981, p. 36.

Writer's Quotes

If I had to give a young writer advice, I'd say don't listen to writers talking about writing. Nothing you write, if you hope to be good, will ever come out as you first hoped.

— Lillian Hellman.

Read over your compositions and, when you meet a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out.

— Samuel Johnson.

In composing, as a general rule, run your pen through every other word you have written; you have no idea what vigor it will give your style.

— Sydney Smith (1771-1845).

Anything that is written to please the author is worthless.

— Blaise Pascal (1623-1662).

I love being a writer. What I can't stand is the paperwork.

— Peter DeVries.

Sometimes I think it sounds like I walked out of the room and left the typewriter running.

— Gene Fowler

Battered Military Manglings

■ **Rifle.** Don't simply say that a rifle can fire, say it is *capable of firing* or *has the capability of firing*.

■ **Soldiers/Troops.** Personnel, bodies, or individuals. Soldiers, squads, platoons never fight; they *operate*. Headquarters have become *echelons* and methods have become *techniques*.

■ **Suffixes allow Imagination.** Simply add —ize. *Cannibalize, categorize, optimize, finalize, even dieselize and ruggedize.* Or, add —ry. *Soldiery, riflery, weaponry, missilery, rocketry, weaponry.* Or, add —wise. *Intelligencewise, weatherwise, weaponwise, healthwise, unitwise.*

■ **Prefixes.** *Debrief* for briefing, *unestablish* for discontinue, *non-greasy* for not greasy.

■ **Other examples.** *"This semiautomatic, small caliber, shoulder-fired weapon, because of mechanical derangement, ceased to fire."* This means the *"rifle jammed!"*

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How to Make the Decision to Write...or not!

Seven points should be checked before one starts to write and should be used as a mental checklist before starting:

1. You must have a clear and practical purpose in writing.
2. Writing must be a suitable way to accomplish your objective.
3. You must be the right person to send the communication.
4. The time must be right.
5. Be sure the written word is not too risky.
6. The written form must not be too rigid an approach.
7. Writing must be sufficient to meet the need.

Source: D.W. Ewing, *Writing for Results (In Business, Government, and the Professions)*, Wiley Interscience Publications, 1974, pp. 21-30.

Techniques of Clear Writing

The *Writing Guide for Naval Officers* (First edition 1958, revised 1964), has been out of print since 1980. This manual was developed to review the types of writing for Navy communications - letters, reports, staff studies, and other similar communications. Chapter 5 - *Techniques of Clear Writing* can be useful to all Navy personnel. Discussion includes:

- Writing Problems.
- Word Order for Clarity.
- Clear Writing Elements.
- Word Volume Sentence/Paragraph Length.
- Expediting Writing.
- Eight Pitfalls to Avoid in Writing.
- Getting Started.

- Readability Formulas.
- The Right Words.
- Basic Grammar.

Tips to Write Good

1. Use commas only when, needed.
2. Don't use no double negatives.
3. Prepositions are not to end sentences with.
4. Correct you're spelling only as it is isential.
5. Never abbrev.
6. Pronouns must agree with its antecedents.
7. Verbs has to agree with their subjects.
8. Use commas to separate words in a series parentetical introductory clauses and the like.
9. Proofread your work to make sure you have not any words out.
10. Join clauses good, like a conjunction should.
11. About them sentence fragments.
13. When dangling watch your participles.
14. Just between you and I, case is important too.
15. Don't write run-on sentences they are hard to read.
16. Try to not ever split infinitives.
17. Its important to use your apostrophe's correctly.
18. While a transcendent vocabulary is laudable, one must nonetheless keep incessant surveillance against such loquacious, effusive, voluble verbosity that the calculated objective of communications becomes ensconced in obscurity.



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The Elements of Style

The following comes from *"That Little Book,"* This little book was first written in 1919 by Professor William Strunk and modified by E.B. White and published in 1957. It is the standard which *"cuts the vast tangle of English rhetoric down to size and write its rules and principles on the head of a pin!"* Use it! Appendix F is a newer version.

Elementary Principles of Composition

- Choose a Suitable Design and Hold It.
- Make the Paragraph the Unit of Composition.

Use the Active Voice

- Put Statements in Positive Form.
- Use Definite, Specific, Concrete Language.

Omit Needless Words

- Avoid a Succession of Loose Sentences.
- Express Coordinate Ideas in Similar Form.
- Keep Related Words Together.
- In Summaries, Keep to One Tense.
- Place the Emphatic Words of a Sentence.

An Approach to Style

Place Yourself in the Background

- Write in a way that comes Naturally.
- Work from a Suitable Design.
- Write with Nouns and Verbs.

Revise and Rewrite

- Do Not Overstate.
- Do Not Overwrite.

Avoid the use of Qualifiers

- Do Not Affect a Breezy Manner.
- Use Orthodox Spelling.

Do Not Explain Too Much

- Do Not Construct Awkward Adverbs.
- Make Sure the Reader Knows who is Speaking.
- Avoid Fancy Words.
- Do Not Use Dialect, Unless your ear is good.

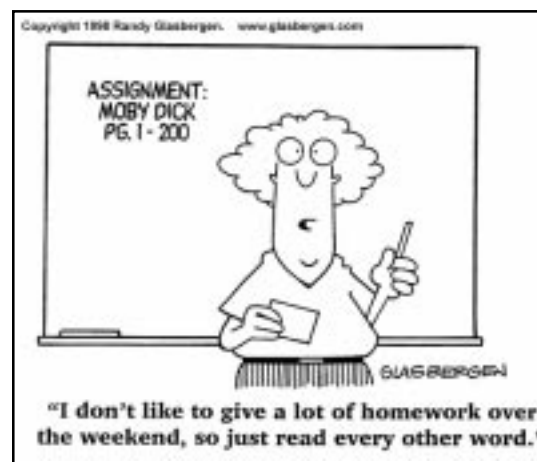
Be Clear

- Do Not Inject Opinion.
- Use Figures of Speech Sparingly.
- Do Not Take Shortcuts at the Cost of Clarity.
- Avoid Foreign Languages.
- Prefer the Standard to the Offbeat.

Organized Writing

- **Avoid Mystery Stories.** Writing should follow the newspaper pattern...most important first, then least important. Use the five honest serving men - *who, what, where, why, when,* and *how.* Avoid mere chronology.
- **Start Fast, Explain as Necessary, then Stop.** Apply the KISS formula - *"Keep It Simple, Stupid."* The strongest letter highlights the main point in a one-sentence paragraph at the very beginning.

- **Downplay References.** Avoid unnecessary or complicated references. Every glance up from the text slows reading. Don't leave the reader helpless.
- **Avoid NOTAL References.** Period!
- **Use Short Paragraphs.** Short paragraphs are important at the start of letters. Paragraphs should be down to about four sentences... white space makes reading easier. Now and then use a one-sentence paragraph to highlight an important idea.
- **Take Advantage of Topic Sentences.** A writer's judgement call. It depends! If simple paragraph, probably not; if complex, critical. Without them some paragraphs make readers shrug and say, *"So?"*
- **Write Disciplined Sentences.** Avoid sentences that mumble: subordinate minor ideas, etc.



Natural Writing

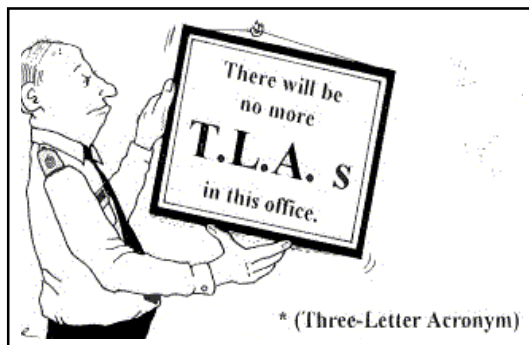
- **Speak on Paper.** Because readers "hear" writing, the most readable sounds like people talking to people. To make your writing more like speaking, begin by imagining your reader is sitting across from your desk...then write with personal pronouns, everyday words, and short sentences — the best of speaking.
- **Use Personal Pronouns.** *We, us, our* for activity or command; *you* for the reader; *I, me, my* from the Commanding Officer.
- **Talk to one Reader when Writing to Many.** Take special care when writing to multiple addressees, talk to a typical group or to one reader.
- **Rely on Everyday Words.** Don't use big ones when little ones work. And, yes you can start sentences with conjunctions such as *but, so, yet, and!!!!*

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- **Use Some Contractions.** (Debatable; it depends! Caveat emptor for writers...may be too informal for the reader.)
- **Keep Sentences Short.** Mix long and short sentences. (26 words average sentence.)
- **Ask More Questions.** A request gains emphasis when it ends with a question.
- **Be Concrete.** Lazy writing overuses vague terms—*“immense dedication, enhanced program, viable hardware, and response line of authority...low morale, poor discipline, and good leadership.”*
- **Listen to your Tone.** Critical for all writing...*“certainly, interagency grouping, needs and concerns, I certainly support this, etc.”*

Compact Writing

- **Cut the Fat.** The longer it takes, the weaker and blurrier it becomes. Be easy on your readers, hard on yourself.
- **Avoid “it is” and “there is.”** Use *we request* (not “it is requested...”); *we recommend* (not “it is the recommendation of this office that...”)
- **Prune Wordy Expressions.** Use *by* (not “in accordance with”), *to* (not “in order to”), *soon* (not “in the near future”).
- **Free Smothered Verbs.** Try to avoid general verbs...make or is. Use *applied, use, met,* etc.
- **Splice Doublings.** Repeating a general idea can’t make more precise.
- **Shun “the -ion of” and “the -ment of.”** Use *to prepare* (not “for the preparation of”), *examining* (not “the examination of”), etc.
- **Prevent Hut-2-3-4 Phrases.** Use *subject codes* (not “standard subject identification codes”)
- **Avoid Excessive Abbreviations.** This also applies to acronyms; if either would appear twice or infrequently, avoid abbreviation or acronym entirely. Put clarity before economy.



Active Writing

- Avoid Dead Verbs.
- Learn the Symptoms of Passive Voice.
- Know the Three Cures.
- Write Passively only for Good Reason.

Revising Your Writing

All writing can be improved. The preceding material has been introduced to help each of you improve your writing. The following steps will help revise from the first to the final draft:

1. Read through the writing quickly.
2. Circle the main point and make sure it's early.
3. Flag unnecessary words and ideas:
 - “it is” and “there are.”
 - Wordy and unnatural expressions.
 - Smothered verbs.
 - Doublings.
 - “the -ion of” and “the -ment of.”
 - Hut, 2, 3, 4 phrases.
 - Excessive abbreviating.
 - Passive constructions.
4. Revise ruthlessly, editing out what you've flagged.



5. Read through for continuity and smooth flow, checking for topic sentences and clear transitions.
6. Use visual guideposts — subject lines, subparagraphs, bullets, white space, parallelism — to highlight key ideas and their relationships.
7. Read the writing out loud. Does it sound like people talking to people? Have you used personal pronouns and an occasional contraction or question?
8. Put the writing down and come back for a final edit. (Use the “guinea pig” reader approach.)

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How to Win at Wordsmanship

Seven Points on Deciding to Write

1. You must have a clear and practical purpose in writing.
2. Writing must be a suitable way to accomplish your objective.
3. You must be the right person to send the communication.
4. The time must be right.
5. Be sure the written word is not too risky.
6. The written form must not be too rigid an approach.
7. Writing must be sufficient to meet the need.



Five Suggestions for Better Military Writing

1. **Keep It Simple (Stupid) or KISS formula.** If a phone call isn't an appropriate response to that blivet that just fell on your desk, how about a **short, informal, handwritten note**? If you have access to electronic mail, learn to use it to send informal messages. If you must write a more formal paper, don't get wrapped around the axle about its format. **Clarity** should be your purpose, not petty conformity. That holds, too, if you are reviewing someone else's written work; whether writer or reviewer, you should generally **confine your concern to the paper's clarity and substance**.
2. **Compose on a Computer.** This is the computer age, so get with it. If high school sophomores can learn word processing, then so can you. The vast benefits will soon become apparent. Being able to make instant revisions will make you a better writer. You will find, once you become adept at driving that keyboard, that **writing drafts on a computer is quicker than writing in longhand**. (If you have a secretary, she probably has plenty to do without the added burden of having to

decipher your scrawl, and would no doubt happily format and print your work for you if only you would compose on the screen.) Learning word processing will require some of your time and a lot of your patience, but it will pay terrific dividends.



3. **Relax.** To repeat, **write as you speak, only more precisely**. And relax: Write as you speak when you are off duty – but without the harsher expletives! Recall Strunk and White's advice on developing your style: **"The approach to style is by way of plainness, simplicity, orderliness, sincerity."**
4. **Revise.** Revising your written work is a pain and time-consuming, but essential if you are writing something important. When you revise, **try to substitute precise words for imprecise ones**. Try to sympathize with your reader: Find and clarify anything in your paper that will be a riddle to him. Make sure your grammar is generally right – **editors tire of seeing subjects and verbs separated by a comma**. And check your spelling. Use the **active voice rather than the passive** (you can look it up in **Words into Type**). Unless you are adding something of substance, **your revision should be shorter than the original**. Kick out the **buzzwords and cliches**. **Avoid acronyms**. If you must use acronyms, limit their number, and spell them out once to make sure your readers will know what they mean. And work to make your prose more forceful: Enlist **meaningful nouns and descriptive adjectives**, deploy some **short sentences**, order **strong verbs** into the action, and aim for originality.
5. **Four Books at Your Side.** Get Your Fingers on Four Books – Read McIntosh...read Strunk and White...refer often to **Words into Type** and to that solid **dictionary** you are going to keep on your desk. Then **enjoy being a better writer**.

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Techniques of Clear Writing

How to Start, Expedite, and Stop Your Writing

- **Outline.** Only used as aids, not sacred. Too detailed will only slow you down.
- **Start Writing.** Get something on paper quickly, critique the material later.
- **Time Planning.** Allow plenty of time, don't procrastinate or dump unreal deadlines on your Administrative Assistant.
- **Deadlines.** Set a deadline or series of deadlines and monitor progress through these deadlines.
- **Organization.** Think about the summary, conclusions, and other details, then write the introduction.
- **Stop When Finished.**

The Right Words

- **Accuracy.** Use a word because it is correct, not because it sounds important.
- **Use the Proper Word.** Don't guess at the meaning of the word, look it up.
- **Temporary Word.** If you can't think of the exact word, use another on a temporary basis. Use the dictionary, not the thesaurus.
- **Use Understandable Terminology.** Know your audience and use terms they know or understand.



Tips for Effective Writing

Source. *Tips for Effective Writing* website

This comes from a new website which recognizes that the Federal government needs to improve the quality and clarity of writing. It is a recent newsletter (on the web) on writing improvement and offers further tips.

I strongly recommend that you print out each issue of this newsletter, so that you can read it and do the exercises at your leisure. Keep your printed copies and completed exercises in a file folder or binder, so that you can refer back to the tips and correct your exercises as necessary (yes, I'll send the correct answers in the issue following the one in which the exercises were published).

Yes, Your English Teacher Was Right

I'm sorry to be the one to break the awful news, but your high school English teacher was, indeed, right. Spelling, punctuation and grammar DO count. Nothing will turn off a reader faster than bad spelling, improper punctuation and incorrect usage. If your goal is to encourage your readers to continue reading, you must pay attention to these nasty, but necessary basics.



Spelling

I'm not going to waste your time or mine with a spelling tutorial; you know if you have a spelling problem. Whether you have a spelling problem or not, the following tips will help you with your written English:

1. **Invest in a GOOD dictionary, and use it.** I'm not talking about the small paperback versions that you can get for \$4.95. The dictionaries to which I am referring are large and extensive, and contain much more than simple definitions of words. They also tell you how the word was derived, what it is (part of speech), how to use it, alternative spellings, how to convert it to another part of speech, and whether or not it's slang. A good dictionary should also contain sections on abbreviations, foreign words and phrases, pronunciation and writing style. If all of these things are not in the book, DON'T buy it. I rely on Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, but there are many others that are just as good. A dictionary from the Oxford series would be a good bet for a Canadian or British Commonwealth citizen.

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2. **Consider buying a thesaurus.** Roget's is the standard, but there are many good thesauri on the market.
3. **DO NOT rely on spellcheck.** The spell-checker on your computer can only tell you if something uses nonstandard spelling. It can't tell you if a word is spelled or used incorrectly. Use your dictionary as your final authority.
4. **Proofread.** Go over everything you have written. If you're not sure about the spelling, look it up in your dictionary.

Punctuation

There will be more on this topic in the tutorial on sentence structure. For now, it's enough to say that without proper punctuation your readers will have no idea what you are trying to say. If you've taken the time to write something, you certainly want your readers to understand it.

Grammar

Okay, you hated grammar class when you were in school, so you didn't pay any attention to what the teacher was saying. Now you have to write a report for work and you don't have a secretary you can rely on to make sure that you don't sound like an idiot. Oops! Maybe you should have paid attention, after all. Sorry, there's no overnight fix for this problem. You'll just have to go through the grammar tutorials, do the exercises, correct your errors and practice what you learn. One quick tip here; your dictionary can help you determine whether or not you are using words correctly.



Edgar Allan Poe in a moment of writer's block

There's another thing that your English teacher probably told you about writing. You can help yourself learn to write better by reading. Good writers are almost always avid readers. So read. Read lots. Read everything you can get your hands on. Read books, magazines,

novels, short stories, poems, newspapers, matchbook covers. The more you read, the better. The more you read, the better you will understand what you are going to learn in the tutorials. Set aside some time every day and read for the pleasure of reading. Yes, this is an assignment.

The Basics

I apologize if what follows sounds like a grade school grammar class, but I've had to use a lesson plan format in order to get my points across.

Sentence Structure

1. What is a sentence?
2. The different kinds of sentences.
3. Basic punctuation: the comma.
4. Exercises

The Writing Process

Step One: Preparation

Do yourself a big favor, and don't try to go over everything in one sitting.

Sentence Structure

Many excellent writers struggle with sentence structure, so don't despair if your sentences are not all that they could be. Over the years you'll learn common problems in sentence structure, and you'll get LOTS of practice writing grammatically correct sentences.

Okay, so what, exactly, is a sentence? Simply put, a sentence is a group of words that express a complete thought. It starts with a capital letter, and finishes with a terminal punctuation mark. It has at least two things, a subject and a verb. It can contain one word, or many words.

Alright, now you're confused. How can a sentence have only one word, if it has to have both a subject and a verb? This is where I segue into an explanation of the different types of sentences. Here we go.

There are several basic sentence forms, and every sentence ever written falls into one of them:

1. The statement

Statements are exactly that. They state something. They give information. In fact, every sentence in this definition of a statement is a statement. Statements may be true or false, right or wrong. They always end with a period. The following examples show how statements are broken in to their component parts: subjects and verbs.

Grass is green. In this example, grass is the subject, and is is the verb.

Birds sing. Here, birds is the subject, and sing is the verb.

2. The question, or interrogatory sentence

The interrogatory sentence asks a question. It always ends with a question mark.

How are you? Subject: you Verb: are

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You should have noticed something here. The verb is in front of the subject. In general, questions invert the subject and verb. That is, the verb usually comes before the subject.

3. The imperative

Army officers like imperative sentences. That's because you use imperative sentences to give orders. An imperative sentence can end with a period or an exclamation mark.

Stop! Don't do that!

Okay, what did you notice here? Aha! Neither of these sentences has a subject, right? Wrong. The subject of an imperative sentence is often implied. That doesn't mean that there is no subject, it just means that you don't always have to write out the subject. If you were going to write out the subject, those examples might look like this:

You, stop!

George, don't do that!

Either form is grammatically correct.



4. The exclamation

When we're excited, we make exclamations. An exclamation is a sentence that expresses strong feeling. It always ends with an exclamation mark.

Your new car is beautiful!

What a glorious day it is!

That's it. There are no other forms of sentence in the entire world. Of course, all of the examples I've given you are simple sentences, with easily identifiable subjects and verbs. In the real world, sentences are usually much more complex, which is why most of us run into an occasional grammatical problem (yes, even I have to check my grammar from time to time).

If we take the time to remember that every sentence has to talk about someone or something (the subject), and that it must tell what the someone or something is doing (the verb), we'll be well on the way to constructing intelligent, grammatically correct sentences.

Basic Punctuation

Punctuation marks are the traffic signs of written language. They tell us when to slow down, pay closer attention or come to a full stop. Without proper punctuation it is almost impossible to understand what a written passage is really saying. If you are having a hard time

believing this, consider the following examples:

Meats which have high fat content are forbidden on some diets.

Meats, which have high fat content, are forbidden on some diets.

Both sentences use exactly the same words, but they have very different meanings. The first sentence tells us that some meats have high fat content, the second says that all meats have high fat content. The only difference between the sentences is two lowly, little commas.

Having started with the example of how the weakest mark of separation used in writing can change the meaning of an entire sentence, I think I'll make the comma the focus of this discussion on punctuation.

Commas are used to indicate a slight pause that will help readers to better understand what they are reading. Experienced writers don't generally have to think about the rules for using commas. They simply place one wherever they feel the need for a pause. There are, however, basic guidelines for comma usage which are fairly easy to remember.

- Use commas to set off items in a series, or list.

John went to the store for milk, bread, eggs and cheese.

- Use commas to set off interrupting, nonessential phrases (subordinate clauses) in a sentence. If the sentence means the same thing, with or without the phrase, set it in commas. If the meaning of the sentence would change without the phrase, leave out the commas.

Johnson, for all his idiosyncracies, was an effective president.

This sentence would mean exactly the same thing with or without the phrase "for all his problems", so the phrase is set in commas.

- Use a comma before the conjunction that joins two independent clauses.

The advertising whetted her interest, and she was determined to go.

In this example, each phrase could stand alone as a sentence. The writer has decided to join them in one sentence, using the conjunction "and", so he must use a comma before the conjunction.

- Use a comma to set off an introductory or qualifying word or phrase in a sentence.

Unfortunately, we did not get the Smith contract. Indeed, you are lucky!

On the whole, they performed very well.

- Use commas to set off interrupting phrases within a sentence. Nonessential appositives, which clarify but do not change the meaning of the subject, are set off in commas.

Jack, CEO, lives in New York.

So are transition words or phrases that point or qualify.

Bears, for instance, are omnivores.

So are terms of address.

Miss Jones, your cab is waiting.

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- Use a comma to set off a subordinate clause at the beginning of a sentence.

Given the circumstances, he did as well as could be expected.

A subordinate clause at the end of a sentence does not need to be set off with a comma.

- Use a comma to clearly mark a contrast or separation point.

Modern man uses his brain, not his brawn.

Use commas to mark off divisions in written titles, dates and addresses.

John Smith, Dean of Humanities, will address the student body.

She starts her new job on Thursday, September 1.

Sam lives in Los Angeles, California.

- Use commas to mark off direct quotations in dialogue.

"Put it down," said Sally.

"Give that back," shouted George, "and leave my stuff alone."

That just about covers all the rules for using commas. I'm sure that most of you knew them already, but now you have them all nicely written out. Now, when you're not sure whether you need a comma, you can refer to this.

The Writing Process

All writers use some form of process or formula for writing. Welcome to the first issue of ***Tips for Effective Writing***. Most of you have subscribed because you recognize that your writing could be made stronger, if you only knew how. I sincerely hope that all of you will find some benefit from the tips and exercises offered in this and subsequent issues. I strongly recommend that you print out each issue of this newsletter, so that you can read it and do the exercises at your leisure. Keep your printed copies and completed exercises in a file folder or binder, so that you can refer back to the tips and correct your exercises as necessary (yes, I'll send the correct answers in the issue following the one in which the exercises were published). **[Editor's Note. This website is great!]**

Source: <http://www.opticalresolution.com/free.htm>

Guide to Effective Military Writing

William McIntosh, 1994, 233 pp.

This is the second printing of this excellent book. Use it as another tool for improving your writing:

- Writing for the Military.
- A Standard for Writing.
- When to Write.
- Substance.
- Organization.
- Style.
- Correctness.
- Military Formats.
- General Formats.
- Editing Techniques.

Seven Rules for the Military Writer

1. I will write only when I must.
2. I will write so my reader can understand what I am saying.
3. I will not waste my reader's time.
4. I will not preserve any of my material that might impeded effective communication.
5. I will not confuse criticism of my writing with criticism of me.
6. I will keep my organization's mission at the heart of what I write.
7. I will write consciously using the voice and tone of the person whose signature will appear on my work.

A Standard for Writing

During the years which followed the VietNam war, the services all made an effort to improve writing...to become reader-friendly.

When to Write

Alternatives to Writing. Why write, when face to face conversation serves in communications. You must write when you have no alternatives to writing: face-to-face conversation, or radio or telephone.

The basic elements of written communications: (1) words and (2) tone. Remember, when you write, the best you can expect is 40% understanding.

Purposes of Writing. Writing exists to: (1) delight and (2) teach. In the military, virtually all is to teach. Military writers "delight" their readers by not making them angry. Writing must either inform or persuade.

Therefore, teaching, for the military writer, comes down to information and persuasion.

Think of writing as the last resort!

Style

Good style is whatever it takes to make your writing communicate its substance quickly, clearly, and directly. Unless you have no choice, do not use the passive voice. Use short words when it makes sense to use them.

Choose familiar words that are commonly used today. Avoid wordy transitional phrases that replace single words.

Write sentences that communicate with the fewest number of words you can use without being rudely abrupt or brief at the expense of meaning.

Say please and thank you when they will enhance what you need to say.

Use contractions when they will help your reader get through your writing quickly.

Correctness

Your reader will expect you to write in complete sentences. Your sentence, in order to be a complete sentence, must have the following four things: a capital letter at the beginning, a subject, a verb, and a terminal punctuation mark.

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Military Formats

Identify your aim. Make sure your intermediaries between you and your reader agree with your aim.

Formats. Memorandum/Information paper/Decision paper/Talking paper.

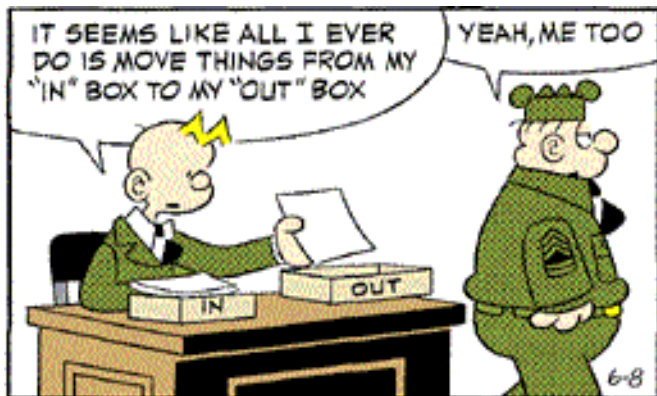
Arrange your information in clear, logical headings. Keep your paragraphs short, no longer than seven or eight single spaced lines.

In summary, specific suggestions are:

1. Identify your aim.
2. Make sure that you and any intermediaries between you and your reader agree with your paper's stated aim.
3. Select the format that best suits your material and aim.
4. Start with a clear announcement of the purpose of your paper.
5. Follow that announcement with a forceful statement of the bottom line.
6. Arrange your information under clear, logical headings.
7. Keep your paragraphs no longer than seven or eight single-spaced lines.
8. Limit your base document to no more than one page.
9. Enclose any additional material in a logical, orderly manner.
10. Show your draft to your officemates, and ask them to check its usage and logical flow.
11. Conduct a computerized check of your usage if your computer software will support one.
12. Circulate your second draft to concerned intermediaries.
13. Respond to any additional corrections or changes.
14. Prepare the final copy, proof it, and send it forward.

Format Examples

This is an excellent section to review from the **Guide to Effective Military Writing** (pp 94-98). Hint, get the book, it's invaluable! The military service formats may be somewhat different, but good writing and communications is the key. Use what we are discussing:



- Executive Summary.
- Memorandum.
- Decision Paper.
- Talking Paper.
- Evaluation Report Narrative.
- Award Citation.

Although we are talking about writing, these principles apply to all forms of communications.

Editing Techniques

Few things are more frustrating than having something you've written returned with instructions to rewrite it. Where do you begin? If the person sending it back has given you no concrete suggestion for the repairs you are to make, you have a real problem. As an editor, the following guidelines apply:

1. Use a highlighter to do your marking.
2. Use a pencil to write any instruction you have for the writer. [Use a red pen; it's better.]
3. Highlight forms of the verb to be, nominalization, verbalizations, and jargon.
4. Never make a writer change what is already effective writing just because you can.
5. Remember: rapid reading and understanding are the goals of your editing — not art.

Army Writing Style

Following the components of the Army writing style will lead you to write to Army standard. The Army standard is stated as "*transmits a clear message in a single rapid reading and is generally free of errors in grammar, mechanics, and usage.*" A general summary of the Army writing style is below:

1. Put the recommendation, conclusion or reason for writing — the bottom line — in the first or second paragraph, not at the end.
2. Use the active voice.
3. Use short sentences (an average of 15 or fewer words).
4. Use short words (three syllables or fewer).
5. Write paragraphs that average 6 to 7 sentences in length.
6. Use correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation.



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7. Use "I," "you," and "we" as subjects of sentences instead of "this office," "this headquarters," "all individuals," and so forth for most kinds of writing.
8. Retype correspondence only when pen and ink changes are not allowed, when the changes make the final product look sloppy, or when the correspondence is going outside the Army or to the general public. In general, do not retype correspondence to make minor corrections.

Learning to accurately use the various components of the Army writing style correctly will help you learn to write using the Army writing standard.

Writing A Cover Letter

Source. http://www.14wing.dnd.ca/admin_mfrc/article6.html

[Editor's Note. Career military personnel will eventually have to consider writing a cover letter with their resume, for your second career! Consider what this says and use some of the ideas in your office.]

Your cover letter is part of your marketing package and needs to be strong, to the point and have a clean message. Once it is in the mail, has been faxed or emailed there is no retrieving the resume and cover letter. So, it needs to be something that sells you. Cover letters are a unique form of letter and need nurturing to present a powerful message that says read me!

When you begin to write, your mind may give you random, disjointed thoughts. Your ideas probably won't come out logically or sequentially, but write them down as they appear, without worrying about order or logic. Don't judge and evaluate, simply collect them. Later you'll evaluate, sort, and organize them. At this stage you just want to get them down on paper, on tape, or on computer disk. Everything can be sharpened up later. Your first goal is simply to collect your rough thoughts. Once you've accomplished that, here's what to do next:

1. Spend time on your letter. Someone once said, "With part-time effort, you get part-time results." This is especially true in letter writing. You can expect to spend several hours, or even several days, on a letter.
2. Write a draft, and then let it cool off overnight.
3. Rewrite if necessary.
4. Use a strong close, like these: "After you have had a chance to review this letter, I will call you to get your reactions." "I will call your office next week to arrange a time when we might be able to get together. If you have any questions before that,

please call me at (902) 765-5611."

5. Avoid weaker endings like these: "Please call me at your earliest convenience." "I believe that a meeting could prove to be mutually profitable, and ask that, if you agree, you contact me so that we can arrange a convenient time." "Thank you for your consideration. I am available for a personal interview at your earliest convenience and look forward to hearing from you." "In the next week or two when your schedule permits, let's meet and discuss my aspirations in more detail. Please give me a call." "I look forward to your reply."
6. Ask for opinions, advice, and feedback from friends, and from sales, marketing, and advertising experts. Anyone who can look at the letter with new eyes.
7. Enclose a response form to increase your response.

Give yourself time to deal with the development of the cover letter. You can't expect to produce an exceptional document overnight. Letter writing is actually harder than resume writing because you're starting with a clean slate. In resume-writing at least you have your background — which is definite — to work with. In letter writing, you start with nothing. Letters can be about anything. That's why they're so difficult. Don't expect to learn or perfect it overnight. There are many different styles and each in its context works very well.

Don't copy someone else's letter because it is not you. Your letter has to be "you." It should sound like you, feel like you, and read like you — because you have to follow it with a phone call, or answer questions about it. So, don't send a really "hot," aggressive letter if you're introverted and laid-back. You'll have trouble following up on the letter and you may not come across well. Send a letter that mirrors your style — and only you can write that letter.

The potential employer is not going to see you or have you there to explain something that may be in your marketing package (read cover letter and resume) so it needs to stand on its own. It needs to stand out from the 100 others on his/her desk and it needs to address the needs of the employer not simply a regurgitation of some job you held. The package is about the employers' needs and how you can benefit them, so make it clear, spell it out, make it the central theme that you are the only one for the position.

Editors Note. See the fictitious sample on the next page. How would you like to be the originator? Has this happened in your office? How would you react if this happened to you? Bottom line, as you attain senior positions, don't do this to subordinates!]

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DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
HEADQUARTERS UNITED STATES AIR FORCE ACADEMY
USAF ACADEMY, COLORADO 80840



REPLY TO
ATTN OF: DEE (Capt Propwash, 4338)

SUBJECT: New Roofs for Quarters 3-43

to: Quarters _____

1. Repair Notice. We've scheduled your quarters for a new roof. Work will start on _____ and last five workdays. Contractors will replace 20 roofs this summer and 21 next summer. Our goal is to end the damage from water accumulation and the area's high winds by replacing flat roofs with sloped ones.
2. Contractor Duties. Workmen will tear off your top roof and expose ceiling beams. Then they'll nail new beams that resemble A's to the old ones. Finally, they'll cover the new beams with plywood sheets and asphalt shingles. During construction, plastic covers will keep any rain off your inside ceiling.
3. Occupant Preparations. We want to reduce your inconvenience and avoid any accidents. So please follow these instructions:
 - a. Clear your driveway. Heavy equipment must move to and from your house.
 - b. Avoid your front door during working hours. Workmen will dump scraps in front of it.
 - c. Remove pictures from walls. Vibrations may knock them down.
 - d. Keep children away from all work areas.
4. Do you expect to be away during construction? If you do, let us know by 1 June so we can reschedule you.

Philip A. Powell
PHILIP A. POWELL, Colonel, USAF
DCS/Civil Engineering



*Max,
Retype the letter,
would you? I'll
have the colonel
sign it when he
returns from TDY
next month.
Ed Bailey
(Sorry about the
coffee spill. Great
letter!)*
