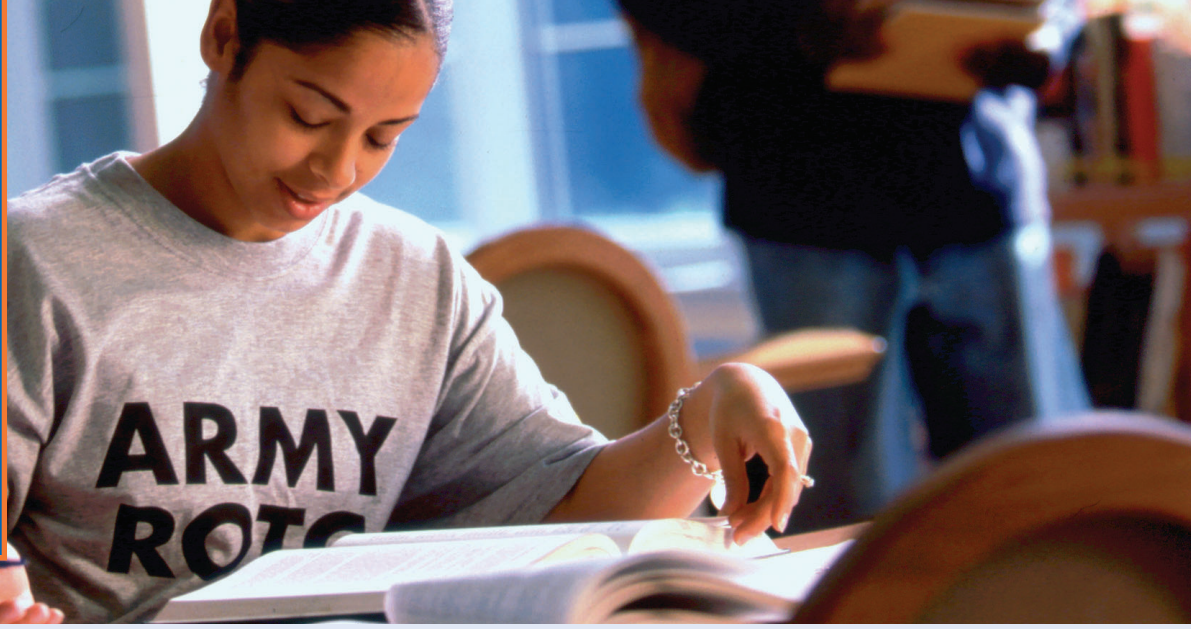
Section 3



EFFECTIVE WRITING

Key Points

1 The Army's "Corporate Standard" for Writing

2 The Principles of Army Writing

3 The Steps in the Writing Process

Use the words people use in talking to one another each day. . . . Come to your point—tell me what you want me to do. Don't be shy. Don't waste my time.

GEN John Vessey

From ST 22-2, *Writing and Speaking Skills for Leaders at the Organizational Level*

Introduction

Army communications skills are leader skills, not simply clerical skills. Officers—from the most junior lieutenants to commanders at the highest levels—must be able to write effectively in order to lead effectively. Recognizing this, in 1984 the Army instituted a "corporate standard" for effective writing. Soon after, the Army extended this standard to include speaking skills as well.

Since that corporate standard was introduced in 1984, the importance of written communication has greatly increased—both in our high-tech, globally oriented, and diverse nation and in the Army that protects it. Technology now allows senders to quickly compose and instantly transmit information, recommendations, and decisions. That means that written communication is both more valuable and riskier. Applying the Army standard to your writing tasks ensures that your writing communicates clearly and poses no risk of being misunderstood.

AR 25-50 clearly states the Army's corporate standard for writing:

> Department of the Army writing will be clear, concise, and effective. Army correspondence must aid effective and efficient communication and decision making. Writing that is effective and efficient can be understood in a single rapid reading and is generally free of errors in grammar, mechanics, and usage. The standards contained in these references are the mandated Army style.

The *Army style* is therefore two things:

1. It is writing that focuses on clear communication for sound decision making
2. It is mandatory, not voluntary.

Applying the Army standard means that your readers should understand what you meant to tell them. To help you apply the standard, this section will give you a framework to keep your priorities in order. At the same time, you'll follow a step-by-step process to make sure you're focusing on the proper writing tasks in the proper order.

You should strive to make this technique second nature. Throughout your career as an officer, you will need to quickly research, plan, draft, revise, and proof documents—from operations orders to memos—that inform, recommend, analyze, or otherwise communicate with readers. But while developing your writing skills is fundamental to your growth as a leader, it also is critical to your success outside the Army, in other professional and personal communications.

The ability to write effectively has long been a critical leader skill, as historian John Keegan's vignette below, on the Duke of Wellington at the Battle of Waterloo, demonstrates.

Decisive Writing from Britain's Most Famous General

Hougomont [Château, at the battle of Waterloo] then looked to be secure, had a French shell not landed in the farmyard and set fire to the buildings. Soon much of the château was in flames and the conflagration threatened to drive the British defenders out into the open. Wellington, still watching from the ridge to the rear, though action was intensifying near the crossroads, was acutely concerned. Taking one of the slips of parchment he kept folded in the buttonholes of his waistcoat, he penciled a note which is preserved today in a showcase at his London residence, Apsley House. It reads:

I see that the fire has communicated from the haystack to the roof of the château. You must however still keep your men in those parts to which the fire does not reach. Take care that no men are lost by the falling in of the roof, or floors. After they will have fallen in, occupy the ruined walls inside of the garden, particularly if it should be possible for the enemy to pass through the embers to the inside of the House.

Wellington's clarity of mind and conciseness of expression were famed. To have written such purposeful and accurate prose (the note contains both a future subjunctive and future perfect construction), on horseback, under enemy fire, in the midst of a raging military crisis is evidence of quite exceptional powers of self-control.

John Keegan

The Army's "Corporate Standard" for Writing

Learning to communicate effectively—especially in writing—requires the same kind of long-term commitment as staying in good physical shape. Good communication can be hard work at first, but with habitual practice, it becomes a decisive strength.

To apply the Army's "corporate standard" for good writing, you must focus on two areas.

- *First,* you must develop strong basic skills like those you are learning in college. Those skills involve understanding the principles of good writing and applying them in the main steps of the writing process—researching, planning and organizing, drafting, revising, and proofing.
- *Second,* you must apply those skills to communicate with your specific audience—most often, a busy military reader—and must therefore understand your reader's needs and expectations. Bringing these two areas together will spell success for you, your readers, and the mission.

BLUF

Bottom Line Up Front—always put the main point of your writing at the beginning of the document

The Principles of Army Writing

Two Army publications give you most of what you need to be a clear and effective writer. AR 25-50, *Preparing and Managing Correspondence,* requires that writers incorporate the principles below into their communication. DA PAM 600-67, *Effective Writing for Army Leaders,* provides techniques to help you apply those principles, or components, of the Army writing standard.

active voice

in the active voice, the doer of the action is the subject of the verb

passive voice

in the passive voice, the subject of the verb receives the action—avoid this weak construction

1. Put the recommendation, conclusion, or reason for writing—the bottom line—where the reader will quickly catch it, preferably in the first paragraph. This is called **BLUF**—**B**ottom **L**ine **U**p **F**ront.
2. Use the **active voice**. Active writing emphasizes the *doer* of the action—often the decision maker—and shows who or what does the action. When writers use the active voice, the subject of the sentence is the actor: "The platoon leader decided to move the team to the ridge line." In the **passive voice**, by contrast, the subject of the verb receives the action. An example is "It was decided to move the team to the ridge line."

In this typical passive-voice construction, the reader cannot know who made the decision. Eliminating the passive voice also often shortens sentences. For example:

Passive: "The vehicle was driven by SGT Smith." (seven words)

Active: "SGT Smith drove the vehicle." (five words)

3. Generally use short sentences (an average of 15 or fewer words). Develop a readable style that is appropriately varied, using long and short sentences. At the extremes, you should avoid both marathon sentences that tire and confuse readers, and telegraphic writing that uses short and choppy sentences. Your sentences should range between 11 and 22 words, to conform to good practices for clear business writing.
4. Use short words (three syllables or fewer); employ efficient phrases, vocabulary, and images; and avoid pompous and inflated language and jargon.
5. **Package** your writing for readability. Write paragraphs that average six to seven lines in length. Some paragraphs may be two inches in depth, others less than an inch, but the average paragraph should be about one inch deep (about six lines) for a single-spaced document. To further package for quick and easy understanding, use headers and illustrations to help your reader visualize your main points, and keep your document as short as you reasonably can.
6. Use correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation. It is important for you to use your time in college to refine your ability to employ the language correctly. The opening vignette on Lord Wellington provides an example of the relationship between finely honed grammar skills and effective leadership.

package

to format a written message so it is easier to understand—examples include short, focused paragraphs; headers that act as verbal "road signs"; and illustrations that reinforce the text

Common Errors

In everyday practice, most writers make a limited number of errors in the basics, but repeat those errors often. Below is a list of frequently occurring errors and corrections with techniques to prevent them.

Sentence Fragments

Conventional sentences have a subject and predicate, and any departure should be clearly intentional. Skillful writers use fragments effectively for special purposes (such as in dialogue: "Of course!"). What is not effective in good Army writing is a fragmentary thought. You must apply the conventions of grammar—the logic of language—to produce the clear communication that your readers need.

Example of a sentence fragment: *When the Soldier wrote the perimeter defense plan.*

Corrected sentence: *The Soldier wrote the perimeter defense plan when she returned.*

Subject-Verb Agreement

Claire Cook, in *Line by Line: How to Improve Your Own Writing*, states:

> Errors in agreement, a singular subject matched to a plural verb or vice versa, do not reflect faulty arithmetic or an inadequate grasp of verb forms. If you made a mistake, you have . . . lost sight of what words go together. . . . To avoid errors in subject-verb agreement, you have to know how to pick out the subject for every verb you use and how to tell whether that subject is singular or plural.

Example of incorrect subject-verb agreement: *Two NCOs and one officer is at the back of the bunker.*

Corrected: *Two NCOs and one officer are at the back of the bunker.*

TIP: Avoid writing inverted sentences, such as those beginning with *there is* and *there are,* because they require an increased effort to match subjects and verbs. So do longer sentences, in which writers tend to match the verb with the closest noun—sometimes incorrectly. Develop habits of analyzing sentences as you write, and write as economically as possible.

Comma Splices and Run-On Sentences

Writers produce run-on sentences with and without a comma, but the use of the comma as a splice is a bit harder to detect than unpunctuated run-ons such as: *My van was overheating the muffler smoked.* Three ways to correct this problem: 1) a comma and a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet*); 2) a semicolon (or occasionally a colon) alone; or 3) a semicolon and a transitional phrase.

Example of comma splice: *Employees may use the cafeteria, however, they must bus their own dishes.*

Corrected: Use a semicolon or period instead of the first comma. *Employees may use the cafeteria. They must bus their own dishes, however.*

TIP: This type of punctuation error may reflect faulty reasoning. The first sentence above implies a cause-and-effect relationship between the van's overheating and the muffler's smoking, which may or may not be the case.

Possessives of Nouns and Pronouns

You can see problems with possessives everywhere. One of the most famous is the Lands End trademark (original form): After years of embarrassment, the company produced the dubious correction of Lands' End (more than one land?). This type of error occurs often in major periodicals, both military and civilian.

Example of incorrect possessives: *Our Deans List is shorter than your's.*

Corrected: *Our Dean's List is shorter than yours.*

TIP: Noun possessives *always* use an apostrophe. Pronoun possessives *never* do. One of the most telling indicators of sloppy editing in printed materials is the incorrect use of *its* and *it's. The orca opened it's jaws* and *Its time to go* are examples of this error.

Critical Thinking

How are grammar errors related to bad logic and risky writing, especially in military writing?

Much Army writing is stilted, verbose, and hard to understand. It wastes manpower by wasting the time of writers and readers. We must reduce this drain on our resources.

Spelling

Studies show that people tend to continually misspell a relatively small number of words—between 25 and 50—in their day-to-day writing. John Gardner, a best-selling author, has a solution that's worked for him. Consider Gardner's technique below:

1. When you look up a word, or when you or someone finds an error and corrects the word's spelling, make a mark in your dictionary next to that word.
2. When you have made three marks next to that word, add it to a list you keep on a small slip of paper. Keep that slip in your wallet or handbag.
3. Whenever you proofread, bring out the list, and put it next to what you're editing. This mini-dictionary, which is with you in garrison and in the field, will act as a screen for about 80 percent of your recurring spelling errors.

There are other reasons for spelling errors, of course, such as ineffective proofreading techniques. In this area, as in others, it's helpful to share with your colleagues what works for you in typical writing tasks.

The Steps in the Writing Process

To make sure your writing task moves forward, you should use a systematic process that will ensure you cover the important steps in the right sequence:

- Researching
- Planning and Organizing
- Drafting
- Revising
- Proofing.

There are variations in the number of steps used in the process. Planning and researching may be combined for short e-mail messages and orders, for example, although almost every document passes through the first three steps of the process.

Step 1—Researching

When researching, you gather your substance—your information or evidence—to discover and support the points you need to make. Much research for Army writing is "capturing what you know" from your own mind, in the local files and reference works, and in discussing your writing task with others. Below are some of the essential elements of the first of the five steps of writing.

- Researching is the gathering of ideas and information
- It includes brainstorming, mind mapping, and other techniques
- People gather ideas in different ways
- As you gather ideas, keep in mind both the intent/purpose and the audience for the document
- Gather as many ideas as you can—it's easier to throw out the ideas you don't need than it is to go back and do more research
- Once you have the ideas you need, move on to planning.

Step 2—Planning and Organizing

Planning is often called organizing. When you plan or organize a document, your goal is to create your main point, your "bottom line," as a simple statement summarizing the key information from your research. Then you should develop at least two statements, but usually no more than five, that directly support the main point and effectively cover the key information. In this phase, it is important to test and revise both your substance and the way it's organized. Keep focused in your *purpose* and your *audience's needs and expectations.* Then you'll be sure to include the right information in the right sequence and to answer all potential questions and objections. The result of your planning should be an outline that is easy to transform into a draft. Below are some of the essential elements of planning.

- Take the information you've gathered, analyze it, and put it into a logical order
- Use mind-mapping, outlining, and other planning techniques
- Start by placing your ideas into groups, then order your groups in the way that best supports your task
- From this ordering, develop a *controlling idea*—a single declarative sentence that presents both your topic and a position about that topic
- Once you have the controlling idea, add
  —supporting paragraphs (evidence = information + explanation)
  —an introduction (if needed)
  —a conclusion (if needed)
- Once you have your outline (your blueprint for the document), you're ready to write your first draft.

Step 3—Drafting

When drafting, you pull everything together into sentences and paragraphs. Drafting must give your document consistency and coherence—the reader must be able to relate everything you say to your main point and your intent for writing. Below are some essential points about drafting.

- Drafting is the bridge between your idea and the communication of it
- Draft quickly and concentrate on getting your ideas down on paper in sentence form
- Try to draft in one sitting, depending on the length of the document
- Don't worry about—don't stop to fix—punctuation and spelling errors at this point
- Use your plan/outline
- State your controlling idea (the bottom line) early and follow the order you've already developed
- When you have the ideas down and you're satisfied with the sequence, put the paper aside to cool for a while before you start to revise.

Step 4—Revising

Revising is your chance to improve the coherence and efficiency—the style—of your document. The revising step is the best time to test how well your communication will work. You should begin your revising by testing the draft on a trial audience.

Ask others to read or listen to what you have written. Describe to them the intent, the purpose, and the audience. Try to have them simulate the final readers. If you must revise on your own, realize that the effort you've spent writing the document makes you reluctant to make changes and therefore makes you your own worst enemy. So let the document cool until you can revise from your audience's point of view. When revising, you should use the techniques below.

- Look at the material through the eyes of your audience
- Revise for style primarily, applying the Army standard for clear writing—if you find you need to put in more evidence, go back and conduct more research and reorganize your content as needed
- Read the document as if you have never seen it before
- Use another reader to review your document, but be sure you give specific guidance on what the reader is to review for
- Find where you need to put in transitions
- Simplify and clarify
- Package for easy reading.

Step 5—Proofing

The focus in the final step, proofing, is on correctness: grammar, mechanics, punctuation, spelling, documentation, and any final formatting fixes. When proofing, follow the guidelines below.

- Focus on grammar, mechanics, and usage
- Use specific standard references for *all* corrections; do not guess at spelling, punctuation, grammar, or formatting
- Proof in short time segments; take frequent breaks
- Avoid distractions; for example, never proof while walking around
- Have someone else proof the paper, but take care to choose someone who is competent and will make corrections based only on standard references.

You are not finished with your writing project until you have coordinated the delivery of the document to make sure it gets to the right people, at the right location, at the right time. Always request that they acknowledge they have received the document and understood it. Finally, encourage readers—superiors, colleagues, and subordinates—to provide you with feedback, and learn from that feedback. Your writing is not a problem you must periodically fix; it is a process you must constantly improve.

Critical Thinking

What are some similarities and differences in preparing papers for your college studies and preparing Army documents?

CONCLUSION

In today's high-tech, globally oriented world, leaders must communicate effectively in writing. Electronic communications technology, from e-mail to instant messaging and other means, allows leaders to communicate with subordinates and others instantly, across great distances. These abilities are of little use, however, if the message is not clear.

Your writing must clarify rather than confuse; it must be concise rather than long-winded; it must state your main point—your bottom line—where the reader can quickly catch it. To do so, you must apply the Army's "corporate standard": writing that someone can understand in a single rapid reading and that is generally free of errors in grammar, mechanics, and usage.

Some messages are critical to immediate success and survival—such as the enemy's current location and strength—while others are routine. The Army's standard applies to all of them. Everything you will write as a leader will in some way affect your Soldiers' well-being, your unit's mission, and your career. Everything you write must be decisive. Everything you write must be clear.

Key Words

BLUF
active voice
passive voice
package

Learning Assessment

1. List the steps in the writing process.
2. List the principles for good Army writing.

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