

*Beneath the rule of men entirely great  
the pen is mightier than the sword.*

—Lord Lytton

# Research, Writing, and the Mind of the Strategist

By GREGORY D. FOSTER

Is the pen truly mightier than the sword, or are these timeless words mere hyperbole? The pen and the sword are literal instruments for dealing with the world around us. But they also are metaphors for shaping our actions by brain or brawn, wit or muscle.

Whether one chooses pen or sword may depend on whether one believes knowledge is power. That belief, in turn, may hinge on how knowledge is defined and power understood. Can the expression of ideas move others as swiftly, as effectively, as permanently as the use of force or the lure of riches? Does truth—or simply the command of ideas—provide leverage over others? Are ideas weapons? Conversely, can force inspire and persuade or only coerce?

If strategy is ultimately about effectively exercising power, the answers to these questions may convey a good deal about our faculty to think strategically; and that ability, especially among military officers, may reveal even more about the future of the U.S. military and America's place in the world. Based on recent events, there is ample ground to conclude that our ability simply to

cope with—much less shape—a future of pronounced complexity, uncertainty, and turbulence will depend in large measure on the prevalence of strategic thinkers in our midst.

Ideas and the ability to generate them seem increasingly likely, in fact, to be more important than weapons, economic potential, diplomatic acumen, or technological advantage in determining who exercises global leadership and enjoys superpower status. Thus it is imperative to develop, nurture, and engage strategic thinkers at all levels—critical, creative, broad-gauged visionaries with the intellect to

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dissect the status quo, grasp the big picture, discern important relationships among events, generate imaginative possibilities for action, and operate easily in the conceptual realm.

Almost by definition, strategic thinkers are broadly educated, not narrowly trained. They seek not simply direction but to grapple with the

underlying questions of whether, why, and what if.

A broad-based education expands—and fuels the self-guided growth of—one's horizons. It develops the intellect and inculcates the spirit of inquiry for a lifelong pursuit of learning. The measure of education, far from being the level or even the sum of formal schooling, rests more in the degree of open-mindedness and active mental engagement it engenders.

Any institution that relies on professionals for success and seeks to maintain an authentic learning climate for individual growth must require its members to *read* (to gain knowledge and insight), *discuss* (to appreciate opposing views and subject their own to rigorous debate), *investigate* (to learn how to ask good questions and find defensible answers), and *write* (to structure thoughts and articulate them clearly and coherently).

The only military enterprise actually designed with education in mind is the senior level of professional military education (PME). Since PME is primarily oriented to training, and since the pressure to dilute education with practical training is always present, there are several things worth noting about officers who attend war colleges. First, they are successful and able professionals by military standards. Their fifteen or more years of service have demonstrated that they are mission-oriented and get things done. Most arrive prepared to engage in discussion, even though they may find themselves immersed in a climate of candor largely alien to them. Many come prepared to read, something they may have regarded as a luxury in past assignments. Some arrive ready to write. But few are really equipped to do research, which they see as too academic. They have succeeded thus far without it and don't expect to do it in the future, especially as they attain higher rank. Finally, they see themselves as real-world decisionmakers who act, not scholars who ponder.

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What do these observations suggest about the military as an institution? On the one hand war college students, although a special and relatively small segment of the officer corps, are entirely representative of their profession. They have attitudes and beliefs that mirror prevailing military culture. They also form the pool from which tomorrow's generals and admirals will be selected. As such, their views will have a major impact on the dominant military ethos. What is important to them is what will be important to the military as an institution. What they think led to their success is what the institution will emphasize in preparing their successors.

War college students provide clear evidence that the military places little stock in serious, expository writing—much less in research. These officers are the cream of the crop. Some write well; most do not—although they think they do. Some show an affinity for research; most do not and generally see no reason they should. They are victims of a system that prizes decidedly non-objective advocacy, adheres to stultifyingly routine staff procedures, and relies on rigid protocols for transmitting the written word. Taken in combination and over time, such practices breed habits that are largely antithetical to sound research and good writing.

Even conceding such conditions, the question remains: Should the military be producing academic eggheads? Certainly not. But it should be producing strategic decisionmakers, planners, and advisers whose expertise is defined less by narrow knowledge and arcane technical and operational detail, less by dutiful obedience to authority, than by a sophisticated grasp of complex issues and a capacity to influence major events. That is where research and writing—and the requisite intellectual disposition and discipline to do them—come into play.

### Eyes and Ears of the Mind

What is research? The answer, less obvious than one might suppose, is critical to establishing the utility of the enterprise. Is research navigating through

dusty archives or looking for obscure texts? Is it conducting controlled experiments in a sterile laboratory? Is it meticulously observing and documenting human behavior? It could, of course, be any or all of these things; but it need not be—and in fact, in the sense intended here, it generally isn't.

In simple terms, research is substantial inquiry into a question, problem, or subject which requires the identification, collection, and objective treatment of evidence on all sides of an issue to reach a well-reasoned, defensible conclusion. Research is an exploration in critical thinking, not a polemical exercise; an investigation,

### the military largely discourages independent thought and critical inquiry

not a crusade; a quest for truth, not a vehicle for propaganda; evidence in search of an answer, not an answer in search of evidence.

What is the value of doing research? For one thing, it adds to our knowledge. At least that should be its intent. Only by looking beneath the surface can we escape the wages of ignorance. Ignorance is not bliss. It is the height of irresponsibility—a breeding ground for incomprehension, incompetence, and intolerance. What we don't know will hurt us; even worse, it can hurt others.

We are surrounded by a flood of information—more than ever before. But information is just an input to the thought processes that supposedly produce knowledge. More, or even better, information does not necessarily lead to more, or even any, knowledge. In fact, relative to the amount of information available, there now may be less knowledge. Is that possible? Could we literally know less than our forebears? The evidence must speak for itself. It certainly is true that the more we learn, the more we realize the extent of our ignorance. It also is true that for every question we answer, new ones arise that beg for yet more answers.

Just as we are inundated with information, so too are we deluged by opinion—on every conceivable topic.

Like information, opinions are not knowledge. Rather they validate the truism that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Opinions often derive from nothing more substantial than impression, assumption, or speculation—things qualitatively quite distinct from reasoned judgment born of concrete fact. Where there is a foundation of knowledge, it is typically only partial knowledge that obscures its own incompleteness and feeds the sort of false conviction that can so easily mutate into zealotry or bigotry.

It is knowledge—not preconception, predisposition, or conventional wisdom—that we ought to strive for.

That is what research helps us acquire. Moreover, doing research is a window to the process of reasoning. It is one thing to hold attitudes or beliefs. It is another to understand how we arrived at such imperfect conceptions of reality—whether by way of gut or brain. Experience arms us almost always with conviction, hardly ever with wisdom—yielding what is, to our minds, unassailable received truth. These convictions often blind us to real truth and, in the process, lead us to deny the validity and even the legitimacy of alternate points of view.

As an institution, the military largely discourages independent thought and critical inquiry. This is an unfortunate, self-defeating contradiction for a profession whose *raison d'être* is closely tied to outwitting adversaries and grappling with uncertainty. Undue emphasis on obedience and loyalty to the chain of command stifles dissent and erodes the spirit of inquiry so critical to institutional vitality. Pervasive doctrine, regulations, and operating procedures breed an orthodoxy that drives out any felt need for originality. Even the deeply ingrained sense of individual duty so central to the institutional ethos tends to be subverted into a mind-numbing workaholicism that leaves many dedicated military professionals drained of sufficient energy to systematically develop their powers of reflection and contemplation. Moreover, there are few rewards for such “unproductive” intellectual pursuits.

By the time officers reach senior rank, they have been thoroughly schooled in *what* to think, yet poorly prepared in *how* to think. And if they have spent the staff time expected of most officers by this stage in their career, they will have fully internalized distinctly anti-rational thought processes of successful bureaucratic and political advocacy.

Aside from yielding knowledge, research releases its practitioners from the grip of certitude that characterizes apparatchiks or true believers. Unlike the latter—who are content to let authority figures tell them what to think—those who follow the rigors of inquiry learn firsthand how elusive answers can be, how much effort goes into the search for them, and how dependent for success any such search is on the questions that precede it.

While research is basically about searching and re-searching for answers, it is the habit of inquiry growing out of such pursuits that is ultimately important—to strategic thinkers no less than to intelligence analysts, detectives, or other investigators. When we do research, we learn how to ask good questions, what constitutes good answers, and what it takes to find them. We discover where to look for evidence, how to weigh it, and how much credence to give its sources. We learn what is and isn't defensible. Most critically, we learn to identify shoddy or specious reasoning. In the final analysis, the ability to see through mental

smoke and beyond rhetorical mirrors is what distinguishes the exceptional decisionmaker or strategist.

As strange as it may seem, would-be generals or admirals are potentially more vulnerable to manipulation by alleged experts than neophyte political appointees—at least when it comes to major policy issues. Officers spend their pre-executive careers in a rigidly hierarchical system where they are expected to defer to authority and attend to all-consuming details that free their seniors to deal with weightier matters. This leaves little opportunity to look up from the weeds. By the time they are eligible for senior schooling, deference—to rank and expertise—is ingrained in their character. Moreover, they are likely to be narrowly focused specialists who, if they have literary interests beyond doctrinal manuals and military biographies, are more attracted to trade publications than to broad-gauged policy journals.

When these officers are then exposed to larger issues and the daunting volume of opinion on the market, their tendency is to defer to purported experts who have found their way into print. At that point, realizing there is little that hasn't already been said or thought on any subject, they confirm Abraham Lincoln's adage: "Books serve to show a man that those original thoughts of his aren't very new at all." Once past this initial stage of intellectual subjugation, though, these officers quickly discover how much more detritus there is than quality. They then will

have begun the transformation from unquestioning consumer to critical—perhaps even original—thinker.

### Tongue of the Mind

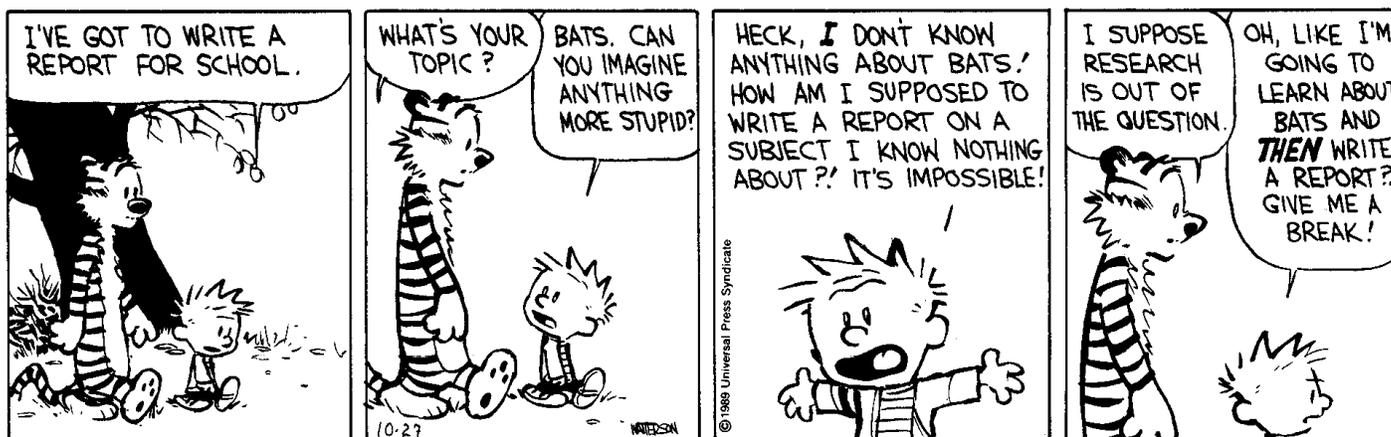
When Cervantes referred to the pen as "the tongue of the mind" he may well have meant to distinguish the mental relationship from the physical one that connects mouth to brain. After all, many people speak at great length without prior thought. The mouth doesn't require high-octane fuel; it can run on fumes. Writing is different. It can't be supplemented by vocal inflection, body language, or immediate clarification. It has to stand on its own. Thus Boswell characterized truly good writing as "disciplined talking."

However, only in an elementary sense is writing merely a tool for communicating. More importantly, it is a catalyst for ideas. Think of what happens when one writes—even if it is only a perfunctory memo. Is the pen simply a mechanical extension of the hand by which thoughts flow from head to paper? Or doesn't the act of writing stimulate the mental juices and give birth to new ideas? Doesn't the struggle to choose the right word or weave a seamless paragraph elicit notions that weren't there before? Doesn't this force us to be more exact?

Writing has two consequential purposes. First, it enhances our ability to think. In fact, it could be called a high-stress performance test for the mind. Second, it is a way to leave

## Calvin and Hobbes

by Bill Watterson



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something tangible to posterity. Few of us think about legacies. But when all is said and done, ideas, schools of thought, and worldviews are the lifeblood of institutions, regimes, and societies. This is a point that should not be lost on the military.

How does writing affect thinking? Studies indicate that writing activates a part of the brain that otherwise lies dormant. Only when hand and eye work in tandem to put words on paper do some thoughts buried in our subconscious come to life. And when we seek clarity, coherence, and a convincing counterpoise to anticipated criticisms, we exercise our minds more

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strenuously than if we engaged in more conversation or even debate.

Experienced bureaucrats might argue that one need only draft readable correspondence and generate cryptic point papers and vu-graphs to succeed. Serious writing is neither required nor appreciated. Bosses want completed actions that signify productivity—and that beget routinization and standardization—and decision-makers insist that whatever impinges on their schedules be short and sweet. Being busy, they prefer to be briefed rather than to read. These managerial

imperatives engender a minimalist approach to writing that sets its own diminished standard of literacy.

One might ask what effect the stunted forms of normal bureaucratic communication have on the thinking of decisionmakers and their staffs. Do strategic failures reflect a dearth of strategic thinking stemming from retarded thought processes? Might these processes, in turn, be developed more fully—tapping unused regions of the brain—by more attention to good writing?

Good writing and good thinking are not the same thing; but experience suggests that they are highly correlated. The mere effort of trying to write well almost assuredly improves thinking. By contrast, sloppy, convoluted, pedantic writing reveals thinking of comparable quality. Good writing requires practice and exposure to the good writing of others. While writing more doesn't guarantee writing well, it improves the odds. But if one works where mediocrity is the norm, it may be impossible to tell the difference. Exposure to truly good writing, then, is the only remedy.

There are no universal standards of good writing nor foolproof ways of learning it. Substantive writing that is riddled with technical flaws may be considered every bit as good or bad as technically flawless writing that is

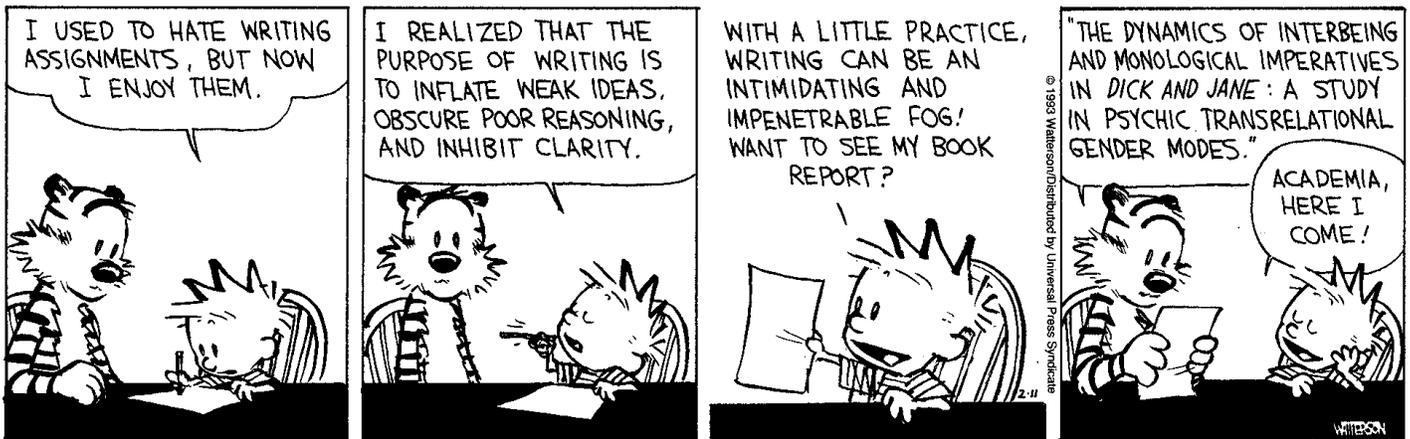
banal. As with all aesthetic forms, the final arbiter is the eye of the beholder. But what if readers, immersed in bureaucratic discourse, are unable to distinguish the good from the bad?

Most military writing tends to be descriptive and reportorial. This is comforting to a culture that values the factual over the hypothetical, the literal over the figurative, the authoritative over the speculative. But descriptive writing, far from being mind-expanding, can be mind-numbing. It requires little thought beyond the linear, one-dimensional variety—only awareness and accuracy.

Good writing thrives on conceptualization born of originality. Thinking for oneself requires the higher order intellectual skills of *analysis* (dissecting and illuminating concepts), *synthesis* (combining concepts and generating new ones), and *evaluation* (establishing criteria and making judgments). Whereas employing these higher order skills focuses on matters of substance, another feature of good writing—logical organization—concerns the structure and coherence of an argument. It exposes the anatomy of one's thinking by asking: Is there a logical flow of ideas from an introduction, which states an author's hypothesis, to the main body of the composition, where he develops a central thought and presents evidence, to a conclusion, where he brings his formulation to closure? If there is no such

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flow, if the elements of the argument and their linkages are not clear, if readers are left confused, the author has failed. A meandering argument reflects haphazard thinking, while merely stringing together the words of others betrays a lazy mind.

Style is the most telling indicator of quality writing. It gives writing the power to inspire. To the denizens of any bureaucracy—including military professionals—style is basically anti-style: the turgid, stilted bureaucratese that over time has infiltrated their minds, subverted their language, and become their *lingua franca*. As anyone exposed to it for a nanosecond knows, bureaucratese is a bastard tongue distinguished by its reliance on passive voice (the time-honored way of obscuring accountability), its often-inscrutable circumlocutions to accommodate the rules of formal English, and its blatant glorification of jargon.

Jargon has no purpose other than to enable insiders to converse among themselves while excluding the uninitiated. It reaches its zenith in the unbridged correspondence and memoranda that are bureaucracy's lifeblood. Even material written for public consumption, which is subject to radical editorial surgery before release, can provide a telling glimpse into just how deep-seated the predisposition to "linguaginal mayhem" truly is.

The antithesis of—and antidote to—jargonizing is, simply, plain English. Writing clearly is the first rule of style. The key to writing plain English, say its proponents, is to "write the way you talk." This is indeed sound advice for those with a firm command of the English language. But since many of us—senior officials included—don't always speak distinctly or cogently, more appropriate advice would be to write as we *ought* to talk.

Writing with clarity establishes only a floor of stylistic acceptability or competence. True stylistic elegance comes from the more sophisticated use of such techniques as allusion, irony, and the nonliteral figures of speech that literary types call "tropes": metaphor, simile, hyperbole, and the like. Such devices enrich language and offer authors higher levels of both conceptualization and precision—if only to

ensure the appropriateness and credibility of their imagery.

Felicitous style can lift the mind to impressive heights. Quite the opposite might be said of the most elemental feature of good writing—grammatical and mechanical soundness—where the emphasis is on strict adherence to recognized standards of correct language usage. For many, such considerations are too mechanistic and inconsequential to warrant serious attention. Yet it would be a mistake to conclude that

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seemingly rote compliance with rules of word form and placement, punctuation, and spelling is somehow unrelated to the quality of one's thinking.

There is much to be said for flouting linguistic conventions whose only justification seems to be that they derive from grammarians of yore. But it is an altogether different matter to assault literacy through unclear, imprecise, inconsistent, even illogical thought: subject-verb disagreement, dangling modifiers, mixed construction, vague pronouns, or sentence fragments. By the same token, technical correctness alone cannot compensate for or disguise the link between monotonous prose and monotone thinking—as when someone invariably uses declarative sentences punctuated only by commas and periods.

The elements of good writing—higher order intellectual skills, logical organization, stylistic elegance, and grammatical and mechanical soundness—bear a demonstrable relation to the powers of the mind. And these powers, more than arms, wealth, technology, or diplomatic and political maneuvering, will determine how well we steer our way into the future.

### Warriors as Intellectuals

To be effective in the strategic realm, the military must produce its own strategic thinkers. This demands

an institutional commitment to education that includes serious and sustained attention to writing and research. The task is to convince the military that such a commitment, long absent, is in its best interest.

It is ironic and disappointing that virtually all the reputed "experts" on strategic and military affairs familiar to the public are civilian academicians, consultants, and journalists. Where are the great military minds of our day? Are there any? Or are they too busy to care? Is that why we must suffer experience-impaired analysts pontificating on strategy after advancing straight from graduate school to think tanks, or journalists-cum-seers expounding on the future of warfare? Is that why disparaging references to the so-called "military mind" endure?

These are questions we should ask. The military, as the most action-oriented institution in a mind-numbingly action-oriented society, tends to eschew intellectual pursuits. Like others who subscribe to the work ethic, military professionals work extremely hard and feel good about having exerted all that effort in the service of the Nation. But the work many of us do is far more consumptive than productive; it burns calories and consumes time but leaves little more in its wake than new work for others.

Actions are fleeting, but ideas endure—primarily through the written word. If men like Clausewitz, Mahan, and Liddell Hart are icons of strategic thought, it is because their ideas and the wisdom contained in them have been transmitted through their writings. Armed only with the pen, they left indelible marks that extended their influence beyond that of their sword-wielding brothers in arms. There is no reason we should not be capable of developing future generations of strategists of the same caliber who can leave an equally rich legacy. **JFQ**