



...And Its 1, 2, 3, What Are We Writing For?

by
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With apologies to Country Joe and The Fish, I'm hopeful the next line is *not* "I don't know, I don't have the knowledge/I'm a student at the Air War College." If you are at a loss as to why the Air Force is interested in having Airmen write, let me give you my take: it's because Airmen often have important things to say on issues regarding national security. Air University, for example, has put its money where its mouth is by blocking off a significant portion of several professional military education curriculums in order to provide an opportunity for students to write, with a corresponding expectation for the faculty to write as well.

A writing requirement in PME programs goes back to the purpose of the Air University, which among other things, is to serve as the Air Force's intellectual and leadership center. Can you think of a great intellectual who wasn't a renowned writer? Certainly there are some, but many brilliant minds (consider Shakespeare, Clausewitz, and Woody Allen) have all been closely associated with the written word. Is your mind brilliant? Even if it isn't, do you have something to say that would benefit the Air Force or the Department of Defense, or might shape the national security debate?

Writing is about communicating, which itself is about developing ideas, refining and organizing them, and describing them in a way that connects with an audience. The part of communicating many Airmen have developed into high art is that of the military briefing. While this certainly has its place, it isn't everything and in-depth professional writing can provide a way to deeply explore a topic that moves beyond a first-order level of knowledge and more greatly stimulates thoughts and insights.

However, professional writing too has its limitations--not everyone has the time or inclination to write or read *Challenging Nuclear Abolition*, even if they should. This opens the door for all sorts of Air Force writing, ranging from articles appearing in professional and academic journals, to this type of nearly-an-op-ed, to even (gasp!) blogging and Twitter. Yes, I left out YouTube for a reason: while it is communicating, it isn't writing.

Consider how things worked for the just-released Quadrennial Defense Review. Yes, the QDR is a written document, but it's really a part of a larger effort to communicate, both with Congress and with the American people. While many of the issues in the QDR had previously been written about by Secretary Gates, the QDR's roll-out itself included a cover-the-waterfront effort of briefings, testimony, interviews, press releases, and (yes), the document itself. The intent of

the QDR wasn't to write it just as an exercise unto itself, but rather was a part of a much larger effort to communicate the goals, challenges, and way-ahead for the Department of Defense.

So how does one become a great writer? Although much has been written about writing, if I had an iron-clad method, I'd protect that as proprietary knowledge. However, since I don't, I'll offer three suggestions. First, having something to say, something you think is *really* important, is an essential part of writing. Otherwise, it's unlikely you'll make the intellectual investment needed (unless you're a student and you have to). As such, having a particular passion about something is just about essential.

Next, practice makes perfect, and writing is a skill which needs to be cultivated just like playing an instrument or video game. Notably, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, the most important rock album of all time, was the Beatles eighth studio release and not their first.

Along this line, very few of us would be comfortable making a speech without taking the time to do the requisite necessary work of researching a topic, creating an outline or script, and practicing. Similarly, writing requires taking an idea, pondering and researching it, and organizing (and polishing) those thoughts. What about the infamous all-nighter pulled to meet a deadline? Well, I've heard of very few successful marathoners who trained for the big race by doing nothing but a 25-mile run the night before the event.

Finally, once something has been created, feedback is important. This is why the students at the Air War College, for example, are extensively mentored (whether they like it or not) as they move through their most important writing project. Often, the beauty of your writing will be in the eye of the beholder, so remaining encouraged is important. Using a personal example, one article I wrote using a "peer review" type process provided highly mixed results. On a hundred point scale, I had one fifty and two high nineties. I like to think Simon was one of those judges grading in the 90's.

The Air Force still *tends* to operate in a command and control mode even as the world has moved well into the information age. Still, it's important to remain positive about communicating items of importance regarding national security and join in with the student-Airmen who are putting their ideas to paper. The Air Force needs Airmen to write because intellectual disengagement is simply not an option.

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