

# War on (Buzz) Words

operationalize

leverage

strategic concept

prioritize

fiscally informed

By Kate Bateman

**Bad writing isn't just poor form, it's a national security issue.**

Consider the following passages. The first is an adaptation, in modern Pentagonese, of the second:

The smaller and more agile forces collected here represent a select and elite band of highly motivated warfighters. In the event of adverse battlefield consequences, senior leadership will ensure that participants are suitably recognized in their next quarterly evaluation. Regardless of the maladaptations of combatants, the current operational environment will leverage their inherent capabilities and capacities and enhance total-force interoperability. Non-participants will regret that they did not have an integrated vision of our potential for full-spectrum dominance.

Which is to say,

[KING HENRY V]

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;  
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me  
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,  
This day shall gentle his condition;  
And gentlemen in England now-a-bed  
Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here,  
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks  
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.<sup>1</sup>

No one expects the U.S. Department of Defense and the services to write like Shakespeare. But the disparity between these examples isn't just amusing, it's harmful to our security and unfair to the American taxpayer.

Bad writing in the Defense Department undermines U.S. national security. Alive and well in the corridors of the Pentagon and throughout the services, the misuse and abuse of language obscures major defense issues, alienates non-defense experts, and suffocates ideas. Put simply, bad writing wastes time and money. The United States can ill afford such waste in peacetime, much less in war.



## Language Costs

Compared to troop retention problems or IEDs, poor writing may seem a distressingly petty complaint. When we consider how far-reaching its effects are, however, bad writing becomes anything but petty. While serving as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1984, General John W. Vessey Jr. put it bluntly, "From my own experience, I can tell you, more has been screwed up on the battlefield and misunderstood in the Pentagon because of a lack of understanding of the English language than any other single factor."<sup>2</sup>

Or as Mortimer D. Goldstein, who had a 25-year career in the State Department, responded to Vessey's words, "I suspect that the problem . . . is not so much a lack of understanding of English as the failure to write it so that it can be understood."<sup>3</sup> From 1985 to 1986, Goldstein published a series of 20 articles titled, "Disciplined Writing and Career Development" in *State Magazine*.<sup>4</sup> I would bet there is no better guide to, as Goldstein called it, "writing style and technique as they affect the practical task of communication."

How does bad writing hurt U.S. national security? Why is it worth getting worked up over wordiness, passive voice, and overused jargon?

Let's start with an example of Defense Department writing. This is the official definition of "Strategic Communication" as published in the *Quadrennial Defense Review Execution Roadmap*:

The ability to focus USG processes and efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or

tion of a noun, the above is not a complete sentence, but an exceedingly long noun phrase. It contains seven verbs (focus, understand, engage, create, strengthen, preserve, advance) and two adjectives derived from verbs (coordinated and synchronized). More than a few of these words are favorites in the Pentagon, surely familiar to a DOD audience. Even so, most readers probably need three reads to begin to understand what "Strategic Communication" means. Most are probably left wondering which verbs take priority. Shall we go forth to focus, to engage, to strengthen, or to synchronize? How do "processes" differ from "efforts"? And why specify "conditions favorable to advance national interests and objectives"? Is there any time when the United States does not seek such conditions?

The definition is a victim of its authors' collective thoroughness, a common pitfall in any large bureaucracy. In their attempt to include every angle and every aspect, to describe each possibly related component, to leave no stone unturned, the authors garbled the real meaning almost beyond recognition.

## More Than Just 1984

In 1946, George Orwell wrote a seminal essay, "Politics and the English Language." This diatribe against sloppy prose is, for the most part, as relevant in 2008 as it was when he wrote it. Orwell leads with this critical, damning insight:

[The English language] becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts . . . Modern English . . . is full of bad habits which spread by imitation . . . If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think more clearly is a necessary first step toward political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers.<sup>5</sup>

In terms of national security, the language we use to convey our ideas, plans, and policies influences whether we choose the right policies, and whether they are carried out effectively. The potential snafu runs in two directions. On one hand, lazy or hasty thinking can lead to flawed logic, which tends to produce miserable writing. Busy decision makers end up with a document that fails to lay out any but the most obvious options, and perhaps poorly defines even those. (Caveat: One can imagine a piece of writing that disguises messy thinking through attractive style. In that case, the onus is on the reader to see through the facade.)

## Lost in Translation

It can be the other way around, too. Poor craftsmanship in writing can obscure good ideas. That is, a sound idea can be scuttled by the failure to properly communicate it. The people who make policy, those who implement it, or both might misinterpret the idea.

Second, bad writing handicaps DOD and the services in their communication with important external audiences



THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

**THE WORD AS ART** In communicating the needs and subtleties of military matters, one doesn't need the command of the language as William Shakespeare did in *Henry V*. But concision, clarity, and a willingness to use plain language should be its hallmarks. The painting by Robert Alexander Hillingford depicts Henry's return to England after Agincourt.

preserve conditions favorable to advance national interests and objectives through the use of coordinated information, themes, plans, programs, and actions synchronized with other elements of national power.

To be clear, my aim is not to skewer the idea, but to challenge how it is expressed. First, note that as a defini-

like Congress, other federal agencies, and the general public. Jargon is especially problematic. Overly formal, technical language alienates the audience whose support the Defense Department seeks.

Third, good writing makes large organizations, particularly those with widely dispersed staffs, more efficient.<sup>6</sup> Good writing communicates more with fewer words, economizing time and resources. For organizations that deal with abstract ideas—such as deterrence, strategic dominance, and stability—the written word must be all the more precise, and wherever possible, lend some concreteness to the abstraction. Otherwise, too many people will have too many different notions of what “stability” means.

Moreover, DOD and the services deal with the gravest matter of public interest—our security, and indeed the security of the world. Therefore they have a duty to explain themselves clearly. Their language must be accessible. Their choice of words directly affects how well the public understands what our nation is fighting for and against, and to some degree how long the public will support that fight.

Last, poor writing costs a lot of time and money. In a world of information overload, where people look for what not to read as much as for what to read, you can almost smell the longing for quick comprehension. (This partially explains the perversion that is PowerPoint, but that is another issue.) Good writing requires concision, clarity, and a willingness to employ plain language: “use” not “leverage”; “resources” not “capabilities and capacities”; and “put into action” not “operationalize.” Every extra minute that a junior officer in the field, a congressional staffer, or a Foreign Service officer spends trying to understand a poorly written document is a minute squandered. Every unjustified program pursued or perpetuated because of a tolerance for bad writing—which may disguise bad ideas—is defense money frittered away.

## The Golden Six

Our next task is to locate the writing problems that stand out as the worst offenders. Goldstein is our starting point.

In his series, Goldstein laid out six foundational principles for good practical writing: “(1) write person-to-person; (2) choose plain, familiar words; (3) rely on the concise, one-idea sentence; (4) waste no words and keep your writing

lean; (5) connect your ideas with unmistakable links; and (6) strive to give your writing a feeling of fluid motion.”

These guidelines are overarching in the best sense of the word; one could probably fit all other common writing advice under them. For instance, we are told to use, whenever possible, words instead of obscure acronyms—that’s (1) and (2). Avoid wordiness—(2), (3) and (4). Let verbs be the engine of your language—(6).

Just as Goldstein’s guidelines are all-encompassing, so is there a single bad habit that violates every one of the guidelines. It’s the profligate use of jargon. “Buzzwords,” a subset of jargon, are best-selling items in the jargon market.

Before we venture on, an important caveat is in order. Every specialized profession inevitably has its own vernacular. (And to be sure, other professional fields, including

other government entities, aren’t immune from bad writing.) Any group of human beings who share a unique experience employ words that have singular meaning for that group. Cardiologists discuss TEEs—transesophageal echocardiograms; dairy farmers refer to blend prices and milkstone; legislative staff talk about cloture and filibusters. Defense experts and service members learn and use the field’s necessarily specialized vocabulary.

However, there is a point of diminishing returns, and the location of that point changes according to the audience.

As the writing gets more specialized, fewer people will understand it. Conversely, the more plain and comprehensible the writing, the more the author sacrifices in complexity, nuance, and technicality. Different audiences thus demand different balancing acts. The best writing retains nuance without resorting to 12-syllable words known only to the indoctrinated few.

The added problem for the defense community is that an audience of generalists might be fellow public servants who aren’t fluent in Pentagon-speak.<sup>7</sup> Yet their decisions may have crucial implications for the services and DOD (and vice-versa).

## ‘Oh! The Humanity . . .’

The biggest drawback of jargon is its lack of humanity, which brings us back to principle “(1) write person-to-person.” When we lose the sense of a human being communicating with us, it becomes harder to pay attention.<sup>8</sup> Our eyes glaze over. Eventually, when we need to



**FROM HIS EXPERIENCE** Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Army General John W. Vessey Jr. declared that more than any other factor, lack of understanding the English language “screwed up” more on the battlefield and created the most misunderstanding in the Pentagon.

regurgitate an idea full of jargon, we may brief the boss without knowing exactly what we're talking about.

Orwell wrote that “modern writing at its worst . . . consists in gumming together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else.” To the guilty reader, he admonishes, “ready-made phrases . . . will construct your sentences for you—even think your thoughts for you, to a certain extent.”<sup>9</sup> This is another danger of jargon-laden gobbledegook. Whole sentences, paragraphs, and even papers, consist of strings of phrases such as “fiscally informed strategic concept,” “operationalizes institutional reform,” “leverage interdependencies,” and “create the effects necessary to achieve mission objectives.”<sup>10</sup> (Why not, “achieve mission objectives”?) The result reads more like an instruction manual in a vaguely familiar but foreign language. The reader thinks, “I should be able to get what the hell this stuff means,” and fumbles along while cross-referencing definitions in joint doctrine.

The Strategic Communication definition above is also a good example of what the abuse of jargon leads to: wordiness. As higher-ups tolerate and even condone jargon, it becomes more popular. Writers then have an incentive to use as many buzzwords as possible. This conflicts with the military ideal of concision, directness, and brevity. In certain quarters, the defense community is admirably succinct. Yet in others, the desire to be thorough results in lengthy, ensnaring webs. Moreover, a longer piece is less likely to be read.

There is a more serious problem with the abuse of buzzwords. Since jargon describes abstract concepts more often than concrete things, jargon can be used as a tool to disguise meaning. For the audience, this is supremely frustrating. For the writer (or speaker), it's an effective strategy for risk aversion. The less meaning that your language contains, the less right and less wrong it can be.

Last but not least, jargon's most incriminating offense: it masquerades as truth. Impenetrable, jargon-heavy prose tends to be viral, as it is sanctioned by higher-ups and then more widely adopted. As writers attempt to squeeze in—or should I say, integrate—as many of the latest buzzwords as possible, the words themselves become a false measure of legitimacy and credibility. We stop questioning the words, and let them do the thinking. That is the audacity of jargon.

## Fix DOD Speak—Now

What should be done about too much jargon, its byproducts (wordiness, abstraction), and other common writing problems? For starters, below are a few principles that echo Goldstein's golden rules, but speak more specifically to DOD and the services:

- Do not convert a noun to a verb.
- Do not convert a verb to a noun.
- Aim for sentences of less than 20 words.
- A paragraph is not a PowerPoint slide with extra words.
- Favor the concrete over the abstract.
- Consider your audience: generalist or specialist?
- Aim for no more than one buzzword in a sentence, and no more than two in a paragraph.
- Less is more.

Ultimately, both top-down and bottom-up approaches are needed to change the writing culture at DOD. Senior and junior officers, managers and subordinates, should reward and insist on plain language. They should discard buzzwords when they become stand-ins for legitimacy. Slowly, individual efforts would chip away at the patronage system that enables Pentagonese. The result may not be Shakespearean, but it would be more human, more accessible, and better for U.S. national security. ❄



**NOT THE EXCLUSIVE CONCERN** George Orwell wrote in 1946 that professional writers did not own the franchise in the fight against bad English.

1. William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, 1598.
2. Richard Halloran, “A Commanding Voice for the Military,” *The New York Times*, 15 July 1984, p. A18.
3. Mortimer D. Goldstein, “The skilled writer is needed more now than ever before,” *State Magazine*, March 1985, p. 29. *State Magazine* is the professional magazine of the U.S. Department of State.
4. Goldstein, “Disciplined Writing and Career Development,” *State Magazine*, March 1985–December 1986.
5. George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” *Horizon*, April 1946.
6. Goldstein, “The skilled writer . . .” April 1985, p. 28.
7. This point brings me to a second caveat. Many defense and military professionals are doubtless more qualified to skewer bad DOD writing than I. My critique comes from experiences on both the generalist and specialist sides: working as a veterans affairs legislative aide on Capitol Hill; studying military affairs at Johns Hopkins and the National Defense University; working on a joint DOD-State sponsored counter-insurgency study; doing a summer stint in the Office of Force Transformation and Resources at the Pentagon; and being married to an Army officer. I'm writing primarily not as a defense expert, but as a consumer of DOD materials who often has been dismayed by their inaccessibility.
8. Note the root of “communicate”: to commune, to feel at one with.
9. Orwell, “Politics and the English Language.”
10. “Guidance for the Development of the Force (GDF) Overview Briefing: JROC Hub Trip” [PowerPoint presentation], slides 3 and 4; and from definition for “Force Application” in “Top Level JCAs [Joint Capability Areas] and Definitions,” PowerPoint slide, August 2007.

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