

During the second and third years of the company's military history reading program, the books to be read and studied include those on military philosophy, small unit actions, training, and logistics, and also an autobiography (see chart).

Again, each lieutenant will study these books, prepare a synopsis of an assigned chapter or incident, and relate it to contemporary aspects of military leadership and tactics.

The members of Company B realize,

of course, that they may not always be able to keep strictly to the program's schedule of reading and writing projects. Nevertheless, the initial successes indicate that the communications skills of the company's lieutenants have already significantly improved and that these officers now have a much greater appreciation for the lessons of military history and for their unit's heritage.

The importance of the diligent and thorough study of military history in

making our Army one of excellence cannot be overemphasized. We can, and must, learn from the experiences of our forebears in the profession of arms.



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Buzzword Cowards

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Too many otherwise brave infantrymen become cowards when faced with a certain recurring duty requirement. It doesn't help to realize that this same kind of cowardice prevails throughout much of the rest of the Army. This cowardice is displayed almost every time a leader sits down to write the narrative section of an officer or an enlisted evaluation report (OER, EER)—and hides behind buzzwords.

In theory, OERs and EERs are a key factor in the promotion and assignment of soldiers, because they allow a comparison of strengths and weaknesses. But this strange quirk of cowardice has kept the theory from becoming fact. Because ratings on the numerical scales of OERs and EERs have always been inflated, the narrative section of the report is the only place a user of the report has any hope of "seeing the individual" (and thus of making accurate comparisons). But too many evaluators refuse to narrate the simple truths the users need.

Why? Their reasons are hard to pin down, but judging by their submissions, these people seem to be highly uncomfortable with "writing" and afraid that commonly used, everyday words—"you and me language"—will be regarded as inadequate and below standard.

In short, too many soldiers (even some with college degrees) fear that their writing will somehow reveal them as uneducated or unsophisticated. Because of this fear, they try to give their writing more "pizzazz" by borrowing strange words and unfamiliar phrases, the kind of wording supposedly considered impressive. This "borrowing" not only cheats the government of the intent of the report—an accurate, detailed assessment of the soldier being evaluated—but sometimes it backfires on the writer and makes him look like a dunce.

EXAMPLES

One writer, for example, was obviously unfamiliar with the meaning of the word "potential" when he wrote, "SFC Walkonwater has far surpassed his highest potential."

The writer of this next sentence, from another report, apparently borrowed more than a single word:

SFC Carefree's basically questioning nature regulates his adaptability to somewhere on the borderline of excellence; however, his outstanding attitude and initiative traits, combined with his graded sense of responsibility and

performance, cause him to be a reliable asset to this section or an attribute to the Army.

Confess! You recognize these borrowed words, don't you? You've probably latched onto some of them yourself: *adaptability, outstanding attitude, sense of responsibility, reliable asset, attribute to the Army.*

It's not that these words are bad in themselves. When used to introduce something specific, any of them will work fine. But when such words are tied together as a group, introducing nothing, as in this example, they lead nowhere.

What is making these empty word structures more destructive than ever is that they are becoming more prevalent. Today, in fact, they are being actively pushed by the ignorant as the correct approach to writing narratives. As a result, the use of copycat phrases has become a fad. At various posts, multi-page lists of phrases and buzzwords are openly exchanged by soldiers. Apparently just two criteria are used for composing such a list: The wording must sound pretentious, and it must be so nonspecific that it can be applied to just about any soldier doing just about any job.

Here are some examples of suggested phrases culled from a list entitled

“EER/OER Awards Assistance Packet”:

Meticulous attention to detail
Effectively planned and supervised
Became infused in
Was outstandingly successful
Was particularly noteworthy
Acted as a pillar of strength

The 136 exotic offerings listed in the same document include the following words—complete with misspellings:

exultant *fabolous*
facile *inexhaustable*
infectious *infalliable*
sedulous *partinacious*

The soldier who makes use of such a list has become a buzzword coward—afraid to use his own mind to relate the facts as only he knows them.

NO PROOF

Another reason often given for resorting to copycat words is that this is the kind of writing higher commanders want. Yet the people who say this cannot prove their answer by any regulation or directive.

The truth is that our top leaders have always advocated the use of short, familiar words; concrete, specific descriptions; and logical, easily understood sentences.

Want proof? Below is an actual narrative paragraph from an EER written by a brigadier general who, at the time of writing, was serving in the Chief of Staff's office at the Pentagon. (Let's face it, you can't get much higher than that.)

SGM Whosis is exceptionally outstanding. He would be highly effective as a Command Sergeant Major in a major command. As an action officer working in the Office, Chief of Staff, Headquarters, Department of the Army, he performs the same duties as specially selected majors and lieutenant colonels and matches them in performance. He is unique in his ability to determine causes for undesirable conditions he observes on field visits. SGM Whosis is an accomplished speaker; he writes extremely well.

Notice that the general concentrates specifically on *what* the soldier did during the rating period, and on *how well* he did it. The wording is easy to understand, and it brings pictures to the mind.

If you hide behind buzzwords and would like to change, try being yourself and using your own words. Before you reject the thought of using normal language, remember that for many years your language has been serving you well as a professional soldier. Probably, you have been praised for classes you taught, and you have had no problem critiquing soldiers and describing their performance or praising a soldier face-to-face for a job well done. Why then do you need someone else's words to handle such tasks on paper? The secret is to write about a soldier's good points and bad points the same way you would talk with your commander about those good points and bad points. It's that simple.

Of course, structuring your thoughts to put them on paper does cause some minor differences. For one thing, because you are limited by the space on the form, you have to choose your points carefully. For another, when speaking to your commander, you would probably let jargon slip into the conversation (terms that might not be understood outside your type of unit). But there's no real problem with that. After writing your narrative the first time, you can go back over it, pull out the jargon, and replace it with words that say the same thing in a way that is more understandable to outsiders.

While going over your narrative, check out a few other things. Unless you have a good reason to do otherwise, use the active voice—make each of your sentences first mention the soldier before saying something about what he does or how well he does it. (The sentences in the general's narrative are fine examples.)

SUGGESTIONS

And here are a few other suggestions that can help you do the job right:

- Make the opening sentence say something important about the soldier's overall performance during the rating period. Have this topic sentence signal your proposed direction to the reader. Make it general enough to act as a "fence" to tie together the specific facts that follow. (You saw how the general laid out the facts in the report he wrote;

lay yours out in the same way.)

- Try to use short, easy-to-understand words that will help the reader picture the situation.

- Get *details* into your narrative. Show the soldier's value in concrete terms, or else describe his actions. A good technique is to present shortcomings by offsetting them with accomplishments. For example, "As a new sergeant, he has often failed to pass on instructions to his team members. He does, however, make an extra effort to see that his mission is always accomplished."

- Another good technique is to follow a general statement with a closely related specific item: "during this rating period, he has greatly improved his professional knowledge. For example, he recently learned, on his own, how to field strip the Soviet PPS-43 Sudarev submachine-gun."

- If a soldier's performance has changed since the last report, say so: "His performance is improving." or "He has shown no improvement since the last rated period."

- The best sentence to close with is one that leaves no doubt as to your judgment of the soldier's performance during the rated period: "Despite the weak area noted, Sergeant Mann's desire to do well stands out above everything else." or "In short, during this rating period, Sergeant Mann performed all assigned tasks in a professional manner." or "Sergeant Mann has made every effort to become the best soldier in his division."

Above all else, the important thing to remember is to be sincere. State the facts accurately as you know them; don't resort to copycat phrasing; don't hide behind buzzwords.

Traditionally, the infantry has led the way across treacherous battlefields. Now a peacetime battle is shaping up, the battle to rescue the floundering evaluation system.

You can help win that battle by making sure you yourself handle the job right.

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