Research Product 2020-04

Digital Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) Writing Guide

April D. Sanders
U.S. Army Research Institute

Kara L. Orvis
Jessica Shenberger-Trujillo
Kristy M. Kay
Ben Nargi
Aptima, Inc.

Liston Bailey
U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command

March 2020

Fort Hood Research Unit

**United States Army Research Institute
for the Behavioral and Social Sciences**

**U.S. Army Research Institute
for the Behavioral and Social Sciences**

**Department of the Army
Deputy Chief of Staff, G1**

Authorized and approved for distribution:

**MICHELLE R. ZBYLUT, Ph.D.
Director**

Research accomplished under contract
for the Department of the Army

Aptima, Inc.

Technical review by

Dr. William A. Scroggins, U.S. Army Research Institute
Dr. Alisha Ness, U.S. Army Research Institute

NOTICES

DISTRIBUTION: This Research Product has been submitted to the Defense
Information Technical Center (DTIC). Address correspondence concerning ARI reports
to: U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, Attn: DAPE-
ARI-ZXM, 6000 6th Street Building 1464/Mail Stop: 5610, Fort Belvoir, VA 22060-5610.

FINAL DISPOSITION: Destroy this Research Product when it is no longer needed. Do
not return it to the U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences.

NOTE: The findings in this Research Product are not to be construed as an official
Department of the Army position, unless so designated by other authorized documents

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

1. REPORT DATE (dd-mm-yy)	2. REPORT TYPE Final	3. DATES COVERED (from. . . to) 13 October 2018 – 10 August 2019	
4. Title: Digital Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) Writing Guide		5a. CONTRACT OR GRANT NUMBER GS00Q14OADU209	
		5b. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER 622785	
6. AUTHOR(S) April D. Sanders, Kara L. Orvis, Jessica Shenberger-Trujillo, Kristy M. Kay, Ben Nargi, and Liston Bailey		5c. PROJECT NUMBER A790	
		5d. TASK NUMBER 331	
		5e. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS Aptima, Inc. 12 Gill St. Suite 1400 Woburn, MA 01801 U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command 661 Sheppard Place Fort Eustis, VA U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences 6000 6th Street, Building 1464/Mail Stop 5610 Fort Belvoir, VA 22060		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences 6000 6th Street, Building 1464/Mail Stop: 5610 Fort Belvoir, Virginia 22060		10. MONITOR ACRONYM ARI	
		11. MONITOR REPORT NUMBER Research Product 2020-04	

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT:

Approved for public release: distribution unlimited.

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES:
ARI Research POC and Subject Matter Expert: April D. Sanders, Ph.D., Fort Hood Research Unit

14. ABSTRACT *(Maximum 200 words)*: Written communication skills are essential for Army readiness and are a core component of junior and mid-level noncommissioned officers' (NCO) job duties (Bradshaw, 2017; Department of the Army, 2020). The *Digital NCO Writing Guide* is an online training tool designed to support NCOs as they develop skills and acquire knowledge associated with the writing process, Army writing style, and preparing specific Army documents. Features of the Digital NCO Writing Guide include a writing checklist, writing tips, and examples of effective and ineffective Army documents. This research product provides a description of the *Digital NCO Writing Guide*, its features, benefits, recommendations on use, suggested enhancements, and future areas of research. Based on Soldier input, we recommended tool enhancements (e.g., additional example Army documents, links to Army doctrine, fillable forms, and an option for reviewer feedback) to improve usability and effectiveness. Future research recommendations include summative evaluations to determine skills transfer during assigned writing tasks. We provide details on the design and development of the *Digital NCO Writing Guide* in Sanders et al. (2020b).

15. SUBJECT TERMS: writing skills, communication, NCO skills, Army writing, online resources, documentation

SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF			19. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	20. NUMBER	21. RESPONSIBLE PERSON
16. REPORT Unclassified	17. ABSTRACT Unclassified	18. THIS PAGE Unclassified	Unlimited	17	Brian T. Crabb 254-288-3833

i

Digital Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) Writing Guide

April D. Sanders
U.S. Army Research Institute

Kara L. Orvis
Jessica Shenberger-Trujillo
Kristy Kay
Ben Nargi
Aptima, Inc.

Liston Bailey
U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command

Fort Hood Research Unit
Brian Crabb, Chief

March 2020

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

DIGITAL NONCOMMISSIONED OFFICER (NCO) WRITING GUIDE

CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF FIGURES

Digital Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) Writing Guide

Written communication skills are essential for Army readiness and are a core component of junior and mid-level noncommissioned officers' (NCOs) weekly responsibilities (Bradshaw, 2017; Department of the Army, 2020). A significant number of NCOs have difficulty with written communication tasks, especially when first entering leadership positions at the squad and platoon levels (Sanders et al., 2020a). Although NCOs receive instruction on writing Army documents in Army style during their professional military education (PME; e.g., Basic Leadership Course (BLC), Advanced Leader Course (ALC), etc.), there are few opportunities to improve their written communication skills or receive constructive feedback and guidance on them when they return to operational units. When Soldiers develop written communication skills it is typically a result of on-the-job training, the primary tool through which Soldiers have learned to complete formal Army documents in operational units (Sanders et al., 2020a). While some NCOs report that writing mentors spent a great deal of time revising documents and providing hands-on learning experiences, the majority report receiving little instruction or helpful feedback. For that reason, we designed and developed the *Digital NCO Writing Guide* to provide NCOs in operational units a consistent and accessible Army-specific writing resource. The tool assists the development of Soldiers' current written communication skills while meeting the writing demands of their duty position. The remainder of this paper describes the *Digital NCO Writing Guide*, its features, benefits, recommendations on use, proposed enhancements, and suggested focus of future research.

Digital NCO Writing Guide Overview

The *Digital NCO Writing Guide* is an online training tool designed to assist NCOs in writing Army-specific documents. The aim of the tool is to provide NCOs a way to improve their written communication skills while completing their day-to-day writing tasks. The tool can serve as a self-development tool for individual users or as a training aid for those assisting junior NCOs. It provides guidance and writing support, while requiring active engagement from the user in order to maximize learning transfer. Mentors of junior NCOs can also apply the tool to help guide Soldiers through the writing process. Furthermore, it provides examples of specific, helpful feedback mentors can provide to Soldiers on written communication skills. The *Digital NCO Writing Guide* provides users with (a) a checklist to evaluate their writing; (b) simple and comprehensive writing tips aimed at aligning writing to Army style; and (c) real world examples of "effective" and "ineffective" Army documents. Below the features and uses of the *Digital NCO Writing Guide* are described.

Features and uses

Checklist. The main page of the *Digital NCO Writing Guide,* formatted as a checklist, provides a systematic method for users to evaluate their own written work (Figure 1 and Figure 2). The checklist allows users to assess their writing based on characteristics of good Army writing as described in Army doctrine (e.g., *Army Writing Style*, *Preparing and Managing Correspondence AR 25-50*, etc.). The first checklist item specifies a rough draft stage, followed by continued development of a draft based on 12 steps compiled from the available Army

references and reviewed by adult education experts (Appendix A; e.g., covering the "5 Ws," use of short words, use of short sentences, active voice, etc.).

In addition, the checklist offers a method for the user to remain organized and focused on actionable items. The checklist can also serve as a training aid for mentors who are reviewing the written work of Soldiers. The checklist provides doctrinally sound, structured feedback to inform mentors on helpful feedback they can provide to writers.
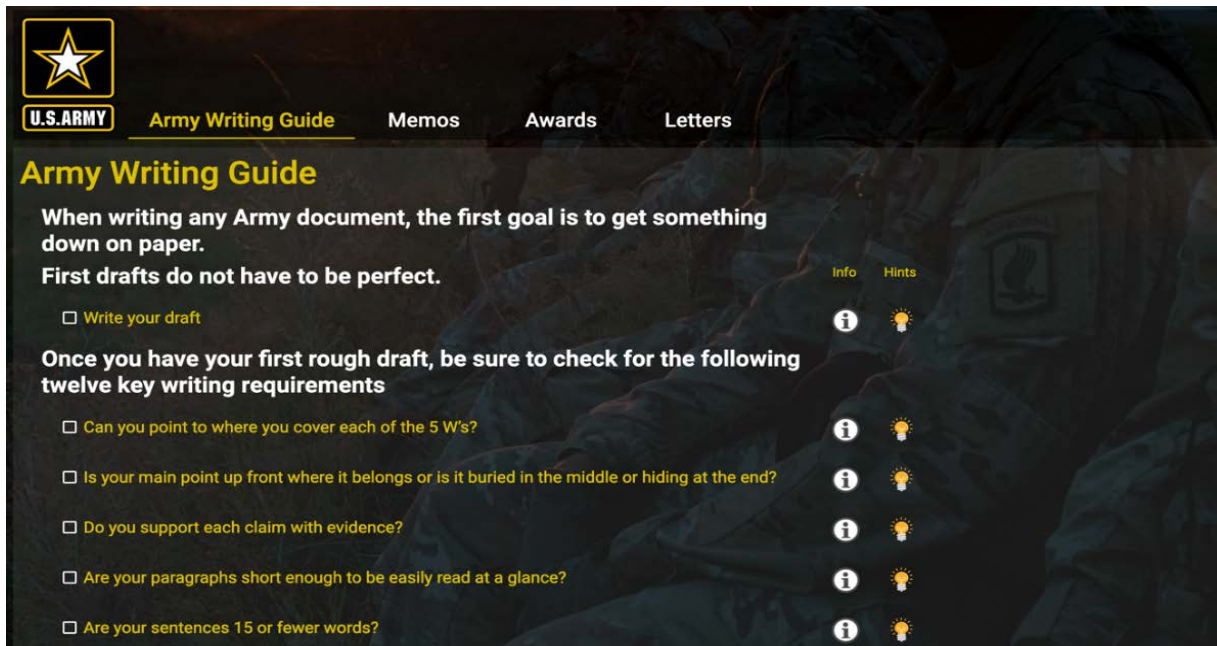

Figure 1. Digital NCO Writing Guide desktop main screen. This figure shows a portion of the main page of the interactive writing checklist as seen from a computer desktop.

Writing tips. Each checklist item has two icons associated with it: an icon labeled *Info*, and a lightbulb icon labeled *Hints*. When a user hovers over the *Info* icon, a simplified explanation or definition of the checklist item appears (Figure 3). For example, when users hover over the *Info* icon on "the 5 Ws" checklist item, they are presented with "Who, What, Where, When, Why," thus offering clarification on this commonly used phrase. When users hover over the *Hints* icon, it provides contextual hints. These suggestions include tips that convey the concept or a conversational excerpt about the specific checklist item. For example, the *Hints* icon associated with the checklist item "Are your sentences 15 or fewer words?" advises the use of the Microsoft Word Count Tool, which quickly determines a word count for any highlighted section of writing in a Word document (see Figure 3).

Figure 2. Mobile Screen View. This figure shows the main page of the *Digital NCO Writing Guide* as seen from a mobile device.
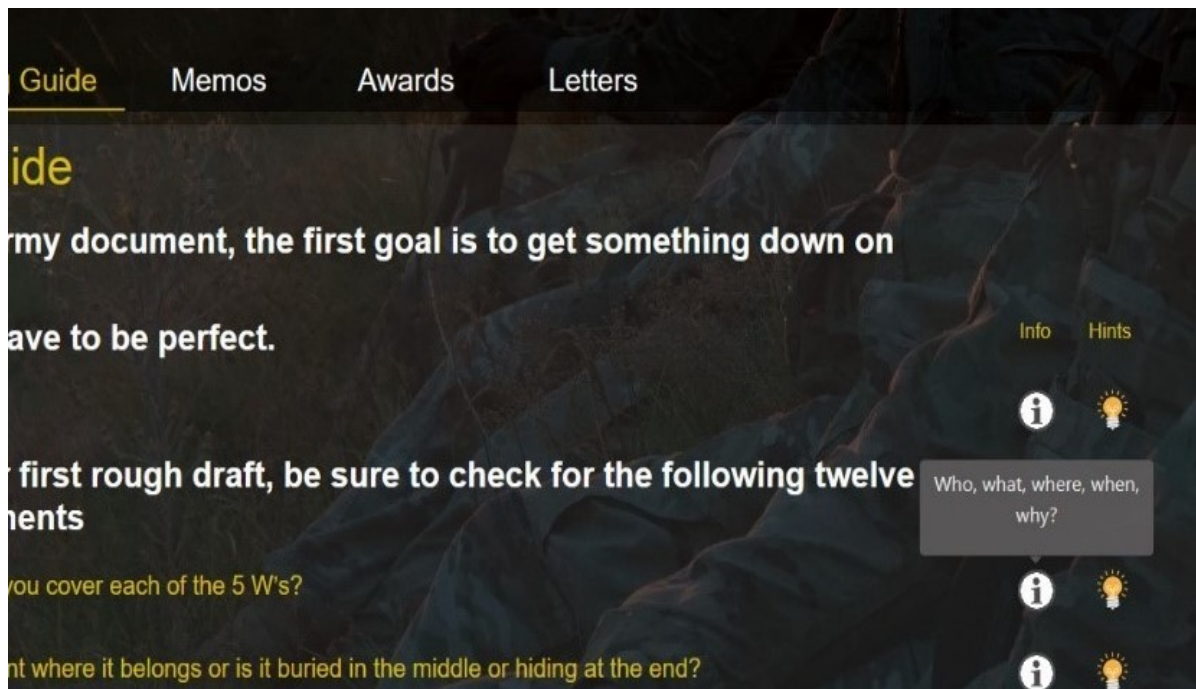

Figure 3. Info icon. This view of the *Digital NCO Writing Guide* desktop main screen shows an example from the *Info* icon. This example demonstrates the *Info* icon information associated with the checklist item "Can you point to where you cover each of the 5 Ws?"
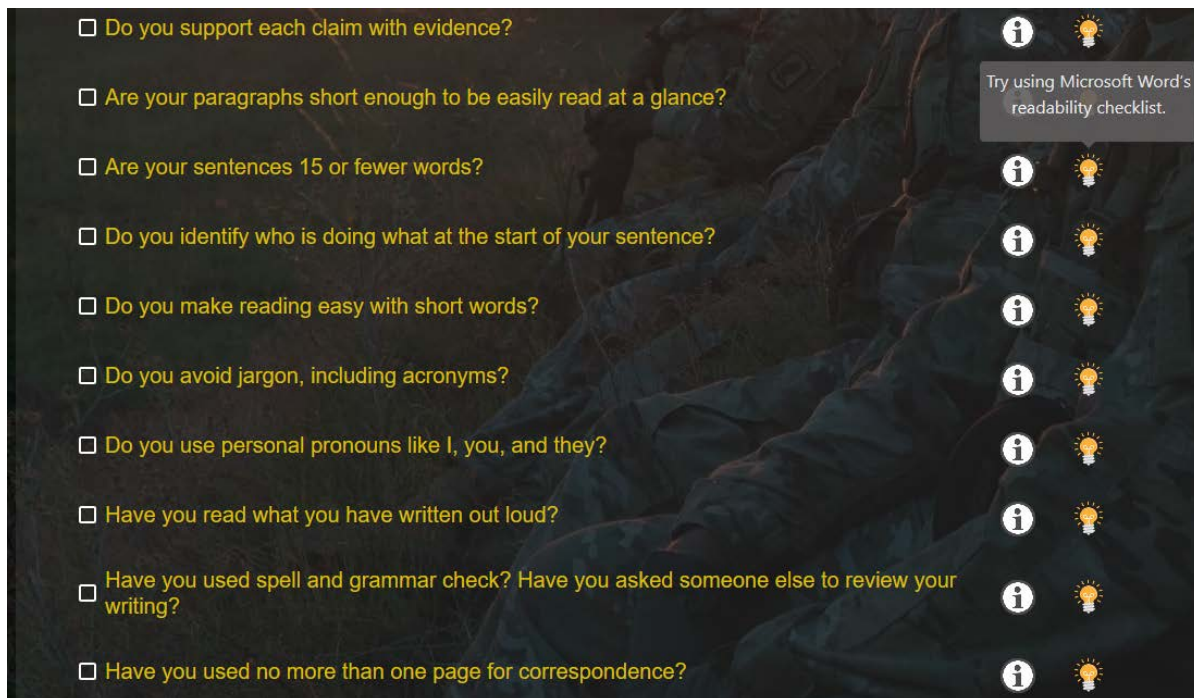
Figure 4. Hints icon. This view of *Digital NCO Writing Guide* desktop main screen shows an example from the *Hints* icon. This example demonstrates the *Hint* icon information associated with the checklist item "Are your sentences 15 or fewer words?"

Document examples. The *Digital NCO Writing Guide* features illustrations of commonly used Army documents. The examples highlight effective writing and ineffective writing. Accessed from the labeled tabs across the top of the main page (i.e., Memos, Awards, and Letters), these examples provide illustrations of the marked-up documents, as seen in Figures 4 and 5. The annotated/marked-up drafts are akin to using a red pen on an essay to point out instances of effective and ineffective writing. A user may choose to review these examples prior to attempting a draft of their own document or use these examples to compare their completed draft document. A mentor may provide similar models to junior NCOs that reflect unit specific document preferences. In addition, mentors could also use these as templates for providing specific feedback to NCOs on their written work.
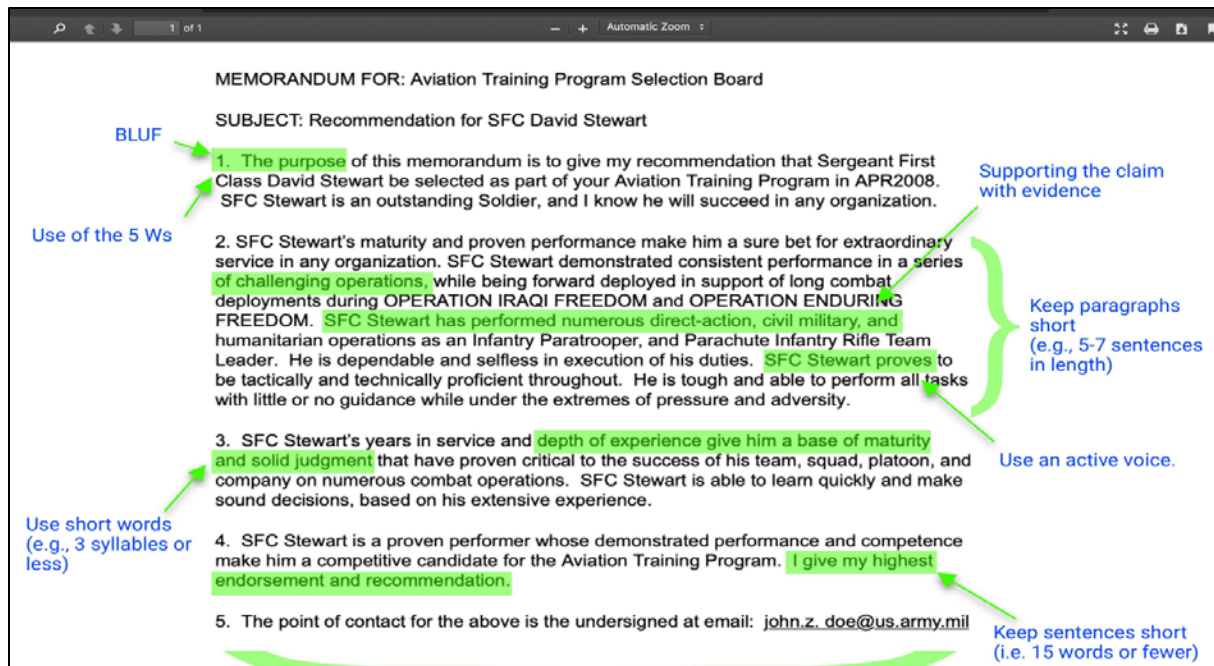
Figure 5. "Effective" memorandum example. This figure depicts an example of an Army memorandum with characteristics of good Army writing, such as supporting evidence, use of the 5 Ws, BLUF, short paragraphs, active voice, short words, and short sentences.

Benefits

There are several benefits of the *Digital NCO Writing Guide*. Soldiers can easily access the tool from any device that has an internet connection to public websites (https://writing.arielrg.org/). Therefore, both junior NCOs and mentors could use this tool during down times when a quick training is needed, when Soldiers are in the field away from desk-top computers, or when a quick reference is needed to review written material in the moment.

Another benefit of the *Digital NCO Writing Guide* is its balanced approach between helping Soldiers improve their written communication skills and providing them with a tool to assist them in completing their daily job duties. The guide implements a checklist approach in order to maximize internalization of the writing process through visual cues. The research team ensured the design of the *Digital NCO Writing Guide* would not allow for easy cutting and pasting. This feature encourages active engagement by the user, leading to more internalization and generalizability of writing skills.
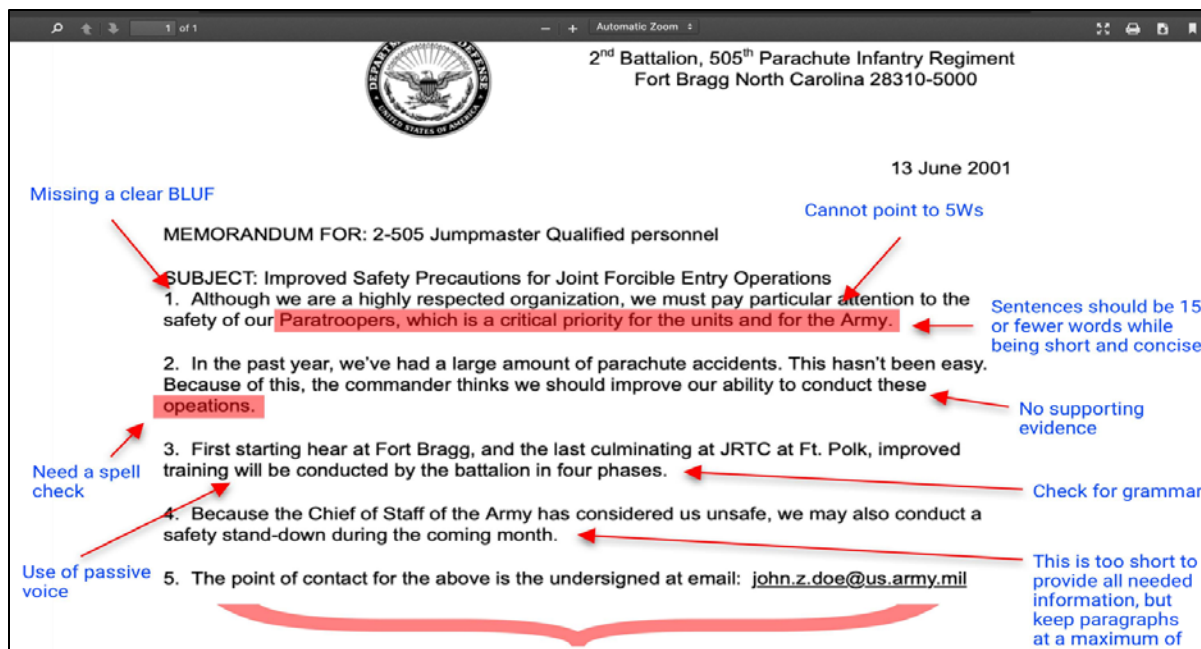
Figure 6. "Ineffective" memorandum example. This figure shows a memorandum that is missing supporting evidence, the 5 Ws, BLUF, active voice, and contains grammar and spelling errors.

In addition, the *Digital NCO Writing Guide* is easy to use and access. The tool's simple design allows Soldiers and those mentoring developing writers to utilize the materials in flexible ways best suited to each individual. In addition, little time is necessary to use the tool, as it is self-explanatory. The *Digital NCO Writing Guide* is an easily accessible, interactive, and flexible tool to improve writing skills through the writing of Army-specific documents.

Recommendations and Considerations for Continued Research

Although anyone can use the tool, it is most likely to benefit Soldiers in operational units who are new to Army writing and those providing writing guidance to Soldiers. Research indicates Soldiers struggle with writing when they first move into positions in which they are required to write Army documents as part of their regular job duties, which typically begins at the rank of sergeant (Sanders, et al., 2020a). We therefore recommend that the NCO academies (NCOA) distribute this tool to Soldiers prior to attending BLC and ALC courses, through their Distributed Learning Curriculum. Furthermore, we suggest that placing the tool on an NCO-centric website, such as the NCO Leadership Center of Excellence's World Campus website would provide easy access for NCOs. Because NCOAs have their own internet resources, we further recommend that they each post a link to the *Digital NCO Writing Guide* on their respective webpage. We also encourage all PME course instructors to provide information to their students about this tool so they can share it within their ranks.

We recommend additional enhancements be made to the *Digital NCO Writing Guide* in order to maximize the learning of written communication skills for junior NCOs. The first recommendation is to provide more "ineffective/effective" Army document examples with

additional writing guidance. Currently the tool contains one set of example documents (memos); however, we added tabs on the main page as placeholders for these future document examples (e.g., awards, letters). The second recommended enhancement is to embed links to relevant Army publications related to writing for easy access and reference (e.g., AR 25-50). Next, we recommend including Army document templates with fillable form features (e.g., memo, award letter, and counseling statement). Such a feature would allow users to type in an Army-specific template while the tool provides suggestions and feedback. This would enable users to engage in the writing process while still completing a work product. Finally, we suggest the addition of a review feature that would allow a reviewer to make notes and suggestions within the tool.

The current version of the tool provides important guidance for Soldiers; however, the recommended enhancements would provide Soldiers with an optimal platform from which they can improve their written communication skills. While we developed the *Digital NCO Writing Guide* with input and guidance from Soldiers, only a small number provided feedback on the final version of the tool (see Sanders et al., 2020b). Therefore, additional tool evaluations should obtain feedback from Soldiers and mentors regarding their tool use experience, tool design, and usability. As the tool is upgraded, feedback should continue to be acquired to ensure the new features are adding to the overall goal of improving written communication skills within the Army setting.

Future research should explore several areas related to written communication skills among junior NCOs. First, we suggest a formative evaluation to determine the extent to which the tool improves NCOs' written communication skills. Relatedly, we would recommend exploring how the tool affects the quality and accuracy of junior NCOs day-to-day written tasks. Such an evaluation should include feedback from end users, unit level supervisors, NCO academy instructors, or others knowledgeable of Soldiers' writing development and day-to-day written work. In addition, future research efforts should examine the transferability of the specific writing skills in the tool and their link to broader communication skills. For example, it would be important to know if Soldiers use the skills identified in the tool when they complete job related written tasks and how use of these items impacts their communication skills as they perform their assigned duties. Because mentors can also use this tool, it would be of interest to explore their experiences with it. Understanding how mentors provide guidance to junior NCOs regarding their writing skills within operational units may provide important insights on the best practices for transferring skills learned in PME to operational units. In summary, we recommend future efforts to include enhancing the current tool functionality and research to support NCO writing skill development in operational units.

References

Bradshaw, C. (2017, September). The importance of effective writing in the NCO Corps. *NCO Journal,* September 22, 2017. Retrieved from https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2017/September/Effective-Writing/

Department of the Army. (2013). Army Regulation 25-50, *Preparing and Managing Correspondence*. Washington, DC: U.S. Army Publishing Directorate.

Department of the Army. (2020). TC 7.22.7, *The Noncommissioned Officer Guide*. Washington, DC: U.S. Army Publishing Directorate.

Sanders, A. D., Orvis, K. L., Shenberger-Trujillo, J., Kay, K., M., & Bailey L. (2020a). NCO communication skills development. Arlington, VA: U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences. (In Preparation)

Sanders, A. D., Orvis, K. L., Shenberger-Trujillo, J., Kay, K., M., Nargi, B. & Bailey L. (2020b). Design and development of the Army Digital Writing Guide. Arlington, VA: U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences. (In Preparation)

U.S. Army Combined Arms Center (2013). *Army Writing Style*. Retrieved from https://usacac.army.mil/cac2/wocc/ArmyWritingStyle.asp

Ward, D. (2018). The art of words: Professional writing through the ranks. *NCO Journal.* Retrieved from https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2018/February/Art-of-Words/

Appendix A

Army Writing Checklist

	Instructions	Additional Information	Examples/Resources

When writing any Army document, the first goal is to get something down on paper. First drafts do not have to be perfect.

	• Write your draft.	• You will need to revise, and that is an important next step.	

Once you have your first rough draft, follow these twelve steps:

Step 1	• Can you point to where you cover each of the 5 Ws?	• Who, what, where, when, why?	• Example: SGT Johnson reported that PVT Smith arrived late for the 1000 training at the Soldier Development Center on Wednesday because PVT Smith's car would not start.
Step 2	• Is your main point up front where it belongs or is it buried in the middle or hiding at the end?	• BLUF (Bottom Line Up Front) • Place conclusions and recommendations at the beginning of the text, rather than at the end. The BLUF facilitates rapid decision-making.	• The BLUF should quickly answer the five Ws: who, what, where, when, and why.
Step 3	• Do you support each claim with evidence?	• Use examples to clarify your statements.	• Include specific observations or references.
Step 4	• Are your paragraphs short enough to be easily read at a glance?	• Write paragraphs that average 6 to 7 sentences in length.	• Try using Microsoft Word's readability checklist. See the instructions for how to set up this feature in Microsoft Word.
Step 5	• Are your sentences 15 or fewer words?	• Shorten longer sentences or split them into two sentences.	• Try using Microsoft Word's readability checklist.
Step 6	• Do you identify who is doing what at the start of your sentence?	• Write in active voice. Active voice means putting the actor in the subject position and the action in the verb.	• Use: 3rd Platoon will secure the perimeter. • Instead of: The perimeter will be secured by the 3rd Platoon.

Step 7	• Do you make reading easy with short words?	• Words should have three syllables or fewer.	• Try using Microsoft Word's readability checklist.
Step 8	• Do you avoid jargon, including acronyms?	• Use jargon, including acronyms, carefully.	• Example use of jargon: Tighten up your shot group, Soldier. • If you are in doubt, use everyday words (even if this means using more words), and spell out acronyms on first use. It is better to use more words than to confuse your reader.
Step 9	• Do you use personal pronouns such as I, you, and they?	• I, you, he, she, it, we, they	• When you are referring to yourself, use "I" or "me." When referring to your group or company, use "we" or "us." Use "you" for the person you are talking to – just as you do in conversation.
Step 10	• Have you read what you have written out loud?	• Check for flow. Is this easy to follow?	• Check the message. Does what you wrote make sense?
Step 11	• Have you used spell and grammar check? Have you asked someone else to review your writing?	• Proofreading is an important habit. Always review your work for errors.	• Errors or mistakes in these areas not only detract from your writing, but may also turn your reader into an editor. Once the reader sees one error, it may become instinctive to look for more errors instead of reading the correspondence for its intended message.
Step 12	• Have you used no more than one page for correspondence?	• Limit length to one page for most correspondence.	• Try to avoid multiple-page memorandums. When necessary, consider using enclosures for additional information.