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“How do I know what I think until I see what I say?”

-E.M. Forster

By Joe Byerly

From the time I commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the U.S. Army I’ve been told that I should read because it was my professional duty as an officer. For years, that is exactly what I did. I felt that as long as I was reading, I was keeping my end of the bargain. Yet, as my reading progressed from [Gates of Fire](#) to [On War](#), the level of critical thinking required also increased. The concepts presented by the authors became more abstract, the articles and books no longer agreed with each other; I found myself mentally wrestling with the texts, my personal theories of war and leadership (which I didn’t realize I had), and the lessons gained from my experiences. It was through this struggle that I realized that we shouldn’t approach professional reading with a checklist mentality, but instead put forth a more comprehensive effort that goes beyond “reading a bunch of books.”

Because most of the books we read as military professionals are based on actions that took

place in the past, we run the risk of falling into intellectual pitfalls. We may glean the wrong lessons from our effort because we analyze decisions and actions in war without understanding the backdrop in which the fighting took place. Additionally, as Jay Luvaas, former professor of history at the U.S. Army War College, once wrote, “Each man reads his own lesson according to peculiar mind and mood.” Thus, our honest attempts at professional development may only reinforce our limited experiences and biases. Finally, we might give up all together because we struggle to understand the material. For example, I’m currently on my third attempt at reading [*The History of the Peloponnesian War by Thucydides*](#).

If we better understand the utility of history to the military profession, and are also aware of the challenges and pitfalls that come with its study, we will be in a better position to reap its benefits. I recommend reading the following articles and books to aid you in your endeavors:

Articles

- [The Use and Abuse of Military History by Sir Michael Howard](#)
- [Military History: Is it Still Practicable? by Jay Luvaas](#)
- [The Trouble with History by Antulio J. Echevarria II](#)
- [On Military Theory by Milan Vego](#)

Books

- [The Past is Prologue: The Importance of History to the Military Profession edited by Williamson Murray and Richard Sinnreich](#)
- [Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers by Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May](#)

- [How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Thinking by Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren](#)

Next, think of self-study as attempting to soak up water in a bucket using a sponge. When we read books with a checklist mentality, only a small piece of the sponge makes contact with the water. While some of the water is absorbed, a greater part of the sponge remains dry. However, when we take a more comprehensive approach to professional study, it's the same as letting go of the sponge and letting it fill with water as it sinks to the bottom.

Below is a list of approaches we can take to get the most out of professional reading:

1. **Write.** Take notes while you read, and write down any key passages, insights, and reflections. Since 2012, I've kept a green notebook that I use specifically as a reading journal. I not only copy down passages that I think are important, I also write down titles of books and articles for future reading, which I pull from the footnotes or endnotes. I also make sure to note any insights that I have while reading. Putting my thoughts on paper helps me achieve clarity and gives me a chance to better formulate new ideas.
2. **Connect.** Connect with mentors, peers, or subordinates who will motivate you to read and drive you to think critically about the subjects you come across. These [connections](#) are critical to strengthening our own self development. Our professional networks can have a tremendous impact on not only what we read, but can assist us when we struggle to understand new concepts and higher-level material.
3. **Share.** The last, and probably the most important, approach is to share our ideas with others. As we tackle books, articles, or subjects, we should talk about them with peers, subordinates, and mentors, all of whom offer vastly different perspectives that can help broaden our own. E.M. Forster, a 20th century British novelist, once wrote, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" His quote helps illustrate the point that through discussing what we read, we gain a more sophisticated understanding of the

material, and the interaction with others helps to develop our critical thinking skills. [Writing for publication](#) is also a means of sharing. Almost every time I publish a blog post or article I get feedback, and that feedback lets me know if I'm on the right track or if my ideas need further development.

I believe that reading for personal growth is just as important as the training we receive in our units, and that its cumulative effect overtime develops our intellect so that we are better prepared for future roles and situations that we might encounter. By understanding the pitfalls of professional reading, putting our thoughts in writing, connecting with others, and sharing our ideas, we can get the most out of our efforts of self-study.

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