



By Joe Byerly

Since launching *From the Green Notebook* in 2013, I've had a lot of conversations with other military professionals who want to write, but feel they are unable to get words down on paper.

A blank page is a tough obstacle for many writers to overcome. Several times, I've struggled to move past the endless cycle of writing the first line and then deleting it. Fortunately,

more times than not, I did find the words to write. I've written more than 100 articles, blog posts, and [even a chapter in a forthcoming book](#). However, it doesn't come easy at first.

I've been able to write because of the strategies I adopted after I got tired of the "write a line, delete a line" method.

Speak to a Crowd

Before I write, I pretend that I'm going to give a talk on what I want to write about to a crowd. Sometimes I imagine I'm going to speak to young company-grade officers who are eager to learn about _____ (I fill in the blank with that idea chewing on). Sometimes I imagine that I'm going to speak about _____ (fill in the blank) to my peers and NCOs who not only feel like they don't need to read what I'm writing, but look upon it with skepticism.

This mental exercise does two things: First, it allows me to develop a clear message that I want to convey through writing. When I try to write without fully developing my message, my work is all over the place with no real thread running through it. Next, this exercise allows me to tailor the message. By knowing *exactly* who I'm speaking to (or writing for), I can work out what details I need to add or omit. I know if I need to be casual or serious, if I can write like I would speak or if I need something more polished.

By thinking through subjects from the point of view of a person who might be unfamiliar with an idea, I've found that it increases my level of understanding on the topic I'm writing about.

Once I have my message and audience clear in my mind, I draft an outline for whatever I'm writing.

Create an Outline

I use an outline to organize my thoughts and make sure my logic chain is clear and tight throughout. For example, when I started thinking about this post, and had my message and audience in mind, I immediately started an outline that looked like this:

Message: *Here are a few strategies for anyone struggling with writing to get words on paper.*

Strategy 1: *Speak to crowd*

Supporting point 1: *Allows you to develop a clear message*

Supporting point 2: *Allows you to tailor your message to specific audience*

By keeping my message at the top of my document, whether I'm writing on a blank page or typing into a fresh Google Doc, I make sure I don't stray from my message or go off on a tangent. By keeping my message clear for myself, it's easier to craft a message that will get through to my audience.

Give Yourself a Shitty First Draft

The famous writer Anne Lamott once wrote, "Perfectionism is... the main obstacle between you and a shitty first draft." I want what I put down on paper to come out looking like prose from a *NY Times Bestseller*, but it doesn't work that way. Great writing is typically edited multiple times. If I find myself getting stuck on perfection I fall right back into the "write a line, delete a line" method.

So, I write. I start by writing a page or two based off my outline, keeping as close to my original message as possible. After I put some meat on the bones of the outline, I then start editing.

I've learned that I have to see what I think before I can evaluate my arguments. Sometimes I

find that my arguments aren't strong enough once I see them written out and I have to go back and make changes. Sometimes I realize that I need to tweak my message a little to make the whole thing coherent. It's here where I usually find grammatical errors, etc. The key is having that first draft to be able to do something with in the first place.

Let it Go

When I find myself stuck, I ask for help. Over the years, I've sent numerous drafts to friends asking for their feedback. Often, they help provide me with the missing pieces that I needed to finish what I'm working on. Or they offer up suggestions that help me take an incoherent argument in a different direction that makes more sense.

A second set of eyes will also help with playing devil's advocate. Many times I've written drafts completely blind to how they could be perceived by others. Feedback helps me rewrite articles so that I don't come off as an idiot or arrogant.

I've learned that my friends also look for different things when they read. Some friends only focus on content, while others pay more attention to the grammar and spelling. Figure out who in your circle can tackle each of those issues and make sure you send them your drafts when you need the feedback each can offer.

Go Do It!

One of my favorite quotes, attributed to E.M. Forster, is: "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" This speaks to this idea of the importance of writing. I believe that when we write, we challenge ourselves to be clearer in our thoughts and arguments. As I've put pen to paper for my own blog or for other outlets, I have found that I achieve a greater level of clarity because I can see my thoughts written out.

Don't let a blank sheet of paper stand in the way between you and clarity. Envision the crowd you are sharing your idea with, create an outline, and then write your first draft. If

you get stuck, phone a friend and ask for help.

How do you get past a blank page? Please share your practices in the comments below.

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