



By Joe Byerly

A few years ago, I [wrote a post](#) encouraging military leaders to write for professional publications and online professional outlets.

I confidently argued, though only anecdotally, that there were no sea monsters and leaders could share their ideas freely without retribution. I was wrong.

There be sea monsters, and they be us.

In the five years since I wrote my original piece, the online community of military and national security professionals has grown exponentially. And with it, so have the dangers.

Segments of this community mobilize when there is blood in the water and an author writes a piece that people don't agree with. I've watched writers get devoured by the kraken, and it isn't pretty.

Is it possible to navigate the seas of professional debate without attracting a sea monster or two? I suppose so. However, some of the greatest shifts in our military's history were met with resistance. [Admiral William Sims](#), [General George Patton](#), and [Colonel John Boyd](#) all battled sea monsters along the way, but they survived, and our military is better for it. So if you are writing on topics that challenge conventional wisdom, sea monsters are unavoidable.

The trick to dealing with sea monsters is to avoid dumping chum in the water when you decide to wade in. Chum takes the form of weak arguments, logical fallacies, ignoring blatant counter arguments, and writing in a arrogant tone.

Avoid weak arguments and logical fallacies

Nothing attracts sea monsters faster than writers who make weak arguments — especially when the topic is controversial.

Entire college courses are taught on identifying, dissecting, and formulating arguments, so I'm only going to scratch the surface. Basically, a good logical argument looks like this: premise + premise + premise = conclusion. One of the keys to having a valid conclusion is that the premises need to be true. To make a premise true, we use facts, quotes from experts, and anecdotes. Remember, not all anecdotes are created equal, so having multiple anecdotes strengthens your argument.

Qualifying your premises is a good practice, especially when there's some uncertainty on whether or not they are true. Instead of writing "all military officers smoke cigars and drink

bourbon,” which isn’t true (I’m not a fan of either), by changing “all” to “some” or “most” or “many” you have a much stronger premise.

But even when you have good arguments and a strong conclusion, there are more pitfalls you need to avoid. For instance, avoid [attacking a straw man](#). Don’t create an easily defeatable aspect of the topic you are arguing against to attack. Also, don’t make [false dilemmas](#) or “either/or” claims in your arguments. For example, don’t write that if the military doesn’t address talent management, then it means it clearly doesn’t care about people. Finally, avoid [slippery slope arguments](#). This is when you say that if one event occurs, then more events will likely follow, eventually leading to a bad outcome.

There are plenty of great books and online resources to help you with this aspect of your writing. [Wireless Philosophy](#) has a great series of YouTube videos that explains the fallacies. There’s also a great free online course offered through *Coursera* on how to [identify and make logical arguments](#). Finally, there are plenty of university [writing guides](#) available online.

Address the haters

Every good argument has a counterargument. And some counter arguments are more apparent than others. It might be worth addressing one or the two of the most obvious ones toward the end of your article.

In exploring counterarguments, it helps us grasp the topic much better and strengthens our own arguments. It also shows readers that you’ve done your homework and you fully understand the subject you’re writing about.

Be humble

No matter how great your arguments are, if you come across as a pompous jerk, you may win in the logic game, but you will lose in the persuasion game every time.

Benjamin Franklin, one of the most prolific and influential of the Founding Fathers, commented on the importance of humility in his autobiography. He saw that when he quit using words such as “certainly” and “undoubtedly” and replaced them with “I conceive” or “So it appears to me at the present,” he won more arguments. He wrote, “The modest way in which I propos’d my opinions procur’d them a readier reception and less contradiction.”

Often, sea monsters will gain more support for their attacks when the writer’s tone lacks an ounce of humility. It helps to have someone read a draft of your article before you publish so they can check your tone. Also, finding someone who isn’t as passionate about the topic helps. They are more likely to provide you with the feedback you need (but may not want) before your writing reaches a larger audience.

Facing the Sea Monsters

To echo [Admiral \(ret\) James Stavridis](#), “Dare to speak out and challenge assumptions and accepted wisdom if your view differs from them. Have the courage to write, publish, and be heard. Launch your ideas and be an integral part of the conversation.”

If you’re properly prepared, even the biggest and loudest sea monsters shouldn’t be able to throw you off course.

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