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Intelligence Writing for Academics

HOW TO WRITE LIKE AN INTELLIGENCE ANALYST

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Wondering how all these social sciences papers at West Point are going to help you in the ‘real world’? Or perhaps you’re coveting that MI designator and want a leg up?

Take it from a former CIA officer and DIA analyst, the work you’re doing in many of your courses – as well as in consultations at West Point’s Mounser Writing Center – can also help you hone the habits of mind and writing skills of an intelligence analyst. That’s a career path with increasing commercial sector as well as government opportunities.



Even though crafting intelligence analysis can at first feel like you’re being asked to flip the conventional organization of academic writing on its head, the skills intelligence analysts use – understanding the audience, balancing evidence and informed judgements, considering potential biases, and writing for concision and clarity – will also make your writing for academic courses more compelling.

The most immediate difference that sets intelligence analysis apart from academic writing is the need to get the critical information across to the ‘consumer’ (the specific reader for whom you’re writing) as directly as possible.

Structurally, this means putting the Bottom Line Up Front (BLUF). A BLUF structure makes sense when you consider the audiences to whom analysts often write: key consumers of U.S. intelligence include the President, the National Security Council, senior military and executive branch leadership, and some members of Congress. In the commercial intelligence realm, timeliness is also crucial as consumers include corporate executives and staff charged with keeping employees and facilities safe.

The key to making the complex comprehensible is having in mind a specific audience and a very precise intelligence question for the analysis to tackle. Data dumps and murky analysis almost always are rooted in trying to write about a development without first asking, ‘Who is my audience and what specific question does it need answered?’

– Martin Peterson, Former Deputy Executive Director of CIA

Above all, intelligence analysis must be consistently impartial or risk losing the consumer's trust. Being cognizant of the potential for bias to influence analysis requires analysts to clearly distinguish their judgements from the evidence they are presenting. The judgements are frequently expressed in the BLUF and/or in the impact statement that follows. The evidence is then listed, as succinctly as possible, to directly support the analysis. This is reflected in each supporting paragraph, which should lead with a judgement as the topic sentence, followed by relevant evidence.

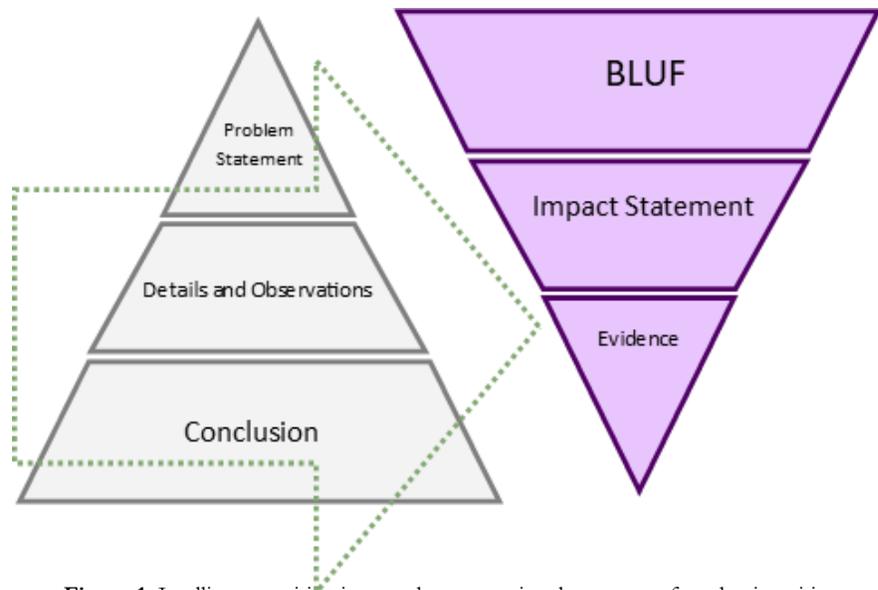


Figure 1. Intelligence writing inverts the conventional structure of academic writing.

Identify and acknowledge potential evidentiary biases.

Intelligence analysts closely consider biases that may be inherent in the ultimate source of the intelligence or that may have colored the information in the chain of acquisition. These biases can be intentional, as in a politician providing a statement that encompasses their party's perspective on an issue; such biases may also be less obvious or diluted – for example, a report from a non-governmental organization that cites statistics provided by a third-party website. Regardless, all quality intelligence analysis requires due diligence to identify and acknowledge potential bias.

Cultivate a clear and concise style. Intelligence analysts write clearly and concisely. Paragraphs are focused around a single topic sentence, all of which serve as evidence to support the BLUF. Word choice is specific and can tend toward jargon, but simple and straightforward. Keep It Simple and Straightforward (KISS) is a handy mnemonic that helps ensure efficiency and that the audience is not lost in complex sentences that could lead to confusion or misunderstanding.

Writing like an intelligence analyst can also help you understand especially dense academic writing. In order to determine the BLUF, an analyst must not only be an expert on the issues, but also understand his or her audience and what they need to know in order to make well-informed decisions.

So, if you get stuck noodling your way through a dense academic paper, you can always try writing it as an intelligence brief in order to help you define your judgements and your evidence, and to help distill the author's or your points into their simplest, most logical order.

Want to learn more about the art of intelligence analysis?

- ◆ *A Tradecraft Primer: Structured Analytic Techniques for Improving Intelligence Analysis.* Central Intelligence Agency, March 2009.
- ◆ Petersen, Martin. "What I Learned in 40 Years of Doing Intelligence Analysis for US Foreign Policy Makers," *Studies in Intelligence Studies*, 55.1, March 2011.
- ◆ Russo, Charles M. "How Intelligence Analysts Can Improve Critical Thinking and Writing Skills," www.inpublicsafety.com, 24 Apr 2018.
- ◆ Sinclair, Robert S. *Thinking and Writing: Cognitive Science and Intelligence Analysis.* Center for the Study of Intelligence, February 2010.