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## Review Essay:

### A Comparative Look at Intelligence Writing and Usage Guides

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Titles reviewed in depth:

***Communicating with Intelligence: Writing and Briefing in the Intelligence and National Security Communities.***

James S. Major. Lanham, MD, Scarecrow Press, 2008. 420 pages.

***Writing Classified and Unclassified Papers for National Security.*** James S. Major. Lanham, MD, Scarecrow Press, 2009. 234 pages.

Titles reviewed in brief:

***Style: Usage, Composition, and Form*** (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). James S. Major. Washington, DC, Defense Intelligence Agency, 2004. 255 pages.

***Citation: Note and Bibliographic Form*** (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). James S. Major. Washington, DC, Defense Intelligence Agency, 2003. 198 pages.

***Style Manual and Writers Guide for Intelligence Publications*** (6<sup>th</sup> edition). CIA Staff. Washington, DC, 1999. 248 pages.<sup>1</sup>

***Analyst's Style Manual.*** Bill Welch, ed. Erie, PA, Mercyhurst College Institute for Intelligence Studies Press, 2008. 40 pages.

***SIGINT Reporter's Style and Usage Manual.*** National Security Agency, 2010, available at [http://www.governmentattic.org/4docs/NSA-SIGINT-style-manual\\_2010.pdf](http://www.governmentattic.org/4docs/NSA-SIGINT-style-manual_2010.pdf).

A year or so ago, I obtained review copies of two books by James Major, titled *Communicating with Intelligence* and *Writing Classified and Unclassified Papers for National Security*. Prior to receiving these books, I personally had been relying on more general style manuals, such as the *Chicago Manual of Style* and the legal manual known as the *Bluebook*, and supplementing anything written about intelligence matters with the CIA's *Style Manual and Writers Guide for Intelligence Publications*. Upon reading Major's two books, I decided that it would be of interest to *AIJ* readers if someone were to do a comparative review of all of the intelligence and security-related style manuals out there, allowing for the construction of a comprehensive set of style rules for intelligence professionals. Now, a year later, as I write this review, I can safely say that I have never found a discipline with as many competing styles and

standards as intelligence, and my original goal is for now beyond my grasp. However, what I can do here is provide a roadmap of the strengths and weaknesses of each of the texts I reviewed, allowing our readers to intelligently choose the best book for the job before them on a case-by-case basis.

In general, these texts can be divided into two main categories, which I term “Writing Guides” and “Usage Guides.” “Writing Guides” discuss the *manner* of writing for intelligence audiences, with general lessons for general purposes, while “Usage Guides” are more like dictionaries of how to spell certain problematic words and how to use certain categories of terms. While a few of these books do encompass both categories, they almost always do so in separate parts of the book, which allows us to easily discuss the “Writing Guide” portions separately from the “Usage Guide” portions.

### I. WRITING GUIDES

#### A. *Communicating with Intelligence*

If I could assign people in search of a national security writing guide one book to read, it would be this one. It is very fitting that this book was Volume 1 in the Scarecrow Professional Intelligence Education Series (“SPIES”) put out by Scarecrow Press (*AIJ*’s Summer 2010 issue included a review of Volume 6: David Perry’s *Partly Cloudy: Ethics in War, Espionage, Covert Action, and Interrogation*, and two others are slated for review in future *AIJ*s), as it establishes a clear set of ground rules that any intelligence educator or student should follow. Moreover, it is not a coincidence that four of the texts I reviewed were written at different points in time by James Major; he has been involved in the training of intelligence writers for longer than most intelligence writers have been writing. If I could in fact choose one *source* of any kind for a burgeoning intelligence writer, I would recommend hiring Major to stand over his shoulder and teach him everything he knows. [Editor’s Note: After retiring from the Army many years ago, Mr. Jim Major created the Writing Center at the then-Joint Military Intelligence College (JMIC). He retired from government service at the end of 2005, and the Writing Center that was his “baby,” what was left of it anyway, has since been folded into the current NDIC Center for Strategic Intelligence Research.]

This book excels at its mission for three reasons. The first is that it is written in a Goldilocks-style fashion that is not too pedantic for students or other writers new to the field, while remaining not too patronizing for seasoned professionals. Major writes in an admittedly casual style that evokes the image of a lecturer pacing back and forth in front of a projector at an orientation seminar, but he

accomplishes his goal. His examples are realistic and immediately relatable, primarily because he shamelessly and openly steals them from papers that have been handed in by his students over the years. And his exercises are interesting and thought-provoking enough to make the reader actually give some thought to them, rather than just skimming them over and reading the answers. Overall, reading this book is more like listening to a lecture at a conference than reading a textbook, which to me is a good thing, especially when it addresses an inherently eye-glazing topic like writing style.

The second reason for this book’s success is the way in which Major teaches the same information several times in myriad fashions, such as descriptions, charts, visual aids (the “balloon maps” and “idea trees” in Chapter 4 and the “paragraph-as-mobile” graphic in Chapter 5 are particular favorites), and exercises. As any educator knows, the more ways you can present the same information to a student, the more likely he is to understand it. Major understands this to a “T,” and the particular genius of this book is that the book *itself* is an example of all of the techniques he is seeking to teach the reader. For instance, Major teaches the effective use of visual aids in intelligence products, while simultaneously “practicing what he preaches” throughout the book. This type of “meta-teaching” allows the reader to learn by example by the very act of reading the book, providing yet another delivery system for the lessons.

The third and final reason for this book’s success is that nothing in it is really *new*; it is just packaged into a new pedagogical style. Some of the book’s most insightful lessons seem obvious once you read them, but they represent the idea that if something goes without saying, *nobody says it*, and as a corollary, *nobody even thinks about it*. Certain such pearls of obvious wisdom that are nonetheless frequently ignored by writers include

- “[A]void the techniques that cause you to lose interest in [someone else’s] writing or simply to consider it bad writing.” (p. 145)
- “Every style has its time and place, and the trick is adapting your own techniques to suit the task at hand and the intended reader of your product.” (p. 152)
- The seven different orders of logic that can be used (pp. 154-157)

Major has found an effective way to teach a very boring topic in such a way that even people who think they already know everything about it will still continue reading. Given how many intelligence professionals are subject matter experts who write for a living, such a presentation is key.

Before moving on to the next book, it is worth noting that *Communicating with Intelligence* also includes an excellent

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discussion of one particular type of writing that is not mentioned in the others – how to review someone else’s work. Chapters 6 and 7 both bear close reading on this subject.

### B. *Writing Classified and Unclassified Papers for National Security*

This book was written as a complementary SPIES volume to *Communicating with Intelligence*, and as such it accomplishes its goal. Where *Communicating with Intelligence* takes more of a bird’s-eye view of intelligence writing style, this book is buried in the weeds, but in a way that does not detract from its appeal. With that being said, however, I would not recommend it as a text for beginners by itself, as it tends to assume that the reader has already learned the basics set forth in the previous book. Taken as a companion volume, however, it does an excellent job of filling in the blanks with specific minutiae.

The best example of this sort of “in-depth” treatment is in Chapter 4, where Major spends fourteen pages (pp. 51-65) exploring the logical reasoning methods summarized in four pages in the earlier work. However, more than just providing a more detailed discussion of the issue, Major applies it in his trademark manner to specific examples, teaching by example as well as by rote. Another example is his expanded treatment of organizational aids (such as titles, headings, and sub-headings) and layout in Chapter 2, which were only discussed in broad terms in *Communicating with Intelligence*.

Perhaps the most important addition of this book, however, to the “Writing Guide” field is Chapter 3, entitled “What an Intelligence Analyst Does.” This chapter is based on an article titled “Managing/Teaching New Analysts” written by Martin Petersen in 1985 for *Studies in Intelligence*, and reprinted in altered form in Major’s 2004 JMIC text, *Style: Usage, Composition, and Form*, also reviewed herein. As an antecedent lecture to how intelligence analysts should write, this chapter first provides a primer on what intelligence analysis actually *is*, with the assumption that if writers know what their writing will be used for, they will be better able to tailor their writing to accomplish that goal. This chapter, the chapter in the 2004 JMIC book, and Petersen’s original article (available at [http://www.nationalsecuritylaw.org/files/received/CIA/Petersen-Managing\\_Teaching\\_New\\_Analysts.pdf](http://www.nationalsecuritylaw.org/files/received/CIA/Petersen-Managing_Teaching_New_Analysts.pdf)) are all highly recommended reading for new analysts.

### C. JMIC Press Works

Major wrote two style manuals for JMIC Press (now NDIC Press) before either of the above two SPIES volumes, and while the vast majority of the material included therein is

duplicated in the later books, each of these JMIC texts does provide further detailed instructions that make them worth having on your bookshelf.

*Style: Usage, Composition, and Form* adds an in-depth discussion of how to write book reviews and annotated bibliographies (Chapter 5). As a subject near and dear to my heart, I strongly advise anyone wishing to submit a book review to *AIJ* or any other publication to review this chapter. Also, as mentioned above, Major’s detailed treatment of the Petersen article in Appendix 3 is a must-read for novice intelligence analysts.

*Citation: Note and Bibliographic Form* adds specific instructions for citing sources that intelligence writers normally utilize that are foreign to most academic or journalistic writers, such as conference proceedings, briefings, government publications, and classified documents. If your written product must include such citations, this book will provide some much needed assistance in keeping them standardized.

## II. USAGE GUIDES

**W**riting *Classified and Unclassified Papers for National Security* does double duty as a Writing Guide and a Usage Guide, and if an intelligence writer only had access to one Usage Guide in this review, this would be the text I would recommend. Specifically, Chapters 8 and 9 provide easily-accessible charts for such things as common abbreviations and problematic compound words, and Chapter 10 is nothing more than a usage glossary of terms common to intelligence analysis. However, each of the other reviewed texts does offer complementary coverage of such items.

*Communicating with Intelligence*, contrary to form, does in fact perform a more detailed treatment in Chapter 6 than *Writing Classified and Unclassified Papers for National Security* of one vital “usage issue,” that of how to effectively use transitions to indicate how thoughts are related. This time, rather than limiting his discussion to big-picture items, Major spends some time detailing the different types of relationships that thoughts can have and specifying which transition terms are best suited for which relationships. The rest of the “usage material” of this book, however, is explored in greater detail in the later text.

The CIA’s *Style Manual and Writers Guide for Intelligence Publications* is *solely* a glossary of terms (and occasionally rules) that by itself is quite limited in its usefulness except to writers who only need a reference text of that sort. Its organizational style is difficult to navigate and, for the rules that it proffers, Welch’s *Analyst’s Style Manual* (which is openly based on the “rules” portion of the CIA

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guide) does a much better job of relaying the information. With respect to the terms listed, other guides handle this better, although the one redeeming factor of the CIA guide is the deadpan sense of humor that sometimes appears in unexpected places. Example A: “In CIA formal issuances, do not use the exclamation point.” (p. 47) Example B: “Intelligence analysts, however, should *evaluate*, not feel.” (p. 49) Example C: the mere fact that the author considered “dancercize,” “karaoke,” “willy-nilly,” “worrywart,” and my personal favorite, “stick-to-it-iveness,” as words commonly misspelled by intelligence analysts. Given that this book appears to be out of print, its value to an intelligence writer is solely as a historical curiosity.

For the best glossary-style treatment of commonly problematic words, I recommend the NSA’s *SIGINT Reporter’s Style and Usage Manual*. While this manual also falls prey to the same flaw as the CIA guide of mixing rules and terms in an overall alphabetic structure, its value is not as a rule guide but as a glossary-style Usage Guide. In that capacity, it exceeds all expectations.

### III. FINAL VERDICT

**C**ommunicating with Intelligence and Writing Classified and Unclassified Papers for National Security should together be among the most closely read books on any intelligence writer’s bookshelf.

However, novice intelligence writers are warned from using the latter without the former, as it takes for granted a certain level of foundational knowledge. Major’s JMIC Press books should be used as reference guides for writers who need to write book reviews or annotated bibliographies (*Style: Usage, Composition, and Form*) and who need to cite sources of information not commonly described in the other style manuals (*Citation: Note and Bibliographic Form*). Neither the CIA’s *Style Manual and Writers Guide for Intelligence Publications* nor the *Analyst’s Style Manual* adds anything that is not present in the others but, if a reader must choose, the *Analyst’s Style Manual* is a better source for rules than the CIA guide. For a sheer comprehensive glossary of commonly problematic terms, the best source by far is the NSA’s *SIGINT Reporter’s Style and Usage Manual*.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The 6<sup>th</sup> edition reviewed herein is the most current publicly available edition. However, shortly after I wrote this review, I learned that a 7<sup>th</sup> edition, entitled *DI Style Manual for Intelligence Publications* and printed in 2004, does exist within the CIA for internal use. I have filed a Freedom of Information Act request for this edition, and when it is released I will make it available at [http://www.nationalsecuritylaw.org/files/received/CIA/DI\\_Style\\_Manual.pdf](http://www.nationalsecuritylaw.org/files/received/CIA/DI_Style_Manual.pdf).



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