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Three missions, four essences

## MANAGING/TEACHING NEW ANALYSTS

Martin Petersen

We have all been there, right? The new hire who has only one talent: driving you insane. He misses deadlines. He erases your editing and restores his stuff in ink, thinking "you can't change it now." He orders one copy of everything. The print button on his terminal is taped down and the 2700 is approaching meltdown. His in-box looks like the registry. He refuses to take directions, and because all his professors told him he writes well, it must be your fault if he is struggling.

You're right. Punching this guy is not enough, but what about the new hire who is obviously trying, seems to have the talent, and is still struggling? One theme surfaces repeatedly in the interviews of new analysts at the end of their first year: a desire for a manual describing how to do analysis. I suspect Directorate of Intelligence managers would also welcome such a document. With the proportion of analysts in their probation period running over 50 percent in many offices, managers are facing a daunting training burden in addition to reviewing an increased volume of production, providing vital hand-holding services during the adjustment period, and passing on tribal lore. Growth has also meant a higher percentage of new managers struggling with these issues for the first time.

After attempting to cope for a while, many managers are ready to conclude that analysts are born, not made—a position I am not ready to abandon entirely, but one that may be a bit extreme. Like the old jokes, however, the news is good and bad. The bad is that there is no substitute for experience, no mechanical formulas that an eager new hire can follow to guarantee an acceptable piece of finished intelligence. Each analyst must learn the job as each before him has, essentially by trying, falling short, and trying again. The odds are improved if the manager is blessed at the moment of making a hiring decision with what Mark Twain held to be the most important ingredient in success. "I'd rather be lucky than smart," he said.

The good news is that the manager can facilitate the learning process if he or she can:

- Communicate a sense of our mission and the difference between intelligence writing and academic writing.
- Describe the process of intelligence analysis in a clear, cogent fashion.
- Prepare the fledgling analysts for early failures and provide lots of positive reinforcement and reassurance.

### The First Step

The manager's first task is akin to deprogramming—undoing habits formed in four to ten years of college-level work. This comes down to impressing on the would-be analyst a sense of what the job is and a thorough discussion of the

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nature of intelligence writing. There are seven key concepts that the new analyst must absorb, three relating to his mission and four to intelligence writing. I am convinced that the branch chief must hammer (if need be) the "three missions and the four essences"<sup>1</sup> into the new hire's head, or face the prospect of yet another journeyman who contributes little but eats up enormous amounts of managerial time.

**The job is to make judgments about the future.** The new analyst often has difficulty accepting the idea we are less concerned about what actually happened than the significance of the event for US interests. Moreover, conditioned by college to search for "truth"—artistic and scientific—he/she is sometimes slow to believe that what people think is true is often more important than what is actually the fact. And then there is that dogged determination to get all the facts, a compulsion reinforced by the mistaken notion that our job is to know everything.

The manager must get the new analyst to understand that:

- Judgments will invariably be on the basis of incomplete and conflicting information.<sup>2</sup>
- There are no "incompletes" given here. The analyst never has the luxury of asking the consumer for a little more time for the situation to clarify or to wait until additional information becomes available.
- Strange as it always sounds, our job is not so much to be right as it is to provide the best answer possible given the time and information available.<sup>3</sup>

**We are the interpreters of foreign cultures and alien problems.** As such, our job is to expose the logic behind the actions of a Middle East madman and to render intelligible to the general reader the physics underlying a Soviet barrage attack on a US missile system.

**Our job is to support decision makers.** This is a concept that all new analysts readily accept. Indeed, for many, the prospect of being part of the policy process is one of the strongest selling points of the job. But (there is always a but), it is a concept that many new analysts have difficulty putting into practice, because they are confused about what constitutes support.

Many believe that if they add to the policymaker's knowledge, they have done the job. The manager must stress that the point of analysis is the interpretation of information, not its presentation. Analysts must be taught to grasp the distinction between providing answers to real problems and expanding the

<sup>1</sup> The Chinese are big on this sort of stuff: the Gang of Four, the Five Ups and the Five Downs and the Four Not Forgets (a spinoff of the Three Non-Divorces), the Three Emptying and Four No Retainings, and my favorite, the Five Stresses and Four Beauties.

<sup>2</sup> One new analyst once asked me where "the plans" were filed. My puzzled look prompted him to explain that he was struggling to reconcile some conflicting information and that he thought he could resolve the issue by looking at the Chinese plans. I told him that only in the movies does someone "steal the plans." In a moment of rare good judgment, I resisted adding that if we had the plans we would not need analysts.

<sup>3</sup> Reflect for a moment on how many times we actually know if we were right or wrong. The who-will-win-the-election or will-country-X-invade-country-Y questions are less common than those dealing with intentions, options, or outlooks that require continual reassessment.

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body of knowledge on some subject. Supporting the policymaker comes down to three related functions:

- Providing answers to specific questions, only some of which may be asked by the policymaker.
- Providing a framework—an illumination of the forces at work and the factors that bear on them—that allows the policymaker to understand an issue and to process new information.
- Where appropriate, to warn.

The four “essences” of intelligence writing flow directly from the three dealing with the mission. The table summarizes the differences between academic and intelligence writing.

**The Difference Between Academic and Intelligence Writing**

Academic	Intelligence
Focus on the PAST	Focus on the FUTURE
Written for EXPERTS with no responsibility to act	Written for GENERALISTS struggling with real problems
Detailed, proof-laden	Essentials only, meaningful characterizations
Short on conclusions with a tendency to summarize	Begins with conclusions and explores their implications

Intelligence writing focuses on the future and it is not enough to marshal the facts. A new analyst who was struggling to make the transition from academe captured this problem best. In college, she just gathered all the facts and “the conclusions just fell out.” Many are under the misimpression that the primary goal of intelligence writing is to discover truth or set the record straight, and as a result, the first instinct is to lay out in loving detail how the present situation evolved.

Managers need to impress on new analysts that because what people believe to be true is often more important than what is, discovery of the facts alone is insufficient for and occasionally immaterial to the real job of analysis—thinking about the future. Students become analysts when they stop thinking in terms of what happened and start thinking in terms of what the facts mean. Many just never seem to make this transition.

Intelligence is written for generalists who are grappling with real problems. One of the hardest things for new analysts to grasp is the nature of their audience. Unlike the situation in which they now find themselves, they are used to writing for professors and academics who demand detail and who are under no obligation to do anything with the information. New people are also slow to realize and often doubt another truth—that after a few months on the job they are among the most knowledgeable people in the government on a particular issue, and for the first time in their lives, they are writing for an audience that

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knows less than they do. They must be taught that their new audience, unlike their professors, does not judge the value of a product by its length, devotion to detail, or complexity. Nor is a well-told tale enough. New hires need to learn that the value of a paper is proportional to its clarity, brevity, and focus on issues.

**Intelligence writing is the art of the meaningful characterization.** New analysts resort to "data dumps" for two basic reasons: they do not know what is important so they include everything; or they believe piling up detail is the best way to demonstrate their expertise, a lesson learned in college. The manager has to impress on the new analyst that the "art of intelligence" is identifying the important in the mountain of detail. While reporters describe the situation, analysts characterize it by making meaningful generalizations that help the reader put events in perspective and think about them. Analysts reconcile conflicting information, isolate the principle in a sea of data, and recognize the exception that demands a reevaluation.

**Intelligence writing begins with the conclusions and then explores their implications.** The idea of going beyond the evidence is new for many new analysts. Academic writing rarely reaches this point; what passes for "conclusions" is more often than not a summary of the preceding pages. In college good students learn by design or default to focus on how situations develop and fit the evidence into intellectual constructs that are more descriptive than predictive. Managers must retrain them to think in terms of "this is the situation; these forces are at work; this is what it means."

This is a very difficult transition for many people. The other elements of intelligence writing can be learned. I am less sure about this one. It seems to go to the core of the thought process. People seem either to have the ability to do it, or they do not. Some are clearly uncomfortable with ambiguity and always seek a little more information before writing. Others draft but cannot move beyond the evidence or reach intellectual closure on an issue, perhaps because they are afraid of being wrong. In any case, the ability to think beyond the evidence and to explore the implications of a situation is the *sine qua non* of intelligence analysis.

#### A Framework for Analysis

In addition to hammering home what the new analyst is supposed to be doing and how it differs from what he has done in the past, the manager needs to provide a concise and simple scheme of how to produce analysis. A "how to" diagram accomplishes a number of things. It helps reduce anxiety by giving the new hire a crutch to lean on. It starts the individual off in the right direction. It reinforces the message of the three missions and the four essences. And, it gives the manager and the analyst a common vocabulary and a framework for critiquing fledgling efforts.

The production of finished intelligence can be presented as a four-step process:

- Identifying the intelligence issue within the topic.
- Identifying the questions that need to be addressed.

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- After completing the research, identifying the two or three key points the policymaker is to take away from the paper.
- Drafting, using questions to organize the paper.

**Step one:** identify the intelligence issue within an intelligence topic. Or, deal with the "Great Title Trap." Ask a new analyst what he is writing about and odds are you will get a reply along the lines of "corruption in China" or "defense strategy in the 1990s" or "Soviet activity in the Third World." And what you get is everything about Soviet activity in the Third World starting with Afghanistan and proceeding through Zimbabwe.

Too often the manager must bear the responsibility for the data dump or the rambling draft that lands on his desk. The sad fact is that most new analysts really do not know what they are writing about. They are researching a title given to them—a problem compounded by the fact that most titles are constructed more with an eye to snagging the reader's interest than conveying the substance of the paper. I am convinced that more papers go wrong for this reason than any other.

The solution is to teach the analyst that the first step is to identify specifically what it is he is writing about. Introducing the concept of a difference between an intelligence topic and an intelligence issue is helpful in this regard. An intelligence *topic* is a broad question of interest, such as Soviet activity in the Third World. An intelligence *issue* is a development or something new and different that narrows the topic and gives a focal point to the paper. There is a simple test: an issue phrase will convey a sense of change or movement or activity; a topic will not.

Examples may help clarify this subtle, but important, distinction. Sino-Soviet relations is an intelligence topic but it is not an issue. The significance of China's expanding economic relations with the Soviet Union for Western investors in China, or the implications of the Gorbachev succession for Soviet policy toward China are issues. Sino-North Korean relations is an intelligence topic; the improvement in Sino-North Korean relations and what it means for China is an intelligence issue.

The purpose of making this fine distinction is to get the analyst to stop and think about what he is attempting to do before he attempts to do it. The new hire is not going to be able to make this distinction; the ability to identify intelligence issues is one of the things that separates the apprentice analyst from the adult of the species. It is the manager's responsibility to insure that the analyst knows exactly what he is working on.

**Step two:** identify the questions. An intelligence issue is still too broad to provide the new analyst much help. He needs something to guide him as he reads files and gathers information.

One answer is to break the intelligence issue into a series of general questions. To do this, the new analyst should be encouraged to step into the policymaker's shoes and ask himself: what do I want/need to know about this issue? The questions should flow from the intelligence issue; if they do not, the purpose of the paper is probably not clear. Using the Sino-North Korean issue

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as an example, a policymaker probably would want to know: have warmer Soviet-North Korean relations caused cooler Sino-North Korean relations, or is it more complicated than that; are the Chinese concerned; what steps has Beijing taken to change the situation; is the Chinese leadership divided on the issue; what would China like to have happen; what is Beijing doing about it; is it working; what do the Chinese expect from the United States? The first cut at this should be a spontaneous, stream of consciousness exercise. The analyst can then weed and consolidate the list.

The list of questions serves to sharpen the focus of the paper. The new analyst now knows "what's in" and "what's out," for instance, whether he needs to be concerned about Soviet-North Korean economic relations. The list also tells him what he should be looking for as he reads files, and once that is done, it helps him identify intelligence gaps and write requirements. Because the analyst now knows what information is relevant, it should also speed up the research and prevent the indiscriminate collection of data.<sup>4</sup> The questions may change as the analyst does the actual research, but this only serves to define the paper more precisely.

As with identifying the intelligence issue, the manager will have a major input in identifying the questions, and the new analyst should be encouraged to touch base with his counterparts at State, Defense, and elsewhere. But, it is important that the analyst take the first cut and actually put the questions down on paper. The exercise furthers three goals: it gets the analyst thinking in terms of an audience; it heightens sensitivity to policy relevance; and it gets the analyst thinking in terms of something besides what happened.

With the questions at hand, the analyst can do the research.

**Step three:** after completing the research, identify the two or three key points the policymaker is to take away. This is the most important step in the process. At this point, the task for the new analyst is to: (1) digest his research, (2) decide what he knows, and (3) put down in a short paragraph or as bullets the two or three key ideas to impress on the reader. Point three is the analytical bottom line, the essence of the paper and probably the heart of the prospects or outlook section. If an analyst cannot summarize concisely his bottom line, he has not done the analysis. If he starts to write before determining his bottom line—the hope that the conclusions will fall out of the facts—he almost certainly will never have one.

It is, of course, a very big step from what you know (2) to what it means (3). How do we get the analyst there? The analyst cannot get there unless he first decides what it is he knows. The manager's function, then, is to get the novice to answer explicitly—if only in his mind—the questions outlined in step two.

That done, the analyst is in a position to go beyond the evidence—to think about what the answers mean. The preferred methodology is to use questions to think the issue through, questions designed to bring out the implications of

<sup>4</sup>I have few illusions about this point. At a minimum, it reduces the excuse for prolonged and indiscriminate research.

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the facts. I just happen to have a set of generic questions with me. Having digested the research, the analyst reflects on:

- What is new or what is being done differently?
- Why is it occurring?
- What are the goals and/or broader concerns of the principal actors?
- What factors influence success or failure? Are the actors aware of these factors? Do they have a strategy/program to deal with the factors?
- What are the prospects for success, and more important, what are the implications for the actors, their broader concerns, the United States, and other countries?
- Where do the principal actors go from here?

By preaching these questions the manager gets the analyst to focus on the "big picture." The questions cannot—must not—be answered by restating the facts. The questions get at the processes and call out for generalizations, the essence of good finished intelligence. The key points the analyst wants to impress on the reader—the "3" —is a distillation of this thought process.

An example may help clarify this. An analyst working on the Sino-North Korean paper might ask:

- What has changed in Chinese-North Korean relations?
- Why has it changed? Is it just because North Korean-Soviet relations have improved or is there something else that accounts for both developments?
- What would Beijing like to have happen?
- Does Beijing have a strategy for achieving its goals? What factors will shape success or failure? Does Beijing appreciate these factors?
- What are China's chances of success? What happens if the Chinese succeed, if they fail? What is the US stake in this? Other nations'?
- Where do the Chinese go from here?

When [ ] did this paper<sup>5</sup> the process yielded three key points to impress on the reader: China's always suspect leverage over North Korea is eroding; China has few options other than continuing present policies, which are not working well; and China sees US actions as the key to recovering its influence in North Korea.

**Step four:** draft using questions to organize the paper. The final step should be the easiest. Once the analyst knows the two or three key ideas he wants to make, the task is to organize the material in a way that makes the points most effectively. The best papers are those that are organized into sections that address what policymakers want to know and need to know. The questions used in step three often can be used to organize the draft.

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**Does It Work?**

Yes and no.<sup>6</sup> The four-step process will not make bad analysts adequate. But it does help the learning process:

- It provides a common framework and language for managers and new hires.
- By helping new people think about the process of writing finished intelligence, it improves their ability to master what is an art rather than a science.
- It can be used to explain to analysts why a particular draft is deficient and offers guidance on how to fix a sick draft.
- It gets the new analyst focused on the consumer and US policy questions.
- It stresses that intelligence is interpretation of fact, not the recitation of fact.

The merits of the system outlined here aside, the manager, and especially the new manager, needs to develop his/her own plan for training analysts.<sup>7</sup> The art of analysis is, or should be, second nature by the time individuals are tapped for managerial positions. It may be particularly difficult to communicate to someone just how you do it, unless you take the time to reflect on what works for you and how best to get those ideas across. A system makes the manager's job easier, it standardizes training across the unit, and it allows the manager to test different approaches in a systematic way.

Whatever he develops, the manager must do a number of other things to make the tool useful. It is especially important to discuss the differences between academic writing and intelligence with the new analyst, and lay out for the new hire what the manager looks for in a good piece. This personal philosophy of intelligence plants a suspicion that there is indeed a method in your madness and that not all you do is managerial capriciousness. The discussion also serves to establish the standards you will hold the new analyst to. Mentors are fine, but the new hire needs to know what the manager thinks.

There is no substitute for practice. The more a new hire writes, the sooner he will master intelligence writing. This has to be coupled with a careful reading of the finished product, but for style and organization rather than substance. The new analyst should be given examples of particularly good papers, and the manager should discuss with the novice what makes the paper exceptional.

Correctly handling the first paper is also critical. The manager should go over each of his editorial changes with the new hire, explaining clearly why each was made. This may be more guidance than the analyst wants at times, but it is an essential part of the teaching process.

<sup>6</sup> Come on. You know that is as good as it ever gets.

<sup>7</sup> The system outlined in this article works for me because it is my style. Perhaps the quickest way to go wrong is to try to apply it without adapting it to your personality.

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Finally, the manager has to dredge up from his own psyche the long suppressed feelings of frustration and anger that accompanied his own learning process. Uniformly, our new hires were very successful in college, doing something that looks very much like what we do. In many cases, you will be the first person ever to tell them their work does not measure up. It is a truly traumatic experience for many when that first draft comes back. Some will not even hear you at first—a good reason for also putting your comments on paper—when you start explaining the changes; they are too busy wondering if they are a failure or are about to be fired. In this situation, there is no substitute for positive reinforcement, patience, and a little judicious handholding. Stress what is right and find a way to say that their experience is typical and not all that different from yours. It is at this point that the framework for analysis can be helpful in pointing out what works, what does not, and why.

A little luck helps, too.

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