

Intelligence in Public Media

Communicating with Intelligence: Writing and Briefing for National Security (3rd edition)

M. Patrick Hendrix and James S. Major (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2022), 310 pages, appendix.

Reviewed by Michael J. Ard

Communicating with Intelligence fulfills a basic need in intelligence studies by providing a comprehensive and common-sense guide for the aspiring or apprentice intelligence analyst. The first two editions by James Major covered just about every aspect of issues of writing and briefing intelligence products. I am aware of no other book that does as thorough a job.

M. Patrick Hendrix of The Citadel Military College has ably updated this third edition, making the current volume about one hundred pages shorter than the second edition by consolidating a few chapters and eliminating some add-on material. The new book is leaner but no less substantive.

Some educators might prefer the longer version, with its appendices on style and better word choices, and I do miss some of the touches of the second edition, such as Stephen King's advice to "Read a lot and write a lot." But I see virtue in the new volume's compactness. Surely the author reasoned that what's been cut, such as the citation section, probably can be found in various agencies' style guides.

The book offers good guidance to its readers, reminding them that analysis is not just about forecasting (apologies, Dr. Philip Tetlock) but also about interpreting problems and supporting decisionmakers. *Communicating with Intelligence* also highlights the important differences between academic and intelligence writing, which can be a significant hurdle for many recent graduates.

The book hammers away at the "Bottom Line Up Front" writing style, even leading off each chapter in this manner. This approach will probably be welcomed by newcomers, who need to learn how to "lead with their strongest punch." Analysts are not mystery writers, dropping clues. "Organizing your paper around questions" and "pointing your paper in one direction" sound like the advice of my first mentor in the CIA's then Directorate of Intelligence. The book also urges its reader to focus on the future and think in estimative terms. An important chapter in the book, carried over from the previous editions, gives

advice on "prewriting"—drafting without worrying about perfection—which will help many junior analysts to overcome the real problem of writer's block.

To illustrate its themes, the new edition makes excellent use of declassified intelligence products, especially excerpts from the 2007 Iran nuclear weapons program National Intelligence Estimate and other declassified products. These work well for new analysts who have had little exposure to what finished intelligence looks like. Reflecting current anxieties, the new book highlights a joint intelligence bulletin on lethal domestic extremism.

The new edition of *Communicating with Intelligence* offers a short chapter on structured analytic techniques (SATs). It is interesting that the original author James Major ignored these thinking tools in his earlier editions. The new inclusion reflects the recent educational and US Intelligence Community trend in encouraging SATs to produce analysis. The chapter highlights common techniques such as brainstorming, indicators and warning, devil's advocacy—the later technique all but obsolete these days—and analysis of competing hypotheses. More esoteric methods can be explored on one's own. In this reviewer's opinion, it might be appropriate, especially for junior analysts, to mention some pitfalls of these techniques, especially if they are relied on too heavily for overcoming bias.

The book deals ably with new research methods, particularly the use of social media and its many hazards, such as disinformation and false accounts. The new edition could make more mention on the legal statutes and rules governing the monitoring of social media accounts by government agencies. Future editions doubtless will focus more on the role of artificial intelligence in conducting intelligence research.

Given that *Communicating for Intelligence* aims at the writing process, it might have benefited from a chapter on how to work with peer feedback, and importantly, how to work with editors. Intelligence analysts, wherever they are, are writing for a bureaucracy with an emphasis on

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consensus, and they must know how navigate through an often lengthy review process while preserving the main analytic message.

The book retains its former valuable section on briefing skills. The only thought I offer is that what often works in briefing civilian policymakers (focus on the bottom line) might fail for other military or commercial audiences, who demand greater detail. Likewise, learning how to read a room—and how to cut material on the fly—is an essential skill that probably only comes with harsh experience.

In closing, the book includes in its appendix a memo written in 1983 by CIA Director William Casey’s adviser Herb Meyer on “Why is the World So Dangerous?” I’m glad the author decided to include this essay in alternative analysis. New analysts need to grasp the message that, 40 years ago, the intelligence community also confronted daunting challenges, but as Meyer noted, our Soviet adversaries had their own problems too, and that their fortunes could change quickly. A good message for these uncertain times.



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