

Interview with James Major – Author of Communicating with Intelligence

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Interviewee: James Major

Interviewers: Sean Campbell and Scott Swigart of [Cascade Insights](#)

Link to: [Communicating with Intelligence](#) and James upcoming book – [Writing Classified and Unclassified Papers for National Security](#)

Topics Covered:

- [The positive and negative aspects of technology in communication](#)
- [Zeroing in on the meaning in a large document, as a writer or as a reader](#)
- [Placing appropriate gravity upon your point of view](#)
- [Attributing information to direct or indirect sources](#)
- [Improving the quality of one's writing](#)
- [The value of collaborating with different personality types](#)

Scott Swigart: To get us started, could you please take a minute to introduce yourself? To frame that introduction, there's a lot of stuff out there on collection and analysis, but we'd really like to take advantage of your insights into how you communicate results to people once that analysis is done.

James Major: I joined the Army in 1963 as an infantry officer, but I decided that I didn't want to spend twenty years running up and down hills, so I branch transferred to military intelligence in 1966, which at that time was called Army Intelligence and Security.

I spent twenty years in that profession, most of it in tactical and strategic intelligence, largely with the Defense Intelligence Agency. I was trained as a foreign area officer in Indonesia, and I studied the language for a year in Monterey, California, then got a master's degree in Southwest Asian studies, focusing on Indonesia.

I spent a year in the country as a student at the Indonesian Army Command and General Staff College, and then I came back to the Defense Intelligence Agency, where they put me in charge of the Korea desk.

It was a fascinating tour, and I gained a lot of insight into strategic intelligence through DIA, and then back and forth to Europe in the 5th U.S. Corps, where I did tactical intelligence work.

Throughout my career, I found myself writing a great deal and giving briefings, and I found that I liked to focus on the presentation aspects of my work. Many of my colleagues and my subordinates came to me for help, and I just kind of gathered experiences over the years.

I reported to the Defense Intelligence College in 1985, and I spent three years there teaching writing and briefing. When I retired from the Army in 1988 as a lieutenant colonel, I became the head of the writing center at what was then the Joint Military Intelligence College. It's now called the National Defense Intelligence College.

Throughout my twenty years with the Joint Military Intelligence College, I taught writing and briefing, ran the writing center, and helped students write. I found that there were unique requirements for the intelligence community, to teach the type of writing that we needed to do.

I sat down in 1986 to write a book, and the first words that came out of my IBM Selectric typewriter were a quotation to the effect that we can collect all the information in the world—gather rooms full of it—but unless we effectively communicate it to someone, we've wasted our time.

That's what I focused the book on, and over the course of my twenty years at the college, I wrote another fourteen books, all of which were published by the government. When I retired from government service in 2005, I decided to work on a book for the community, to be published outside. My colleague Jan Goldman put me in touch with Scarecrow Press.

Scarecrow has been just wonderful, helping me through every aspect of it, and



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Next Committee Meeting:
October 6th at 8am at the Bijou Cafe.

Next in person event:
October 13th - Jake's Grill @ 8am.

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the book hit the street last April. I do have another book coming out at the end of December, which is basically a style guide for writing papers in the national security community.

Sean Campbell: You mentioned hammering things out on the typewriter. I suppose you've seen an interesting evolution of technology and media used to communicate intelligence summaries—from typewriters to YouTube, as it were.

Where have you seen great advantages from new communication technologies, and where have you seen them act more as a detriment? We've certainly all seen great communication advantages from the Internet, for example, and we've also seen horrible PowerPoint.

James: That's true. I think I should write another book on that.

[laughter]

Thermobaric bombs—bunker busters—have been around for a while now. They operate in part by sucking all the air out of enclosed spaces. I've sat through my share of what I call "thermobaric briefings."

[laughter]

I don't know if I coined that term, to be honest, but I find that the most effective briefings and written pieces are the ones that best exhibit clarity and conciseness, which are the first two points I cover in my book.

I've seen briefings thirty or forty minutes long that were nonetheless concise, because they stayed on point and they focused on two or three major points. Likewise, I've seen much shorter ones that seem interminable, because people stray off on tangents or pad the briefing with unnecessary detail.

The National Defense Intelligence College is an accredited, degree-granting institution, and graduate students are required to write a thesis. I have seen theses that were written up to five, six, eight hundred pages that were well done, because of the documentation and the information they contained. I've also seen master's theses of less than a hundred pages that really were tight and well written.

An effective intelligence paper, on the other hand, can't be a hundred pages long and really get its point across. It has to have all the basic ideas right up front, and that's why I start every chapter of my book with a summary of the main points covered in that chapter.

Sean: Right—there's always a tension between the need to be concise and the need to justify your conclusions adequately. One approach to solving that is to write in layers, such as using an executive summary, followed by the full analysis, and then the raw data. That lets people quickly get to the core conclusions and then dig down as far as they want.

What kinds of advice do you give people to provide a balance between the need to support their conclusions without ballooning their documents up to ten thousand pages?

James: You hit it right on the head there, with the idea of an executive summary. That's one of the things I taught regularly—the use of executive summaries and/or key judgments.

Let the busy reader know right up front what the main points are in the paper or briefing. It may sound trite to say, "Tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you told them." Still, that's sound advice, and I used that technique in writing the book, because they need to know what's coming up, so that their mind listens to it.

The human mind is very compartmentalized, and we tend to think logically, for the most part, especially in our business. The mind searches for answers in a logical fashion, so it makes sense to have the main points up front, and then if someone has more time, they can read a deeper level of detail.

There's another point to be made there: using headings and subheadings well helps the reader find his way through a written document much more easily.

Sean: You make interesting points in the book about different ways to approach getting the meaning out of a long, detailed document. I think we all deal with this challenge, when we are faced with a thousand pages of documentation to get through, and it must be particularly daunting in the intelligence community.

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What kind of techniques do you use to quickly analyze meaning within a document? I understand that in the end, you may read the document in its entirety, but in that initial phase, what are some of the things you do to dig into the document quickly?

James: That's a good question. I tend personally to be a bottom-up style of reader and editor; that is, I read words and sentences first and then go back to get more meaning. In approaching big documents, I had to retrain myself, because if I did that with a three-hundred-page master's thesis for example, I would never have been able to retire. I'd still be sitting there reading it.

[laughter]

The idea is to get an idea of what the thing is about first. I used to tell my students, "When I ask you what your paper's about, don't say, 'Well, it's about a hundred pages.' You tell me in twenty-five words or less, like a screenwriter does when he pitches an idea to a producer in Hollywood."

In a well-written piece, the writer should posit right up front what it's all about, so I can look at that, and then I skim through the paper as a whole to be sure that headings and subheadings approach that topic logically. Then I go back and fill in the details.

I confess that I do have some trouble reading documents that have errors in them, and I tend to correct errors before I really read for substance. That said, I do outline, as you mentioned, several processes in the book for approaching a paper top-down, bottom-up, and inside-out, as well as specifically what to look for to support those approaches.

Sean: To use an intelligence-oriented example, even though the situation is relevant elsewhere as well, what about the situation where the Pakistan analyst walks in and says, "Pakistan will take over the world," and then ten minutes later, the next person walks in and says, "Indonesia will take over the world?"

How do you balance that fine line between not overselling what you have, but at the same time making sure that its relevance comes through, when you're managing just a small piece of someone's competitive or a strategic environment?

Of course, the question is relevant to both parties in the conversation. The person taking the information has to figure out how to filter it effectively, and the person submitting it has to avoid over-selling it, even though they may be very highly invested in the topic, which they might have researched for weeks or months or years.

James: That dynamic has very serious consequences; think of the questions about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Some analysts said that those weapons existed, and others said they didn't.

That's why policy makers and decision makers are paid the money they are—sometimes they have to make these decisions based on incomplete or even conflicting information. Our job as intelligence professionals is to provide them the best estimate we can based on the information we have.

I found in my 42 years with the government that it was very rare when we could speak in absolute terms. We would speak in terms of indications, and we would present those indications.

Years ago, my corps commander in the 5th U.S. corps stopped me during my presentation and said, "Did you just use the word 'intention?'" I had to stop and think and say, "Well, I'm not certain sir, I might have." He said, "You don't ever talk about intentions. You tell me what they're capable of, and we'll work on what they might be doing."

It may seem like a cop-out when we talk only about capabilities, but when we forecast someone's intentions, we're talking about what they're planning to do, which in many cases, they might not even know themselves. We're trying to crawl inside their skin and think like they do and then make a decision based on that.

Scott: Every intelligence guy at some point gets called in to do a briefing with people senior to him, whether it's in government service or in private practice. What advice or stories do you have about things really going wrong when the senior people are in the room and it's time for them to present their findings?

James: I think it was 1973 or 1974 that I was called upon to brief the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I developed a briefing and before I got to that four-star admiral, I had given the briefing 13 times, and it had changed

every single time.

When I gave it to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, it was almost back to what I had started with 13 briefings earlier.

[laughter]

So there are judgment calls involved. One of the biggest mistakes that the government makes, especially the military services—although it's an absolutely unavoidable mistake—is moving people around so often.

In every job I ever had, I spent the first year learning. By the second year, I was beginning to contribute. By the third year, I may not have been an expert, but I was at least knowledgeable in the subject matter, to the point where I could help people who were calling to ask for information about it.

The experience factor plays a role in both written documents and in briefings. It's vital to be able to gauge the audience and respond appropriately. Most often, we are told by our superiors, "This is who you're going to brief, you have this much time, and this is how you're going to do it." There's typically some wiggle room, though, and that's where experience comes in.

Sean: In terms of sourcing and information, you have an interesting example in the book about a statement like "500 trucks crossed the Peruvian border." You point out how important it is to identify the source; did it come from a New York Times reporter whose source was himself a secondary source?

Statements like that are often written as facts, but in the newspaper scenario here, we may not actually know whether they were Budget rental trucks, military trucks, paramilitary trucks, or tourists on vacation.

What techniques have you found to tease out over-reliance on secondary or tertiary sources, as well as ways you have developed to educate summary authors about source analysis?

In the business world, reading industry and trade publications, you often get the sense that the writer is just summarizing other news sources, without any actual contact with primary sources. It seems to me that clarifying sources is an area where a lot of writers neglect important information.

James: People need to know and convey to their audience just how far removed they are from the source. If I'm looking out my window at a busy intersection where I can see people run the stop sign every two or three minutes, I can tell the police for sure what I saw.

On the other hand, the police have only my word for it until they come and see for themselves. It can be reported in our local newspaper that Jim Major saw 14 cars today run the stop sign, but the story may be based on hearsay from the police report. Someone who reads that story may assume more credibility than what is actually there.

It's important to convey to your reader or listener the number of layers in that chain of sources. I believe that just the procedure of asking that question makes people better analysts.

Scott: We've talked about the value of providing an executive overview, good topic headings, and as few errors as possible in the text. What are some of the other relatively easy things that most people could do tomorrow to improve their writing or presentations?

James: One piece of advice that I always gave my students and that I do myself is to let someone else read your writing. I say in the book that we are our own worst editors, because in reading our own material, we see things that are not there, and we don't see things that are there.

Hand it to a disinterested observer, and ask them to read it for clarity and correctness. Is it clear, does it make sense, and can you find any glaring errors? What I find too often is that people will hand a piece of their writing to someone and say, "Will you look this over for me?"

One can look over a piece of writing simply by glancing at it, which is unlikely to help. Ask them to do specific things, like editing, proofreading, and looking for structure and clarity. People are reluctant to do that, because they tend to think of their writing as their baby that they've been working on, which makes them hate the idea of constructive criticism.

I've always found that the definition of constructive criticism is that which you give to someone else. It's very hard for one to accept criticism of his own work as constructive. But, for the most part, you've got to get past the thin skin and

allow the criticism.

Sean: What is the thing, looking back on your career, that is the hardest for students to get, even though you absolutely need to get it across to them?

James: With the master's thesis, students have the most trouble with the hypothesis. In most intelligence writing, there is at least an implied hypothesis—what the paper is going to try to prove. That is notwithstanding the fact that I tell my students that we don't really prove anything, if you think in terms of a court of law, we try to offer a preponderance of evidence to support our claim.

My students were a combination of military and civilian mid-level intelligence professionals. Many of them had been in the career for seven to 10 years, and some up to 20 years already. Still, they were reluctant to make claims, and they simply wanted to repackage information. That is what we are used to in our business—taking something that other people have done and repackaging it.

I try to get them to look at everything that's already out there and then to stick their necks out. I stand by the "behold the turtle" approach. "Behold the turtle. He never makes progress until he sticks his neck out." So, stick your neck out, make a hypothesis or claim, and then support it with evidence. And don't ignore evidence to the contrary—offer a rebuttal against it.

Scott: There are a lot of people out there who have been conditioned not to stick their necks out and make any claims. They have decided that the sanest course is just to regurgitate and summarize existing information.

Of equally limited value are people who make decisions based on very little evidence and then really just look for evidence that supports that conclusion. How do you counsel people in terms of skills that can help them remain open to new evidence?

James: I am going to digress a bit here, but bear with me.

Early in my career, just from idle interest, I took the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. I found that, by knowing myself and my own tendencies, I was able to become stronger. I learned, for example, that I want closure. There may be a lot of evidence, but I start saying, "OK that's it, I want to reach a conclusion. Let's close this matter."

On the other hand, the man I worked for at the college found out from the indicator that his tendency is to want to keep options open. That lets him use my personality type to his advantage in helping him seek closure, and by the same token, I could lean on his strength of keeping options open and get a few more options that way.

Sean: We have discussed in other conversations the value in competitive intelligence of having team members that represent a kind of Yin and Yang. An analytical person and a human factors person can complement each other's capabilities in a strong way.

It's rare to find one person who exhibits both those skills, but a really good intelligence summary is usually built up of people who have those separate skills. That sounds a bit like what you're getting at.

James: Exactly.

Scott: At some point, you're going to have a blind spot, and you need to find somebody who can fill in that blank for you. That implies that constructive criticism during the writing process can benefit from handing your document to someone who has a very different temperament for reviewing the analysis and weighs different factors differently, if you really want to get a great intelligence summary in the end.

James: That is a very, very helpful thing to do. If you can find such a person and they're willing to do it, you can complement each other greatly in the process of turning out intelligence. It's a matter of knowing oneself, knowing those strengths and weaknesses, and relying on both.

Sean: We very much appreciate you taking the time for the interview. We really had a lot of fun doing it.

James: Well, so did I, and I appreciate your interest not only in the book, but the information contained in it. So, thank you very much.

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