



Top Secret #1: How I learned to write

My first position with the Central Intelligence Agency was as a political analyst. The official CIA website describes analysis jobs as:

“Collaborative. Problem-solvers. Critical thinkers. These are the qualities needed for CIA analytic positions. The ability to study and evaluate sometimes inconsistent and incomplete information and provide unique insights that help inform decisions.”

The website offers more about being a political analyst at CIA:

“You will support policymakers by producing and delivering written and oral assessments of the domestic politics, foreign policy, stability, and social issues of foreign governments and entities. Your analysis will examine these actors' goals and motivations, culture, values, history, society, decision making processes, and ideologies in the context of how those elements affect US interests and national security.”

For the first five years of my career, I did just that and it was a terrific introduction to not only the US intelligence community and US military but also to the challenges of international diplomacy. Information from multiple sources crossed my desk. I had to sift through the details to find patterns and motivations. Sometimes the salient points were clear as a bell. Other intelligence questions were much harder to answer.

Former CIA Director (and Secretary of Defense) Leon Panetta, writing in *WORTHY FIGHTS*, put it this way:

“In the real world of intelligence . . . breakthroughs are the result of patient and resolute work, the slow accumulation of facts, each of which may seem ambiguous but that collectively add up to a hypothesis.”

As an analyst, I sat at the intersection of multiple streams of information and had to make sense of it for decision makers. The raw information was often spotty, unreliable, or unpredictable. Teamwork was imperative.

Analysts connect with counterparts in other government agencies and the military, consulting and often collaborating. I became close friends with a State Department officer who made baby

quilts when my children were born. I also had a bit of a crush on a Marine colonel who headed up a community-wide task force (this was before I was married, ahem).

Being an analyst meant writing in a disciplined style and specific formats, including for the Presidential Daily Brief, which David Priess wrote all about in *THE PRESIDENT'S BOOK OF SECRETS: The Untold Story of Intelligence Briefings to America's Presidents*. A bit of an academic tome, but with great historical vignettes.

I have to credit one of my first bosses with teaching me how to write. As opposed to academic writing, which usually follows a *fact-fact-fact-conclusion* format, intelligence publications—for readers who are perpetually pressed for time, like the Secretary of State—follow a *key-judgments-fact-fact-fact* format. I was fresh out of grad school, buoyed by my Master's thesis and successful defense of it at a major academic conference. Switching my mindset was tough. I will always remember Jerry, who was partial to plaid sport coats and running around the office in his socks, taking the time to coach me.

Now as a mystery and thriller author, I really appreciate how being a CIA analyst forced me to become a disciplined writer. I learned how to construct an argument and create useful outlines. There was no waiting for the “muse” to strike before getting down to work.

But that *fact-fact-fact* drumbeat has proven hard to shake. I may be writing fiction now, but often find it a struggle to be humorous, use pop culture references, or drop qualifiers like “almost certainly.”

But I'm almost certainly trying.

Top Secret #2: The importance of having a “Coup Kit”

My official resume says this about my time as an all-source analyst in the CIA:

Performed all source analysis of geographic topics of intelligence interest in support of US national security, including National Intelligence Estimates

Action officer during 24/7 analytic coverage of coup d'état events in Africa, the South Pacific, and East Asia.

Let me direct you to the phrase “coup d'état.” When you are an intelligence analyst assigned to cover a country, and that country becomes engulfed in civil unrest, a military takeover, etc., you are the person expected to pull all the information together, provide analysis of fast-breaking events, and brief stakeholders, i.e. key decision makers like the President.

The first question to be answered in a coup event was always “Are any Americans in danger?”

If the country is a major US partner or ally, if the US has a national security or geographical interest there, or if someone in the current administration has ties to that country, then there's even more pressure to swiftly assess the situation, distill facts, and provide judgments in written reports and verbal briefings.

When I was an analyst, there were so many coups in Africa, the South Pacific, and East Asia that we developed a checklist of what to do if there was a coup in your country. My boss Jerry, who favored plaid sport coats and ran around in his socks, was an experienced officer who kept a “coup kit” in the office. It was an actual box with checklists, phone numbers, and exemplar reports from previous coup events so when things fell apart in your country and you were called into the office at 2:00 am, you weren't starting from scratch as the phone rang off the hook.

The coup kit also included a blanket and snacks.

Coup d'états aren't always fast. A prolonged coup event could be a grueling marathon of reporting, briefings, targeting planning, and meetings scheduled to coincide when people across the world are awake. Few meetings take place at your desk, but could be held at the State Department, the Pentagon, etc. I recall a particular week-long coup attempt in a country that was an important strategic ally for the US. We worked in three shifts to ensure 24/7 coverage, constantly trying to make sense of fragmentary and conflicting information. Teams had to prep for twice daily video conferences, a stream of ad hoc special reports, and the regular intelligence publications.

Jerry's coup kit was a great lesson in giving yourself the best possible advantage when you know hard things loom ahead. I've tried to adapt that lesson to being a mystery author by developing

systems to streamline my publishing efforts and create repeatable processes. Every so often, I update my writing coup kit with checklists to help me navigate the publishing world and lists of resources to explore.

And snacks.

What's in your coup kit?

Top Secret #3: CIA's Formula for Decoding the News

This is the formula to decode the news I learned as an intelligence officer with the Central Intelligence Agency.

The CIA was never solely about spies meeting in dark alleys. Consider the whole technical realm—from spy planes to listening devices—where I spent the majority of my 30-year career.

To decode the news, you have to understand OSINT. That's shorthand for intelligence gleaned from openly available sources.

First, some background

Open source intelligence collection and analysis got its start in 1941 before Pearl Harbor when the Foreign Broadcast Monitoring Service was created to monitor Axis short-wave radio transmissions and analyze implications.

The new organization, known unofficially as “the Screwball Division,” recruited top linguists, engineers and social scientists. An early headquarters was TEMPO Y, one of the war-time temporary buildings erected on the Mall in Washington DC.

After the war, the renamed Foreign Broadcast Information Service--later the Foreign Broadcast Intelligence Service (FBIS)--was folded into the newly-formed CIA in 1947.

During the Cold War, FBIS primarily focused on state-controlled media in the Soviet Union, East Europe, China, North Korea, Cuba, and other “closed” countries. Its flagship product was the *Daily Report*, a daily collection of critical translations for each country or region. A scholarly analytic newsmagazine called *Trends*, came out weekly.

What it was like to be a media analyst for FBIS

Early in my CIA career, I got the chance to write for *Trends* about messages intended for the US audience hidden in state-controlled Chinese media.

During the Cold War, critical messages were hidden in plain sight in the news coming out of communist countries. News for the domestic audience could be different (remember, there was little other information getting inside the country) than what was broadcast to the foreign audience.

If you dug into the content and knew who mattered in their media organizations you could essentially decode the message.

Certain buzzwords were coded messages to the West. If they appeared in an official briefing or news outlet or were voiced by certain editors known to be a leadership mouthpiece, it carried certain significance. On the other hand, if they were published in something further from the seat of power, say in a Chinese-owned Hong Kong newspaper prior to the takeover, it was more likely to be testing the waters.

Those buzzwords are still around. If a Chinese media outlet refers to “sovereignty,” they’re talking about Taiwan with an implicit warning that no one declare it independent or try to defend it.

Beijing’s new foreign minister, Qin Gang, recently told US Ambassador to China Nicholas Burns that US-China relations needed to “stabilize” after a series of “erroneous words and deeds.”

“The agenda of dialogue and cooperation agreed by the two sides has been disrupted, and the relationship between the two countries has once again encountered cold ice.”

If I was an FBIS media analyst now, I’d be frantically combing the archives to find the last time a senior Chinese official referred to “cold ice.” What actions did the Chinese take in the wake of those words? An economic move? Military?

US policymakers should anticipate a similar action now.

Cold War news redux

Media analysis methodology isn’t merely about code words but also about intentional or selective media behavior.

In the past few years, Western media outlets have adopted characteristics of the closed media that we studied so rigorously. CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, Breitbart, the *New York Times*, *Epoch Times* etc, etc, cater to certain agendas with a variety of techniques.

Look for these indicators:

- Media reports are slanted or shaded a certain way,
- Context or pivotal details are left out (how much and for how long),
- Headlines are vaguely misleading (i.e. clickbait),
- Facts that do not align with the article’s intended slant are buried at the bottom or in long and dull paragraphs,
- Phrasing of the intended message is lively, impactful and emotional; rival concepts are portrayed as dull, dangerous or otherwise unappealing,
- Minor news stories are piled on to obscure/deflect attention from potentially troublesome reporting,

- Specific keywords are used across media so that all outlets project the same message at the same time.
- Multiple news outlets use the same exact terminology to report/downplay/heighten an event.
- Absence of reporting—if certain media outlets completely fail to report on a story or offer only a partial report.
- Imagery is selected to shape opinions—for example, certain politicians are shown as grim by one news outlet and smiling by another.

Use this decoder ring

You can effectively “decode” the news with 5 critical thinking techniques:

1. Go beyond information silos.

Search for a breadth of perspectives on a single topic. Read across party and political lines. Seek out sources you normally would not.

2. Find what’s hidden.

Hunt for contradictions. Compare past and present. Look for repetition of specific words across media outlets.

3. Beware of shiny objects.

Is important real news hidden behind distracting entertainment? Released at midnight on Friday after the weekly news cycle is over? Buried at the bottom?

4. Question vague language & statistics.

Don’t be suckered by vague claims like *35% better!* Better than what? How was that number achieved?

5. Recognize this formula: Problem, Agitate, Solve.

This blog/marketing formula is everywhere. As journalism slides into infotainment and is ad revenue-dependent, look for news reports to use this formula, too.

Last thoughts

No Cold War methodology can beat the best technique of all: Slow down and ask questions.

Questions like . . . Is this true and accurate? How do I absolutely know that? What if I’m wrong? Whose agenda benefits from this piece of information and the way it is presented? Who else is reporting on this story? Is the truth somewhere in the middle?

It usually is.

Author Carmen Amato draws on 30 years with the Central Intelligence Agency to craft crime fiction loaded with danger and deception.

Beginning with *CLIFF DIVER*, the Detective Emilia Cruz series pits the first female police detective in Acapulco against Mexico's cartels, corruption, and social inequality. Optioned for television, it's a two-time winner of the Outstanding Series award from CrimeMasters of America as well as a Silver Falchion award from Killer Nashville.

Standalone books include political espionage thriller *THE HIDDEN LIGHT OF MEXICO CITY*, which was longlisted for the 2020 Millennium Book Award.

Carmen's new Galliano Club historical fiction series was inspired by her grandfather, a deputy sheriff during Prohibition.

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