



# COMBAT VERBALIZATION

**BY GARY  
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**Develop strong verbal tactics  
to round out your arsenal**

**F**or many officers, the concept of combat verbalization may seem to be a contradiction in terms. How can verbalization co-exist with combat? In fact, combat and verbalization are inseparable. This article will examine this critical officer survival relationship, beginning with the following three truisms:

1. All defensive tactics must combine verbalization skills and physical alternatives;
2. You can always disengage and/or escalate in order to take proper police action; and
3. If you're going to shoot, shoot, don't talk.

Combat verbalization is not a new concept. Daniel Vega, a crisis-intervention specialist, began discussing the topic in 1982 in Wisconsin as a part of the statewide defensive tactics program that developed into Defensive and Arrest Tactics (DAAT), the state's standard for training law enforcement officers. He explains, "all defensive tactics must combine verbalization skills and physical alternatives" in order to truly be effective. Officers must learn these psychomotor skills in combination with each other and not as separate training programs. Many

of the current firearm training programs that combine verbal

commands with firearm proficiency and decision-making are based on his groundbreaking work.

As for "you can always disengage and/or escalate in order to take proper police action," officers must be physically trained in the skills both of escalating to higher force options and withdrawing at least temporarily from an incident in order to regain the advantage. Although officers are often told they can attempt to disengage whether on the range or in the defensive tactics arena, most are programmed only to escalate, not to disengage. Simply telling officers they may need to disengage is not enough; they must practice tactical withdrawals to make sure officers possess disengagement skills as a tactical option during combat. Verbalization skills are an important component of this training because prior to and immediately after a physical-force application, verbalization is very important in establishing that the officer's force response was both reasonable and necessary.

The final axiom, "If you want to shoot, shoot; don't talk," deals with knowing when verbalization is inappropriate, has failed or is unsafe.

Many officers place themselves in jeopardy by talking too much or too long rather than too little. There is a time to talk and a time to shoot; your survival depends on your ability to recognize which option to use. Knowing when to stop talking and to start using force is an issue I will examine later in this article.

### **Basic Concepts**

Vega examined six verbalization skills

**During the initial approach, set the tone of the transaction so it doesn't develop into a situation requiring combat verbalization.**



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in his training programs, which include the following:

1. Presence;
2. Dialog;
3. Verbal direction;
4. Officer coordination;
5. Monitoring/debriefing; and
6. Articulation.

### Presence & Dialog

Presence and dialog work together for effective communication. Your body language, along with your words and your tone of voice, are very important. You can diffuse most situations when these verbal skills are used effectively. In fact, an International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) study found 99.5 percent of police contacts were resolved using only verbal tactics. Experienced officers preferred verbal tactics for many reasons. The two most important: 1) the only fight you can't lose is the one you don't have, and 2) the less you fight, the less you write.

With his SAFER 8 to 5 Concept, George Thompson of the Verbal Judo Institute has developed effective verbal tactics for making initial contact with a subject, dealing with resistance and knowing when to shift gears to something besides talk. (For more information about Verbal Judo contact Dr. Thompson through here: [www.verbaljudo.com](http://www.verbaljudo.com).) Establishing initial contact with a subject is called the Tactical 8 Step Pattern and consists of these components:

1. Appropriate greeting;
2. Introduce self/department;
3. Explain reason for contact;
4. Ask whether any justifiable reason exists for the subject's actions;
5. Request identification;
6. Request any needed additional information;
7. Decision stage; and
8. Appropriate close.

Basic verbalization techniques used when making a car stop might go like this: "Good afternoon, I'm Deputy Klugiewicz, Milwaukee County Sheriff's Department. I pulled you over because you didn't stop for the stop sign at 22nd and Scott Street. Is

there any justifiable reason for you not stopping for that stop sign?" This initial approach sets the tone of the entire transaction so it doesn't develop into a situation requiring combat verbalization. However, subjects sometimes choose not to follow your initial courteous and lawful orders. The following outlines Thompson's Tactical 5 Step Pattern, which illustrates an effective way to deal with verbal resistance:

1. Ask;
2. Set context;
3. Give options;
4. Confirm non-compliance; and
5. Take action (disengage and/or escalate).

By asking a subject to do something in an interrogatory tone; setting context (i.e., explaining your legal authority for taking action); and informing the subject of the positive options if they cooperate or the negative options if they don't, you maximize your prospect of resolving the incident without having to escalate to physical force.

Finally and probably most importantly, Thompson's SAFER component offers a guide when words have failed and it's time to disengage and/or escalate in order to take proper police action. SAFER consists of:

1. Security;
2. Attack;
3. Flight;
4. Excessive repetition; and
5. Revised priorities.

### Verbal Direction & Officer Coordination

Once you're justified in taking action, combat verbalization comes into play. With your decision to use physical force, the whole tone and volume of your verbalization change. Where once your body language, tone of voice and words were meant to persuade, your tone now becomes authoritative,

**Five officers employ the Star Tactic.**

and you begin to give verbal commands that combine verbalization skills and physical alternatives, and are designed to generate compliance where communication skills alone did not. All physical intervention tactics, whether empty-hand or weapon-oriented tactics, must be accompa-

## If you are thinking about what you are going to say, it will slow down your trigger pull.

nied by verbal tactics to enhance their effectiveness.

The most effective application of words and physical control techniques progresses like this:

1. Initial verbalization should calm the subject and give them direction. Example: "Sir, just relax and take it easy. You don't need this type of trouble."
2. Verbal direction



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accompanies physical intervention and combines an initial, loud verbal command; rapid, intense application of technique; and simultaneous verbal stunning. Example: “Stay back!” Perform a strong-side knee strike while verbalizing, “Down!”

3. Stabilization commands should follow verbal direction to assist in the maintenance of control.  
*Example:* “Get down on the ground!”

Another important component of combat verbalization is officer coordination, which refers to how officers work together as a team to overcome possible subject resistance through tactical positioning and communication. The simplest example: the contact/cover principle. Officers who arrive on scene take over the role of either contact officer, who handles the initial contact with the subject(s), or cover officer, who protects himself and the contact officer from the initial subject and other subjects who are present or may arrive later.

Besides communicating directly with the subject(s), verbal and non-verbal communication between officers becomes important when several officers must deal with a physically resistant subject. Done properly, officer coordination develops efficient physical and psychological control.

Unfortunately, multiple officers usually don't respond well to a combative subject simply because most officers are more used to working in pairs than together as a team. When five or six try collectively to control a violently resisting subject, they often perform poorly. Team tactics must be part of each officer's basic training. Officers who learn to communicate with each other can work together effectively as a team.

The Star Tactic is one example of team tactics designed originally for the correctional environment that's finding widespread application in the police world as the need for team techniques becomes more recognized. It involves five officers who lift the subject before slowly lowering them to the ground,

which dramatically decreases the severity of subject injuries compared to dynamic takedowns. It also protects officers from self-initiated duty injuries that follow the normal unregulated fall to the ground we refer to as the “crash and burn.”

Once the initial command Star Tactic is given, these commands follow as appropriate:

1. “Secure,” which directs the first two officers to secure the subject's arms;
2. “Levitate,” which directs the third and fourth officers to secure and lift the subject's legs;
3. “Lower,” which directs the fifth officer to secure the head while the team slowly lowers the subject to the ground; and
4. “Stabilize,” which directs the officers securing the arms to sweep the subject's arms behind their back for handcuffing.

#### High-Stress Verbal Commands

Whether an officer can use effective verbalization during a life-and-death confrontation remains an ongoing controversy in law-enforcement training circles. Randy Clifton, an internationally known Simunition Master Instructor, says, “If you are thinking about what you are going to say, it will slow down your trigger pull,” which could interfere with your survival. Therefore, once you make the decision to shoot, stop verbalizing. This is why the contact/cover principle was created. The contact officer does the talking while the cover officer remains silent in order to be a more effective shooter. I agree; if you must think about what to say, your response will slow. However,

simple verbal commands that have become a psychomotor skill, such as shouting “Knife!” when faced with one, does not slow your reaction.

According to Bill Lewinski, law enforcement psychology authority and director of the Force Science Research Center (FSRC) at Minnesota State University—Mankato, “If integrated properly into a patterned, pro-



Photo Gary Monreal

Give stabilization commands as a confrontation winds down.

grammed package, an officer can talk, move and shoot effectively without conscious effort, but it takes training and practice.” But because of tunnel vision, officers believe they are focused during a lethal-force encounter. We narrow our focus to one task or individual, severely compromising our ability to multi-task, which is required for survival in today's deadly-force encounters. In essence, we cannot move, particularly over unfamiliar terrain, get a great sight picture and verbalize all at the same time.

We can address two of these

challenges during training. For instance, if we focus on moving safely while creating a stable shooting platform and verbalizing an effective and simple command, we can learn these tactics well enough that our conscious attention remains free to focus on getting good alignment and a sight picture.

The challenge with verbal skills is to develop and practice commands officers can use universally. Dr. Dan Houlihan and two of his graduate students at the FSRC are evaluating videos of officer-involved shootings to determine the effectiveness of commands in real lethal-force encounters. Although the project has a long way to go, we already have some interesting results. Houlihan has found that during these types of encounters, some officers have repeatedly given "beta" commands, which basically convey little information, particularly to emotionally distraught or emotionally intense individuals. Example: "Don't make me shoot you." It's clearly a warning but gives little direction to the subject during an intense, rapidly unfolding, dynamic and perhaps confusing situation.

"Any command that conveys direction or action to the subject may be better," Lewinski says. "Typical commands of this type would be, 'Drop the knife!' 'Get face down on the ground!' etc. As soon as the research permits, FSRC plans to develop and test the effectiveness of different commands. (For more information, visit [www.forcescience.org](http://www.forcescience.org).)

### Surrender Rituals

Whether the subject follows your verbal commands or requires physical force or weapons, officers must give stabilization commands as a confrontation winds down. These commands are often referred to as the "surrender ritual."

The most common surrender ritual consists of the following verbal commands: "Get down on the ground! Hands out to the side! Palms up! Don't move!" Officers must practice these orders enough to make them a psychomotor skill so they come

naturally in the appropriate setting. The universal police truism "officers perform like they train" applies to both verbal and physical skills.

### Radio Communication

Effective radio communications are another element of combat verbalization. By the time you make your radio call after a high-stress incident, your speech may be rapid, high pitched and unintelligible. Without a great deal of experience, the only way to develop a slow, calm, understandable radio presence is to practice your radio transmissions until they become a psychomotor skill. Based on the nature of the emergency, efficient radio transmissions include:

1. Your identity;
2. The exact location of the event;
3. The nature of the problem;
4. Immediate feedback on the conditions on scene and the offender's status; and
5. Your current condition (i.e., whether you are injured).

### Monitoring & Debriefing

Once you've stabilized the subject and the scene, begin monitoring/debriefing, another component of combat verbalization. This follow-through after the use of force is often overlooked and has been a key focus of liability associated with "failure to render aid" to sick or injured prisoners.

Monitoring/debriefing consists of these steps:

- Calm yourself/partner;
- Calm subject;
- Make initial medical assessment:
  - Determine level of consciousness;
  - Check airway, breathing, circulation (ABCs);
  - Perform body check; and
  - Treat to level of training (activate the EMS system if appropriate).
- Continue to monitor subject; and
- Reassure subject.

Taking care of the prisoner once

the fight is over is an important aspect that demonstrates you and other officers were just doing your jobs and that it was not a personal matter.

### Articulation

Tending to a subject after using force leads us to the combat verbalization tactic that often takes place after the original battle but remains essential to winning the war on the street. Articulation refers to both verbal and written justifications of your use of force, which begins with the way you conduct yourself on the street. Do you create a positive, witness-rich environment? Afterwards, articulation involves report writing and testimony necessary to justify your police action. An officer must be able to explain why they did the right thing. You must be able to educate the jury to the realities of the use of force; then and only then is the incident truly over.

## If you're going to shoot, shoot, don't talk.

### Conclusion

Verbalization tactics play a critical role when you must use force to deal with subject resistance. These tactics begin with your initial contact, transition into your use of force, continue with you rendering aid after the incident and conclude with your explanation justifying your actions. Vega got it right when he stated more than 20 years ago, "All defensive tactics must combine verbalization skills and physical alternatives." **LOM**

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