

Get your chicken strings out of my ditch box



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Over the course of my union career, I've had the opportunity to review many grievance files from all over the country. Back in the late '80s, I worked in my national business agent's office helping prepare NALC grievance files for Step 3 meetings. My job then was to review each file and write a position paper describing what the case was about, what its strong points were, what weak points to watch out for and to recommend a remedy. The NBA or an RAA would then use this to familiarize him or herself with the case before the meeting with management.

This was before most grievance handlers used computers or word processors. Most were handwritten and, to be kind, let's just say that some were easier to read than others. There were different appeal forms for each step of the grievance procedure, each done in quadruplicate with carbon paper between the pages. Sometimes the steward didn't press his or pen or pencil (sigh) hard enough to make it through to the bottom copies. Other times, those who typed their grievances would make corrections using white-out or correction tape (remember those?) on the top sheet, but would forget to correct the three carbon copies. This resulted in an indecipherable mess. I'm sure that the hundreds of LBAs, RAAs and NBAs who handled grievances during those years can relate.

Our region covered six northwest states from Alaska to Utah and everything in between, so there was a wide variety of grievances and almost as wide a variety of writing "styles." Some were easier to decode than others. For the most part, once I was able to figure out what the grievance was about, I had a context to decode the less-than-clear writing, and if I couldn't, I could always call the steward and ask. This happened most often when the steward used words I didn't understand. I'm not talking about big words I could look up in a dictionary or postal jargon; I'm talking about slang.

Most of the jargon I recognized. Jargon is words or phrases that are unique to a particular organization or company and are included as a regular part of communication within that group, but likely not understood by those outside of the group. In the Post Office, jargon would include things like "casing mail," "opting" and "204-b". Nearly every postal employee knows what those mean and those terms can be found in postal handbooks and manuals and in

our contract. For the most part, when writing internally, whether it's a memo, e-mail or a grievance, using jargon is acceptable because the recipient is going to understand what the term means. When writing for the public, such as a letter to the editor of a newspaper or to a member of Congress, postal jargon should be avoided as the terms will not be understood by the readers.

Slang, on the other hand, refers to words and phrases that are more localized. They are not usually found in official communication. In the Post Office, slang would not be found in handbooks or manuals. Some examples of postal slang are terms like: "soup," "shot gun" and "banging out." Some of you reading this article may know what those mean, but I'd venture to guess that most don't or your definitions may differ. Usually, reading them in context helped me to figure out what they meant, but sometimes I'd come across a slang term that would bring me to a screeching halt.

What in the world is a "ditch box"? And what heck are "chicken strings"?

Both of these stopped me cold. I had no idea what the stewards who wrote those grievances were talking about. After re-reading the files several times, I eventually figured them out, but I still phoned the stewards who used those terms to make sure. What I found was that in Butte, MT, a "ditch" is a portion of a park-and-loop route that the M-41 calls a "relay" or a "loop." So, a "ditch box" is what the rest of us call a relay box. In Wenatchee, WA, "chicken strings" are what you put on your tires to avoid slipping on snow-packed roads, aka tire chains. Everyone in the units where those terms are used knows what they mean, but they're a mystery to the rest of us.

The point is, as a writer, you want to keep the reader focused on your message and not spending time figuring out what the words mean. Thus, it makes sense to avoid using slang terms. Instead, use words and terms that are more common. A good rule is to use the terms that appear in postal manuals and handbooks or in the contract and JCAM. Sometimes using slang terms can't be avoided, as when directly quoting someone who used them. In those cases, you should define them for the reader. "The carrier asked the supervisor to 'Get your chicken strings [tire chains] out of my ditch box [relay box].'"

By the way: In Santa Barbara, CA, "soup" is undeliverable mail brought back to the office. A "shotgun" is what carriers in Eastern Oregon call a series of deliveries on a mounted route where the carrier has to dismount from the vehicle to service the mailboxes. "Banging out" is what you are doing when you call in sick in Brooklyn. *Capisce?*