

# Writing notes redux



Philip  
Dine

**F**ebruary’s wintertime helping of broccoli (if that stops you in your tracks, refer back to the column; or ask me) drew some interest, and so in these hot summer days we’ll return to the topic.

What follows are small thoughts on writing and speaking—not grand theories but practical pointers. The purpose: to boost our mission of getting the message out—something letter carriers do better than anyone else in the labor movement. Indeed, for years now, your letters to the editor and commentary pieces, your explanations to reporters, your appearances on radio and TV, have changed the national conversation about postal matters—contributing mightily to

NALC’s success in getting postal reform accomplished.

We have the facts on our side, no small advantage. But communicating those facts and their import in an effective manner lifts our message to a whole other level. We add clarity, efficiency and credibility to the way we express ourselves and it’s off to the races.

How so? We make our meaning clear; readers absorb it without difficulty, and they retain it. We don’t waste words; we have more space/time for what matters. We use the language properly; we gain credibility among readers, listeners and viewers—and editors/producers are more likely to turn to us.

**With that in mind, a few notions, mostly derived from observing the news media, some from editing this magazine:**

- “Unveiled for the first time” is redundant; “unveil” already means to show or announce for the first time. Adding “for the first time” is tantamount to saying, “The union released its goals today initially for the first time.” The word “introduced” is much the same.
- The terms “understate” and “overstate” are interchanged improperly about half the time. Someone who says that it’s difficult to understate the role of unions in promoting a more just society is stating that labor’s role is exceedingly minimal. Tip: If you’re writing about something you feel positively about—that you’re *over* the moon about—you likely mean “overstate.”
- When you’re discussing a hypothetical situation, including the importance of something being done or that you wish to be so, switch from the regular verb form to the subjunctive. For example, “The letter carrier always *is* on time,” but “It’s important that the letter carrier always *be* on time.” Similarly, “In practice, the carrier typically *finds*

a supervisor quickly,” but “It’s vital that the carrier *find* a supervisor quickly.” Or, “Today *is* my day off,” but “I wish today *were* my day off.”

- Writing “comprised of”—as in “The council is comprised of members of various unions”—is always wrong. Replace it with “composed of,” “consists of,” “is made up of” or simply “comprises.” The word “comprise” means “contain” or “consist of”—and saying “comprised of” is like saying “contains of” or even “consists of of.”
- I keep reading (or hearing), including from top-notch journalists: “There are several different reasons for...” Not only is the “different” a wasted word, its use here is absurd. Obviously, the various reasons are different, otherwise there’d be only one reason. Save space, save face.
- There are some nouns/verbs that change syllable emphasis; and getting it right on radio or TV makes a good impression on listeners/viewers. Examples: The PERmit perMITS you to...” “We have a CONflict because our views conFLICT with yours.” Or, “We go into COMbat to comBAT a foe.” I hear the latter (comBAT) as a verb and I’m thinking that’s someone who’s seen combat or who has been well trained. I hear him say COMbat as a verb and I’m thinking “C’mon, man,” rather than listening to what follows.
- It’s always wrong to say, “The reason is because...” It’s always right to say, “The reason is that...”
- “Some of the states include...” makes no sense. We’re saying twice that this is a sample. Say either “Some of the states are...” or “The states include...” Similarly, I often read that a group is focusing on eight states in the fall election, including—followed by the names of eight states. Using “include” suggests that we’re about to give a partial list that cites the key ones or perhaps shows the regional diversity—instead we’re providing the whole shebang. If that’s what we intend to do, just say, “The states are...”
- Write tight. Rather than “Please check to make sure that your time sheet...” say, “Make sure that your time sheet...” or even, “Check that your time sheet...” With the latter, you’ve shed 44 percent of the words, none of the meaning. Similarly, “This will be a benefit to us all” could be “This will benefit us all.”

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