

Writing notes, redux



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Dine**

Every union advocates for its members and their interests in its own way. Building trades unions, for example, engage over contractual matters with the local or national businesses that employ their members. Public opinion is typically not a factor; congressional activity may occasionally be.

Given who we are and whom we represent, NALC advocates in quite different fashion—by seeking to influence the views of lawmakers, which also compels us to reach out to the public, both of which require constant engagement with the media.

That three-pronged nexus of activity is, of course, in addition to the periodic across-the-table contractual bargaining with our employer.

In our whole-of-union efforts to influence the national conversation on postal matters by dialoguing with the pols, the public and the press, two aspects are paramount: our positions, and how we express them.

Our ideas are rock-solid, because they are eminently reasonable, based on facts and provable via empirical data; and because they coincide both with the public interest and, uniquely within the labor movement, with the Constitution.

How we communicate those ideas, how we explain them to our various audiences—Capitol Hill, newsrooms, public square—is vital to our ability to gain support for our positions.

While letter carriers already do this well, such efforts are always subject to improvement. That may be particularly so now with the myriad of issues arising—whether crime and safety, business plan moving forward, staffing or delivery issues—following years of a near-singular focus on postal reform/pre-funding.

We must be nimble and adroit in going from topic to topic while making the case clearly and precisely, whether on TV or radio, in newspapers or online, or in person. That leads to clarity for our audience and credibility for us—which together make what we say more persuasive. And saving space or time through efficient use of words allows us to make other salient points.

With that in mind, here is another installment of language notes. What follows are specific examples, but please ponder what each says more broadly about word usage, grammar's role, sentence construction and strategic choices.

Among and *between* aren't synonyms. There is a dispute *between* labor and management; there are disagreements *among* the states. *Among* is used when more than two entities are involved.

Hyphens can drastically change your meaning. You write *five-digit codes*, and you're talking about a potentially vast array of codes of that specific size. But leave out the hyphen,

and the subject at hand is limited to a total of five codes, of undetermined length.

So can the way you use commas. Consider: *Senators, who are not familiar with postal intricacies, tend to overlook pre-funding's impact.* You are saying that not a single senator is versed in postal matters. You write *Senators who are not familiar with postal intricacies tend to overlook pre-funding's impact*, and you're referring to a subset of senators, maybe as few as a couple, while all the others get it.

Speaking of the power of a comma, there's a story, perhaps apocryphal, about a man sentenced to death centuries ago in Europe and granted his last wish of personally delivering the verdict—*Pardon impossible, to be executed*—to the executioner. Upon being handed the piece of paper containing the sentence, the executioner congratulated the prisoner and promptly set him free. It now read, after all, *Pardon, impossible to be executed.*

Noun and verb agreement aren't bound by proximity. *The variety of choices are unlimited* is wrong; write instead, *The variety of choices is unlimited.*

All synonyms for *says* are not created equal; in attempting to avoid repetition, beware of unintended consequences. *Contends* or *asserts* or *maintains* reflect some doubt on your part; *claims* implies outright skepticism. Meanwhile, *notes* or *observes* suggests that you agree with what's being said. To the extent possible, stick with the neutral *says* or *states*, maybe throw in an occasional *declares* or *remarks*. Never *sub believes*. You know what *you* believe; you can know only what someone else *says* they believe. Same with *thinks*.

Back to hyphens, but here just style, not meaning. Don't write, *The branch president carried mail from 2001-2022—rather, from 2001 to 2022.*

Stronger verbs save space: *Their position is in sharp contrast with ours* is one-third longer and weaker writing than *Their position contrasts sharply with ours.*

So can adverbs: *explaining things clearly and efficiently* is tighter than *explaining things in clear and efficient ways*—thus synchronizing your writing with the content.

Smith's nomination must be approved by the Senate—actually, no, senators get to decide whether to accept or reject the nominee. *Smith's nomination requires Senate approval* is correct, and shorter.

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