

## On writing



**Philip Dine**

**I**n recent columns, we've addressed how to approach media outlets about a letter to the editor or a commentary piece, and how to compose them to best get our message out.

Today, we'll drill down into specific ways to craft your writing so as to get into the newspaper and to connect with readers.

**First, think big. In your first paragraph, or, as it's known in journalese, your lede, don't dive into the details, which without context are off-putting. Give folks the big picture, so they know what they're about to read and why. You have to hook them before you can reach them.**

For example, if you're writing about red ink and operating profit, don't start by asserting facts, as in: *The Postal Service had an operating profit last quarter. The red ink stems from a congressional mandate.*

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Instead, try this: *Even though the U.S. Postal Service is based in the Constitution, delivers to 155 million homes and businesses six days a week and consistently ranks as the public's most-trusted federal agency, misinformation still circulates. Some, unfortunately, was contained in the March 10 article.*

Casting a wide net accomplishes several things. You draw in the reader, who wonders what you're about to tell him. Your piece takes on the tone of a tutorial where learning will take place, and puts the reader in that frame of mind—as opposed to ducking as a bunch of facts are hurled at her. You provide a cautionary lesson—Reader, don't accept everything said about USPS. And, you're subtly imparting fundamentals we want people to know: constitutional roots, extensive reach, public support.

With that, your letter or opinion piece already is a success. And you've set the stage to offer facts that support your lede: *For example, the references to red ink notwithstanding, the Postal Service operates at a profit—\$3.7 billion since 2013—because of an improving economy and rising online shopping.*

**Second, localize your piece. Editors don't want commentaries that seem generic.** For example, if you're writing to an Indiana newspaper, add the last three words here: *The Postal Service is the centerpiece of a \$1.3 trillion national mailing industry that employs 7 million Americans in the private sector—including 170,731 Hoosiers.*

Your readers will think: Hey, I don't want anyone messing with almost 200,000 jobs in my state.

(Ask and I'll supply the figure for your state.)

You can provide a local touch without research. For instance, when mentioning packages, say: *As residents of Los Angeles increasingly shop online, that sparks a rise in package deliveries.*

**Third, write simply. We aim to inform and influence, sometimes even to inspire—not to impress.** Toward that end, good journalistic writing isn't writing that gets noticed. It's writing that spotlights the ideas we're communicating. Much as after a well-refereed basketball game fans don't discuss the referee—in fact they barely noticed him—but rather talk about the game itself.

Concise sentences, short words, coherent organization—that helps focus attention on our points: USPS' societal value, actual postal finances, public policies to be addressed. We want people to read the piece and say, "Wow, I didn't realize that," not "Wow, great writer."

The irony here is that if you do achieve this—frame the issues effectively while staying out of the way—it's precisely because your writing *is* good.

**Now let's spotlight letter carriers who've made the last few weeks of messaging something most unions can only wish for.**

Mike Montes of Oak Brook, IL Branch 825 got a letter to the editor in his local *Northwest Herald* after negotiating for more space to rebut a misleading *Washington Post* editorial it ran about USPS. A *Buffalo News* letter by Buffalo-Western New York Branch 3 President Emeritus Robert McLennan urged New York to adopt vote-by-mail. Idaho State Association President John Paige had letters in the *Idaho Statesman*, *Idaho Press Tribune* and *Times-News*.

Second-generation letter carrier Dawn Sylvester of Central Florida Branch 1091 was featured by CBS affiliate WKMG-TV. Kansas State Association President Andy Tuttle continued to inform us of media reports around the country meriting responses. NALC Executive Vice President Brian Renfroe provided valuable insight for a HowStuffWorks story about letter carriers' delivery routes.

Meanwhile, President Rolando discussed the Postal Service's importance in a letter published by the London-based *Guardian*, which has the world's third-most trafficked newspaper website with more than 100 million readers, including 15 million Americans. His commentary piece in *The Hill*, closely read on Capitol Hill, gave the facts on postal reform. And his letter in *USA Today*, the nation's second-largest newspaper, explained USPS finances.

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