

Getting to the granular: the words



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Dine

As we all know, changing the national conversation about the U.S. Postal Service is one of the key actions we can take to assure the future of our employer—and of our jobs.

We not only know that, many of you have been doing it, informing the public so folks will reject the misleading conventional wisdom and educate their representatives in Washington. And, of course, you're also directly educating lawmakers, not to mention journalists.

That three-pronged impact—vis-à-vis the public, the pols and the press—is what lends so much power to your actions.

Recent columns have covered strategies of approaching the media, of selecting the most effective points to make, of sketching our thoughts on paper and more.

Today we'll get as basic as one can—by focusing on words.

As I've mentioned, too many people regard words as the key to writing, when in fact it's the ideas that matter most. Clarity of thought and coherence in organization are the foundations of a persuasive message. That said, once you've done the hard work, it would be a shame to let misused words lessen the impact of your efforts.

Poor word choice makes your piece less likely to get past the editorial page editor and, if it does, to resonate with readers.

Obviously, we can barely skim the surface here. But I'll mention some examples to keep in mind, which may also serve to get you thinking about what types of things to look for before you seal the envelope or hit the send button.

Or before you get before the radio mic or TV camera. Whatever the medium, constraints of space or time create imperatives of efficiency and precision in the words we use.

Unnecessary words. Well-chosen words are your ally; unneeded ones are your foe. The latter create flabby sentences—written or spoken—that take up space or time better used for a new idea.

Once you've written a piece, reread it with a skeptical eye—viewing each word as you would a stranger on your porch knocking on the front door: Do you really want to let him in? Will he add anything, or will he do damage?

In order to make the point, let's consider this. *Hey, what was I thinking?* Almost every time you use the phrase “In order to,” you can delete “In order” and simply instead start with “To.” And make the point faster.

Above, in the sixth paragraph, I wrote “That said.” I could

have written “that having been said” or “that being said.” But why lengthen—by a third or even a half—a phrase simply intended to move the reader on to another point?

Beyond wasting space, unnecessary words can create redundancy or even nonsense.

The airwaves and print media are full of stories of a new record being set—for temperature, rainfall, home runs—and it's always silly. As opposed to setting an old record? By definition, when a record is set, it's new. So the Postal Service doesn't set a new record for package deliveries, it just sets a record. Nor does anyone set an all-time record—at least not until all time has expired. And you certainly don't set a new all-time record. You just set a record.

The word “different” is frequently misused. As in: “The congressman visited three different countries on his trip,” or “The applicant speaks four different languages.”

Yup, more impressive than speaking four of the same languages. So every time you use “different,” check whether it adds meaning or absurdity to your sentence.

Wrong meanings. You hear pundits talk about a speaker “inferring something.” Well, those pundits shouldn't be pundits because a speaker can't infer anything, she can only imply something. It's the reader or the listener who infers, because inferring involves interpreting what the speaker or writer said.

Or you read about the “enormity of the challenge confronting a new president”—and you wince, because enormity doesn't mean size or extent or volume; it means evil.

So, if you are using a word in print that you don't use regularly in speech, don't hesitate to look it up in the dictionary. The best writers do that, many times a day.

Improper grammar. A letter carrier doesn't deliver “their mail”—a letter carrier (singular) delivers “his or her mail,” or letter carriers (plural) deliver “their mail.” Similarly, don't talk of “their” revenue in reference to the Postal Service; rather, “its” revenue.

Eliminate unneeded words and misleading usage and editors will rejoice while readers and listeners focus, undistracted, on your message.

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