

Words matter



**Philip
Dine**

Today we turn from the sublime to the mundane.

OK, maybe previous columns weren't all sublime. This one, though, certainly will be mundane—but perhaps useful.

We know the imperative of getting the message out, so the public—and its elected representatives in Washington—understand the truth about the Postal Service and the best way forward. Only then are legislators likely to enact public policy fixes that help secure USPS and our jobs.

We also have a good idea of what the message is, and how to get it into media outlets.

As I've mentioned occasionally, but will revisit today, the words we use to deliver the message, in print or on air,

are key to our communications efforts.

Misused words and phrases grate on the reader or listener, reducing his confidence in what we're saying, leading her to turn away. They waste space, limited to start with. And they make it less likely that an editor will run your piece in the first place.

Let's start with the word "only," which usually is misplaced. It's as if most people, including journalists, simply guess where to put it or assume that as long as it's in there somewhere, it works.

But it doesn't. The word's placement affects what the sentence communicates.

Doubt that? Try this exercise—Insert the word "only" at various junctures in the following sentence: *The guard claimed that he'd glimpsed the man suspected in today's bombing at the site last night.*

That sentence contains 14 potential meanings, depending on where you put the "only." For example, if you start with "only," you're saying that no one else claimed to have seen the suspect there last night. Make it the second word and it means there was a lone guard. Put it before "glimpsed," he's saying he didn't get a good view. After "glimpsed," he's saying he saw no one else. Before "man" it means no other adult male is suspected. After "suspected" means the man is connected to no other bombings.

Here's the rule: Put "only" immediately before the word or phrase it applies to—and you get precision and clarity.

Folks also often guess at whether to use "farther" or "further." No need to guess. The first refers to distance, the second to degree. *He ran farther than anyone else*, but *He is further along in his studies*. How to remember? Tell yourself that the "a" in farther represents "area."

Let's assume you'll be on radio or TV, where pronunciation

matters. Words that can function as both nouns and verbs pose a challenge. Here are a few: combat, contest, address, convert, conflict, subject, increase, decrease, protest, produce, conduct, digest, escort, insult, record and project.

A common mistake is to pronounce these words the same, whether as nouns or verbs. I hear a military reporter talk of troops about to COM-bat the enemy and I cringe—the guy's embedded, he's dressed for the part, but he never learned to say com-BAT?

Remember this: Emphasize the first syllable in the words above for the noun, the second for the verb. But complicating matters is that many such words are pronounced the same as a noun or a verb: alert, disdain, motion, surprise, neglect, shadow, contact, credit, access and revolt among them. Plus, some emphasize the first syllable, others the second.

So, figure out beforehand which you're likely to use and look them up.

Turning to politics, people sometimes write or speak of the Senate and the Congress. But the Senate and the Congress aren't distinct entities: the Senate is part of Congress, as is the House of Representatives. The proper distinction is between senators and representatives.

There's only one political title I know of that's always capitalized, even without a proper name following it. One writes "the president" or "the senator," but "the Speaker of the House." Why? So it won't be taken as referring to whoever happens to be speaking on the House floor.

Let's turn to an accomplished wordsmith and a friend. Drew Von Bergen, NALC's longtime director of public relations, passed away in December. I first met Drew, a former journalist and past president of the National Press Club, in 1990 when he accompanied NALC President Vince Sombroto to a letter carriers' meeting in St. Louis.

Unlike many of his peers, Drew put out press releases only when warranted, having been on the receiving end himself, so when he sent something out I paid attention. I also paid attention when he told me about a job opening here.

Pivotal in NALC history for stewarding the national food drive, Drew was one of labor's best media people, a true professional and a gentleman.

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